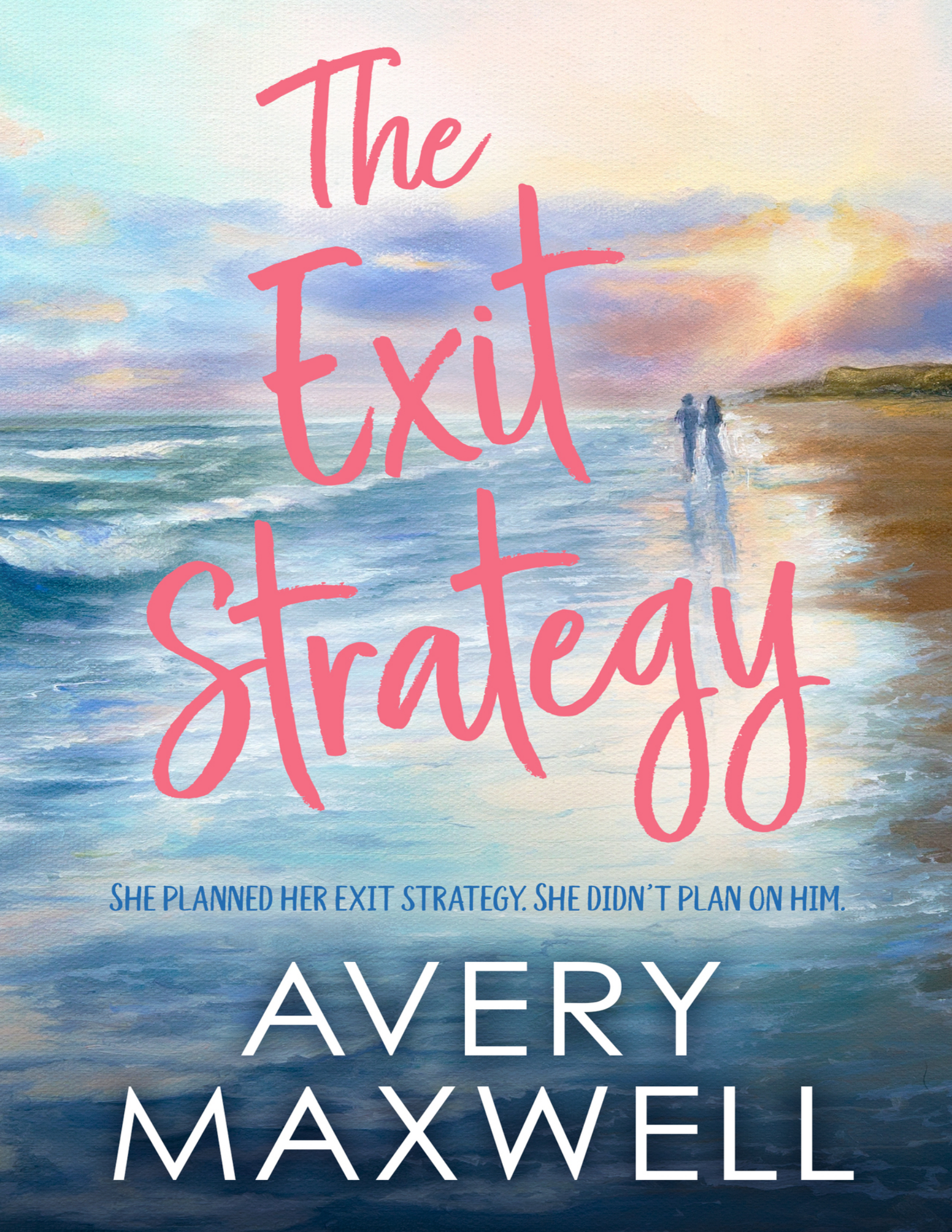

The Exit Strategy
SHE PLANNED HER EXIT STRATEGY. SHE DIDN'T PLAN ON HIM.
AVERY MAXWELL

THE EXIT STRATEGY

AVERY MAXWELL

That's What She Said Publishing,Inc.



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The Exit Strategy

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Cover design by Kari March Designs

ISBN: 979-8-88643-860-4 (ebook)

ISBN: 979-8-88643-861-1 (paperback)

averymaxwellbooks.com

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For anyone who has ever been told they were too much—too thorny, too loud, too hard to love.

You were never unlovable.

You were just waiting for the people who'd leave the light on.

This one's for you.

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AUTHOR NOTE

When Junie Mercer stepped onto my screen with more spite and sass than I could handle, I knew I was in for a wild ride with her.

What happened was I fell in love with a flawed character—someone misunderstood and just wanting to find where she belonged in this world.

That is something I relate to every single day.

Junie was raised knowing that she couldn't count on the one person who should have protected her unconditionally—her mother.

While this story focuses on how Junie views the world and how she takes back control of herself and her situation, it does briefly discuss the trauma of her childhood.

If you or someone you know has walked this path, please know that you are seen, heard, believed, and loved.

I hope you enjoy the love story between not only Junie and Cole, but with their entire found family as well.

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1

TRIAL BY TIKTOK

JUNIE

Saturday 3:15 a.m. TikTok Notification: Your video has 1M views.

Oh God. This isn't good.

I set my empty glass on my nightstand and pull the covers up to my chin.

This will pass. Closing my eyes, I will myself to dream of happily ever afters and not the shit show my life has become.

Monday 8:30 a.m. TikTok Notification: Your video has 3K comments.

No. No, no, no.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, flashing my brother's name. He's been in Japan for the last two years learning…whatever it is doctors learn over there, but it's not our scheduled check-in day, so I send it to voicemail, which must piss him off because he immediately calls back three more times.

Nolan: Answer your damn phone, Juniper.

I bury my face in my pillow. Maybe if I just stay in bed long enough, this will all blow over.

Tuesday 9:00 a.m. Email Notification.

My fingers tremble over the message in my inbox.

From: Callahan Analytics
Subject: Urgent.

And for the second time in less than a week, my dreams are shattered.

Dear Ms. Mercer,
We regret to inform you that due to recent online activity, we are forced to rescind your offer of employment. Our social media morality clause…

My eyes glaze over. When I can't see the words anymore, I toss my phone aside and scream into my pillow.

I SHOULD'VE SEEN THIS COMING. I'M ANGRY WITH MYSELF THAT I DIDN'T, but somehow, even after my life imploded, this particular brand of destruction still blindsides me.

And I've had fifteen hours, sitting in the back seat of my own damn car, to dissect all the ways I was wrong and all the things I should have said, would have said, if I hadn't been so caught off guard by my own personal band of merry meddlers. Or as my brother calls them, his best friends. That's how long it takes us to drive from a viral crashout in Boston to a town I swore I'd never set foot in.

The town that Cole Whittaker calls home.

Fifteen hours of gas station coffee with my sweatshirt hood pulled low and so many true-crime podcasts that now I'm one check-engine light away from a complete and utter breakdown.

I'll stop scrolling on my phone in just a minute, I swear.

"Holy shit." I sit up straighter. "What's she doing?"

Forty-seven ways to ruin Grace Elliott scroll through my mind as I glare at my phone.

- An anonymous call to the IRS because she's never paid taxes from her nanny job.
- Change all the passwords on her bank and credit card accounts. I could do it too. The asshole couldn't pay her credit card on time, even after I set up her autopay, because she couldn't balance her checking account with her bar tab and just assumed I'd fix it.
- Create a burner account on Reddit. I can call it u/ReceiptsforGraceElliott and counter every single one of her claims.

Hmm…Reddit does like to lose its mind. If I make the retaliation juicy enough, they'd really—

"Why are you still scrolling?" Fen's sharp words snap me back to reality. He's generally the playful one, but right now, he's pissed. "I told you to take all that shit off your phone."

"What's happening?" Hudson asks from the driver's seat. They obviously know me too well—that's why they're chaperoning my exile. Left to my own devices, I would have driven right past Porchlight Cove and never looked back.

Porchlight Cove.

Of course Cole would live on a barrier island that sounds as though it was designed for second chances. If I had any other options…

My fall has been deep and fast.

I have no other options now that the TikTok mafia is on my heels.

"Grace started some new social media profiles," Fen grumbles. "She named herself *I.AM.Sorry* and is going on the offensive against our little Spite-Berry." He turns his glare my way again. "You should have told me she filmed you throwing all her shit out of a second-story window. Or that you made a goddamn retaliation video last night. This makes my job much harder."

"I simply refuted her lies," I say.

“With all the sass and spite you could muster. Jeez-us, Junie.” Fen groans. “Now she’s splicing together bits from your new video to back up her falsifications. This is why you cannot engage.”

Because I’m not as likable as most women my age. I’m too…thorny. He doesn’t say it, but that’s the gist of it.

“You what?” Hudson has perfected the dad-bark. It’s annoying. “For fuck’s sake, Juniper Marie, what the actual fuck. Didn’t the Mr. Fissile debacle teach you anything?”

If I had to label my teenage protectors, I’d say my big brother, Nolan, maintained that role, mostly. Fenway became the excitable uncle who just wanted me to be happy. Hudson was the grumpy dad who never took any of my shit.

And Cole?

Cole became my best friend.

My confidant.

My silent encourager and emotional support beam.

Until he left me too.

Not that these guys have any right to scold me. I’m no longer the teenager they had to shuttle to school. I’m twenty-four years old! And it’s my freaking house.

My mother’s cancer and my deadbeat dad are how my brother and his three best friends became the unlikely shepherds of my childhood—they moved out of their college dorm and into my childhood home to keep our lights on when my mother no longer could and my father flat-out refused. They were barely adults themselves, but somehow, we made it work.

Lord knows we had the space.

I was almost seventeen when she died, hence the weird boundaries the guys and I have had ever since.

Tugging my hoodie over my head, I shrug. “It’s my house, Hud. She doesn’t even have a lease. She’s a tenant at will, and I willed her gone.”

“Jesus Christ, you little law-skirting shit. That’s not how things work.” Hudson slams his palm on the steering wheel, takes a deep breath, then meets my gaze in the rearview mirror. “I know they hurt you, Junie. And if I could kill them with my bare hands, I would. But you’re an adult. You must start handling situations with your fucking brain, not your emotional trigger finger. Okay?”

As though it’s that easy. But I nod because arguing with him right now is pointless. He’s had practice with this speech already—six months ago when I started a Wi-Fi war with Mr. Fissile next door for stealing my Internet. I named my network *Mr. Fissile steals Wi-Fi and doesn’t pick up his dog’s poop.* The asshole took me to court for slander and Hudson was forced to defend me.

Of all my guardian bros, Hudson’s the one who’ll use that shit against me.

“What’s happening now?” he asks.

“Grace is gaining followers,” Fen says. “Especially with the new video she posted of Junie…being Junie. Thankfully most of her comment sections are still filled with snake emojis. But I’m not going to lie—Grace is a good actress, and she’s going at this hard. She’s going to be a problem.”

So much for being my friend.

Fen continues filling Hudson in, but I zone out and watch the world roll by. No one has ever understood that I don’t get myself into these situations on purpose. I just don’t know how to be any other way.

It was easier when I didn’t have any friends. It was stupid to let Grace into my life in the first place. That’s an error in judgment I won’t make again. I should’ve just stuck to my books—fiction won’t betray you.

“What about Paul?” Hud asks. He’s watching me in the rearview.

“What about him?”

It’s at that moment that I realize I have no feelings about Paul. None. It’s like a stranger died. Sad but not painful. His betrayal stings, but I loved Grace like a sister. It’s probably why I’m so angry.

“Guess that answers how you felt about him.” Fen laughs.

The truth is, I thought I loved Paul. Now I know I didn’t.

Hud slows the car when the highway suddenly cuts down to two lanes, and we crawl from one stoplight to the next.

The groan I’ve barely contained since Boston finally breaks free.

“It’s not forever, Junie.” Hudson’s uncharacteristically gentle tone raises my hackles. “Cole needs help getting his accounting software in order, and you just need to lie low for a bit.”

“Two months, tops,” Fen agrees.

I start calculating how many minutes are in two months when I spot the welcome sign.

Welcome to Porchlight Cove—Where the lights are always on. Even Heartmark would reject that slogan for being too on the nose. But there it is, in all its cheerful yellow glory.

This is supposed to be my fresh start? Population 1,000 retirees and one very specific reason I've never, ever visited the Carolinas with my brother and the Berry Brigade of Merry Guardians.

Cole Whittaker.

I've always known where he was, which made it easy to avoid him. These assholes and our group chats keep me informed and up to date whether I want them to or not. And where Cole is concerned, I most certainly do not want.

My brother and his idiotic crew still feel responsible for me years after their duty ended.

They're the reason I'm in this town, driving toward his life, about to take a job that will make Cole not only my first heartbreak but also my first boss straight out of my MBA program, and there's pain attached to both those things.

My heart pinches before I can force the frost in my soul to freeze the hell over. Cole created his own little community here in Porchlight Cove when he built the homes of The Haven—a community within a community. The only comfort I get from knowing that we were so easily replaced is that Hudson let it slip that Cole built The Haven for young adults and families, but somehow ended up with a small retirement community instead.

Well, a retirement community, and now…me.

He's only allowing it as a favor to my brother. And perhaps because they're all a teensy bit worried that Boston has become a crime scene and my face is the chalk outline after Hudson had to extract me from the Brookline Bagelry yesterday because people were filming me.

Even Brookline, my little city surrounded by Boston on three sides, has turned against me.

They were probably expecting another meltdown, especially after finding out there was a freaking news crew set up outside of my house that not even the privacy wall could hide, but thankfully, I was still in shock from having my first-ever STI testing done thanks to my ex and now ex-best friend.

With less than $1,000 in my bank account and no business willing to touch me, I'm out of options.

Which is how I end up driving straight toward the one man I swore I'd never see again.

And maybe, maybe because a small part of my pathetic heart has been waiting for an excuse to see him again. To ruin his day like he ruined my senior year of high school.

Probably freshman and sophomore years of college too, but even I can only carry so many grudges.

GPS directs us through an aggressively charming coastal town with pastel buildings, hanging flower baskets, and a coffee shop called Grounds for Celebration that I will absolutely never enter on principle alone.

A girl can only handle so much wicker, and I'm already at my limit.

The scent of salt air blows through the AC, and I begin to fidget.

Cole always said the ocean made everything feel…smaller.

Easier to survive.

When we turn onto the road for The Haven at Porchlight Cove, things get…weird.

The Haven is a gated community, but the gate is wide open and decorated with a banner that says, "Welcome Home, Juniper!" in glittery letters.

"What the hell?" I mutter.

Fen laughs. "Welcome to The Haven."

"What is this?"

"Nana Mae alerted the welcoming committee." Fen sounds downright gleeful. It's irritating as hell.

A golf cart pulls up alongside my car. The driver's an elderly man wearing a bucket hat and a Grateful Dead T-shirt, while binoculars hang from his neck. Awesome. The first person I meet is a bird-watching enthusiast.

I hate birds.

He honks the horn on his golf cart. It blasts a rap song from the early 90s I vaguely remember from a podcast on an East Coast-West Coast rivalry.

"The new girl's here! I repeat, the new girl's here! Stanley out!" the old guy says into a walkie-talkie, then winks, points two finger-guns at me, and peels away. Literally. His tires squeal and he leaves rubber marks on the pavement.

What the hell kind of place is this?

“You’re going to love it here.” The sarcasm in Hudson’s tone makes me want to throat punch him.

Slowly we roll through the open gate, and people stand on front porches, backlit by the soft sunset while waving us by. By the third stop sign, we’ve accumulated a train of golf carts following us through the streets, with one of them blaring the theme song for Jaws, which feels like a personal attack.

When Hudson finally pulls into a driveway, I’m white-knuckling my seatbelt. Who the hell gets followed by a parade of golf carts? Me. That’s who. And now they’re sitting at the end of a very long drive, watching.

Nolan must be pranking me.

A woman in her forties walks down the sidewalk in wedge heels, white capris, and a navy-blue tube top, shooing away the golf carts. As they disperse, I take a deep breath but don’t follow Hudson and Fen as they exit the vehicle.

The house before me is beautiful. All the ones in this neighborhood are. They have a…homey feel to them that makes my skin itchy.

Despite how people made me feel there, my home has been my only safe space.

The house in front of me is different. It’s white with blue shutters, has a wraparound porch with rocking chairs, but my favorite thing is the gas lanterns that bracket both sides of the front door.

It makes my throat uncomfortably tight. They’re probably meant to make guests feel welcome, like someone was waiting for them, but I know better than that.

Cole is likely counting down the days until he can tell Nolan that this little experiment isn’t working out. After all, he’s run away from me before, and this time, I come with way more baggage.

Maybe I can just stay in my car. Or better yet, turn around and drive anywhere but here.

As if reading my mind, Hudson waves my keys at me through the windshield. He’s such an ass.

Then the front door opens.

My stomach drops.

Some things you recognize instantly, like muscle memory forcing you to recall every painful moment, regardless of how much time has passed.

Cole Whittaker steps into my world, stopping just feet away from my car, and I focus on controlling my breath while Hudson and Fenway hurry to greet him.

When our gazes connect, he doesn't move.

For a second—just one—his composure slips. His body locks up, his shoulders tense around his ears as though someone hit pause on his entire being.

Then it's gone.

And he's studying me like I'm a problem he's already calculating how to solve.

Too bad for both of us, he stopped being my emotional crutch when he walked away.

Liar.

He lifts a hand in an awkward wave, and three thoughts hit me all at once.

One, he's bigger, harder, hotter.

Two, I need to create an exit strategy. Immediately.

Three, I'm going to put fish oil in his shampoo.

Because old habits die hard, and it's easier than being soft and getting trampled.

Fenway's talking animatedly, while Hudson's as stoic as ever, glaring in my direction. But Cole? He just stands there in jeans and a button-down that has no business fitting him as well as it does. It makes me regret the Frosted Flakes pj pants I'm wearing. I wasn't supposed to see anyone until tomorrow.

Frankly, he's the one being rude. Standing there, staring at me with his arms crossed over his broad chest. His expression is unreadable, but his eyes? Those still hold the same dark and steady confidence that always sees too much.

That's the real problem. He always saw too much…until he walked away without a word or a goodbye.

Some part of me longs to know why, but I'll never ask.

It's easier to be angry. Easier to pretend I don't care, *didn't* care. Six years is a long time, and I don't hold grudges—for long.

Say it again louder, Junie, for those in the back—we don't hold grudges for long.

With a heavy sigh, I exit the car without getting too close. I'm happy he's flanked by Hudson and Fen. It's better to have a buffer.

"Junie." His voice is lower than I remember. Rougher. My name rolls off his tongue like it pains him to say it.

His hand flexes at his side, almost as though he wants to reach for me but stops himself.

"Cole." I keep my voice flat. Professional. The tone I use for people I don't trust.

He steps forward, his arms held out stiffly. Is he trying to freaking hug me?

My shoulders lift to my earlobes, and he snaps back like an elastic band pulled too tight. When I glance up, confusion flickers in his expression, there and gone in a flash.

"We're heading inside. I have to piss." Hudson physically drags Fen away from us.

There goes my buffer. Hudson has leveled up his assholishness today.

"How was the drive?" Cole asks.

God, this is painful.

"Fine."

He flinches. He's always hated the word fine. It's funny what you forget when you spend six years pretending someone doesn't exist. A tiny spark of vicious satisfaction flares in my chest because he spent years forcing me to elaborate—and now he doesn't have that privilege.

"Fine" is not a descriptor for your feelings, Junie.

It was his favorite saying. Now I'm using his hated word as a weapon, one that's helping me build my walls, and he knows it.

Good.

He's already reaching past me for the trunk before I can process what's happening.

"I've got it." I step between him and the suitcase, dragging out the smaller of the three I've packed. It's all I'll need tonight anyway.

His hand drops, but he doesn't step back to give me space. He just stands there, watching me wrestle the bag across his cobblestone driveway like a man physically restraining himself from calibrating a problem I didn't ask him to solve.

"Junie—" His voice is rough, clipped, and it makes me irrationally irate.

He doesn't get to be mad, or sad, or confused. I hold all the stock there.

“Juniper,” I hiss, cutting him off before he can say something that will bring out emotions I’m not here to face. “You should probably call me Juniper now. You know, since you’re my *boss*.”

He drags a palm down his face, but it doesn’t hide the pain there.

“Right,” he says quietly. “Juniper. Your apartment is above the garage. Nana Mae left the key under the mat. She wanted to welcome you, but she had a…scheduling conflict with her club.”

I don’t respond. I was never particularly close with his Nana Mae, not like the boys are. She’d already moved back to South Carolina when they all came to live with us anyway, and I refused to go when they visited over school vacations.

She’d only relocated to Boston to raise Cole after his parents died when he was five, so I think she was ready to get back to her life in the Carolinas when he graduated high school.

Nodding, I continue dragging my suitcase toward the garage where I’ll figure out what the hell to do with my life now.

“Juniper.”

His voice stops me cold. My body remembers him, and it feels like a betrayal. How can it still long for someone who actively broke my heart?

There’s a beat of silence. Then, as though the words are being cut out of him with dull knives, he says, “I’m glad you’re here. Even if you’re not.”

My chest is too tight, and my eyes are too hot as I drag my suitcase as fast as I can toward the stairs.

With his eyes burning into my back, I make it to the landing, willing my hands to stop shaking as I search for the key.

But the door flies open, and the woman from the sidewalk tugs me inside.

“Katie,” Cole barks from below. “Get the hell out of there and leave her alone.”

Am I being kidnapped now?

“I’m Katie,” tube-top woman says, shutting the door and dragging me toward a small table set up under a window that looks out over the driveway.

Cole’s standing in the glow of the lanterns, staring up at my apartment as though he expects me to storm out at any second.

He should know better—confrontation isn’t my style.

“Oh, shit.” The woman hums. “You’re holding onto something explosive. You’re a powder keg of emotion.”

I turn away from the window to find this stranger assessing me. “I’m sorry, who are you?”

“Katie, your new best friend.”

“No.”

She ignores me. “I showed your TikTok to Mae. The welcoming committee will be by with their own basket, but after what you’ve been through, a bunch of cinnamon rolls just isn’t going to cut it.” She bends down and lifts a heavy-looking box. “I was kicked off the welcome committee for this exact reason, but sometimes, a woman just has to handle things herself. Am I right?”

Glass clinks inside when she drops the box on the table with a thud.

“Now,” she says with a grin. “I don’t know your preference yet, so I brought a bouquet. Bourbon, gin, vodka, red wine, white wine, and my favorite, Fireball. I’ll let you get settled. But don’t worry, I’ll be back tomorrow with the mixers, and we’ll have our first official ladies’ night.”

This strange little woman wraps her arms around me and squeezes the fuck out of my ribs, then she trots off on espadrilles that make my toes ache and shuts the front door behind her.

I’m not sure what I expected upon arriving here. Maybe screaming or crying. Maybe a confrontation, or at the very least an explanation from Cole.

Instead, I got a “nice to see ya, pal,” an aggressively awkward attempt at a bro-hug, and a new best friend literally one second after declaring myself a no-friend zone.

My phone buzzes in my hand, so I flop down onto the tiny two-person sofa, then groan when I see the group chat.

Juniper & Her Berries:

Fen has always had an affinity for group chat names. This one has been alive since I was fourteen.

Fen: Proof of arrival.

Fen: Picture sent.

Oh, God. He captured Cole’s awkward attempt at a hug. Cole looks broken, but I look like I always do—pissed off and planning someone’s

demise. It’s something I’ve been working on. Today, I obviously failed.

Hudson: Awkward, but she didn’t gut him, so it’s progress.

Jesus. Maybe Cole and I haven’t been as stealthy in our friendship breakup as I thought.

Nolan: Junie. Check in.

Cole doesn’t respond. He never does. Not since he left.

Begrudgingly, I reply.

Junie: Alive. Arrived. Almost got taken out by a Jaws-wielding golf cart and an aggressive new “bestie,” but alive.

Nolan: And Cole?

I drop my phone face down onto the cushion next to me. I’m not answering that.

Through the front window, his porch light glows, steady and golden.

Where the lights are always on.

I don’t know if that’s a promise or a warning, but I guess I’m about to find out.

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2

THE 3 A.M. RULE

COLE

NOTHING GOOD COMES FROM A 3 A.M. PHONE CALL.

It was true in college, and it's even more true now.

So when my best friend's name had flashed across my screen, only two thoughts entered my head.

One, someone died.

Two, Junie.

It's only been twenty-four hours since that phone call, and my life has already been turned upside down as a result.

I created a goddamn TikTok account just to keep tabs on the situation, but all I've managed to do is memorize the heartbreak I saw in Junie's eyes.

A social media meltdown shouldn't be the thing that scares me.

But it does.

It plays in my mind as clearly as on a phone screen.

Junie's standing on a bar top I recognize—Brookline's Square Tavern.

And thanks to Fen and his group chat obsession, I know she worked there all through college and grad school.

Behind her is a banner that reads: Happy MBA Graduation, Junie!

It should have been a celebration, but instead, my girl was crying.

"Fuck."

Juniper Marie Mercer is not, has never been, and can never be my girl.

Which was exactly why I left Boston. I couldn't be the one to blow up both our lives.

I blink feverishly, but the scene of her current downfall is burned into my retinas.

Mascara streaks her face with tracks of black even as she rolls her shoulders back and tilts her chin to the sky like a queen. I see her pain, the destruction tearing at her walls.

The last time I checked, the video had over two million views.

Jesus Christ, Junie.

I drop onto the top step of my porch and scrub my hands over my face. I should leave it alone. She's not my problem to solve anymore.

But my brain's already running the diagnostic—cataloguing the damage, calculating what needs to be fixed, building a plan I have absolutely no right to execute.

Fixing her hasn't been my honor for six years, but my hands didn't get that memo.

"I'm not sorry," she sings into a bottle of liquor she's holding like a microphone. "I'm not sorry you took out my trash." She points to someone off-screen, and the camera pans to a woman sitting on a barstool.

Fucking Grace. Her college roommate and supposed BFF. She moved into Junie's house their sophomore year when Fen finally got his own place.

"I'm not sorry you broke my damn heart. I'm not sorry you failed your last exam. I'm not sorry you slept with my boyfriend. I'm not sorry you now have eighteen years to think about what you've done. I'm not sorry that you can't go home now. I'm not sorry you made a bad call, you can't make amends, you chose it all wrong."

My chest burns.

The camera moves, and her dickhead ex-boyfriend's pale face is enough to make me want to punch something. He's reaching for Junie, shaking his head. His lips move, even though I can't hear him. He's sorry.

I slam my fist against the porch floor.

Her best friend, the only one she ever allowed close enough to even be called a friend, slept with her douchebag of a boyfriend. And Junie, being Junie, chose spite.

It's why Fen has always called her Spite-Berry, but this side of Junie will always be Viper to me. When pushed to her limits, Junie will retaliate—it's just not typically so public.

Now her spite-filled rampage is going viral across social media, and the entire world has a front-row seat to her pain.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, but I already know it's Hudson, so I don't bother answering.

I'm surprised Junie hasn't thrown Katie out yet. That woman means well, but she's pushy as hell, and I can only imagine what she has in store for Junie.

The buzzing of my phone is incessant, but I'll ignore Hudson for as long as possible. Whatever he has to say will change the course of my life. Temporarily, anyway, because Junie can only ever be temporary.

Nolan made sure of that when I left Boston behind. Even if my noble reasons for leaving feel thinner now, worn through by six years of silence and the look on her face when she told me she was *fine*, the fact remains that she was eighteen when I realized I was falling in love with her. Eighteen when I'd already changed the trajectory of my life so she could live hers.

And the truth is, I couldn't risk Junie by staying—I was stuck between a bad choice and a terrible one. The only decision I could afford was the one that gave Junie a chance.

My phone vibrates again, so I check it to get a feel for what I'm walking in on and groan.

Juniper & Her Berries:

Fen: Proof of arrival.

Fen: Picture sent.

That fucking asshole. When I don't respond, he texts his second favorite group chat that I also actively avoid.

Fen & Tonic:

Fen: At least Spite-Berry didn't punch you. How bad was it though?

What the hell do these guys think happened between us?

Hudson: On a scale of one to "she set the car on fire"?

Nolan: Just check in, Cole.

I pocket my phone without responding. With Hudson and Fen here, they'll badger me in person anyway. It doesn't mean that any of them will

stop pushing the group chats, but they've had years to realize Juniper & Her Berries is not a place I belong anymore.

Forcing myself inside, I catch the door just before it slams shut behind me. The last thing I need is anyone psychoanalyzing the whirlwind of emotions swirling inside my mind.

I pour myself a drink that I don't taste, then start another just as the guys enter the kitchen.

"You up for this?" Hudson asks.

I nod and sip my second drink while pouring them each one as well.

"You know," Fen says with a lilt to his tone that always leads to one of two things—jail or trouble that could lead to jail. I brace myself for what comes next. "We're not twenty-three anymore. And she's not the teenager we're trying to help through a tragedy."

I lift my hand, palm out, to stop him. Even if that's true, Juniper's still my best friend's baby sister who has more damaged baggage than the Boston airport—and I'm still the man who could unwillingly ruin her future.

"You guys hungry?" I ask.

"Grabbed burgers an hour ago because Juniper was hangry," Hudson says. "I just need a shower and a nap."

"How long are you staying?" A month would be good. They're much better at handling Junie now.

"Our flight leaves at seven tomorrow morning." Hudson's a dick. His smirk says it all. He's dropping off a bomb and retreating to his life.

Hudson's phone chimes, and he answers it before it can ring again.

"Hey," he says in greeting.

"How's it going?" Nolan asks. "Should I come home?"

"We haven't been here long," Hudson says. "You're on speaker."

Nolan's silent for so long that I check Hudson's screen to ensure we weren't disconnected.

"Are you sure about this, Cole? She's…emotional and…already hurting."

Typical Nolan. He's warning me away from his baby sister even as he throws her in my path.

"You know I'll always take care of her, Nolan." It comes out too harshly—overcompensating, the way I always do when the alternative is admitting how much I've already failed her.

Hudson makes a garbled noise in his throat but says nothing,

"I—It's just…she's really in it this time." Nolan carries a weight for his sister that none of us were ever able to help shoulder. And I tried. "Fenway said the *Scout Report* called asking for an interview with her."

That's not what I wanted to hear. The *Scout Report* is the least-reputable trashy gossip site out there. You know it's bad when even I'm aware of its existence.

I'm also not surprised. Junie's father squandered the fortune that her mother's family spent generations building years ago, and now the Mercer name sings like a cautionary tale. Especially in Boston, and Grace is using it to her advantage.

"Obviously, I turned them down," Fen says when he finds me glaring at him. "I'm damn good at my job, Cole. We're all protective of her."

My spine stiffens. "I know you are."

"Just…keep me posted, okay?" Nolan says. "She threatened to put hair removal cream in my shampoo if I came home, but if she needs me—"

"I've got her." The sharp words have Fen and Hudson smirking in my direction, while Nolan goes quiet again.

"I've got some work to do. Anything else you want to say?" Hudson asks.

"No," Nolan replies. "I'll check in on Junie in the morning. Just…thank you. All of you."

"That's what we're here for," Fen says before Hudson pockets his phone.

"Nana Mae got your rooms ready." I wave toward the stairs, and Hudson takes off with only his laptop bag in hand. The guy is a workaholic.

"You know," Fen says, backing away from me with his drink in hand. "Whatever happened at Nolan's graduation party to make you run…" He glances in the direction of the garage. "Well, maybe you'll find that running was never the solution to your problems. Maybe this time, you'll learn how to stay."

He's gone before I can formulate a response that isn't telling him to go to hell. Nolan made it perfectly clear that his sister was off-limits, and then my ex weaponized her. It's not a risk I'm willing to take—even if my heart is the price I pay.

What I need right now is a distraction. And the only thing that even comes close to matching Junie is my work, so I also head upstairs with my

drink in hand.

As I stand in my home office, which unfortunately lines up with her bedroom window, our uncomfortable reunion runs through my head.

Work has gotten me through the last six years of missing Junie and my friends, and there's only one project I want to work on tonight.

My version of Junie's dream house.

Tomorrow I'll get my shit together. Set the boundaries. Stop acting like a man who's allowed to want what he can't have.

But tonight, I'll create her happiness the only way I can.

Perhaps someday, I'll have the opportunity to give her the blueprints.

Or maybe not because the idea of her living in her dream home with some twinkie dick who doesn't deserve her makes my blood burn hotter than the sun.

There's no in-between with Junie and me. There never has been. That's the real problem.

Hours later, I'm detailing Junie's home theater room when something crashes in the kitchen. Either we have a rabid raccoon again or Fenway's hungry. Honestly, neither would surprise me.

I make my way to the kitchen in the dark, then nearly shit my pants for a second time in less than a day.

My grandmother is standing on top of a barstool, folding herself into my freezer.

"What the hell are you doing?" Stepping behind her, I wrap an arm around her waist and haul her to the floor. "You're going to break a leg or something."

"Nah." Nana Mae waves me off. "Osteoporosis isn't setting in yet. But the damn hot flashes? Those are eating me alive."

"What hot flashes? You went through menopause in your fifties." I know because what I witnessed one summer was almost enough to have me following Nolan into medicine just to fix that shit.

She tuts and crosses her arms. "Who the hell knows. Doctors aren't exactly studying aging female health, you know."

Her shoulders lower, and she drops into a chair at the kitchen table.

"These hot flashes are because I'm fit to be tied, I tell ya. Fit. To. Be. Tied. And I left my ice packs in your freezer today." Nana Mae has her own cottage next door to her friend, Bea, but she spends half her time here.

She pulls her cell phone out of her housecoat pocket, unlocks it, scrolls for about a minute, then slides her phone across the table for me to see.

Fucking Grace's face stares back at me, so I lock the phone and hand it back. "Fen showed me earlier."

I should've known there was no way Junie would go viral without Nana Mae knowing about it. She's a social media junkie. She has a social club dedicated to reality television dating shows that would put any of our fantasy football leagues to shame.

"Katie sent it to the group chat. She recognized Junie from all the pictures you got around here." She lifts her head, possibly only now noticing that my home went through a hasty redecoration in the last twenty-four hours. She narrows her eyes but doesn't comment. "She's hoping Junie becomes the next contestant on *Upgrade* because, and I quote, 'that girl is in serious need of a life update.' She does have that…spark. It's probably what Katie was like at that age."

I fall into the chair opposite Nana Mae. Katie is a forty-year-old divorcee with a distinct wardrobe and…opinions.

"How long have you known?" I ask.

Nana Mae has two tells. One, she rubs the pad of her index finger over her thumbnail and two, she won't quite meet your eye.

She's doing both now.

"You spoke to Nolan as soon as it happened," I guess.

She shrugs. "The morning after, but he was…hesitant to send her here." Lifting her chin, she finally stares me down. "I told him to send her anyway, and you'd offer her a job. You need the help. At least until I can get my hands on that little shit, Devin."

My second cousin, Devin, is a problem for another day. Right now, I need to focus on Junie.

"They deserved everything Junie dished out," Nana Mae says, staring down at her phone. "But I can see how there might be some…blowback."

"She publicly eviscerated her ex-boyfriend and her ex-best friend at her own graduation party."

"It's not like she recorded it herself." Nana Mae frowns. "Okay, so in her drunken stupor, she did create new handles, calling herself *I'm Not Sorry*, and posted it, but still, I stand by what I said. They deserve whatever comes their way."

My life is about to collapse with a Spite-Berry-sized explosion covered in Nana Mae's special frosting.

"So how did it go when you saw her?"

I stare at my grandmother. "How did you—"

"Cole." She gives me the look. The one that says she's known me my entire life and I'm not about to get anything past her. "You know that Fenway loves to spread shit. At least this time he's using his powers for good. Anyone with eyes can see how much you love that girl."

"That's not—"

"Remember who you're talking to. I was there when you sold Papa's antique cars to get her out of that mess her mama created. I've always known where your heart lies. Maybe now you can get your head out of your ass and do something about it."

I stare at a spot on the wall behind her. If only selling cars was the worst of what I was hiding. "When Nolan called, I said that we needed Junie's help with the books because that's the truth. There isn't a hidden agenda here."

Not one I'm willing to admit, anyway.

"Don't insult me or lie to yourself by pretending this is just about the books. You may not be willing to acknowledge where your heart is, but a heart wants what it wants, and yours has always wanted that girl."

I don't have a response for her, and she knows it. Nana Mae pats my hand and pockets her phone instead.

"Start adding oat milk to your grocery list too. She's been drinking it since college."

How she even knows that is beyond me. But I'm too lost in my own fucked-up emotions to call her on it.

Instead, I walk Nana Mae out to her golf cart with her ice packs and watch her drive off, then I sit on my porch just as Junie's front door opens.

This woman is about to make my life significantly harder. She always has.

Yet here I am, on my porch like a goddamn idiot, watching her door and realizing I'd rather have the chaos than the quiet. That's a problem I don't know how to fix because I don't know if I'll be strong enough to put her first a second time around.

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3

FERAL, ALLEGEDLY

JUNIE

My high school guidance counselor once called me feral, but she justified it by saying she didn't expect anything less when I was being raised in a frat house.

Turns out Miss Jones was only twenty-three and attended one of Fen's house parties. The one where I dumped tuna juice on the crotch of some girl's pants when she stripped naked to go down a Slip 'N Slide in my backyard after telling me I was bringing down the vibe by being there.

In my own fucking house. Three months after my mother had passed away.

Sometimes I wish I had inherited the failing business and Nolan got the haunted house instead of the other way around. Unfortunately for me, the one thing my mother did do was bequeath her ancestral possessions to her spawn.

Now, my house feels like the only thing my mother left behind that still feels…untouched. Like if I hold onto it hard enough, nothing else can disappear.

Closing my eyes, I attempt to meditate away those wild feelings that are crawling up my neck, but it's intensely hard to do when I'm stuck in a garage apartment owned by Cole freaking Whittaker.

I mean, the ways I could fuck with him are endless. But there's a thread of doubt that keeps me from going completely savage.

Pouring more wine into my glass, I groan because now I owe that pushy lady a thank you for this.

The apartment is much nicer than I was expecting when I first walked up those stairs, and I wish I could poke around a little, but my mind won't shut up about what's to come.

I can't even count on Fen or Hudson as a distraction because they're leaving in a few hours.

When my options are myself or Cole, who I know is still awake because I had the misfortune of looking up and making eye contact with him through my bedroom window earlier, I choose myself. Sighing, I make my way out to the stairs.

It's cool out, but considering summer in Boston is like a gym rat's armpit, the fresh air that flows in from the ocean is refreshing. I sit on the top step that overlooks the water and do the one thing Fenway told me not to do.

I scroll.

Today, Grace posted her baby registry along with a slew of photos. The cover photo is her sitting in a pile of her shit outside of my house, crying fake tears, gaining sympathy like it's her job.

My heart splinters a little more. I didn't think that was possible after Cole demolished the organ when I was eighteen. *Thanks for reminding me it's in there, Grace.*

I scoff. Seriously, who sleeps with their best friend's boyfriend?

Someone who was never your friend to begin with.

I swallow hard. That voice sounds suspiciously like Cole's, and I can't afford to have him in my head. Not here.

Knowing I shouldn't focus on the wreckage of my life, I continue to scroll, feeling worse by the second. How long was I holding onto a one-sided friendship just so I wouldn't feel so lonely?

The TikTok notifications are still rolling in, like an earthquake with continuous aftershocks.

Your video has 2M new views.

Your video has 5K new comments.

I swipe through the damage with the manic energy of someone picking a scab. Yes, it's bad for me. Yes, it'll leave a gnarly scar. No, I can't stop.

Someone auto-tuned my "I'm not sorry" speech into a dance remix that's now also going viral. The famous influencer SassyTalk is now doing

a series on it that's bringing in viewers at an alarming rate. My newest video, where I told the world that she slept with my boyfriend, in my house, where she lived rent-free, is being suppressed by the one Grace spliced together, omitting her bad behavior but keeping my colorful language.

It only takes three swipes for me to come across the original video of myself. The woman staring out of the screen doesn't even look like me. This girl really is…ferine. She's mascara-smeared and magnificent, saying things I've swallowed for twenty-four years.

She's also the reason no one will hire me.

The lump in my throat gets bigger.

Callahan Analytics was the center of every spreadsheet I've ever made for my life. My five-year plans, the career trajectory I mapped out in the school library long after I should have been in bed. All of it was torched by sixty seconds of spite.

It wasn't just a job. It was *the* plan. The one I started to formulate in the fourth grade at career day. The one my mom pinky-promised to show up to. And as I sat, listening to Christy Callahan's mom talk about life balance and how numbers never lie, I understood once and for all that lies were all my mother was capable of.

That's the day I chose the Callahan path. Years later, I made their company my mission. And now it's gone too.

Hudson's words when he rescued me from the Bagelry ring in my head. *"One of these days, you'll figure out that all that spite you wield to protect yourself is really just what ruins your joy."*

I shove that memory down and keep scrolling.

It takes even less time to land on Grace's I.Am.Sorry account because of the sheer quantity of posts she's made. Toxic acid swirls through my gut.

She has new videos pinned to the top. The first one I click on is of me tossing her stuff out my window with her crying into the camera. The caption she chose? *This is what she did to me after I told her the truth.*

It has 3.1 million views. A million more than the bar video.

Her second video is of her with perfect lighting and perfect tears. "I lost my best friend, and I don't know how to heal. I just don't understand what I did to deserve this."

What you did? I want to throw my phone into the ocean. *You slept with Paul. You're pregnant by someone else's boyfriend. You told me at my graduation party with all my acquaintances present, not while we were*

getting ready to go out in the privacy of my bedroom. You knew exactly what you were doing!

It's clear in the comments section that the viewers don't have any context. All people see is a crying woman sitting in the wreckage of her belongings, pregnant, on a sidewalk, and the monster who threw them there.

She's unhinged.

Classic narcissist behavior.

Grace, you have nothing to be sorry for.

Her account name is genius, and I hate that I recognize it. I.Am.Sorry. It sounds like an apology. It's designed to make the audience say you have nothing to apologize for. She was always smarter than people gave her credit for.

I scroll again. A video of Grace holding up a torn book, another of her showing screenshots of death threats she says she's received. Each video is more polished than the last. Each one with more followers, more sympathy, more love.

My hands are shaking. How can she be benefiting off of my pain that she caused, while I lost everything?

A text notification pops up from Fen. He's never slept normal hours.

Juniper and Her Berries:

Fen: Jesus, Spite-Berry. This thing is spiraling.

Hudson: Dare I ask?

What the hell is he still doing up?

Nolan: Answer your fucking phone, Junie.

Fen: Seriously. The fucking audacity. She must have bots scanning her I.Am.Sorry account. The second someone defends Junie, it's gone. Wiped as though it never existed.

Fen: This means war.

Hudson: I'm not bailing you out of jail again.

Nolan: Keep it legal, but I'd be okay with some of Grace's dirty laundry being aired.

Pulling my knees up to my chest, I allow my forehead to fall as I continue to scroll through the decimation of my carefully curated life.

I FEEL HIM BEFORE I SEE HIM. IT'S ALWAYS BEEN THIS WAY BETWEEN US. He's silent as he climbs the stairs, then a tiny clink and the scent of mangos fill my nose.

"It's a mango magnesium blend," he says, but I don't lift my head.

He sits on the stair below me, and his body heat warms my bare legs. His scent makes my heart hurt. It hasn't changed at all—sandalwood and clean laundry with a hint of citrus.

For a long moment, neither of us speaks. The only sounds are the rolling waves and some aggressively loud wind chimes in the nighttime breeze.

"You don't have to drink it, but Nana Mae says it helps."

His words blanket me in a comfort I no longer accept from him.

"You still can't sleep," I say, and he shifts as though he's uncomfortable. We used to know everything about each other.

"Neither can you, apparently."

"I have two million people calling me unhinged and a million more calling me the queen of petty. What's your excuse?"

He opens his mouth, but no words come out, and I roll my eyes.

Abruptly, he turns to face me.

Up close, it catches me off guard. How the green of his eyes reflects the moonlight that seems to highlight the pain that lives there.

"Honestly?" He drags his knuckles across his jaw. "That reunion was a fucking disaster, and it was all my fault."

"Is that what this is?" There's no malice in my tone. Even my snark seems to be on vacation. This is what happens around him. My defenses set down their weapons without ever asking their general for direction.

"I don't know, Junie—per. I—us—this. Fuck. This is weird, right?"

I snort in a lame attempt at shielding my emotions from this man. "Yeah, that hug was…rough."

A bark of laughter rips from his chest. I hate that it still covers me like a familiar sweater.

"I panicked."

“I noticed.” *Did you see that I was dying inside? Did you feel my sadness like you used to?*

Another silence falls over us, so I pick up the mug of tea simply to have something to do.

“The comments are brutal,” I say quietly. Silence has never had a space between us. “Someone made a compilation of all the things I said and set it to that Sarah McLachlan song. You know…” My gaze dips to his for less than a second before I tear it away. “The sad dog commercial one they play at Christmastime?”

“Stop reading them, Junie.”

“Right. Let me just snap my fingers and pretend none of this is happening. Grace—” My voice cracks, and he lifts his arms as though he’s about to comfort me.

I don’t know if that would help or make things worse, but I’m relieved when he drops them without making contact.

“Grace is a knob goblin who never deserved you.” There’s a fierceness to his tone that I don’t remember.

“But people like her, Cole.” Something we both know I’ve always struggled with. My mother said I was aggressively unlovable at times, and I keep proving her right.

He sucks in an audible breath that I ignore.

“She’s waging a war against me that I have no chance of winning, and she’s the one who got pregnant by my boyfriend. I guess it should tell you something when she was my only option for a friend.”

“She’s not.” He curses under his breath, and I sit up taller. “She’s not your only friend, Junie.”

My eyes burn with unshed anger.

“Fen—”

Fen. Right. Fenway’s my friend. Hudson is my friend.

Not him. Not Cole. Not anymore.

“Fenway’s the PR expert here,” he says. “He may not have anticipated how far Grace would take this, but he won’t make that mistake again. And those people online, they don’t know you, Junie. They saw a sixty second video of one of the worst moments of your life and decided they understood everything. They don’t.”

I force my gaze to meet his and stay there.

“Do you?” I ask. “Do you understand everything?”

So many stories play behind his eyes, but now there's a wall there too. An arbitrary boundary he set to keep me out, and that hurts more than anything Grace has done.

"No, Junie. I don't understand everything. But what I do know is that you deserved better." This time he's the one to look away. "From them, and from me."

It's the only acknowledgment he's ever given that he knows how much he hurt me by leaving the way he did. It also tells me that I may never get the answers I want about why.

"Where do I go from here?" Somehow, I've fallen back into the safety of our friendship, except this time, I don't know who I am anymore and I'm afraid I'll drown before I escape.

Because this version of me is the scared little girl who used to curl up on her front porch, begging someone to see her, but knowing deep down that everything she wanted would be ripped away eventually.

And maybe that's the problem. He's always been able to see me, and now I can't protect myself without knowing who I can become.

"Fuck if I know, Junie." He sighs, and some of the tension leaves his back and shoulders. "Why don't we start with what we can do, huh?"

"Great. What's that?" There's my snark…of course she couldn't stay away for long.

"Well, Viper…"

Warmth. It begins in my chest and spreads outward at an alarming rate. That nickname should not make me feel good.

"For starters, why don't we work on being friends again, in real life, without social media?" He holds my gaze for a long moment. He used to be able to read all my expressions. Can he see the emptiness in me now?

"Friends, hmm?"

He nods, his lips ticking up on the right side, like he believes friendship is all he has to offer.

"Friends." It's not acceptance. It's not forgiveness.

It's not even a truce.

It's just…something. Somewhere between spite and us.

We sit in the silence until the sky begins to lighten. We don't get into my asshole ex or what the comments say. I don't ask about his life or his equally shitty ex. We just…exist. In the same space. Breathing the same air.

I’m not even sure what I want from Cole anymore, but I do know him. He’s planning to fix me up, get me steady on my feet, then send me back to Boston—just another pit stop in his life.

And I can’t do that again.

My exit strategy has to be clean, efficient, set in stone so I don’t fall back into the easy comfort of what used to be.

Do the job. Collect the check. Make a new plan. Move on.

“I should try to get a little sleep before I have to pretend to be a functioning employee,” I say as I stand.

Do the job. Collect the check. Make a new plan. Move on.

Easy.

He rises with me and shocks the hell out of me when he tugs me into a hug that doesn’t allow for any awkwardness between us. I stand frozen for five full seconds before I find myself returning the embrace.

When he finally pulls away, a tiny seizure clenches my heart—a thumping and a pounding that feels like a second chance. This isn’t going to be easy.

“Nana Mae wants to see you at nine. She has…plans,” he says with the crooked smile that made me fall in love with him when I was sixteen.

I take a step backward. “Should I be scared?”

“Terrified,” he teases.

The corner of my mouth twitches, but I don’t allow a smile.

“Good night, Juniper.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to say Junie, but I’m already struggling to find my equilibrium. “Good night, Cole.”

I step inside my apartment as the sky glows in shades of pink and gold, knowing if I don’t figure out how to protect my heart against the one who still holds it, what’s left of my life will blow up in my face too.

And that would be an explosion I’d never recover from.

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4

RECALIBRATING

COLE

She turns off her apartment light, and I'm still standing on her stairs like an idiot.

I need to move, but my gaze lingers on her window. It's been years since I was this close to her. I can't explain the way my system recalibrates when she's near—I just know it does, and I've spent six years trying to forget it.

Jesus Christ. I even failed at hugging her—at least my second attempt went better.

Spinning on my heels, I jog down the steps.

The lanterns that frame my doorway flicker with life. It was Nana Mae's one request when she transferred ownership of the land to me so I could create The Haven.

"A porchlight tells you someone cares…someone's waiting," she'd said. "It means you can always come home."

Once more, I check Junie's window. The curtain drops suddenly. Was she standing there? Watching me?

A memory I've actively avoided flares to life.

"Dance with me, Cole." Her smile tilts to the left, the aftereffects of the champagne I've seen her consume for the last three hours.

Not a question—it never is with her. That sharp tongue hides her soft center. It always has. But now? At eighteen? Her confidence is growing. It's a beautiful thing.

It's a dangerous thing too. Because as I stare at her now, eyes glimmering with mirth, she could be my downfall.

She's fucking stunning.

I don't know how to process the shift in my feelings.

It's why I'm being forced to leave. She's too young for me. She's Nolan's sister.

She doesn't know what I've done.

And if my little Viper had any idea how Natalie has forced my hand… It wouldn't be enough for Junie to know that I'd broken up with Natalie. She'd want a full annihilation of Natalie's life. The chain reaction would ruin Junie's.

The only thing I can do now is ensure that no one finds out how deeply that fuckup goes. Because if Junie finds out what I've done to protect her, I'll lose her anyway.

"Cole?"

'No' is on the tip of my tongue, but that word, no, squeezes off my air supply. I'm drowning on dry land, so when she places her hand in mine, when it feels like the only right thing in my life, when she rests her head against my chest, I dance.

"Don't ever leave me, Cole." Her words are sleepy and wrap around my lungs like a noose. "You're the only good part left."

That was the final straw. The moment that changed me on a molecular level. The only option I had was to leave and give her the opportunity to live without the baggage I would have saddled her with.

Three weeks later, when Natalie hammered the final nail in my coffin, I left Boston behind for good.

Unfortunately, now I know that leaving didn't stop the longing. It just gave it six years to grow roots. And now, for the second time, I'll have to find a way to leave her better than I found her.

But this time, she'll take all the good I have left in me with her too.

I drag my hand down my face and head home. *Friends*. I'd offered her friendship even though we both felt it was a demotion.

HUDSON APPEARS IN THE KITCHEN FIRST, FULLY DRESSED IN YESTERDAY'S clothes, a laptop bag slung over his shoulder like he's heading to court and not a regional airport with one terminal and a Cinnabon.

"She still asleep?" he asks, peering out my back door.

"I wouldn't know." I slide a mug of coffee toward him.

He takes it, then stares at me over the rim. Hudson has a built-in bullshit detector, the way that dogs detect fear. Silently. Accurately. With full intent to bite.

"Right." He takes a long sip. "Take care of her, Cole. And I don't mean fix her and send her on her way. I mean let her be a goddamn mess in your vicinity without trying to solve it."

I don't know what to do with that, so I nod.

Fen stumbles in next, wearing one of my shirts and basketball shorts that he can barely keep up and are decidedly not mine. He looks like a child playing dress-up.

"Morning." He yawns wide enough to dislocate something. "I left a note under Spite-Berry's door. I told her the welcome banner was Stanley's doing and that he's harmless." He pauses. "Mostly."

"That was…nice."

He slaps my back hard enough to make my coffee slosh over the sides. "Take care of our girl."

Our girl. The words sting in a way he doesn't intend. But it's the reminder I need that she was never just mine. We all belong to the same makeshift family that formed out of tragedy and stubbornness.

They load into their rideshare, and Fen waves as though he's on a Mardi Gras float, while Hudson gives me the middle finger that carries the weight of a threat, a promise, and an IOU.

Then they're gone. And it's just me, The Haven, and the object of my infatuation—who is most likely upstairs plotting her revenge.

JUNIE ARRIVES AT 9:06.

Not on the hour. Not a quarter past. 9:06. Which tells me she's making a point. Junie always has a point. She was late one minute for every year I've been gone, but not late enough to be considered unprofessional.

Unfortunately for her, I was trained on Junie's spite years ago. This is classic Juniper Mercer—and I've fucking missed it.

She walks into the kitchen with wet hair that makes her dark blond strands appear brown and a to-go cup of coffee that still has steam rising from the top.

I don't linger on how her jeans cling to her ass, the shirt that's tailored to the perfect curves of her body, or how her wardrobe choice today feels like a test. One I refuse to comment on. But it's her *I dare you to mention my tardiness* expression that makes me feel alive.

Game on, Junie. Game fucking on.

"Good morning, Juniper."

She flinches on her name. She never did like me calling her Juniper, and it appears that hasn't changed either.

She lifts her coffee in acknowledgment. No words. Just vibes. Hostile ones at that.

Nana Mae, who's been lying in wait like a woman who was born for this exact moment, rounds the corner, holding a laptop and a banker's box stuffed with folders.

"There she is. Morning, sweetheart." Nana Mae deposits the box on the kitchen table with a thud that rattles the salt and pepper shakers. "These are the financials for the last eighteen months. The laptop has our accounting software, which I use loosely because the last person who managed it, Devin, had the organizational skill of a squirrel on drugs."

Junie's gaze flicks to me, then back to my grandmother. "Devin?"

"My nephew." Nana Mae's tone could frost glass. "He was Cole's CFO until about six months ago when he decided that vacationing was a viable career path. But that's neither here nor there."

It's very much here and there, but I let Nana Mae steer.

"Fix this, dear. Cole operates out of his home office because he insists on living in the model home, so we've set you up in the conference room, which is really just the formal living room at the front of the house." Nana pats Junie's shoulder. "Cole, don't you have a meeting with the landscape committee?"

My gaze cuts to Junie. I expected Nana Mae to put Junie to work, but I didn't expect her to just dump her into the middle of a landfill. Not with… everything going on in her personal life.

But it’s a clear dismissal because there is no landscape committee meeting. Nana Mae is operating on the principle that Junie and I in the same room for extended periods will either result in a homicide or a romance, and she’d like to control the variable.

“I’ll check in with you later,” I mumble with no idea who it’s aimed at.

“Looking forward to it, Mr. Whittaker.” Junie displays the smile she uses when she’s lining up a kill shot.

Mr. Whittaker. Christ. This won’t end well.

I grab my keys and get the hell out of my own kitchen before I say something I’ll regret.

Since there’s no meeting, the only place for me to go is the clubhouse. As I’m walking the path there, I check in with Frank about his gutters and make a mental note to clear them out when he and Dollie are at church next Sunday.

Then Stanley nearly takes me out with his golf cart while trying to show me his new dashcam footage. He only hightails it away from me when Marley, the self-appointed social coordinator, walks up to give me a seventeen-minute update on the parking situation here at the clubhouse, which is not a situation, because there are only ever twelve cars and forty spots.

By the time I make it back to the house, at least two hours have passed, and Junie has taken over the conference table like a five-foot dictator staging a military operation.

The banker’s box is gutted, its contents organized into neat stacks. Her laptop is open and projecting three different spreadsheets to various screens. She has a pen between her teeth, one in the knot in her hair, and another tapping aggressively against the wood grain of my table, all while she mutters.

Mutters.

I lean against the doorframe to take it all in because walking in there feels like stepping into something sacred. Her blue eyes are electric. The exhaustion from last night has been replaced with something I haven’t seen in way too long.

Focus. Purpose. The quiet ferocity of a woman who was built to succeed.

“Did he pay this invoice twice?” Junie says, I think to herself. The pen clicks against her teeth. “Who reconciles accounts like this? Animals?”

She still hasn’t noticed me, and I’m not announcing myself because watching Juniper Mercer in her element is the most dangerous thing I’ve done in years, and I can’t stop myself.

This is the girl who made a perfect score on her statistics final and then got pissed because she got a B plus in pottery. The woman who mapped out a five-year career plan in a Google spreadsheet with color-coded tables. Numbers are her love language, and right now, she’s speaking fluently.

My chest does something between aching and expanding. Something that feels like pride in a person I have no right to be proud of.

“Your ex-CFO was wildly incompetent,” she says, startling me into standing upright. She doesn’t even look at me, but my body responds to her as if it knows her circadian rhythm. “These numbers just don’t add up, Cole. They’re designed to look as though they add up while actively not adding up. That takes skill or complete cognitive maladroitness.”

“You…knew I was standing here?”

“You breathe loudly.”

I don’t. I know I don’t. But I do like that she’s still as in tune with me as I am with her. I just can’t do anything with that information.

“Which is it?” I ask, even though I already know the answer. I’ve known for weeks. I just didn’t have proof or the skillset to find it.

As much as it pains me to admit, I need Junie. I need her to find the proof of my innocence because I don’t trust anyone else. It’s also why I’m managing the information she gets and how quickly—it will be a curated drop so she can find and follow every single step Devin took to fuck up The Haven.

The truth is, it will kill me if she, for one second, thinks I’m the guilty party here—but I also know she can do this.

The destruction of her life might be what saves mine. Karma, it seems, is a petty bitch too.

Junie stops clicking her pen. She looks up at me for the first time today, and there’s no snark or sass in her eyes. No armor. Just the sharp, clear intelligence that’s always been her most undervalued trait.

“There’s definitely some financial manipulation happening here, but it’s too soon to know if it’s intentional. I’m following the breadcrumbs though. I’ll figure it out.”

She will. I just hope it’s the only mystery she unravels while she’s here.

Fucking Devin. My own goddamn family, running the same playbook everyone outside of my inner circle seems to default to—take what you can and leave the damage for Cole to clean up.

“There’s more,” Junie adds, softening her tone. It makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. “I need more time, but if what I’m seeing is what I think it is—”

“Then The Haven has a much bigger problem than a messy spreadsheet,” I finish for her.

She nods and holds my gaze a beat longer than either of us is comfortable with.

“I’ll need access to the original contracts. And the bank statements going back two years, not eighteen months.” She finally looks away.

“Done.” *Please find what I haven’t been able to.*

“And oat milk. Your fridge is a travesty.”

She doesn’t look at me, but I swear her eyes crinkle at the corner, and my lips tug into a grin I hate myself for. *Friends*, I remind myself. *This is what friends do. They bring each other oat milk and pretend the room doesn’t have a pulse.*

“I’ll be sure to stock it to your liking.”

Her face flushes red, then she picks up a new file and gets back to work.

I wish it were that easy for me, but the rest of the day is a parade.

Not a literal one. Not yet, anyway. Stanley’s already pitched a “Welcome the new girl” golf cart procession for Saturday, and Marley shut it down on the grounds that he hasn’t filed the proper permit.

Now Stanley’s appealing.

The revolving door of Haven residents is as close to a circus as it comes.

At 12:15, I catch Stanley pressed against the office window with binoculars, mouthing the word *welcome* and making a heart shape with his hands. Junie, of course, doesn’t notice because she’s elbow deep in vendor files, so I physically redirect him before she looks up and calls the police.

At 1:47, Marley calls the house line. I hand the phone to Junie without warning.

“You’ve been added to three committees,” Marley says. I can hear her through the receiver even four feet away.

“I didn’t volunteer for—”

“Noted. First meeting is Thursday.”

Click.

Junie stares at the phone in her hand like it bit her. “Did I just get conscripted?”

Muscles in my cheek twitch, but I absolutely refuse to smile. “Welcome to The Haven.”

At 2:30, Katie arrives with a bottle of rosé, a tube of SPF 50, and zero boundaries. She drops into the chair across from Junie as if their brief meeting last night has made them fast friends.

“So. Cole,” she says with enough insinuation to power a small city.

“What about him?” Junie asks while my blood pressure spikes.

I roll my office chair to the left to glare at Katie, and she carries on as though she doesn’t see me.

“Nothing. Just…” Katie swirls her wineglass, which is already full. “He’s different since you got here. Less…” She waves her hand in the air. “Broody.”

“Katie,” I say from my open office door, “I’m right here.”

She shrugs but doesn’t take her eyes off Junie.

“I’ve been here for one day,” Junie says, dropping her gaze back to her work.

“Honey,” Katie coos. “He started smiling at six this morning. That man hasn’t smiled before noon in two years. I have the data. And Stanley saw him on his run.”

“Katie.” One word. Full exasperation. “Out.”

“I haven’t finished my—”

“Take it with you. She’s working.”

Katie stands, but not before patting Junie’s hand and stage-whispering, “He’s always like this. Don’t let it fool you.”

I head for the kitchen before anyone notices the vein in my forehead and pass Bea on my way out. My house has always had a revolving door of Haven residents, but this is getting out of hand.

“I heard she’s having a tough time,” she says, holding up a tray that smells like chocolate.

I step out of the way and watch Junie’s expression go from confused to annoyed to *what the fuck*.

“How did you—”

“Stanley’s newsletter,” Bea says as if that’s supposed to explain everything.

And if you live here, it does. God help us, it does.

Junie catches my eye as Bea sets down the tray. Her expression is equal parts *what the hell's happening* and something softer.

These people are ridiculous. They're nosy and overbearing and they have zero concept of boundaries.

They also wore me down inside of six weeks, and I'm twice as stubborn as she is.

So good luck, Junie.

JUNIE STRIKES AT THE END OF THE DAY. I'M ACTUALLY SURPRISED SHE MADE it this long.

It happens when I go to pour my evening coffee and it's been diluted with water. My favorite mug—the oversized one that Bea gave me for Christmas—is on the top shelf where I can reach it just fine, but where Nana Mae would never put it.

Then I sit at my desk to review Junie's notes, and my chair drops three inches. My knee hits the underside of the table hard enough to send her neat stacks of paper sliding to the floor.

That's when I hear it coming from her office. A laugh. Not the polite, controlled one she shared last night. A real one. Quick and sharp and bitten off, like she'd caught herself enjoying it too much.

I should address it. Set a boundary or be irritated. At the very least, inform her that this is a professional arrangement and psychological warfare on her employer is not in her job description.

Instead, I adjust my chair, reorganize the papers, and sit back with my coffee.

Because that laugh? The one she tried to silence?

It's a sound that awakens all the parts of me that died six years ago, so some sick, selfish part of me doesn't care that it's at my expense.

Friends, I remind myself for the hundredth time today.

My phone buzzes.

Fen & Tonic:

Fen: Day one survival check. Did Spite-Berry commit any felonies?

Hudson: My money's on a misdemeanor.

Nolan: Just check in, Cole.

I stare at the screen. There's so much I could say. That she's brilliant. That she's already moving in the direction it took me two months to find. That she made my kitchen feel like a war zone and home at the same time. That The Haven residents adopted her before lunch and she hasn't lashed out at them even once.

That when she laughs, the whole house heats by ten degrees.

Instead, I type one word.

Cole: Fine.

And for the first time in six years, I mean it the way I've always hated because *fine* carries the weight of everything I cannot say.

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5

DEATH BY DECAF

JUNIE

IT'S TAKEN ME A WEEK, BUT I'VE FINALLY DEVELOPED A NON-WORK-related routine here at The Haven.

Wake up. Stare at the ceiling of the garage apartment that, for some reason, always smells like lavender and old wood. Avoid the mirror because the bags under my eyes have their own zip code. Drink copious amounts of coffee. And my favorite, plot psychological warfare against Cole Whittaker.

It's the last part that gets me out of bed each morning.

And today, my sabotage is a three-pronged attack. First, I swapped his coffee for decaf. The man drinks a full pot before nine and still looks as though he hasn't slept since the Obama administration, so this should be interesting. He won't notice the switch because I bought the same brand and resealed the bag with a hair straightener.

Spite requires attention to detail.

My second and third objectives will hit him when he least expects it.

Hudson would absolutely chew me out for my antics, but a girl's got to survive her first heartbreak somehow. Petty revenge is harmless fun, and it's what's getting me through this forced proximity with Cole.

By the time he wanders into my conference room, I'm settled at the table with my laptop open and an expression of complete innocence. Since this room is technically a formal living room, it's open on one side, and I can hear every move he makes.

"Morning," he says.

“Mr. Whittaker.” I don’t look up, but I do use the tone I reserve for men who think their very existence warrants a fan club.

Cole takes a sip of his coffee and frowns. He pulls the mug to eye level as though it personally offended him, then takes another sip.

I bite my lip so I don’t give myself away.

“Does this taste—”

“I wouldn’t know. I brought my own.” I lift my Grounds for Celebration cup as evidence. As much as I planned to avoid this shop on principle alone, they sucked me in like a moth to a flame, and now I’m slightly addicted.

He drinks the coffee anyway, because Cole Whittaker’s allergic to admitting that anything in his vicinity is out of his control. He would sit in a burning building and call it a warm draft if he wasn’t the one to find an extinguisher.

Tucking that observation into a vault of things I shouldn’t know about him, I open the next spreadsheet.

“Mail’s here,” Nana Mae says with a bright smile. “Oh, Cole. Natalie sent another—”

Cole aggressively snatches the mail from Nana Mae’s hands. That’s when I register her words.

Natalie. As in, Cole’s ex and the biggest bully of my entire life. Because why wouldn’t life throw those two things at me in one bitter package and not expect me to turn out as I have?

I don’t know the exact trigger, but somewhere around my fifteenth birthday, Natalie went from silently glaring at me to a full-time bully who thrived in the shadows of my home.

“Natalie?” My voice croaks. “You’re still—”

“No.” Cole cuts me off. “Natalie and I haven’t been together since I was in Boston. But she sends me updates on her little brother sometimes.”

He stuffs the letter into his back pocket and storms into the kitchen, taking his lie-coated excuse with him.

Nana Mae *tsk*s but says nothing as she hands me a stack of bills, then makes her way outside.

Fucking trauma triggers, and fuck Cole for never seeing the truth. I slam another folder open on the table and take all my anger out on numbers… because numbers never lie.

BY ELEVEN, I THINK I'VE FOUND ANOTHER PROBLEM.

Not a mistake. Not an oversight.

A possible pattern.

Devin—Mae's nephew, and former CFO whose filing system I can only describe as what happens when a weasel earns an MBA from a diploma mill—didn't just mismanage The Haven's finances. He dismantled them. Methodically. Over months.

Yesterday, I found what I think are forged signatures and invoices paid twice to a company I can't prove even exists. Today, I found something… worse.

There's a line item labeled "community enrichment" that appears to be siphoning $4,000 a month into an account I can't trace from here. Four thousand freaking dollars. Every month. For the last year!

That's $48,000 that should've gone to maintaining homes, the clubhouse, common areas—all the places these people live and love. The places they've entrusted Cole to protect.

Leaning back in my chair, I press my pen against my lips until I'm sure the cap has left a mark.

It's all here, just waiting for someone to put the pieces together. I can feel it. I just can't *see* it yet, and that pisses me off.

But the worst part of it all is, if I'm right, Devin built every breadcrumb to look as though it leads right back to Cole. It's in his name. It's his approvals on documents I'm betting he never saw. If anyone audited The Haven right now, they wouldn't find Devin's fingerprints.

They'd find Cole's.

And he knows it. I read it on his face when I told him there was a pattern of behavior. He wasn't surprised, he was…relieved? Resigned? He looked as though he'd been carrying the weight of it, just waiting for someone to finally confirm it.

So why hasn't he done anything about it?

Standing from my desk, I plan to do some digging.

I find him near the coffee and smirk. He's already on his second pot, and it's not even noon. The decaf is clearly doing its job because there's a slowness to his movements that's new.

Good, I think. Then immediately feel like a jerk. But only a small jerk. Medium jerk at most.

“When did Devin actually leave?” I ask, leaning against the wall with my arms crossed. I keep my posture intentionally professional.

Cole jumps and uses two hands to steady his coffee. He can’t already be going through caffeine withdrawals, can he?

The pinch of his brow and the shakiness of his hands indicate he might be. And if that’s the case, then I’m actually doing him a favor. Caffeine addiction is one he should curb anyway. It totally messes with your nervous system.

“Six months ago.” His eyebrow twitches as he speaks.

“Why did he leave?”

“It didn’t work out.”

“Cole.” I wait until he looks at me. “If what I’m seeing is correct, it isn’t just *not working out*. It’s a felony. Multiple felonies, actually. Why haven’t you gone to the police?”

A shadow clouds his eyes—like he’s holding a grenade and choosing to absorb the blast rather than let anyone else get hit.

“It’s complicated, Junie.”

“It’s *theft*, Cole.”

“I know what it is.” His voice has dropped to a register I’ve only heard him use twice before. Once the night Nolan told him my mom was gone, and once when I overheard him ask Nolan if I was okay after he left.

Every instinct I possess is fuming, screaming at me to push him now because that’s what I do. I pry and dig and shove my way through until the truth is laid bare and bloody on the floor.

But there’s something in his body language, his voice, that stops me. He’s known to be a martyr, but why is he standing in this wreckage all alone?

“There’s a county tax assessment coming up,” I say instead, pulling back to the facts that don’t require emotional involvement. I’ve been there, done that, and ended up in tatters. I can’t—I won’t go there again. “If these books aren’t clean by then, it won’t just be your reputation on the line. The residents could be assessed penalties, Cole. Property values could drop. The empty homes won’t sell. Some of these people have planned their retirement around your community standards. Not everyone will be able to absorb these costs.”

His knuckles go white around his coffee mug, and fine, a tiny glimmer of guilt lodges itself in my throat.

“How long do we have?”

“Six weeks. Maybe eight if I can stall by filing an extension.”

He nods. Just once. “Well, then, Viper. I guess you’re stuck with me for at least eight weeks because I’ve spent the last two months trying to find a way out of this clusterfuck and I couldn’t do it.” His gaze darkens, burning through my existence as if he’s searching my soul for something he won’t name. “I need you, Junie.”

I should hate how relieved that makes me. I do hate how his words incinerate the spite I thrive on. “Don’t flatter me now, Whittaker. You need me to fix your spreadsheets, sure, but me, as a person? You left her behind six years ago.”

He sucks in a breath I pretend not to hear as I scurry to my makeshift office. Maybe I should work at the clubhouse from now on.

The more space I can put between me and Cole, the better, because he doesn’t need me. He needs someone, but not me.

Apparently, he still has Natalie in his life, and that alone is reason enough to keep my walls heaven-high.

THE NEXT MORNING, I SKIP THE BREAKFAST I WAS INVITED TO AT THE clubhouse. Not on purpose—not really. Making friends has never been my thing, and everyone here wants to be a friend.

I also woke up at the crack of dawn and got lost in the vendor files I snuck into my apartment late last night and promptly forgot that community meals are monitored events around here.

My mistake announces itself at 8:45 when I hear a strange rumble.

Not thunder or a roaring engine, but a pack of semi-electric golf carts that have been…optimized for maximum speed.

Pulling back the curtain, I count eight of them idling from the base of my stairs all the way down Cole’s long driveway in a formation that would make any marching band director proud. Stanley is front and center with his walkie-talkie while he fights with Marley, who’s holding a clipboard in the air like a weapon.

What in the fresh hell is this?

“Juniper!” Stanley shouts to the heavens. “This here’s a Safe Haven Wellness Committee check. Please confirm signs of life!”

He—this—he’s joking, right?

Behind him, Cole’s front door opens, and he stands there in a button-down, holding a steaming mug of caffeine-free coffee.

And he flashes a blinding, infuriating grin toward my window. He didn’t even give me one goddamn warning, and I know for a fact that he went to the breakfast this morning because I may or may not have watched him leave.

Cole sees me staring at him, and he beckons me out with a come-hither finger. I despise his stupid sexy fingers.

“Juniper Marie Mercer, are you in there?” Marley calls next.

How the hell does she have my full name?

Opening my door in my pajamas, holding my own fully caffeinated coffee, and wearing what I’m sure is a look of bewilderment, I step out onto the small porch.

“You weren’t at breakfast, dear,” a small older lady says, rushing the stairs. Well, she would consider it rushing. The woman has to be in her late seventies.

I set my coffee cup on the porch and meet her somewhere in the middle, where she shoves a basket into my belly.

“I’m Dollie, Frank’s wife. We hadn’t seen you in twenty-four hours. There are protocols here, deary.”

“Protocols,” I repeat. “For…missing breakfast.”

“For any unexplained absence exceeding twelve hours,” Marley shouts from below.

“Turn on your damn hearing aid, Marley.” Stanley points to his ear while wearing a *duh* expression.

Marley does something on her phone, then returns to her clipboard. “It’s in the community handbook, section four, subsection B. Shall I send you a copy?”

“Ah, no…thanks. I was working. I’m fine.”

“Working.” Marley draws out the word while she writes it down. She’s probably writing me a ticket.

Cole’s chuckle causes goose bumps to rise on my arms, but I refuse to look at him. Instead, I focus on a woman walking through the golf cart brigade. I haven’t met her yet, but she’s watching me with calm, assessing

eyes. She has a silver bob and reading glasses hanging from a chain around her neck, and where everyone else radiates concern, she emotes…patience. The unnerving kind.

The kind I've been forced to visit with at various times in my life.

"I'm Bea," she says when she catches me staring. She doesn't seem to have a golf cart. "I'm also a semi-retired therapist, but that's not the point."

It's *very much the point*, and every alarm bell in my body chimes at once.

"I'm fine," I say again, firmer this time. "Really. I just got caught up in work."

Bea tilts her head. Not in challenge. Not a confrontation. Just a quiet, measured look that makes me feel as though she's dissecting all my lies. "Your brother once said that to me too."

My—she knows Nolan?

"Do you often throw things away?" she asks. "Or only when someone you love betrays you?"

The baked goods nearly slip from my hands.

She's seen the videos. Obviously. At over two million views, who hasn't seen them? Nana Mae probably had a showing party with popcorn on the big screen over at the clubhouse for her—what did she call it—Screen & Steam club?

But there's something about the way Bea asks—without judgment, without the morbid curiosity I've gotten from everyone else—that freezes me to the spot.

I don't even have an answer. Not one that doesn't crack open something I'm not ready to analyze.

"I—I should get back to work," I manage while actively avoiding the concern on Cole's face.

Bea nods as if she expected nothing less. *Asshole old lady.*

I'm panting as they all make haphazard U-turns in Cole's driveway.

Bea's question lingers long after she's turned away.

I close the door and lean against it as if it's the only thing holding me up.

"Both," I mutter. "The answer is…both."

My phone buzzes while I'm elbow deep in bank statements that afternoon. Unfortunately, I'd had to leave the sanctuary of my apartment and face a yawning, grumpy-assed Cole to get the statements I needed.

Group chats are bad. Private messages are worse. Glancing around the conference table, I listen for any signs of life. Cole's been so quiet, I wonder if he fell asleep at his desk.

It would serve him right.

Fen: Hey, don't freak out.

Great opener. Very calming.

Junie: What?

Fen: Grace's account was picked up by the Scout Report. They ran a piece called The Other Side of Sorry.

My stomach drops to my ankles.

Fen: They didn't use your name, but they used your photo. The window video is embedded. Grace did an interview.

Junie: She did WHAT?

Fen: Hudson already sent a takedown notice for the photo. But there's more.

She's still profiting from the misery she created.

Fen: They also called my office asking where you are. Someone, likely Mr. Fissile, tipped them off that you haven't been seen and might have left town. They don't have a location yet.

I read that line three times.
They don't have a location yet.
Yet.

Junie: What did you tell them?

Fen: I'm a PR professional, Junie. I told them nothing and implied they'd be hearing from our legal team, which is just Hudson in a bad mood, but they don't know that.

Fen: I’m staying at your house so it looks like someone’s home now.

Fen: Stay OFF socials. Don’t post anything with a location. And maybe tell Cole to make sure nobody at the compound is live streaming you—or the Safe Haven check-in committee again either. I’ve already had to scrub those.

Outside, Stanley is currently making his third lap of the block with a GoPro his grandson gifted him mounted to his golf cart.

They might be a problem.

Junie: I’ll handle it.

Fen: Handle it like a normal person or handle it like Spite-Berry? Remember, that’s an important distinction right now.

Junie: Goodbye, Fenway.

Fen: Never mind. I texted Cole. Let him handle The Havens.

I drop my phone face down and then press my palms into my eyes until I see stars.

Grace is doing interviews. She knew the audience would fall for her.

And now her fame-chasing is actively attacking me because my pain has a shelf life and the world is ready for their next installment.

I came here to disappear. To do the work, to earn money, to figure out who I am when the Internet stops watching.

That’s the real problem here. I don’t know who I am or who I want to be—and I’ve always had a plan. Plans are safe. Plans give me purpose. Purpose keeps me out of trouble. Purpose keeps me safe.

How did my life get so derailed that I’ve landed in the one spot where privacy is a theoretical concept, while being hunted by a tabloid, enduring wellness check protocols, untangling a financial crime, and trying very hard not to notice that my boss still smells like cedar?

“Ugh. What the hell are you doing, Junie?” My forehead crashes to the table, and I bite my tongue to keep from screaming at the unfairness of it all.

I wallow for all of thirty seconds before Cole curses loudly. Through the window, I catch sight of him in the yard. He’s on the phone, and from the

rigid set of his shoulders, I'd say it's not a good call. He drags a hand through his hair—a gesture I remember from a hundred late nights at the kitchen table in Boston when he'd be hunched over his internship application, design ideas, or tiny models he'd build while I pretended to do my calculus but was really just watching him.

Well, at least until Natalie started sending me photos of myself staring at him like a lovesick puppy dog. Her jealousy had a nasty mean streak I absorbed more than once.

He pockets his phone and stands there for a moment, staring at the ground. Even his posture is familiar. I memorized it at my mother's funeral. I've mimicked it ever since whenever I've needed armor. It's what happens when you're forced to carry a load that's too heavy but you're too stubborn to set it down.

I could go out there and check on him. I could ask if he's okay.

Instead, I pick up my phone.

Juniper & Her Berries:

Junie: I got wellness-checked by retirees today. They have protocols.

Fen: Are they adopting you?

Fen: Did they add you to the newsletters? Can you get me in?

Hudson: Please tell me you're eating actual food and not just gas station garbage.

Junie: I ate a muffin, MOM.

Nolan: How's Cole?

Outside, I know Cole's reading the messages by the way he hangs his head.

How's Cole?

Cole's drowning in a financial disaster his own family created. Cole's—

Cole's a big boy who can answer for himself, so I ignore my brother's message, knowing a reply from Cole will never come.

Maybe his silence is my version of spite.

We're standing at the same impasse, blaming each other for not being the first one to cross it.

Teenage me would have flung myself at his feet.

Twenty-four-year-old me knows better. *Love is not a renewable resource, and I don't have much left to give. Not anymore.*

I won't be that girl again—not for someone who has already proven he can so easily walk away.

I close the chat and open my next file, but Bea's question nags at me.

Do you often throw things away, or only when someone you love betrays you?

No reason to examine why my mind files that question next to Cole's name instead of Grace's.

Some things are better left in the dark.

I know that better than anyone.

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6

A PROCLIVITY FOR PETTY

COLE

I HAVEN'T LIVED WITH JUNIE IN SIX YEARS, BUT SOME THINGS NEVER change. Like her proclivity for petty.

She never does anything to truly cross a boundary, but she will fuck up your day, and she's definitely been fucking with mine.

For the last four days, I've made a pot of decaf coffee she thinks I don't know about. It only took me two days of brain fog and a headache that wrapped around my skull like barbed wire to know she'd been up to her old tricks. It was confirmed when I pulled the decaf bag from the recycling bin and saw the label.

I haven't said a word about it. Partly because admitting she got me means she wins, and partly because her watching me drink it with a barely contained grin is the closest thing to joy she's willing to give me.

And I'm not about to take that from her. Even if it means secretly brewing a pot in my upstairs office like an addict hiding his stash.

She also signed me up for every resident newsletter The Haven has to offer. My inbox is a war zone thanks to her. Stanley's golf cart tips alone have generated forty-seven emails in three days. Dollie's cat facts have taught me that cats have over twenty vocalizations, and Marley's bulletin board is a list of passive-aggressive complaints thinly disguised as community updates that come through one at a fucking time.

It only took me a few minutes to create a workflow to send them to a separate folder so Junie doesn't realize I'm onto her.

She’s also sneaking into my office to rearrange my shit. Not a lot. Just an inch to the left or the right, but enough to feel…off. I would have noticed even if her scent didn’t linger long after she’d gone.

But the thing that keeps me up at night more than caffeine withdrawal is how Junie flinches when I walk in a room.

It’s not dramatic. Most people wouldn’t even notice. It’s a slight tightening of her shoulders, a half-second pause in whatever she’s doing. A shift in her body that angles her just out of reach like she’s bracing for impact.

She used to do this when her mom was in the room. I’d watch from the kitchen doorway as her mom’s voice climbed, and Junie at twelve or thirteen would make herself smaller by pulling her elbows in and tucking her chin. A girl trying to take up as little space as possible so the shrapnel would miss her.

She’s doing it with me now and it’s so much worse than the silence of the last six years. It’s worse than being called Mr. Whittaker. Worse than the line she carved into my chest three days ago that I still haven’t been able to shake.

“Don’t flatter me now, Whittaker. You need me to fix your spreadsheets, sure, but me, as a person? You left her behind six years ago.”

I deserved the way that cut. But knowing and surviving are two different things, and I’m not sure I’m managing either.

Then there’s Natalie’s letter that sits in my desk drawer like a perfectly placed bomb. I haven’t opened it. It’ll say the same thing they always say. It’s an update on Marcus. A reminder of the lie I foster. A thread that ties my past to my present in ways I can’t cut without hurting people who’ve been hurt enough.

And now Junie knows the letters exist. The look on her face when Nana Mae said Natalie’s name—the way her voice cracked on the first syllable—told me everything I needed to know about her assumptions.

She’s wrong. But telling her why means telling her everything, and no one’s ready for the fallout of that confession.

So instead, I make my secret coffee, delete Stanley’s latest email about horn decibels, and prepare for tonight because Nana Mae has decided that Junie’s attending her first Screen & Steam meeting, and when she makes a decision, the only options are compliance or witness protection.

ON THURSDAY NIGHTS, THE CLUBHOUSE TRANSFORMS INTO SOMETHING between a Las Vegas sports bar and a courtroom.

Eight residents occupy their designated spots—and they are designated. I learned that the hard way when I sat in Katie's chair then received a lecture on territorial respect that lasted longer than most sermons. Living in the south, that's saying something.

The projector screen takes up half the wall. Wine bottles line the counter like ants marching in perfect formation. And the energy in the room is roughly the equivalent of a New England Patriots playoff game, except the stakes are whether contestant Jake deserves a second group date on the show *Ring or Run* or if he should be eliminated.

Marley likes to think she runs the operation with the scoring system she developed and guards with the ferocity of a tenured professor protecting their research. Categories, and yes, I'm loath to admit this includes connection potential, villain probability, fantasy suite readiness, and a heat scale that ranges from jalapeño to ghost pepper, with an honorary category Katie added called "Katie's divorced" that no one fully understands but everyone respects.

Typically, I avoid these nights. Not because I don't like the residents—they're…fine—I just prefer to deal with them from a distance. Miles, preferably. And no conversing. If I could just go about fixing all their shit without speaking to them, that would be even better.

Plus, the last time I came at Nana Mae's urging, Katie rated my emotional availability as a "jalapeño at best" and told me I'd be eliminated by week two.

Tonight, though, I'm here because Junie's here and I need to see what happens when these people get their hands on her.

I even arrived early enough to scope out a spot where I could watch her without being obvious. So of course she arrives late. Not dramatically, but enough to make it clear that she didn't want to come.

She's wearing a sweatshirt that hangs off one shoulder, and her hair is piled high on her head, showcasing her skin and the long, delicate column of her neck.

A bare shoulder has never been sexy. Until now. I bite back a groan when her collarbone kisses the light as she leans forward. I want my lips,

my tongue, my teeth there.

And it'll never, ever happen.

"There she is," Nana Mae announces, steering Junie to the empty seat between Katie and Dollie—a human chess piece on Nana's board. "Juniper, this is Screen & Steam. You're going to love it." She hands her a scoring card that gets printed in my office every week.

"Ah, I was told this was optional." Junie eyes the scorecard and the numerous bottles of wine with suspicion.

"It's not," Nana Mae confirms cheerfully. "Sit."

I lean against the back wall and nurse a beer. My role, when I attend, is support staff. I refill drinks, fix the remote when someone accidentally sits on it, start the projector, and try not to draw Katie's analytical eye.

For the first fifteen minutes, Junie sits rigid. Arms crossed, mouth shut, radiating the kind of hostility that makes most people back off.

Unfortunately for her, Haven residents are not most people.

She also excels at pretending I don't exist. She hasn't looked my way once. It's as though I'm a ghost in her life, and I fucking hate it more with each passing minute.

"He's not here for the right reasons," Katie announces, and I nearly fall sideways before I realize she's talking about contestant Jake and not me.

"He's a textbook love-bomber," Marley agrees, pen flying across her scorecard. "Connection potential: two. Villain probability: eight."

It's getting harder to decipher if they're talking about Jake or me.

"His villain probability is a five at best," Junie mutters.

Every head in the room swivels toward Junie.

The frost hasn't melted from her body language, but there's a spark in her eyes that wasn't there a second ago. And I would know because my gaze never strays far from her. I've seen this spark before—today, actually—when she was studying spreadsheets and had no idea I was creeping on her from the corner like a fucking stalker.

"He's too obvious to be the real villain," Junie continues as though she's presenting findings in a boardroom. "The producers want you to think it's him so the actual villain blindsides you in week six. That's basic narrative misdirection, and it's been happening longer than I've been alive."

Silence.

Leave it to Junie to jump in headfirst.

Then Marley leans forward, her gaze narrow and assessing as she lifts her reading glasses up her nose. “Go on.”

That’s all the opening Junie needs. It takes exactly eleven minutes to commandeer the entire operation.

She asks for a pen and uses the back of her scorecard, a big no-no that no one in here calls her on. Then she squares on Marley, and I brace for impact.

“Marley.” Junie’s voice is deceptively sweet, polite, non-confrontational, which means she’s about to dismantle Marley from top to bottom. “Are you weighing your villain probability against screen time, or just raw behavior data?”

This is the Junie who’s never met a system she couldn’t improve.

Marley sits up straighter in her chair and adjusts her glasses. “Raw behavior,” she says with a dangerous edge to her voice. She’s either going to fight Junie or adopt her.

My gaze cuts to Nana Mae, who leans back in her chair with a satisfied expression on her face. Was this her plan all along?

Sneaky, sneaky Nana Mae.

“That’s your problem,” Junie scoffs.

Marley bristles, and everyone else holds their breath. Marley does not like to be called on her shit.

After a brief tug-of-war, Junie takes Stanley’s scorecard and turns it over to draw a grid. “You need a weighted model. Screen time inflates perception. A guy who gets twelve minutes of footage looks like more of a threat than a guy who gets three, even if the three-minute guy is statistically more volatile. You have to normalize exposure.”

Frank leans over to me. He’s only here to escort Dollie to and from the clubhouse anyway. “What’s she doing?”

“Ruining Marley’s life,” I say, not bothering to hide my grin. “Or saving it. Hard to tell.”

By the second commercial break, Junie has redesigned the scoring matrix on the back of four scorecards and is in an animated debate with Katie about whether the lead is emotionally constipated or protectively stoic. It’s hitting a little too close to home.

“Emotionally constipated, obviously,” Katie insists. “The man hasn’t expressed a single genuine feeling in four episodes.”

“I’m seeing protectively stoic,” Junie fires back, gesturing with a too-full wineglass that sloshes rosé dangerously close to Dollie’s cookie tin. “He’s not withholding because he doesn’t feel things. He’s withholding because he feels too much and doesn’t know what to do with it. He’s a protector. A fixer. Those guys don’t talk about their feelings.”

My beer stops halfway to my mouth.

Is she talking about me?

I set my beer down because my hands caught a tremor I can’t hide.

Bea, who has said nothing all evening, catches my eye from across the room. Her look says a thousand words that all relay the same message: *I see what’s happening here. Do you?*

I busy myself by tossing an empty wine bottle, but my focus snaps to attention when Dollie mentions the cocktail party dress code and Junie laughs.

She…laughs.

Not the sharp, controlled one she parcels out like a woman on a budget. This one escaped her defenses. It’s loud and startled and immediate. She claps her hand over her mouth as though she can shove it back in.

But it’s too late.

I heard it.

The sound hits me somewhere I wasn’t braced for. Which is every-fucking-where. That’s the problem with Junie—she doesn’t aim, but she never misses.

Katie turns to me with a saccharine smile that’s pure vindication. “Smiling. Again,” she mouths, then taps something into her phone.

I’ll talk to Katie later about whatever data she’s collecting. But not tonight. Tonight, I’m too busy memorizing the exact pitch of a sound I thought I’d never hear again.

The S&S members return to their debate, but Junie’s posture has changed, and I’m cataloguing that too. Her arms are uncrossed. She’s leaning forward. Several minutes into the second episode, Stanley refills her glass without being asked, and she takes it without breaking eye contact with the screen because she’s smiling.

It’s sweet and unguarded.

And it makes me forget all reason.

As stealthily as possible, I capture the moment on my phone and send a message before I can talk myself out of it.

Fen & Tonic:

Cole: Picture sent.

I hadn't noticed until just now, but while Junie stares at the screen, Dollie's staring at Junie and Katie's staring at…me with a smirk that says *gotcha*.

Shit.

Fen: Holy fuck.

Hudson: She's…

Hudson: Smiling.

Fen: How does that make you feel, Cole?

Goddamn it. That was a mistake. I blame the second beer I downed after seeing her in action.

What the fuck will Nolan think?

He doesn't make me wait long. Even with the time difference, Nolan always responds to our group chat. Especially when it concerns his sister.

Nolan: Thank you, Cole.

Jesus. For what? For creeping on his sister? For capturing her smile? For not fucking touching her? For loving her?

"Chris is a narcissist," Junie shouts at the TV, and I drop my phone into my back pocket.

But the damage is done. My control is slipping, and it's only a matter of time before the whole world knows it.

"She's giving main character energy." Katie laughs with Dollie. "Delightfully feral." She nods to Junie, sitting between them, up on her knees with a fist raised at the television.

And for once, I don't disagree with Katie.

THE CLUBHOUSE EMPTIES SLOWLY. STANLEY OFFERS JUNIE A RIDE HOME IN his golf cart, which she declines with more grace than I expected after he

chased her into town.

“I’ll schedule a scoring methodology review session for Saturday,” Marley says, clutching Junie’s scoring matrix like it’s a sacred text.

“Ah, sure,” Junie replies. “Why not?” The two glasses of wine must have gone to her head. There wasn’t an ounce of spite or sass in her reply.

The walk back to my property takes less than five minutes, but I’m halfway across my yard before I realize she didn’t break off toward her apartment—she’s heading to my porch.

I slow my pace to match hers.

She sits on the top step without an invitation—it’s not as though she’s ever needed one—but this feels…intentional. Junie tucks her feet under her, just as she used to do in Boston, and doesn’t say a word.

I hesitate at the base of the stairs, then take a seat two steps below her. Not beside her. I never sit beside her. Distance is the only rule I seem to be able to follow in her presence.

The lanterns frame us in amber light, and the night sounds of The Haven mingle with the gentle waves of the ocean a hundred yards away.

The silence should be uncomfortable. With anyone else, it would be.

“They’re…insane,” she says finally. There’s no bite in it though, and I smother a smile.

“Completely.”

“That scoring system had so many structural flaws, I don’t even know where to begin.”

I relax my fists in my lap. “Whatever you did on that scorecard seems like a good start. I’m pretty sure Marley’s going home to laminate it.”

She drops her feet to the stair I’m sitting on, bumping my shoulder on the way down. Glancing back at her, I find the corner of her lips tilting up. Not a full smile, but a crack in the foundation. “Katie asked me to come back on Monday for the other show they watch.”

“What did you say?”

She picks at a thread on her sweatshirt. “I said maybe.”

From Junie, that’s a yes. She just doesn’t know it yet.

“Careful what you agree to,” I say playfully. “They’re known to have four shows going at any given time.”

It’s time to go inside. Pour myself a drink and lock myself away in my upstairs office to work on something that doesn’t cause this heartburn. But

the quiet between us is the kind that used to make her talk, and I'm selfish for wanting it now.

"What were you working on earlier?" she finally asks. "Upstairs? Before S&S. I—your light was on."

Using more pressure than necessary, I grip the back of my neck.

"Just…designs." *Designs I'd love to show you but you'll never get to see.*

"Designs for what?"

Distract and deflect. It's the right thing to do, but she has her guard down for the first time since she got here, and it makes me want to offer her something in return.

"A community garden," I say. It's not a lie—it's just not the full truth. "For The Haven. I've been working on it for a while. Raised beds, accessible pathways, a greenhouse for Frank because he's been asking for one since they moved in."

She slides away from me, and the tendons in my neck tighten. When I meet her gaze, swallowing becomes a futile task. There's something in her expression, or maybe it's the absence of the thing she's been using to keep me at arm's length.

"You're still designing?"

Crack! The lock around my heart splinters.

There's just so much she doesn't know.

"It's what I do," I mutter with a shrug that feels anything but casual.

"I remember." Her voice is quieter now. "I used to watch you at three in the morning at home with graph paper littering the kitchen table. I was always in…awe. Before you, I didn't know anyone could see things that weren't there yet and make them real."

The air between us thickens. My lungs forget their entire purpose.

"Will you show me? What you're working on now?"

There are so many things I shouldn't do with this woman, and this feels like a gateway to unlocking them all. Plus, the garden designs are in my upstairs office, along with six years' worth of secrets covered in her initials.

But I do have the garden sketches on my phone. I saved photos last week when I was going to pitch the concept to the homeowners committee.

I pull up the image and hand her my phone. Our fingers don't touch in the exchange, but the space between us feels charged, like the air before a storm that hasn't decided on destruction or just passing through.

She studies the screen with the same intensity she brings to my financial records. Pinching to zoom, tilting the phone, her brows furrowed in concentration as I hold my breath.

It reminds me of those times she talked about—at her kitchen table in the middle of the night. I knew she was watching me, sometimes adding me to her vlog, sometimes just needing a silent companion. That's when it was innocent between us. It had always been innocent…right up until that dance.

"The pathway radius is too tight for a wheelchair," she says.

I sit up taller. "What?"

"Here." She points to my screen. "If Tony wants to visit, this corner won't accommodate a turning radius. You need at least sixty inches."

I didn't even know she knew who Tony was.

She hands my phone back. Our gazes meet in the lantern light, and I have the disorienting feeling of being seen. Not the surface version people usually get, but the underbelly. The part of me that builds and fixes things when no one's paying attention.

She's paying attention.

"How do you know that?"

She shrugs, then tucks a loose chunk of hair behind her ear. "You mentioned it once. When you were working on a hospital design for a school project."

She's *always* been paying attention. Fuck me.

"You're right," I say. "I'll fix it."

"I usually am." No snark, just facts. She pulls her knees up to rest her chin on them, and I wish I had a blanket to offer her. "You built this place for them."

"Not exactly." I chuckle. "My original plan had been for families, but my designs were…well, I priced out a lot of young families. Before I knew it, I had…all of them." I sweep my hands out to encompass The Haven. "They built this. I just drew the lines."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it."

I don't know if I do. She remembers the version of me I thought I could be before I left Boston—the one who built and created instead of running—and now she's trying to decide if that version of me was real.

I honestly don't know anymore.

Her shoulder shifts, and at some point, I've drifted closer to her because the cotton of her sweatshirt grazes my arm, but this time, we don't move away.

It's nothing and literally everything. A centimeter of fabric against my bare skin, and it's the most alive I've felt in six years.

"I should go," she murmurs, but she doesn't stand. The fabric of her sweatshirt grazes more of my skin, as though we're both pressing to the other millimeter by millimeter.

"Yeah," I agree, but slide my elbow closer by half an inch.

Our breathing syncs. The wind picks up, and she shivers once—an involuntary shudder that presses her elbow into my bicep, and that's what finally breaks us.

She stands.

I follow.

The distance between us returns like a tide rushing back in.

"Good night, Cole."

Not Mr. Whittaker.

Cole.

It's just my fucking name. But she says it in the voice she used to use—soft and unguarded. It lands right behind my ribs where I can't reach to pull it out.

It's lodged there now. A cramp that reminds me she'll never be out of my system, no matter how noble I try to be.

"Good night, Junie." It's hoarse, deep, wrecked.

She pauses on the first stair at my words but doesn't turn around. Then she's gone, swallowed by the dark stairwell to her apartment, and I'm alone on my porch with lanterns and the quiet devastation of a woman who just looked at my work and saw the man I've tried to shield her from.

Tomorrow I'll add lighting to her stairs while she's working.

Tonight, I'll fix the garden pathway. Something that took her three seconds to spot while I've missed it for six months.

In my office, I sit at my drafting table and stare at the other set of blueprints—the ones I can never show her—and for the first time, the walls of her dream house feel less like a monument to what I lost and more like a confession I don't know how to make.

Her bedroom light turns on, and my gaze flies to the source as though I have no control.

I’m in so much fucking trouble.

The thought arrives with the weight of everything I’ve been outrunning for almost a decade. It’s not new. It’s not even surprising. It’s just finally, devastatingly honest.

She’s building something here.

Something stable.

Something I already almost took from her once.

Tonight, when her shoulder touched mine, it grew roots so deep I can feel them wrapping around the foundation of every wall I’ve built.

So I turn off my drafting lamp, but I don’t leave. I sit here, staring across the driveway, because her light is still on, beckoning me with whispers of what could have been if only the choice had been mine to make.

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7

HIS KITCHEN, MY RULES

JUNIE

ROUTINES, I'M FINDING OUT, HAVE A WAY OF FORMING IN THE HAVEN whether you want them to or not.

Every morning now, I enter Cole's home and make coffee in his kitchen because the machine in my apartment produces something that tastes like mold and his kitchen has the good stuff—a French press, whole beans that wake you up with their scent alone, and a grinder that makes so much noise an aircraft carrier could take off next to me and I wouldn't hear it.

Do I also enjoy the possibility of waking Cole up before he's ready? Yes. Yes, I do.

And, every morning, after I've made my own cup, I reach into the cabinet to find the hidden decaf coffee I make for Cole.

Today I hold it for a full ten seconds though. Debating. Warring. Cursing myself.

This has always been the plan!

Strategic sabotage to keep him off balance and even the scales a bit. And if I don't maintain the upper hand, I'll have to admit that last night… mattered, and quite honestly, I'd rather chew on glass. But the dark circles that have appeared under his eyes haunt me now.

I put the freaking decaf back and grind more of the caffeinated beans. I press brew for an entire pot, then leave his mug untampered with on the counter where he'll find it after I'm gone.

There's no need to examine why.

Cole Whittaker is but a bump in my pothole-filled road, nothing more.

With my mug in my hands, I retreat to the conference room before I hear his bedroom door open upstairs. That's how comfortable I've become in this space. I know the click of his bedroom door, and that knowledge is a poison in my veins.

How much more of this can I take?

Heavy footsteps hit the stairs, and I stare straight ahead at my screen because the sight of Cole Whittaker in the gray sweatpants he insists on wearing every goddamn morning just might be the two-handed shove that sends me flailing into the feelings I'm actively attempting to avoid.

TWO HOURS AND THREE CUPS OF COFFEE LATER, I'M STARING AT SOMETHING that ignites my spiteful ways.

I've been inside The Haven's books for weeks now. At first, the damage looked like incompetence—misallocated funds, duplicated payments made to look like a clerical error, vendor accounts that don't match invoices. All stuff that could technically be considered innocent mistakes by someone who isn't qualified and is in over their heads.

But incompetence is random. Incompetence doesn't follow a pattern.

And this? This is a pattern.

Opening another spreadsheet, I begin the tedious process of cross-referencing the vendor payments against the actual contracts to confirm what my gut already knew.

Devin didn't mismanage The Haven's finances. He funneled them. Systematically. Over months. Small enough to avoid detection, large enough to matter, and now I'm close to having proof—a bank account registered to an LLC I can't find a physical address for. Whoever set it up knew what they were doing.

It's the kind of careful that requires a very good accountant or a very paranoid thief.

I've even deep-dived into Cole's personal accounts because yes, I'm thorough like that. The only thing out of the ordinary was a very large personal loan that he's never missed a payment on. Maybe he bought Nana Mae's land outright? Still, I wonder briefly why he took out that type of

loan, but because it’s all aboveboard and not connected to his business accounts, I decide to move on. Not that I expected to find him stealing from himself, but he probably didn’t expect Devin to…

I sit back in my chair and tap my pen against the table. The tap, tap, tap is like a drill to my forehead.

Devin didn’t just steal from Cole—he framed the LLC to look like Cole’s doing. It’s the only thing that makes sense. I just have to find the proof.

It changes Nana Mae’s narrative completely. This isn’t a nephew in over his head. This is someone who looked at a family business, a community of retirees, and saw an opportunity.

Mae’s nephew stole from people with trust so ingrained in their belief system that they never saw it coming.

I pull up the bank routing number again and run it through every public database I can access. It’s another dead end. Then I try cross-referencing the LLC registration against state filings. Still nothing.

Money always leaves a trail. Wherever Devin was funneling money to, he knew how to bury the trail. But I have this thread, and I will pull, and pull, and pull because numbers don’t lie and I’m very good at making them talk.

My phone buzzes with a direct message from Fen, and I grind my teeth.

Fen: Don’t freak out.

Great. My favorite opener from a man whose entire career is built on controlling narratives.

Junie: What now?

Fen: Grace did a podcast. The Unfiltered Hour. It has 2.3 million subscribers.

Fen: Just when your story was beginning to fade, she stepped it up. Again.

The coffee in my stomach threatens to make an appearance in my mouth.

Fen: She’s rebranding. She’s creating a full victim arc and said she’s writing a book about surviving friendship abuse. Her words, not mine.

Fen: Also—and I need you to stay calm here—she showed another video. Of you at the Red Sox game. Obviously edited. And she cried.

Of course it’s edited. I’m sure it doesn’t show the guy grabbing my ass, just my reaction to it. I’m not even surprised she cried—she’s been rehearsing for this moment her entire life.

Junie: How bad is it?

I have a feeling I already know. If you pit me against Grace, I’ll always get the shit end of the deal. Grace is lovable in a way I’ve never been able to manage.

Fen: Her I.Am.Sorry account gained 200K followers overnight. She’s at 750K now.

Fen: But, my little Spite-Berry, this is important here. She’s overplaying her hand. Her timeline doesn’t match up. I’ve got screenshots from three different interviews where her story contradicts itself.

Fen: When she falls, she’ll fall hard.

Fen: DO NOT ENGAGE. Don’t look. Let me handle it.

Fen: In fact, handing your phone over to Cole isn’t the worst idea either.

Junie: I’m not going to engage.

I sit back in my chair with a huff and open a new web browser. Does he truly think I have no self-control?

Fen: Spite-Berry, I love you, but I know you. You’re already googling the podcast, aren’t you?

I close the browser and set my phone face down.

Asshole.

Seven hundred and fifty thousand people. That's how many humans have chosen Grace's version of events. Seven hundred and fifty thousand strangers think I'm the villain in the friendship I gave my best to.

Meanwhile, I'm hiding out in a retirement community in South Carolina, untangling someone else's financial wreckage, making coffee for a man who broke my heart, and slowly realizing that the mess in these spreadsheets goes deeper than anyone in this house wants to admit.

Friendship abuse. For real?

I close my eyes and count to ten. Then I reopen my spreadsheet because numbers don't lie, and numbers don't cry on podcasts, and numbers have never once made me feel utterly alone.

COLE APPEARS IN THE DOORWAY OF THE CONFERENCE ROOM WITH A PLATE of food I didn't ask for and sets it on the corner of the table without saying a word. A quick glance at the time tells me I've worked through lunch. Again.

The tightness in my throat grows thorns. He made grilled cheese and cut it diagonally, with a pickle on the side I know came from Dollie's personal stash because that woman is obsessed with the healing properties of pickle juice and makes it herself.

I eye it while he watches me, but I don't thank him, and he's not expecting me to. That's the weird arrangement we've silently fallen into. He feeds me, I pretend not to notice, and we both act as though this is normal boss-employee behavior.

We both know it's not.

"I need to talk to you about the books," I say, swiping a triangle of the grilled cheese my stomach refuses to let me ignore. I'm not a freaking martyr like him.

He leans against the doorframe and crosses his arms. He's wearing a baby blue button-down with the sleeves rolled up, showing off his forearms. He probably does that on purpose. Add in the glasses he's pushed to the top of his head, the slight scowl tugging his lips down, and he looks like some irritably hot professor who punishes bad girls over the top of his desk.

Er—record scratch and salt in my eyeballs. What the fuck?

"What about them?"

Shit. Focus, Juniper!

“The damage isn’t random. Devin wasn’t incompetent—he was strategic. The money he’s been funneling from The Haven started at least twelve months ago, but I have a feeling that if I keep digging, it’ll go back even further.”

Cole’s face flashes…anger? Regret? It’s fast—there and gone—but it was there. A flicker behind his eyes that looks like the moment before a building collapses.

“Did you find proof?”

I frown. What other kind of proof does he need? “Numbers don’t lie, Cole.”

“Did you find proof?”

Asshole! Does he not believe me? We don’t need proof to know there’s a problem. “Not yet, but I’m getting close.”

“I need irrefutable proof, Juniper,” he snaps. Unlike others, I’ve had years of experience with his bark, so even if it’s never been directly aimed at me before, I don’t react.

“You’ve known about this for months, haven’t you? And you haven’t even filed a police report. I haven’t seen a single contract or a bill for a lawyer—”

“Because I don’t have proof yet, Viper.”

The asshole used my nickname as a defense mechanism. But I’m not his enemy. Not in this. “My proclivity toward petty has nothing to do with this, *Mr. Whittaker*. This is the one area of my life where I’m in control. I’m the professional here. I know what the hell I’m talking about. And from where I’m sitting, your grandmother’s nephew systematically stole from you, from her, and you’re sitting on it. This isn’t something you can quietly fix without telling anyone.”

His throat works as he stares at me. The tendons in his forearms pull tight where they’re crossed over his chest, and for a second, I think he’s going to say something real. Something that would explain why a man with his resources and evidence would choose to sit in the wreckage of someone else’s crash.

Instead, he straightens off the doorframe, even more tense than before. “Devin is Mae’s only other living family member. And yes, I’m aware the books are fucked, but I can’t just—” He resets, pulling air into his lungs,

making him appear taller. This is what he does when the safe thing and the honest thing are two different sentences. “It’s complicated, Junie.”

“It’s not complicated.” I slam my uneaten sandwich to the table. “It’s theft. And you’re protecting the person who did it—why? Because Nana Mae would be heartbroken? Because you’d rather bleed quietly than make someone else uncomfortable? Well, news flash, Cole. This isn’t just about Nana Mae anymore. You have 130 residents relying on you too.”

“You don’t think I know that?” Each word from his lips draws him a foot closer until he’s hovering over me, his face mere inches from my own. “How I proceed is my decision, Viper. Not yours. Not unless you have actual proof.”

The words land like a slammed door. The heat rises in my chest. The familiar burn that comes right before I do something I can’t take back. Instead, I roll my chair away from him and rise to my feet, putting much-needed space between us.

“This is what you do, isn’t it?” My voice is quieter than I want it to be. I’m treading into dangerous territory here, but I can’t stop the wreckage either. “Someone fucks you over, and you just—what? Take the hit? File it away? Because fixing things yourself is easier than confronting them? Than having the hard conversations?”

His attention locks on me, and there’s a stillness in his eyes that’s as terrifying as it is exhilarating. A dangerous, loaded calm that tells me I’ve wandered too close to something he’ll never admit. I’d take a step back if I wasn’t already pressed to the wall.

In this moment, Cole Whittaker is a predator, and the heaviness of the moment controls his movements until he’s a breath away from me. “Are we still talking about Devin?” he says slowly, his gaze jumping from my eyes to my lips to the pulse point in my neck and back again. “Or are we talking about something else?”

The air between us thickens. Every unspoken thing we’ve been circling for years fills the room until there’s no oxygen left.

You left without a word.

Why the hell do you still talk to Natalie?

Why did you leave?

I don’t say any of it. It’s not why I’m here. My emotional damage isn’t his responsibility, even if he did light the match to my pain. And admitting

any of it would be admitting that he matters to me, but I've built my post-Cole identity on the premise that he doesn't.

"I'm talking about the books," I say flatly, my pulse skyrocketing with the lie. His gaze drops to my neck. Before he can call me on it, I continue. "I'm your employee, and I'm telling you, as is my fiscal and moral responsibility, that I believe there's a serious problem—a felony, actually."

He holds my gaze for three more seconds. Long enough that I catch one more flash of insecurity or sadness in the flicker of his eye before he shutters them, a wall sliding into place that I recognize because I'm made of the same self-preserving shit he is, then he nods once.

"Noted. Send me what you've found, and I'll look into it while you keep digging for proof." He turns and walks out. He doesn't slam a door or raise his voice. Just leaves, quiet and contained, the way he always does when the conversation gets too close to the fault line.

I stare at the empty doorway. Air is still trapped in my lungs, and my hands are shaking.

Not from anger, but from the terrifying, gut-level certainty that I wasn't talking about Devin.

He just confirmed my biggest fear without saying anything at all—if I don't choose me, no one will.

CLOSING MY LAPTOP, I LEAVE THE UNEATEN SANDWICH ON THE CONFERENCE table even though I'm starving, walk across the driveway, climb the stairs to my apartment, and lock the door behind me.

Cole will find all the records I've unearthed so far in multiple forms I created for ease of understanding and processing in his email whenever he returns. It's not enough to convict, but it's enough to start an inquiry while I unearth the rest.

The apartment is quiet. It always is. That used to be the point in Boston—quiet meant safe, meant no one could see my mess, and I could fall apart without an audience.

Now the quiet just sounds like all the things we never said.

Grabbing my phone, I settle onto the couch and draft a text message to Cole.

Junie: I’m sorry I pushed. I’m sure you have your reasons, but I can’t help you if you don’t share them with me.

I delete it. That’s a message a friend would send, and he made it painfully clear that I’m just an employee now.

Then I open the browser on my phone and type “The Unfiltered Hour Grace Elliott.”

Three minutes in, I close the app. Not because of Fen’s advice, but because Grace is talking about the night she told me about her and Paul. She’s describing a conversation that never happened. Doesn’t she realize there was a bar full of people who witnessed my humiliation?

I drop my phone to the cushion beside me. Instead of the rage I like to cling to, I feel something worse.

Exhaustion.

I’ve carried anger with me since my mom died and my dad took off. Anger has always felt safe. But now it’s feeling like a prison I can’t escape. It’s a heavy thing to carry.

I’m tired of the TikTok comments and Grace’s performances intended to kick me while I’m down. I’m tired of the 750,000 people who all have an opinion on how I should have handled the betrayal. I’m tired of watching Cole protect everyone but himself, and I’m tired of pretending I don’t see it because seeing it means I still care.

Because I do still care, and that’s the whole stupid problem with this plan.

Are we talking about Devin, or are we talking about something else?

We’re always talking about something else. I’m just not brave enough to say it out loud and risk having him break me again.

I turn off my phone, waiting for the little apple to fade and the screen to go black before I curl up on my bed and stare at the ceiling as the light shifts from the afternoon glow to something softer, cooler.

With my lights off, I have a perfect view straight into Cole’s private office. His broad shoulders are hunched over his drafting table while he works on something I’ll probably never see.

I’m mad at him for not confronting his issues, yet I’m up here alone, doing the same thing—retreating, regrouping, rebuilding the wall he was starting to chip away at.

It’s all I can do now—protect my heart—because life has proven time and time again that those we give our hearts to are the ones who will hurt us

the most.

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8

CHEESE AND CONSEQUENCES

COLE

IT SHOULDN'T BOTHER ME THAT JUNIE LEFT HER GRILLED CHEESE ON THE table. It's a sandwich, for Christ's sake. Bread and cheese and a stupid pickle I had to barter with Dollie for, and now I'm on the line for three more S&S meetings.

It would've been worth it if Junie ate the fucking thing. It's my fault she didn't.

Now she's sending a message.

I toss the sandwich and wash the plate, then sit at the island and open my laptop. Her email is the only one I open.

From: Juniper Mercer
To: Mr. Whittaker

She has me listed in her contacts as Mr. fucking Whittaker.

Subject Line: Haven Financial Records—For Your Review.

I'm such a dick. She's organized the entire mess into a language so clean and precise a jury could follow it.

It's the separate tab with LLC structure and the screenshots of forged signatures next to my own that makes me pause. She doesn't know I didn't

sign these, but somehow, she still believes in my innocence.

Juniper Mercer is finding the evidence I hadn't been able to.

And she's creating a timeline even I can follow.

She put this file together in the two hours between our argument and now. While angry. Probably hurt. Most likely hungry. She has no idea that I've been sitting on the little information I had because, without proof that Devin is the thief, I'll be the one to take the fall.

And I'm too chicken shit to say that to her face. To see her reaction. To witness the moment she might lose all faith in me.

I close the laptop and rest my forehead against the top of it while my hands grip the granite so hard my knuckles ache.

Junie's right about everything.

It's how I know the past and present are going to collide. Not today. But soon.

And it's not something she'll ever understand. Not really. Even if she does, the look of betrayal in her eyes will be so much worse than it was today.

The urge to fix shit rises in me until I can no longer sit still. I need to get my hands on something that makes sense because the expression on Junie's face when I shut her down isn't something I can fix and it's not something I can file away and it's not something I can run from forever.

So I grab my tool belt and go.

THE HAVEN HAS A HELP REQUEST LIST THAT LIVES ON A CLIPBOARD IN THE clubhouse kitchen. It's different from the list for the actual maintenance we have staff for. This one is so I can get shit done around here without the need for long conversations about cost or time or repayment. It's supposed to be organized by priority. Instead, it's organized by whoever's annoyed me the least.

Today's list has Frank's gutters. Again. The man has three oak trees within spitting distance of his roofline, and he refuses to let me cut a single branch because, and I quote, they were here first and he doesn't believe in gutter guards.

There’s a porch light out at Marley’s place. She’s filed four written complaints in two weeks. The first three were formal warnings. The fourth included a diagram.

A loose railing on the clubhouse deck that Stanley’s been monitoring with his GoPro because he thinks someone is tampering with it so they can fake an injury which would increase everyone’s insurance if the invisible culprit filed a lawsuit.

I start with Frank’s gutters because they require a ladder and enough physical effort to shut my brain up.

It almost works. For twenty minutes, the only thing in my head is leaf rot and downspout angles while my hands do what they’re good at. They grip and pull and clear and measure and for a little bit, I’m not the guy who keeps finding new ways to break Junie’s spirit.

Then Frank comes outside with two glasses of bourbon and sits in his lawn chair to supervise.

I thought I was safe, since they rarely come outside after dinner except on S&S nights. This is why I typically work on anything I can after 10 p.m. Junie didn’t give me a choice tonight.

“Dollie says your girl didn’t eat her lunch.”

I nearly lose my grip on my ladder. “She’s not my girl, Frank.”

“Right.” He sips his bourbon. I only know because he makes a slurping noise just to be a pain in the ass. “Dollie also says you cut her grilled cheese diagonally with a pickle you had to work for.”

How the hell does Dollie know how I cut Junie’s sandwich? Then again, how does anyone know anything around here? I live in a surveillance bubble run by retirees with nothing better to do than monitor my emotional collapse as if it’s an episode for S&S to rate.

“Frank,” I bark. “The gutters.”

“I’m just saying.” He lifts his hands in surrender. “When Dollie’s mad at me, she won’t eat what I cook either. It’s a sign.”

“It’s a sandwich.”

Frank chuckles from somewhere deep in his chest. “It’s never just a sandwich, son.”

I climb down the ladder, chug Frank’s offered ounce of bourbon, and then move on to Marley’s before Frank can impart any more relational wisdom I never asked for.

Stanley intercepts me on the path between Marley's house and unit 12 that hasn't sold yet. He's in his golf cart that's now fitted with aftermarket headlights bright enough to land an aircraft, and one of them is aimed directly at my face.

"Jesus, Stanley. Turn down your headlights. It's eight o'clock at night. If you flash those things into Marley's place, I'll never hear the end of it."

"Evening patrol." He adjusts his vest. It's new. This one is fluorescent yellow and says Enforcer across the front.

"Stanley, putting on a vest does not give you any authority. We've been over this."

"I noticed some suspicious activity near the garage apartment."

My pulse quickens. "My garage apartment?" I pick up my pace, with Stanley tailing me. "What kind of activity?"

"Bea said the lights have been off all evening. Usually, your girl's up there working till at least midnight, so I did a couple'a rounds." He taps his dashcam. "I've got the data right here."

The data. For fuck's sake. Stanley has footage of Junie's light patterns. I'm not even the most obsessive person monitoring her movements in this community, and that's a thought I'm going to bury immediately.

"She's fine, Stanley. Go home."

"I'll do another loop. Just to be safe."

He putters away before I can argue, his headlights sweeping across properties like this is a tactical hostage situation. We need to find him a new hobby that has him hitting up Home Depot less.

By ten o'clock, I've burned through the resident's wish list and have started inventing problems to solve, like Bea's rocking chairs that squeak too loudly and give Dollie headaches, and the hedge by the pool that always grows a straggler branch that refuses to conform to The Haven's neatly ordered shrubbery.

The thing about fixing shit to avoid other shit is that it works until it doesn't. You can replace every bulb, tighten every railing, and clear every gutter in the community, and when you're done, the woman upstairs still hasn't turned on her light, and you still don't know how to explain things in a way that won't hurt her more.

I'M WASHING MY HANDS IN THE KITCHEN WHEN I HEAR NANA MAE'S slippers on the tile.

"Mail came later than normal today." She sets a small stack on the counter and continues past me to the kettle. "Something for you on top."

Natalie must be more paranoid than normal because she's upping her tactics. But I take the envelope, and my hand remains steady through sheer force of will.

The second my skin touches it, my gaze drifts to the driveway, to Junie, feeling like even holding this piece of paper is somehow a betrayal.

"Nana Mae, what the hell are you doing wandering around The Haven at ten at night?"

"How's Natalie doing?" Nana Mae asks, ignoring me but turning her back to fill the kettle. She's casual in her questioning, but there's always a bite to it when Natalie's involved.

Nana Mae doesn't know what the letters really are. She thinks they're updates from a former girlfriend who became a friend. She thinks the letters about Marcus are exactly as they appear to be—a woman keeping her ex informed about her brother's health because I'm the kind of man who cares.

She's only half right. I do care about Marcus. He's as innocent in all of this as I am. That part has never been the lie.

It's everything else.

It's not his fault that his father's gambling debt is what made Natalie his guardian. It's not his fault that his sister chose blackmail because her ego wouldn't allow for anything else.

"I'll read it later." I pocket the envelope and force myself to lean against the counter, pretending the paper isn't burning a hole through my heart.

Nana Mae's quiet as she waits for her water to heat, then she turns with two mugs, and I lift a brow. She's always done this—anticipated the crisis before it arrives. This time, she uses tea as the method to have a conversation.

Respect for my grandmother is the only reason I sit next to her at the same table where she didn't ask me why I left Boston, just handed me a deed to her portion of the land and said, *"Build something, Cole. That's what you're good at."*

She doesn't know about the giant loan I took out against my five acres. The most important acreage to us both. The land that sits undisturbed except for the fishing dock my grandfather built fifty years ago.

“Juniper found some…things in the books today.” Talking about Devin is easier than thinking about the letter in my pocket.

Her mug pauses halfway to her lips. “What kind of things?”

“The kind that confirm my suspicions.” I choose my words the way I choose building materials—carefully, structurally, knowing what they have to support. “Devin was…strategic, not careless as I originally hoped.” And that’s the truth. I hoped that he was just a fucknut, not an active thief. “Junie’s good at collecting evidence.”

Mae sets down her tea. Her index finger traces her thumbnail, and she won’t meet my eye.

Which means she’s about to drop a bomb of her own, and I won’t like what she has to say.

“What aren’t you telling me, Cole?” Her question is quiet, but it lands with the precision of the woman who raised me and knows exactly which boards are under pressure.

“Nana—”

“Don’t Nana me.” She glances up, and there’s no softness in her gaze now. But there’s no anger either. Just the steady eye of a woman who survived six decades of marriage, a recession, a global pandemic, and menopause without losing her composure. “You don’t get to decide what I can handle, Cole.”

“I’m not—”

“You’re protecting me from something the same way you’re still protecting her.” She tilts her head toward Junie’s apartment, and the air leaves the room. “How’s that working out for you?”

Badly. It’s working really fucking badly.

I’m shielding Nana Mae from the full extent of Devin’s betrayal and shielding Junie from the full extent of mine. The weight of both is compressing my spine into something that won’t hold much longer.

“Devin’s your only—”

“My only other living family,” Nana Mae finishes. “But I’m aware of who he is, Cole. I also have a pretty good guess as to what he’s done. You think I don’t see it, but I’m old, Cole, not stupid.”

I gape at her.

“I don’t have the details, and I don’t need them tonight. But I’m sure my nephew takes after his father, just as I know you take after yours. You

wouldn’t look like this”—she gestures at my face with her teaspoon—“over a few misplaced invoices.”

If only Devin were the single issue. If Junie doesn’t find proof of my innocence, one theft will snowball into the other.

The urge to confess everything rises in my throat. But behind it, lurking with teeth and claws, is the other confession. The one that starts with Natalie and ends with a threat that could dismantle what little semblance of peace Junie has left in her life.

I swallow both.

“Junie’s good at her job,” I say to deflect while adding another beam to the structure I’ve built around the truth. “She’ll find the answers we need.”

Nana Mae studies me for a long moment. Then she reaches across the table and pats my hand twice, firmly, the way she does when she’s choosing not to push but wants me to know that she could.

“She’s good at a lot of things. Including seeing right through you.” She stands and carries her mug to the sink—she never even took a sip. “That girl has always seen you, Cole. Even when you’re trying your damnedest to disappear.”

Her slippers whisper against the hardwood as she turns to leave, then outside, where I hear the squeal of her golf cart as she makes the U-turn too sharply.

I sit alone with her words in my head and Natalie’s letter in my pocket. I don’t open them in public. Ever. But I always open them. I sit with the guilt, the fear, the pain of what she’s cost me.

Over the six years I’ve been receiving them, I’ve developed a protocol. I’m always alone, in my office, with the door locked because I never know how I’ll respond to whatever veiled threat she hurls at me through precise handwriting on thick white paper.

In my office, behind my desk, I open the ticking bomb.

Cole,

Marcus had a good month. His new therapist has been working on motor coordination, and the team says he’s responding well. He asked about you last Tuesday. He wanted to know if you were still building things. I told him yes.

The facility costs are increasing, but I'm sure you're aware of the annual adjustment. I'm managing, but I wanted to remind you of our arrangement.

I hope you're well.

Natalie

P.S. I read the article about The Haven in the regional press. It looked lovely. You always did know how to make something beautiful from nothing.

I read it twice, hearing the silent threat between each line. This has never been about Marcus. Then I fold it along the original crease and place it in the locked drawer with the others.

I lost count of how many letters there are. Each one is a reminder that I exist inside a structure of Natalie's design, and every one of them is a load-bearing wall I can't remove without bringing the whole thing down.

I wanted to remind you of our arrangement.

Arrangement. "Blackmail" would be too crass, too honest. And Natalie only speaks in lies and propaganda.

The memory of her betrayal lashes out at me in the dark—a quick one-two punch I never saw coming.

For the first few months, I wondered which loss was greater, my work or my family, and how she had managed to rip both away from me.

Six months in, and I knew which was worse. I've sat in the grief ever since.

Every once in a while, she'll send me a photograph to keep me in line. A photo strategically taken of a twenty-three-year-old and his best friend's teenage sister who look, when framed just right, like something they're not.

Sometimes it's a photo of the foreclosure notice Junie never saw.

But it's not just the threat those pictures created that gutted my life and rebuilt it according to her blueprint. It's the video—that my misplaced trust allowed her to acquire—that keeps me in line, tethered to her fiction, while the life I could have had moves on without me.

An arrangement.

Bile coats the back of my throat. Opening another of her threats is the only time my body betrays what I've gotten so good at hiding—the fear, the

shame, the quiet rage that has nowhere to go because the only person I'm angry at is myself.

The blackmail works because somewhere, in the deepest recesses of my mind, it holds a truth I can never explain. It's what keeps me jumping when she calls because it's the only thing I can do now to protect Junie's future, even if no one ever knows of the price I pay to keep her safe.

Natalie didn't invent the guilt I carry. She found it, framed it, and handed it back to me in the shape of her cage.

I close the drawer and lock away her *arrangement* for another month.

Then I stare out my window and into Junie's, willing her to turn on a light as though she's been waiting for me too.

By midnight, it's obvious that she's shut me out again, so I head to the garage and quietly load up my wheelbarrow with LED strip lights that are waterproof and low voltage in a warm white.

I ordered them after Junie navigated her staircase in the dark. The railings are too low for my liking, and the landing has no overhead fixture. It's been on my personal list since before she arrived, but my personal list gets even less attention than Marley's written warnings.

The lighting became a priority when I saw her catch herself on the wall.

I think I lost five years of my life when she stumbled and I was too far away to catch her.

It's a safety issue, and I would be a terrible landlord if I didn't fix it. The fact that I picked warm white because it would be softer on her eyes when she climbs her stairs at night is irrelevant.

The installation takes just over two hours because I'm working in the dark, wearing a headlamp on its lowest setting. Junie was always a light sleeper, and the last thing I need is her finding me on her staircase in the middle of the night with a screwdriver and asking for an explanation I don't have to give.

I almost snort when that conversation plays in my head.

Why are you installing lights on my stairs at two in the morning, Cole?

Because you almost fell. Because the railing should be taller. Because you work until your eyes cross and then you navigate these steps in the dark, and I can't fix the twenty things between us, but I can fix this one thing, and I need to fix something. I need to be useful to you in at least one way that doesn't cost us anything.

Yeah. That would go over *really* well.

I mount the strips along the underside of each tread so they illuminate the path without being harsh. When that's done, I add motion sensors to the wires and then test them.

The stairs light up one by one, each step outlined in soft light, then I pack up my tools and wipe down each step.

At the top, through the glass in her door, I can just make out the shape of her laptop on the kitchen island. Which means she's still combing through The Haven's books, and it's only a matter of time before she finds more.

She always will—it's who she is.

I only hope she finds proof before it's too late. Because the destruction Devin left behind has the potential to lead straight to the trigger that blew up my world six years ago. And if Junie finds out the truth, none of our lives will ever be the same again.

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9

STAIRWAY TO SPITE

JUNIE

At six a.m., I step out of my apartment, ready to get a jump on the day and possibly avoid Cole for as long as possible, but nearly fall to my death when the top stair sets off a chain reaction that has each subsequent stair lighting up as though it's a fairy path in the forest and I'm the magical Fae.

"What the hell?" I grab hold of the railing and spin in a circle before kneeling onto a step to get a good look at what's going on.

This isn't a quick fix. Someone spent time—I poke at the professional strip of lighting—considerable time installing these. On a Friday night, no less.

I narrow my gaze at Cole's office window, then across the path toward the clubhouse. Does maintenance work odd hours so they don't disturb anyone, or is Cole playing Mr. Fixit to ease a guilty conscience?

That's his typical MO. When I was fifteen, Hudson yelled at me about using all the hot water, and the next day we had a newer, bigger hot water heater installed. I came home from the library early and saw Cole tearing apart the box and agreeing to shovel Mr. Jamison's drive all winter to cover the service fee.

I shake off that thought and make my way to Cole's kitchen for coffee, having officially surrendered in the decaf war. Not because he won but because I ran out of energy, and I need him to be able to focus on every

bullet point I send his way. The fight against Devin is more important than the war on caffeine right now.

I must be going soft, and it doesn't bode well for my future. That's precisely why I'm sneaking into Cole's house to get ahead of some work at six on a Saturday morning.

Except when I attempt to insert my key into the knob, I find it already unlocked, and the house is in chaos as the door swings open.

Nana Mae is on the phone, issuing commands that sound less like requests and more like a mob boss coordinating a siege. Cole is at the counter with a clipboard, which means this is serious. He's also dressed in a Henley that does inappropriate things to his forearms that I refuse to spend another second on.

Still, I take a mental snapshot. Involuntarily. My brain is a traitorous bitch.

"Morning," he says without looking up. His gruff tone sends heat to a heart that's trying desperately to defrost against my will.

"What's happening?"

"Festival," Cole grunts at the same time Nana Mae says, "War, didn't I tell you? I thought for sure I mentioned it."

She didn't.

He flips a page on his clipboard. "It's the annual Haven Community Day."

"Yes, but those snots over at Cypress Hill caught wind of it and have been one-upping us ever since," she scoffs.

"Nana Mae." He pinches the bridge of his nose as if this is a conversation they have often. "Cypress Hill is twice as large as we are, and the quality of their builds is half of what ours are. This is in no way a competition."

"Bullshit," she barks. "Cypress Hill is trying to take your thunder in that architectural design award, just like Paula Pea Brain did back when your mama was up-and-coming."

"An award I haven't entered. Ever," Cole fires back, ignoring the comment about his mom—he never talks about his parents.

Her eyes pinch at the corners. "No, but this year I dug the application out of the trash and entered it on your behalf. Those soul-sucking leeches are not encroaching on your success."

He goes still. "Nana Mae. What the hell are you talking about?"

Ventriloquism looks sexy on Cole.

Ugh.

Cole Whittaker is not sexy.

“Try me, Cole. Just try and win this one.” Nana Mae’s tone is enough to have me stepping back. Something passes between the two of them. A story, a secret I’m not privy to, but Cole is the first to acquiesce.

“The award means nothing,” he grinds out. “Just because you have some old vendetta against Paula Van Holten—”

“This has nothing to do with that old bat and everything to do with you, this land, and our family.”

“Ah, I’m just going to—”

Nana Mae tosses an apron over my head as though I’m cattle she just hog-tied. On the front it says, Kiss the Cook’s Granddaughter, and she wastes no time tying it behind my back. “Pushy Paula’s daughter and Cole’s mama were rivals growing up. That rivalry reignited when they ended up in different branches of the same company. His mama in Boston, and that twit over in Charleston.”

“Nana Mae,” Cole groans.

There’s more to that story, I’m sure.

“Lemonade stand,” Nana Mae says. “You and me, sweetheart. Starts at nine.”

“But…work—” I spin to find Cole. Surely he’ll help me out of this. But when I find him glaring at my apron, I know I’m all alone. You’d think I’d be used to that by now. “I actually have work to do.”

“Your spreadsheets will survive one day without you,” Nana Mae says, offering no room for argument. She leans in and whispers, “Paula Van Holten’s granddaughter will be there too. Cole may call you Viper, but that woman’s the real deal, and we’re not gonna allow her to get her claws into our Cole, you hear me?”

That giant ball of jealousy I used to wear like camouflage anytime Cole’s ex was around bursts free from my ribs like I’m a goddamn storm cloud built for spite.

Cole’s mouth twitches. I see it. He sees me see it, and then he focuses on his clipboard.

“Her mama and Cole’s mama might’ve been friends and competitors back in the day,” Nana Mae continues. “But they’ve already taken too much. They’re not getting Cole too, you hear me?”

“Fine,” I growl. I don’t know how long I’ll be in Porchlight Cove, but I can’t handle another one of Cole’s girlfriend-bullies in close proximity, so if I have to play bouncer for him, I will.

This is strictly for my professional sanity. Nothing else.

I need—

In front of Cole, in his favorite mug, steam rises from the coffee he beat me to making. I steal it while he isn’t looking, except his head lifts the instant his mug hits my lips. He watches me take a long drink and set it back down, but he says absolutely nothing.

Jesus, it’s good. Strong, slightly over-extracted, exactly how he likes it.

His sparkling green eyes give him away. He knows about the decaf. He’s known for a while, and the prick never said a word.

“YOU COULD’VE WARNED ME THE FESTIVAL WASN’T JUST FOR THE HAVEN,” I grumble as I move around Nana Mae in the booth that’s attracting kids and bees by the handful.

“This is how we show off all Cole’s hard work, dear. Everyone who lives here already knows how great he is.”

I snort but continue juicing the lemons.

It feels as though the entire town showed up from the mainland. Couples with strollers fill the streets. Teenagers who clearly have nowhere better to be snicker and take selfies.

And not a single one of them knows who I am.

Today, I just get to be a woman squeezing lemons at a lemonade stand.

The freedom of it hits me so hard, I set down the pitcher and grip the edge of the table.

This is what it felt like before the bar, before Grace’s campaign, before hundreds of thousands of strangers appointed themselves the jury of my character. But now, I have Nana Mae at my side, and Cole, who runs booth to booth, fixing things that aren’t his responsibility.

“You’re staring into space, dear.” Nana Mae bumps my hip with hers. “Pour and smile. That little hussy Paula and her granddaughter Lola are heading this way.”

My spine instantly straightens. Lola sounds…sexy.

I glance down at my T-shirt, cutoff denim shorts, and Nana Mae's apron that covers me from collarbone to knee, and cringe.

Did I even brush my hair today?

Then I stomp my foot because how I look doesn't matter.

I'm not Cole's and he's not mine.

I pour more glasses of lemonade when the frost hits our tent.

"Paula," Nana Mae hisses.

"Bless your heart, Mae Belle, dear. Your little festival is so…quaint."

Oh, this bitch is going down. I lift my gaze just as an Elle Woods wannabe steps up beside her.

"You remember Lola, don't you, Mae Belle?" Paula's voice is syrupy sweet.

I almost gag.

"Lola," Nana Mae replies, and dang. I might be falling in love with Mae's spiteful side.

"Where's Cole?" Lola asks. She doesn't even spare me a glance, but I'm used to it. She's probably the kind of woman who only acknowledges other women she views as competition.

If I had long sleeves on right now, I'd be rolling them up and ripping out my earrings.

"He's around," Nana Mae hedges. "Junie, dear. Put this back on. I think we've squeezed enough lemons for a bit."

Before I can ask what the hell she's talking about, she reaches for the ring she set on a glass dish and forces the giant diamond onto my ring finger. Then she has the balls to squeeze the sensitive skin between my thumb and forefinger hard enough to hurt.

She's sending me a warning. I'd be impressed if my entire body wasn't sweating.

Nana Mae turns back to Paula and her mannequin granddaughter. "But before you run off Junie dear, let me introduce you to the woman who got turned down by my Arthur. Repeatedly. Junie, this is Paula Van Holten. Paula, this is Cole's fiancée, Junie Mercer."

I'm mid-swallow when Nana Mae shoves me forward ring-first by holding my wrist in a grip so tight I'll wear her bruises for a week.

"His what?" Lola whispers. "Since when? Gran, you didn't tell me—"

"Well, this is…interesting." Paula's Southern charm has worn off.

Nana Mae pinches my side, and I stumble forward. “Ah, yup. I’m going to go find my ah, Cole. I’ll be back. Nice to meet you. I think.”

Shaking my head, I practically sprint through the festival with one thing on my mind—kill Cole Whittaker for his grandmother’s lies.

It takes me twenty minutes to find him. Mostly because Katie made me sign an agreement about attending the next S&S meeting that turned into drinks on Wednesday too.

But even after I find him, I can’t bring myself to interrupt. I don’t mean to watch him. But Cole Whittaker running a community festival is a spectacle I’m not equipped to ignore.

He’s…everywhere. Setting up folding tables with a speed that suggests he does this a lot and doesn’t like it any more than the first time he did it. Then he adjusted the orientation of Stanley’s entire booth, which Stanley promptly moved back, only for Cole to readjust it a second time and then lock it in place with foot-long metal stakes.

I’m about to intercept him when he hauls a cooler full of drinks onto his shoulder while directing a group of teenagers with the warmth of a man being forced to adopt seventeen puppies at gunpoint.

Then my thumb hooks on the ring I can’t get off no matter how many times I twist it.

“Thanks, Mr. Cole.” one of the teenagers waves with his whole body and a smile that says Cole might be his hero.

Cole grumbles, then drops the cooler onto an open table just as another teen approaches him with cups. I can’t hear what Cole says, but I can tell by his expression he’d rather shart himself than continue the mindless small talk.

Yet everyone in his sphere keeps gravitating toward him. They always do. He’ll grumble about their issue, fix it, then act personally offended when they come back to thank him.

He put up those lights last night. I’d bet my entire bank account on it.

Freaking asshole.

When I look up again, he’s closer, with his sleeves shoved up to his elbows, and he’s talking to a little boy holding Frank’s hand.

“That’s not a dog,” the kid protests, pointing at a balloon blob in Cole’s hands.

When the hell did he learn to make balloon…animals?

“It is a dog,” Cole snaps.

“It doesn’t have legs.”

“It doesn’t need legs to be a dog.”

The kid frowns, then glances up at a smiling Frank before facing off with Cole again. “Yeah, it does.”

Cole holds up the balloon and draws a smiley face on it. “It’s a dog. Take it or leave it.”

The little boy only deliberates for half a second before he’s clutching a bright red hotdog-shaped balloon to his chest and shaking it at Frank.

Cole watches it all with an expression that’s 90 percent irritation and 10 percent something he’d rather die than admit.

This is who he became after he left me behind. A man who guards everything good about himself like a secret that will destroy the world if it ever came to light.

And I hate—genuinely, actively hate—how attractive he is. It’s not just the Henley that appears to be painted on or the forearms that truly make me question my sanity. It’s the competence. It’s watching someone be exactly who they’re supposed to be and do it so well that everyone around them is a little better for it.

Everyone except me.

I never fit into his equation.

And now I’m stuck wearing a diamond ring with a sexy vixen named Lola shooting laser beams at my backside.

Cole lifts his head and catches me staring.

I stick my tongue out at him because I am a mature, professional woman with an advanced degree who doesn’t know how to handle the emotional minefield exploding in my chest.

The corner of his mouth lifts. Just the right side. Just a fraction. It’s the same look he’d give me when he’d catch me recording him for my vlog when I was a teenager. Quiet. Just for me.

And another crack crumbles in my wall, but he’s already striding toward me. His long legs eat up the distance before I can choose where to run.

“He got that smile from his grandfather, you know,” Nana Mae says, scaring the shit out of me. “Arthur only ever used it on me.”

“Nana. Junie.” Cole’s greeting is choppy at best.

My mouth opens and closes, but no sound comes out. My entire body is on fire, and my head is muddled with too many questions, emotions, and irrational thoughts that I do the only thing I can think of.

I lift my left hand, palm facing me, and thrust the ring into his line of vision.

His crooked smile freezes into place, his gaze darting from the ring to my face and back again.

“What. The. Fuck. Is. That?” I’ve never heard Cole sound angrier.

“Now, Cole. It just happened.” Nana Mae attempts to step between us, but Cole grips my hand like a vise and drags me behind a tree—as if that will keep the prying eyes of The Haven off us.

“Explain. Now.”

A choked, wet sound gurgles in my throat.

“You see.” Nana Mae stands to the side, worrying her hands in front of herself. “Paula, she just… And then Lola, well, she’s one pregnancy scare away from trapping you. And. Well.”

Cole’s dark gaze never leaves mine. “Well, what?”

“I—It’s stuck. I can’t get it off.” Panic is settling between my shoulder blades, and it hurts to breathe. This ring is cutting off circulation not only to my finger but also my brain.

Cole turns my hand over in his while his thumb and forefinger work the band stuck to my finger.

“It’s just water weight,” Nana Mae says. “From the heat and all that ramen she’s hoarding in her apartment. A few homemade meals and it’ll slip right off.”

Is that supposed to make me feel better?

“There you are.” *Fuck off, Paula!* “I hear congratulations are in order.”

Cole’s finger holds the ring intimately, his gaze correctly reading the fear in mine.

And then he smiles. A full one. Broad. Knowing. And devious to a fault.

His arm slowly wraps around my waist, and then he’s spinning us both.

I stare up at Cole, waiting for him to explain, but he simply keeps that smile in place and lifts a brow at Pushy Paula and Daisy Duke.

Sweat collects in my bra as I pinch his side because at some point, I hooked my arm around his waist too. This is my teenage dream and worst nightmare combined into one seriously fucked-up equation.

“Paula.” Cole and Nana Mae could run for dual mayors of Frost Town. I’ve never heard either of them be so cold. “Lola.” Jesus. His voice just dropped another fifty degrees. “I hear you’ve met my fiancée.”

“But.” Lola pouts. “When?”

“I’ve known Junie her whole life.” He leans down, his lips lingering on my forehead with so much meaning my knees nearly buckle. “Our timing’s finally right.”

“She’s… *That’s* what you’ve been waiting for this whole time?” Lola might be as confused as I am.

Cole’s hold on me turns brutal. I don’t know if it’s because Lola just insulted me, or because she let slip something he doesn’t want known.

Has he been waiting for someone?

Oh, God. I’m such an idiot. Of course he is.

Natalie still sends him letters.

He’s still holding out for the one who got away. My childhood bully is the love of his life.

I try to peel away, but he clamps down harder on my waist.

“I needed you tonight, Cole.” Natalie’s voice cuts through the pain in my arm.

The memory crashes into my lungs.

“She broke her arm, Natalie. What did you want me to do? Drop her off at the ER and leave her there alone? She’s fifteen.” Cole’s voice is low—he’s trying to protect me from her anger the same way he does with my mom.

My cast is pink. I focus on that so I don’t have to see the rage in Natalie’s eyes.

“She’s not your priority,” Natalie screams in his face. “I’m your girlfriend, Cole. Me. I had an emergency. I needed you, yet you chose to comfort her?”

Natalie’s cold glare sends shivers down my spine. It jostles my arm, and I flinch when she steps closer.

“That’s enough, Natalie. A Red Sox game is not an emergency. Go home. I’ll call you later.” Cole holds open the front door, and I swear Natalie contemplates kicking me.

“Why can’t you see what she’s doing? Why is she so important to you?”

Cole gently takes her by the elbow and ushers her out the door. “She’s my family, Natalie. Go home. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Natalie’s attacks on me got vicious after that. Secretly. Quietly. In shadows. No one ever saw it but me… She was the master manipulator of my torment, and she loved every minute of it.

I can’t do this with him. I can’t pretend he isn’t slicing me open in more ways than one. Not when it comes to Natalie freaking Moore.

“But, Cole—” Lola whines like a fucking toddler about to have a tantrum.

“If you’ll excuse us,” he interrupts. “Junie and Nana Mae have to get back to the lemonade stand, and I’m needed…anywhere else.”

He uses his arm around my waist to guide me away while also taking Nana Mae in his free hand. “What did you do?” he hisses at his grandmother.

“Solved two problems with one ring.” She leans over Cole to speak to me. “Don’t worry if you can’t get it off. It was always meant for you anyway.” Then she weasels her way out of Cole’s hold, manages to hook arms with me, and drags me away from him before anyone can say anything else.

“HEARD ABOUT THE ENGAGEMENT,” KATIE SAYS WHILE TAKING HER THIRD cup of lemonade and immediately spiking it with a half nip of vodka.

She’s on a mission to pilfer secrets I can’t afford to share, but I’m starting to become concerned about her drinking habits. I can’t tell if she uses it as a social crutch or if it’s a problem. The thing is, I never actually *see* her drink, she’s always just…holding it.

I try to remove the diamond ring while she stares at me. It doesn’t budge. Again. I’ve tried everything from ice to dish soap to no avail.

“Katie,” I growl.

“As your best friend, I should’ve been your first call.”

My best… She’s high. She must be.

“But I’ll excuse it because of the festival and all, as long as I get to be your maid of honor. Plus, it did put that shyster Lola in her place. She’s been trying to get in Cole’s pants since the minute he showed up here.”

I snap my rebuttal back but keep tugging on the ring.

“Katie, stop badgering her.” My body locks up at the sound of Cole’s deep voice coming from behind the tent.

How long has he been listening?

“Congrats to you too, I suppose?” Katie grumbles. “If you’d given us a heads-up, we could’ve at least made it special for her.”

“Jesus Christ. How did this spiral so fast?” he snaps.

I shrug as if he’s speaking to me, but he’s the one who went along with it. I’m still over here nearly breaking fingers to get this damn ring off.

“Go ahead, take a break,” Nana Mae says.

She explained why she did what she did but has no explanation for Cole going along with it other than Lola is relentless and he saw an opportunity to get her to back off.

Just what a girl always wanted to hear—I’m an opportunity.

“I’m fine,” I say, pouring more lemonade into plastic cups.

“Viper, please.” I don’t know if it’s the way Cole says *Viper* or *please* that has me putting the pitcher down, but I do.

“I’ll be back in five minutes,” I tell Nana Mae.

“No need, dear. I’m closing up soon. Time to head over to the pie eating contest. Stanley’s been practicing all year, so I promised to support him.”

Great. At least I still have work to use as an excuse.

I slip out the back of the tent and Cole holds out his hand as though I should walk with him.

I do. All the way back to his house, beyond the garage, and to a tree swing that overlooks the ocean.

I don’t remember seeing this down here before. Is this another kindness he performed under the cover of darkness?

He holds it steady, as though he expects me to jump on like I’m a ten-year-old.

Instead, I walk to the edge of the water, kick off my sandals, and sink my toes in. Moments later, he follows, coming to stand beside me with his jaw set and his shoulders squared.

Great. Another fight.

“I apologize for using you to get away from Lola. She doesn’t take no for an answer, and when I saw that ring on your hand, I—” His chin drops to his chest. “I’m sorry.” He nudges me with his elbow, then slips me a small tube of Aquaphor. “This might help get it off.”

Doubtful. So far, olive oil, coconut oil, dish soap, ice water, and something called beef tallow that Nana Mae gave me haven’t worked.

But I take it and tuck it in my pocket.

“Why does Nana Mae hate them so much?”

Cole's shoulders droop even more. "Lola's mom and my mom were sort of friends when they were young. They went their separate ways for college but became competitors in adulthood when they both went to work for the same company, just in different cities.

"But I think Nana Mae has had it out for Paula since she hit on my grandfather when they were teens." He bends down to pick up a rock and throws it far out into the ocean. "The real issue is that Lola's mom was supposed to be on assignment in New York, not my mom. Apparently, Paula had a meltdown that kept her daughter here, and because my mom was so competitive, she went to New York in her place. Dad went with her—they were making a weekend of it. But they never made it home. Nana Mae blames Paula for our loss."

I dart my hand out to rest on his forearm. It's the most I've heard him talk about his parents. Ever. Before I can offer anything in sympathy, he changes the subject.

"I also read your report last night."

That has me standing up straighter and removing my hand like I need armor for this conversation.

"And?"

"The LLC. The vendors." He lowers his voice, though the nearest person is two football fields away. "I want you to stop digging into the account holder."

I take a step away. "Excuse me?"

"For now," he amends when he clocks my expression. "I want you to focus on the tax assessment first. Get the books clean for the county deadline. Find proof for what you believe is going on. The proof is the priority."

"The priority is figuring out where $48,000 went, Cole. The tax assessment is damage control. The LLC is an actual crime."

"Junie—"

"You hired me for this." My voice drops to a register I don't entirely control. "You said you needed me because you couldn't find the connecting thread. I found the thread, and now you're asking me to stop pulling?"

He exhales through his nose, and the tendon in his neck jumps. "I'm asking you to prioritize."

I tug harder on the ring. I need it off. I need it to come off now.

"You're asking me to look the other way."

We stare at each other as another battle wages. His walls are up, but so are mine. We're two people standing on opposite sides of the same silence, both armed, neither willing to fire first.

Then something shifts—his armor showing the first signs of a crack. A sadness buried by fear that's gone before I can call him on it.

"There are things about this situation," he says carefully, "that are more complicated than numbers."

"Numbers aren't complicated, Cole. People make them complicated."

"Exactly." That one word sounds heavy and laced with regret as it leaves his mouth.

What the hell is he afraid of?

Once upon a time, he would've trusted me. He would've believed in me. But apparently that time has passed, and now I'm *just* an employee.

As an employee, I can be ice-cold. No heat, no burn of righteous indignation. Just a clean, sharp frost that coats my insides and turns my voice into something polished, professional, and utterly, completely empty.

"Understood. I'll focus on the tax assessment."

He blinks. Whatever he expected, it wasn't compliance. "Junie—"

"I said 'understood.' You're my boss, Mr. Whittaker. You gave me an order, and I'll follow it."

His hand reaches out lightning fast. The warmth of his palm cradling mine causes another fissure in my wall. He feels like home and love and happily ever afters I've obviously made up in my head.

Because that's not what this is.

So I smile. It's the smile I gave when I presented my capstone project. The one that could pass a polygraph while lying through its teeth. "I'm going to head in. I've got a lot to do to prepare for the assessment."

I don't storm off. I just…leave. Clean and quiet, like flipping a switch.

This is what the world didn't see of me because they decided I'm all fire. But the truth is, the fire is the performance. The ice is real. Fire is what I'm forced into when I'm out of options. Ice is what I reach for when I still have the chance to disappear.

I climb the steps to my apartment—the treads glowing beneath my feet, mocking me with their warmth—and close the door behind me.

Then I sit on my couch and stare at the wall while I quietly rearrange my carefully constructed plans.

Eventually, I grab my laptop, open the program that will sort Cole's tax assessment, and get to work on what my boss told me to focus on.

And if the world comes crashing down around us in the meantime, fuck it. I'm just following orders.

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10

OUR BOY DID IT

COLE

By Sunday morning, I'm engaged to Juniper Mercer, and the whole Haven knows about it.

Stanley has already updated his newsletter, including a congratulatory edition with a header that reads: Our Boy Did It, and a poll asking residents to vote on a reception venue.

The clubhouse is winning by a landslide.

Marley left a voicemail at 6:55 requesting I fill out the proper cohabitation paperwork—section nine, subsection C of the community handbook—and submit it to her office by end of day Monday.

And Nana Mae—the architect of this disaster—is humming in my kitchen as though she didn't detonate a social grenade in the middle of a lemonade stand yesterday.

"You look tense," she says, sliding a plate of eggs and a bagel in front of me. "Look at it this way, you're a shoo-in for that award now because once word spread, everyone was over here lookin' to congratulate you."

"That award means nothing."

She sighs heavily. "I'm sorry I entered you without your approval, Cole, but it does mean something. You're just not willing to admit it yet. But I'm not sorry it's pushing you out of the ties that bind you. You truly are your father's son."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

“I mean, he chose to run into that building, Cole. He wasn’t on duty, and he didn’t have his equipment. You’re doing the same thing, just without the flames.” She shakes her head, and it’s only the sadness in her eyes that keeps me from lashing out. “You’ve been trying to carry burdens alone since the day they died. I’ve never been able to get through to you. Maybe she can.”

I don’t talk about my parents, and I’m not about to start now. “She?” I grind out. “The *she* I’m supposedly engaged to? The woman who currently wants to murder me?”

“Dramatic.” She waves her spatula. “You should’ve seen your grandfather the day I told his mother we were married. He didn’t speak to me for three days.”

I pause with my bagel suspended in midair. This woman gives me whiplash. “You told his mother you were married before he did?”

“Details.” She points the spatula at my chest. “The point is, he got over it. You will too.”

It’s not me I’m worried about.

Junie and I are not the same as Nana Mae and Arthur. We’re not even in the same category. Arthur didn’t spend six years hiding from his future wife because he was terrified of what loving her would cost the only family he had left.

But I can’t say that, so I eat my bagel and eggs, then check my phone.

Fuck. Me. This day just keeps getting better.

Fen & Tonic:

Fen: So. Something interesting happened at a lemonade stand in South Carolina yesterday.

Hudson: I’ll need some context before I draft the prenup.

Fen: I’m on Stanley’s newsletter now! I knew my little Spite-Berry could pull some strings for me. Congrats to the happy couple!

Fen: There’s a poll, Cole. For the reception venue. This is priceless.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Nolan: What?

I stare at Nolan’s single word for a long time. There are exactly zero ways to explain this that don’t end up with him on the next flight home.

Cole: Nana Mae. Long story. It’s handled.

Nolan: …

Nolan: Is it?

Fen: It’s absolutely not handled. I’m screenshotting the newsletter for posterity.

Hudson: Is the ring real?

I lock my phone and shove it deep into my pocket.

Yes, the ring is real. It’s Nana Mae’s ring from my grandfather, and it’s currently stuck on Junie’s finger, and every time I think about it—the way it shined, the way she kept twisting it, the way it looked like it had always been there—my chest cashes a check I can’t afford.

Junie hasn’t come down yet. Her light was off when I checked. Not that I checked a lot—just most of the night and all this morning.

When she does show up, she’s in full armor. Hair up. Laptop bag over one shoulder. Her blazer buttoned all the way to her neck. And the ring is still on her finger—clocked that immediately—even though she’s turned the diamond inward, so it rests against her palm.

She doesn’t look in my direction at all.

“Morning,” I offer.

“I’ve completed the preliminary reconciliation for the Q3 vendor accounts.” She sets a printed report on the kitchen island without breaking stride.

No good morning. No Mr. Whittaker. No snark or spite or even hostility. Just…cold efficiency. As though I’m a task on a spreadsheet she’s checking off.

This is so much worse than Spite-Berry energy.

With fire, I know where I stand. Fire means she cares enough to burn. This—this professional emptiness—means she’s decided I’m not worth the heat.

“Junie, it’s Sunday.”

“And? What the hell else am I going to do? The county assessment templates are downloaded. I’ll have the first draft of the filing by Wednesday. The sooner we clean this up, the sooner—”

The sooner she can leave.

“Junie—”

“Is there anything else you need from me today?” She’s already halfway to the conference room. I glance at Nana Mae, hoping for some help, but even she lowers her gaze to the floor. “I’d like to get ahead of this filing so I can have a clean draft for your review.”

My review. I’m now a client to manage instead of a man who kissed her head yesterday with a longing so visceral I thought my heart would combust.

“No,” I manage. “That’s—fine.”

Junie’s got me uttering the worst word in the English language.

She disappears into the conference room. There’s not even a door to slam, but I don’t think she’d do it anyway. The silence she leaves behind feels more like a wall than any door could provide.

Nana Mae sips her tea. “You want to fix that?” She nods in Junie’s direction. “You’re going to have to show her something real.”

“I showed her real yesterday.” Calling her my fiancée felt real. Kissing her head, that was real. Telling her about my parents was real. Holding her to me as though she belonged there, that was fucking real.

It’s as real as I can get without ruining her life.

Isn’t it?

“That wasn’t real, Cole. That was reactive.” Nana Mae sets her mug down. “Show her something you normally hide. Something you don’t show everyone else. That’s what Papa did. That’s how he showed me who he was in a way that finally made me listen.”

I don’t respond because the only things I hide are things that would hurt her more.

Show her something you normally hide.

I HANDLE THE FREEZE-OUT UNTIL ELEVEN P.M.

Today was a masterclass in avoidance. Junie worked in the conference room. I worked in my downstairs office, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. We occupied the same house without once being in the same room, which shouldn't be possible in a building I designed for open sightlines, but she managed it with precise efficiency.

She communicated exclusively through email. Three of them. All formatted with headers and bullet points and her signature block that reads Juniper Mercer—Financial Consultant.

I never even gave her a fucking title, so she created one herself.

And she didn't sign it. Not even Juniper. She gave me a cold credential, a title, and a woman I don't recognize and don't want to know.

I want my Viper back—even if I don't deserve her.

Now the house is quiet. Nana Mae took off after breakfast, but Junie's light is on across the driveway. She's probably still working too.

If things were different, we could be working side by side. If things were…

They're not different though. Things are this way because of choices I made.

And now I'm staring at the Meridian Architectural Design Award website—the award that Nana Mae entered on my behalf. The same one Paula Van Holten's firm has won three years running. The same one my work won when I was twenty-three and the world hadn't yet taught me that talent is something people take from you when you're not paying attention.

Nana Mae even forged my signature, which is ironic given the Devin situation, and she submitted a portfolio I didn't approve containing work I've never shared with anyone—Viper's childhood home. The only design from happier times that wasn't used as collateral—because the collateral was already constructed.

She also left the confirmation email printed out on my drafting table with a Post-it note that said: Stop hiding and fight for what you deserve.

Stop hiding. As if it's that simple. Every time my work has entered the world, it's come back wearing someone else's name.

But Nana's note does what they always do—it burrows and festers. So at eleven p.m. on a Sunday, I pull the file drawer open and toss my old designs across the drafting table for the first time in six years.

Stop hiding. How can I stop hiding designs that now bear someone else's name? I stare at them with a mix of emotions that are too intertwined

to decipher. Then I open the archival tube.

The smell hits me first. Vellum and graphite and the particular mustiness of paper that's been stored in the dark too long. Then, as I roll them out, I remember the lines themselves—clean, deliberate, drawn by a version of me who still believed the work could speak for itself.

And it did—just with someone else's voice.

There's the coastal library I designed for my senior thesis. Cantilevered reading rooms suspended over a tidal pool, floor-to-ceiling glass angled to track the sun's arc so the light moved across the interior like a slow hand. My thesis advisor called it "impossibly ambitious," and then spent three weeks helping me engineer the load calculations to prove it wasn't.

There's the veterans' memorial I drafted during my first summer after college—the dark age, as I've come to call it. That period between what I lost and what I gained here with The Haven.

I designed this memorial with an open-air corridor, so the wind played different tones depending on the season. The building literally sings. It's the first piece I ever designed that I had a true, personal connection to, and it's the first piece that disappeared from my portfolio and reappeared under a different name.

I run my thumb along the edge of that blueprint and feel the old wound pulse. It's not sharp anymore. It's duller. The kind of ache that's settled into the bone and become part of the architecture of me.

Gently, I flip through the designs like pages of a novel. Each chapter of my life, showcased in blueprints.

All of it mine. All drawn by my hands, in this style—the angular lines that soften at transition points, the obsessive attention to how light enters a space, the way I design buildings around the people who'll use them instead of the people who'll photograph them.

And none of it belongs to me anymore.

I should have burned these a long time ago. I should put them away now. Looking at these is the architectural equivalent of pressing on a bruise—it serves no purpose except to confirm the injury still exists.

But Nana Mae said to stop hiding, and the truth is, the story of this file isn't the only thing I'm hiding. If I accept that she's entered my biggest lie into competition, I won't be able to hide it any longer.

Fifty thousand dollars.

That’s what sits at the top of the prize sheet, printed in bold under the Meridian letterhead. Fifty thousand dollars for first place, paid out within fifteen days of the ceremony.

It’s enough to cover what Devin took from The Haven.

Nana Mae doesn’t know about Devin—not the full scope of it, anyway. There’s no way she knew we’d need this prize money. She entered me to beat her nemesis, Paula Van Holten, to fulfill an ache that’s never left her. She also doesn’t know I’ve fought with myself about this contest for months, knowing The Haven might need the money but unable to risk engaging with a company that made millions off my designs without their knowledge.

But no matter how I look at it, the prize money from Natalie’s company could undo the damage Devin has caused.

One stolen thing paying for another.

Stop hiding, Nana Mae’s note says.

If only she knew what that would actually cost me.

My attention snags on my mother’s drafting compass. She was an architect too, though I only know that through Nana Mae’s memories and a few inanimate objects. I don’t usually let myself think about her. Tonight I’m thinking about her, which means I’ve stopped keeping my own rules.

I glance at the bottom drawer—the locked one—the one that contains the blueprints with JM sketched into the cornerstone of every detail.

I’m designing that home based on the way Junie moves through space—wide hallways because she reads while she walks, a south-facing kitchen because she gravitates toward the sun’s warmth, even if she doesn’t realize it. A reading nook tucked behind the stairs because she always loves spaces that feel hidden but aren’t.

I glance back at the application Nana Mae submitted. The timeline to withdraw is…

Wait. I glance down at my watch, then click through apps on my phone until I find the calendar. What the actual fuck?

The timeline to withdraw was midnight. Midnight last fucking Friday.

My empty stomach twists, and my ribs sink into my lungs, constricting air until my vision blurs.

Stop hiding.

Stop fucking hiding. She didn’t give me a choice.

I stand abruptly, tossing the archival tube and grabbing my pencil.

I can’t think when my mind is like this. I can’t focus on anything but the heartbeat in my ears, so I do the one thing, the only thing I can do in my sleep—I design.

I rework the library design on autopilot. Adjusting sight lines and recalculating angles until finally, the rest of the world falls away.

This is the only time my brain goes quiet anymore. Not in my bed, or the porch, or even the ocean that’s a hundred yards away. When my life implodes, I turn to my drafting table. Pencil on vellum. The act of creating an idea and making it real.

This is where I lose track of time. My pencil moves precisely, my breathing slows, and the constant low-grade hum of anxiety that’s been my baseline since Boston dims to something manageable.

Which is why I don’t hear her enter.

“I knocked. Twice.”

I jolt so hard my pencil skids across the vellum, ruining a line I’d been refining for longer than I care to admit. My body is rigid before my brain catches up—Junie’s in my doorway. The one I always lock but forgot to tonight because Nana Mae’s note rattled something loose and I was in too deep to notice.

Junie’s standing three feet inside my private office, and I swivel my head, searching for any signs of the life I’m designing for her without her knowledge. Or worse, the truth I’ve kept hidden from her so she’d always have a safe place to land.

It’s hidden. Right?

“Cole?”

My gaze snaps back to hers. She’s in an oversized T-shirt and shorts, her hair damp from a shower, and she’s holding a manila folder against her chest like a shield. But the thing that really gets me is that she’s barefoot. Like she just climbed out of the shower and decided to walk across the driveway, which means the stair lights did their job, and now I’m thinking about what else I can fix at her apartment instead of the fact that she’s standing in the one room in my house she was never supposed to see.

“The, ah—the door was open.” She’s staring at the drafting table again. At the designs spread across it like a confession. “I found a discrepancy in the Q2 insurance filing. And…your light was on.”

Her eyes aren’t on the folder—they’re on my blueprints.

I almost spread my arms wide to block her view.

Get her out of here. Guide her to the conference room and lock the door behind you.

That's the thing about secrets. Once one is exposed, the dominoes begin to fall. And this is not a thread I want her to pull.

Yet I stand frozen. I don't cover anything, and I don't really know why. Or—I do. I just don't want to examine it with her standing in my office, smelling like whatever flowery soap she uses that makes my entire respiratory system malfunction.

Show her something you'd normally hide.

Goddamn it, Nana Mae.

"These aren't Haven designs," Junie says. It's not a question, and the ice from earlier today has cracked. Not fully thawed, but underneath it is the voice she uses when her brain has latched onto something her mouth hasn't caught up to yet.

"No." My voice is strained. There's no way she remembers these designs. She would've been in high school when I first started them. "They're not."

She takes a step closer. Then another, and the fear—that fear that Natalie instilled—roars to life. If Junie remembers this…what else will she remember?

Junie scans the coastal library spread, and her soft expression is a fist to my sternum.

She understands it. She remembers.

Not the engineering. Not the math. She understands the intent. I see it in the way her gaze follows the lines from the reading alcove over the water, in the way her head tilts to track the light path I designed into the ceiling, in the way her lips part on a breath she doesn't release.

She's reading the building the way I designed it. Not as a structure, but as a feeling.

"The light," she murmurs. Her fingertip hovers over the glass calculation—she doesn't touch the vellum.

She remembers not to touch the vellum.

"You made it so the light moves through the building. It's a clock."

The thorn in my throat triples in size. "It's a sun path. The reading rooms rotate through direct, diffused, and ambient light over the course of the day. Morning readers get east exposure. Afternoon gets west. The main hall tracks the zenith."

“So the building tells you what time it is?”

“The building tells you where the sun is.” I set my pencil down because my hand isn’t steady enough to hold it. “There’s a difference.”

Her gaze lifts to mine, and I’m hit with the same disorienting vertigo from the porch—the feeling of being seen past every layer I’ve constructed. She’s not looking at me like I’m her boss or her older brother’s best friend or the man who left her behind. She’s looking at me like I’m someone who makes things matter.

It’s how she used to look at me when—

When she was too young, and I was too old, and neither of us knew what was building between us.

“When did you make these?” She’s moved to the veterans’ memorial now. Her fingers trace the air above the corridor design as though she’s seen them before.

“Years ago.” I drop into my chair and let her look because the alternative will probably make her leave.

I don’t want her to leave.

“The library was my senior thesis.”

She nods as though she remembers.

“The memorial was…”

“Your summer project,” she says quietly, stealing the air straight from my lungs in the process. “You called it the Whisper of Souls Memorial. It’s the one you designed to honor your father—the one that sings.”

Adrenaline spikes in my nervous system. She described the memorial the exact way I’ve always thought of it. No one else has ever said that.

Even the firm that accepted it called it “innovative acoustic integration” and “marketable.”

Junie called it what it is. An honor, the only way I knew how to do it.

“The wind corridors are shaped to produce harmonic resonance based on air speed and direction,” I say, and realize with a jolt that I’m talking about my work the way I used to before it became a casualty of war. Before it became something to mourn instead of celebrate. “Different seasons have different prevailing winds. The building plays different notes.”

“What does it play in winter?”

Nobody ever asked me that. And I didn’t get to oversee construction, so I wasn’t afforded the opportunity to explain the positioning. It ended up, in my estimation, a lackluster build because they never understood the design.

“Something low,” I say. My voice has gone to a place where I can’t retrieve it. “A minor key.” I worked with musicians at the Berklee College of Music for an entire month on it. “The winter winds, if the building was positioned correctly, would come from the northeast, so the corridors there would be wider, making the tone drop. It’s…mournful but not sad. Like remembering someone you loved.”

At least, that was how the music professor had explained it to me back then.

Junie’s quiet for a long time. The drafting lamp throws warm light across the table between us, making the room feel smaller than it is.

“You designed a memorial that grieves the loss of life with you.”

Fuck me. I can’t speak. I physically cannot form words because she just described in one sentence what I spent three months trying to articulate in my design statement. And she did it standing barefoot in my office at midnight without even trying.

She moves along the table while I try to find my breath. The community center. The floating greenhouse. The adaptive housing project. She doesn’t rush as she studies each one with the same careful attention she brings to her spreadsheets. It’s meticulous focus I’ve never seen anyone else apply to my work.

“Why aren’t you doing this?” she asks.

The question is quiet but lands in a minefield.

“Doing what?” I scratch at my jaw to hide the way my throat works.

“This,” she says more emphatically. “You’re running a retirement community and fixing gutters and arguing with Stanley. But that’s not *who* you are. You’re Cole Whittaker, architect. You design buildings that make people experience an answer without ever recognizing there was a question. Why are you spending your life replacing porch lights?”

The words scream in my head with the desperation of six lost years. *Because I traded my career for my family and then lost them both anyway.*

“The Haven needed me,” I say instead.

“The Haven needs a property manager. This—” She taps the air above the library. “This needs an architect.”

The distinction slices through me with a precision I wasn’t prepared for. The thing I do versus the thing I am. She’s here, drawing a line between survival and purpose, and she has no idea how deep that cut goes.

“It’s complicated.” I didn’t mean to growl at her. I don’t mean the harshness that she hears, but she reacts to the sound accordingly.

It’s complicated. Fuck. The same words I’ve used about Devin, about Natalie, about every truth I can’t afford to tell her.

Her jaw tightens as she files the deflection the way she catalogues Devin’s vendor discrepancies. And I hate that I’m forced into the same category as a thief and liar.

But isn’t that what they’ve turned me into?

Then her eyes fill with the one thing I never wanted to find there—heartache. But she doesn’t push. Instead, she lowers her gaze—it feels as though she’s cut out my heart with the motion—then she moves to the edge of the table where the veterans’ memorial blueprint curls up at the corner.

“What happened to this one? Was it ever built?”

“No,” I lie.

“Why not?”

“It didn’t work out.” The words taste like ash.

Junie stares at me as she processes my answer. I watch her weigh it against every other nonanswer I’ve given her since she arrived. She doesn’t believe me. I can see it in the set of her mouth.

But she gives up on it, just as I fear she’s given up on me.

As she lowers her gaze to drop her file onto my desk, I follow her line of sight moments too late.

She’s staring at the framed photograph, lying down, partially covered by a design, next to the pencil cup she made me for my Master of Architecture graduation.

I see the question before she asks it. The slight tilt of her head. The way her fingers twitch toward it, then pull back. She’s deciding whether to cross a line, and I can’t believe how much I wish she could cross it.

“What’s this?” She doesn’t pick it up. She just gestures at it, giving me the option to lie.

The photograph is of me, standing in front of the memorial rendering in her kitchen. The design I’d planned to submit to Meridian’s internship program. The internship that would’ve catapulted my career. The design that won Natalie my place in that firm.

And I’m not alone in that photo. Natalie’s on one side of me, clenching my arm so tight I walked away with half crescent moons dug into my skin. Junie’s on my other side, and that’s where I’m looking. Only her shoulder

and dirty blond hair are exposed now—and that's what she caught a glimpse of.

If Junie sees Natalie in that photo, she'll build a story that's wrong in every direction that matters.

I can't give her more ammunition for a wound I didn't cause but can't mend or even explain.

It's a photo I keep to remind myself why I heel to Natalie's manipulations—I've only ever wanted Junie.

"It's just…old stuff…from the firm I applied to years ago," I say, but I can hear how thin my lie sounds. "From before The Haven."

Junie's hand draws back. She meets my gaze and holds it for three beats too long. One for the question, one for my deflection, and one for the hurt she tucks away so cleanly I almost miss it.

Almost.

"Right." She nods once. Professional. Controlled. The ice slides back into place so seamlessly, it's like watching a door close in slow motion. "Old…firm…stuff."

Her gaze darts back to the photo. The wisp of golden hair that can only belong to her. To my gaze that stares not at the camera, but to the girl just to my left.

I want to flip the photo over and explain everything. But telling her means telling her why Natalie's blackmail works in the first place. And the reason the blackmail works is standing in my office, wearing my grandmother's ring, staring at me as if I kicked her puppy.

So I say nothing, and Junie finally remembers the folder in her hands. "The insurance filing."

I take the folder from her, and she's very careful about not allowing our fingers to touch, but the ring catches the lamplight, and as she pulls her hand away, suspended for one second, my grandmother's diamond throws a pinpoint of light across the ceiling like a small, private star.

We both watch it. Neither of us acknowledges it.

"I'll review it." The words sound like gravel under the tires of a Mack truck.

"Good." She tucks a strand of damp hair behind her ear. And for one brief moment, I imagine it damp for other, more provocative reasons.

Then she smacks me in the face with her sincerity. "Your designs are—" She presses her middle finger to her temple and presses, hard. "I'm glad

Nana Mae entered you in that competition. Not because she wants you to beat Paula Van Holten, but because your work is—”

I take a step forward, unable to stop the pull she has on me.

She glances up, startled, or put off by our sudden closeness, but she doesn’t retreat, even as I take another step forward until we’re sharing air.

This close to her, my body thrums, like she controls the heartbeat and the blood pumping through my veins. I’m electric next to her. Amplified in ways I’ve never considered before.

She’s the half of me that’s necessary for survival, and now I know why I’ve been slowly dying inside. You can’t live when the best parts of you are missing.

“Your work is extraordinary, Cole.”

Her compliment shreds me all the way to my bones.

She says it like a fact. No performance, no flattery. Just a woman who reads the data and gives her findings.

I don’t have a response. Hearing her call my work extraordinary applies pressure to a fracture I thought was starting to heal.

“Goodnight,” she says, backing away from me and hurrying towards the door.

“Junie,” I croak.

She stops but doesn’t turn. She did the same thing when she paused on her stairs after our…conversation on the porch.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Then she’s gone. Bare feet slapping on the hardwood, down the stairs, and across the driveway. The motion sensors kick on as she races up her steps, but she doesn’t turn on her light.

And I wait for it to turn on for a long time. It never comes. Almost as if she knows I need it.

Eventually, my hand lowers to the locked drawer where I keep her blueprints—her dream house, built from conversations she probably doesn’t even remember having.

But this time, I don’t unlock the drawer. This time, the lock feels like protection more than cowardice. Even as I stare at the faces in the photo Junie only saw half of because the frame must have toppled over when I tossed the canister to my design table.

I stand it up now, knowing why I kept it. A reminder of what—of who—I'm protecting and from whom, but now I just want to burn it all because the story this photo tells isn't about me and Junie. It's Natalie's calculated smile. My naivety in believing silence would protect us.

But silence never protected anyone. Silence is the thing that's killing every chance I ever had with the woman who just walked out of my office, tugging on a diamond ring that refuses to budge.

My phone buzzes.

Junie?

Fen & Tonic:

Fen: Update: Stanley's newsletter "Wedding Edition" just dropped. There's a section on catering. Dollie's volunteered her cake-making skills.

Hudson: Cole. The ring.

Nolan: I'm booking a flight.

I should tell Nolan that the ring is stuck, that nothing happened.

Except something did happen, and I don't know how long I can keep up the lies. Not the engagement—that's a comedy of errors I'll deal with tomorrow. It's what happens next that has me pocketing my phone before I can respond and then returning to my work.

Not because Nana Mae wants me to beat her rival.

But because a woman who reads blueprints like poetry told me my work was extraordinary.

And for the first time in years, I'm stupid enough to believe her.

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11

A STORM WITH A GRUDGE

JUNIE

THE SKY TURNS THE COLOR OF A BRUISE AT TWO IN THE AFTERNOON, AND by three, Porchlight Cove is being swallowed whole.

I've lived through Boston nor'easters. I've lost power in February with nothing but Nolan's med school textbooks to burn for warmth—hypothetically because he would have killed me—but a South Carolina coastal storm is a different animal entirely. It doesn't creep in. It arrives like it's been personally offended by the existence of dry land and has come to settle the score.

The wind starts first.

Not a gradual build, but a switch flipped, zero to tree-bending in under a minute. Rain follows in horizontal sheets that hit the glass like someone's power washing the building.

I'm in the conference room when the lights flicker, hold, then flicker again just before everything goes dark.

My laptop screen is the only light in the room. And my battery's at 2 percent. Excellent.

Cole appears in the doorway, and I know damn well he's been waiting for this kind of emergency because emergencies are where he thrives—the bossiness, the control. It would be sexy if he were allowed to be sexy.

He's not.

"Clubhouse," he says. One word. He's already in fix-it mode, securing windows and moving around me as though I'm an afterthought. It shouldn't

hurt after all this time, but it does.

His rain jacket leaves puddles in his wake. There's a flashlight in his hand, and his boots appear to have survived three wars and a Home Depot clearance sale.

"Residents are meeting there." He moves onto the next window, pulling down shutters I hadn't noticed before. "Transformer blew. Stanley's doing headcounts, and Nana Mae's coordinating kitchen rations."

The low timbre of his voice, the authority…he makes it freaking impossible to think of him as an ogre.

"I'll grab my things and head over—"

"You're staying here." The low, rolling growl of his words infects my limbs with his order.

Hovering above my chair, I blink. Slowly, intentionally, to get my shit together. "Excuse me?"

"Your apartment stairs aren't safe in this wind. I've been meaning to update the railing, but—" He pulls a second flashlight from…somewhere. The man is a walking hardware store. He sets it on the table between us. "I'm not having you break your neck crossing the driveway or falling down the stairs. The generator is in the garage. I have to get the clubhouse running first, then I'll come back and get ours online."

"Ours," I repeat. Of course the possessive pronoun is the thing my brain latches onto.

My thighs quiver because I'm *still* hovering, so I drop into my chair and reach for the flashlight, but he's already gone. The door slams, and I jump, then I'm left alone in his dark house.

The flashlight flickers to life, catching on the fucking diamond I still can't remove.

How pissed will Nana Mae be if I have someone cut it off?

Lightning sears the sky, as if warning me not to do it.

But at some point, this damn thing has to come off.

Right?

Ugh! Don't be stupid, Juniper. The ring may be real, but the sentiment is not. Cole would never allow it.

Frustrated with the direction of my thoughts, I exit the conference room in search of candles. Nana Mae probably has them in the kitchen, so I head there first and find them in the third junk drawer down.

Matches are in the blue ceramic jar by the stove, and I try not to focus on how comfortable I am here as I light the candles.

The room shifts from dark to amber, and suddenly Cole's kitchen feels less like the office I pretend it is and more like what it should be, a home. The candlelight softens the hard edges. The granite looks warm. The photos on the fridge that I've actively avoided all month are suddenly golden and intimate, and I really need to stop staring at them.

There's one of Cole and Nolan at a Red Sox game—they're younger and carefree here. It makes me believe it's after my dad ran off but before my mom died and they inherited the burden of ensuring I made it through high school.

Beside that is one of all four guys. It must be Hudson's law school graduation because Hudson is the only person I know who would wear a three-piece suit under his cap and gown.

I lift it with the tip of my finger, and the Palmetto magnet falls to the floor. I slam my palm to the door to keep all the photos from fluttering to the ground, and my gaze snags on…myself.

Something lodges in my throat.

I'm sitting on my porch in Boston, my knees pulled up to my chest, and I'm staring at something off camera, but it doesn't hide the sadness, the sheer devastation in my expression.

This was taken the night of Nolan's grad party. I can tell by the dress—it was the one and only time I wore it. This was the night I knew I was losing Cole for good—it happened even before he left Boston. I felt it that night dancing. The surgical separation. The stitches in the barrier reinforcing.

Why does he have this? Who took it?

The storm outside screams as loud as the thoughts in my head, and I attach a new magnet, then back away from the fridge. I sit numbly at the island with my dead laptop clutched to my chest and my candles and my catastrophic inability to stop collecting evidence about a man I've vowed to keep at arm's length.

Something metal crashes in the yard—my money's on Stanley's new aftermarket fenders. The rain is so heavy it sounds like static, like the world outside these walls has been replaced with white noise. Or is that just in my head?

I twist the ring on my finger with growing irritation. I've already rubbed the skin around the band raw, and still it doesn't budge. At this point, I'm half convinced Nana Mae had it enchanted by a sea witch before she forced it onto my finger.

How the hell did she even get it over my freaking knuckle?

The back door crashes open forty minutes later, and Cole blows in with the storm.

Have I really been sitting here staring at those freaking pictures this entire time? *Get a grip, Juniper!*

Cole shakes his head, and water droplets fly about the room. He's drenched. Absolutely soaked through. His rain jacket dripping a river on the hardwood, boots leaving muddy prints that would give Nana Mae a stroke.

"Clubhouse is set," he says, shaking the water from his hair again like a dog. A very large, very annoying, very attractive dog. "Everyone's accounted for. Stanley tried to do a perimeter check, but Bea physically blocked the door."

I hand him a towel without being asked because apparently, my body is making this a home while my mind tries to burn it down.

He takes it.

Our fingers don't touch—I ensure it. I've developed an entire system for object exchange designed to prevent skin-on-skin contact, and it's fine. Not at all pathetic.

"Generator?" I ask.

"Breaker panel first. Something tripped when the transformer blew." He towels his hair, and I look away because a wet Cole is a hazard I didn't prepare for. "It's in the utility room. I need you to hold the flashlight."

Of course he does.

The utility room is the size of a closet, which I didn't fully appreciate until Cole stepped inside and took up approximately 80 percent of the oxygen.

I'm wedged between the water heater and the wall, holding the flashlight at the angle he specified—forty-five degrees because he's anal like that. He's working the breakers with both hands, flipping switches in a sequence that apparently makes sense to him and looks like a guessing game to me.

"Higher." He's gruff, and I almost tell him to stick the flashlight up his ass.

Instead, I adjust it, silently cursing how much heat this man puts off. If he were standing outside, he'd have steam rising from his appendages.

"More to the left."

Now, he's pushing it.

I adjust again, but my arm's beginning to shake. I don't remember the last time I worked out, and my biceps are not built for this.

"Steady," he mutters.

Is he just messing with me now? I glare at him in the dark.

"I am steady."

"You're drifting."

"You try holding a flashlight at a mathematically precise angle in a room the size of a coffin while a man who apparently generates his own gravitational field and heat source takes up all the breathable air."

He pauses. Turns his head just enough for the edge of his jaw to cut into the flashlight's beam. There's a drop of rain still caught in his stubble.

I definitely should not file it away in the growing vault of *Things About Cole Whittaker That Are Ruining My Life.*

"Are you always this dramatic during storms?"

Asshole. He knows I am.

"Are you always this bossy during electrical repairs?"

"Yes."

Even my nipples respond to his huskiness. I need to talk to Hudson. Maybe I can get him to rethink hiring me and allowing me to hide out in his condo from now until…forever.

Cole turns back to the panel. I hold the flashlight. The storm gets angrier. We exist in this tiny room together with air that's too thick and charged to have anything to do with the breaker panel.

His hand drops to reach a lower breaker, and his shoulder brushes my arm. My bare arm. I don't have a barrier today. And it's not a graze. It's contact. Solid and warm through his damp Henley, and I feel it in my teeth.

He doesn't pull away.

Why do I lean into it? Pull away, Juniper. Pull away.

"This one's corroded," he says, but his voice has dropped to a register that has no business being in a conversation about electrical…somethings. "I need to—can you hold the light closer?"

I step in—into the room, into him. The room doesn't allow for subtlety. Stepping in means my chest is at his back. It means I can smell the cedar

and rain and whatever pheromone this man secretes that makes my brain sign off.

My arm wraps around him, under his arm, closer.

It hurts my feelings.

My hand isn't steady anymore, and neither is his breathing.

He works the corroded breaker loose, and his elbow draws back into my breast. My inhale is loud, and he freezes. My nipples could cut glass, and when his swallow is an audible gulp, I know he can feel it, grazing his skin like a needle into a vein.

His bicep flexes, forcing my arm to press more tightly into his side, which also presses my chest more firmly into him. My flashlight is now aimed at absolutely nothing useful because my arm has given up on professionalism entirely.

"Got it." God, his words are hypnotically thick. They coat my skin like a long lick from his tongue. The breaker clicks. Nothing happens because the generator isn't online yet, but something in the air shifts. It has nothing to do with electricity and everything to do with the fact that he turned his head and now I can feel his hot breath against my collarbone.

Don't look up, Juniper. Please, do not look up.

I look up just as his gaze drops to my lips—a trick of the light. To my chest—shadows dancing surely. To my eyes—I drop the flashlight and flee.

"Fuck."

The word is a long, drawn-out groan and plea for…something as I retreat, but I don't stop until I'm safely back in the kitchen, common ground, even footing.

My fantasies have gotten me into trouble before, so I no longer fuck around with fairy tales.

He enters the kitchen right after me, opens his mouth, snaps it shut, then heads back out into the rain, across the driveway, and into the garage.

Cole storms back into the house an hour later, but I haven't moved. I just stand in the candlelight, staring into the storm because my flashlight died and I didn't notice.

"It's flooded," he says, wiping his hands on the towel I gave him earlier. "Water got into the intake. I drained it, but it needs to dry out before I can restart it. It'll take a couple of hours."

The wind chooses that moment to rattle the windows, even sheltered behind the wooden shutters.

“So we’re stuck?”

“We’re not stuck. We’re waiting.”

“We’re stuck, Cole.”

“Waiting implies a plan. Stuck implies helplessness. I have a plan.”

“Your plan is to wait.”

“Exactly.”

Let it go, Junie.

A rational, emotionally regulated adult would let this go, would light another candle, pick up a book, and ride out the storm like a person who hasn’t been slow-cooking in unresolved tension for weeks.

Unfortunately for the both of us, I’m not that adult. I never have been. And something about the dark, and the rain, and the way he said “ours” earlier has loosened the fight in my chest that I’ve been keeping in a chokehold.

Too many pictures and memories and half-truths lubricate my inhibitions.

“You know what your problem is?”

“Enlighten me.” He pours himself a bourbon but doesn’t offer me one. No, to him I’m still the kid sister of his best friend. *Classic fucking Cole.* He’ll make me a grilled cheese unprompted but won’t pour me a drink.

So I take his. He watches. Studies me as I bring the glass to my lips. Heat flares in his features as I remove the glass and lick my bottom lip. *That* I know I’m not imagining, so I do it again just to see his irises dance like the flicker of the candles.

“You think fixing things is the same as dealing with them.” I take another sip. It burns in a way that feels productive. “You fixed the breaker, and Marley’s porchlight, and every goddamn thing in this community that even wiggles funny. Hell, you probably even fixed my stairs, but you won’t—”

I take another sip. Anchoring myself to the burn so I don’t say something I can’t take back.

“Won’t.” He leans into my space. I’m still standing too close. “What?”

“You won’t handle the actual problem.”

There’s two feet of space between him and the island I’m pressed against, but as he takes a step toward me, that space evaporates.

He hitches at the waist, bringing our eyes in line with each other. “Which is?”

“You.” The word lands between us. I watch it hit him—the recognition that flickers behind his eyes, the way his arms snap out to cage me in on either side. But he doesn’t fire back. He simply…stares and clenches his jaw so hard I can hear his molars grinding.

“You hide behind the repairs and clipboard and the grumpy mayor routine, and it works. It does. On everyone else. But it doesn’t work on me. I stood in your office and saw you light up when speaking about your work for the first time since I’ve been here. That was the Cole I recognized. Then I had the audacity to ask one question about one photo, and you shut down so quickly, I got whiplash.”

Real pain flashes in his expression. “Junie—”

“Tell me that wasn’t the real you up there. What am I supposed to do, Cole, huh? Stand here and pretend I don’t see it? That I don’t see you?”

My voice cracks on the last word—a despicable weakness. I hate that he can hear the fracture. I hate that I’m standing here, fighting with him while wearing his grandmother’s ring, forcing him into honesty when I can’t be honest with myself about why any of this matters so goddamn much.

“You see what I want you to see,” he says. Low. Rough. The voice he uses when he’s one sentence from walking away or breaking open.

“That’s the problem.” The words rip from my chest with years’ worth of pain. “You decide what I get to know, how I get to feel. What about what I decide? Huh? I’m sick of being managed by a man who can’t even—”

The world explodes. It ends right here. It must because I sure as fuck know that Cole Whittaker’s lips did not just slam down on top of mine.

He slides his hand into my hair and fists it. Hard. He tugs my head back to angle my face so he can devour me.

Cole Whittaker is kissing me, ruining me, redesigning what it means to be kissed in real time.

He’s not slow. He’s not gentle. It’s not the soft, tentative first kiss of two people testing the water. This is a lifetime of silence touching down like a tornado. He pulls my hair, and my clit vibrates. He cups my face with his other hand—rough and calloused. The dichotomy of hard and soft messes with my equilibrium.

And his mouth *is* on mine. It’s not a question. It’s an answer to something neither of us has been brave enough to ask.

Every self-preservation instinct, every spiteful retaliation I’ve dreamed up since the day he left is screaming at me to stop, step back, find the ice,

run.

Instead, I grab his shirt with both fists and pull him closer.

The sound he makes—low, broken, like I've knocked the air out of him—undoes some fundamental law of attraction that's sat unchartered in my chest for a lifetime. Like I bricked it over six years ago and swore I'd never reopen it.

His mouth is warm and tastes like bourbon. And when his thumb traces my jaw, my lids fall shut. I fall into the sensations of it, of him.

Cole drops his hand from my face and anchors at my waist. Like he's holding onto something he's been reaching for across a distance he created, and now that he has, his body doesn't know how to hold it gently.

I savor the way each finger digs into my skin. Hope that it will leave marks—proof that this isn't all in my imagination. Because this? It will be the thing that destroys me if it goes wrong.

Not my viral video. Not Paul or Grace or any of the small betrayals that cracked the surface. This is the foundation. He is my fault line. If Cole Whittaker breaks my heart a second time, there won't be enough spite in the world to put me back together.

He drops his forehead to mine when I pull back first because I'm out of air.

It's also my pattern now. Feel something real, then run before it can be taken from you.

Textbook Juniper Mercer.

His hands fall from my body in slow motion. I see the exact moment he lets me go—the way his fingers curl inward reluctantly, like they're memorizing the shape of what they just held.

"Um. Thank you," I whisper.

Just before I run.

"Junie." He knocks on the bathroom door where I've been sitting in the dark for an undetermined amount of time.

"It's fine." Internally, I cringe. "I'm fine." Fuck with the double fine.

"Come out here and talk to me." He always did like barking orders.

Yeah, that's a no.

The handle rattles, and then to my utter horror, a drill sounds. The door leans sideways, then he rips it off its hinges, places it in the hallway, then returns and sets a candle down on the counter.

“The lock has always caught,” he says, shrugging at my WTF expression.

He stares down at me, sitting on the toilet lid with my knees pulled up to my chest. When I don’t say anything, he sighs. “There’s a break in the rain.”

Does that mean it’s time to go home? Can I flee his house without having to hear him call this a mistake?

“Junie, I—”

Oh, God. Here it comes.

“Don’t.” The word comes out sharp. “Don’t apologize. Don’t explain. Don’t—” …*make me a mistake you have to fix.*

He closes his mouth and nods. I use the moment of silence to slip past him and find my shoes in the mudroom.

“Where are you going?”

“I should—home,” I say, grabbing the umbrella I used earlier. Hopefully he doesn’t need it.

“The stairs—”

“Will be fine.”

His brows lift in surprise, right before he shuts me out with another wall.

“Good night, Cole.”

“I’ll walk you over.”

“No need.” I’m already on the porch.

“I’ll try to start the generator again.”

We dart out into the rain—lighter than before, but still enough to soak through in mere moments.

He stops at the garage door while I continue to the stairs.

“Good night, Junie.”

Pretending not to hear him, I hustle up the stairs. Once inside, I press my fingers to my lips because I still feel him there. I fear I may always feel him there. The pressure. The desperation. The sound he made when I pulled him closer.

The microwave beeps, and the clock blinks twelve o’clock.

And instead of doing anything productive, I enter my bedroom, go to the window that faces his, and turn on my light, knowing he'll see it. Knowing what it means in the language of porch lights and lanterns and two people who have spent a lifetime speaking in everything except words.

Less than ten minutes later, across the driveway, his office light turns on too, and then he's there, staring at me as I stare at him.

Hope, sadness, and a lifetime of mistakes hang in the space between us. But for the first time since I arrived in Porchlight Cove, it feels like an olive branch is trying to grow from his heart to mine.

And it will either end up being the beginning of something or the most beautiful way I've ever fallen apart.

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12

LOCKED DOORS

COLE

I KISSED JUNIPER MERCER LAST NIGHT, AND SHE THANKED ME FOR IT.

Then she locked herself in my bathroom.

But fuck. The sound she pulled from deep in my chest—that broken, gutted sound… And instead of pushing me away, she pulled me closer.

She pulled me closer.

I need to sit with that because my brain keeps trying to reclassify it as something it wasn't. A mistake. A storm-induced lapse in judgment. A momentary failure of the six-year freeze I enacted to protect her from the catastrophe of being loved by me.

Think about Nolan.

Think about rebuilding the framework—the sacrifice, the carefully maintained distance that keeps Natalie from detonating and my entire life from unraveling, but…

It's too late for that. I knew it the moment my lips crash-landed against hers.

Because I meant everything I poured into that kiss that was unlike any other I've ever experienced. I…devoured, claimed, demanded. That's not something a man does when he's committed to reinforcing boundaries.

I stare at the ceiling. Thinking I could ever be just friends with Juniper Mercer is the real lie.

Friends don't kiss like that. Friends don't grab fistfuls of shirts. Friends don't make the sounds she made.

Fuck me. The sounds she made.

I drag both hands down my face and groan into my palms.

Nolan will kill me. Actually kill me. Not metaphorically. Hudson will represent him, and Fen will livestream the trial to sway the court of public opinion in his favor.

The threat of Nolan isn't even what's keeping me up though.

Of all the things keeping me from Junie, Nolan barely makes the list.

It's something so much worse.

She couldn't handle the truth at eighteen.

But the woman who kissed me back last night? The woman who pushed me past my limit and demanded answers? That woman? She's not a broken teenager anymore.

Could she handle the trauma now?

Because what if I can't go back? What if kissing Junie Mercer is the thread that untethers me completely? I don't know how to stand in the wreckage of that without burning all our lives to the ground.

The answer comes to me with the sunrise. There is no going back.

I know it the way I know a structural integrity analysis is required—instinctively, inherently, with the kind of certainty that doesn't require a calculator.

The wall is coming down, and I'll learn how to manage the fallout before it does.

I'M AT THE STOVE MAKING EGGS WHEN SHE WALKS IN. EGGS ARE THE ONLY thing I can cook right now that doesn't require emotional bandwidth because mine was obliterated ten hours ago by a woman who tasted like bourbon and ruin.

She's in jeans and a T-shirt and not a swipe of makeup. I love her this way. There's no armor between us. She looks like Junie—the real one.

And she's carrying two cups of coffee from Grounds for Celebration.

She sets one on the counter next to me without saying a word. Just slides it into my space like a woman who's been playing chess her entire life.

I look at the cup. Then I look at her.

“It’s the real stuff,” she says, meeting my eyes for the first time since my favorite thank you left her lips. “Consider the decaf war officially over.”

This isn’t just a coffee. She’s handing me a ceasefire, a recalibration of whatever we are now that we’ve crossed the unthinkable line.

I take a sip and stifle a groan. It’s so fucking good.

“Thank you,” I say. And then, because I’m incapable of leaving well enough alone, I add, “For the coffee.”

The tiniest twitch appears in her upper lip. It’s not a smile, but it’s not *not* a smile either.

“For just the coffee?”

My spatula slips from my fingers and clatters to the stovetop. She did not just—

I turn to face her, but she’s already walking toward the conference room. Junie Mercer just made a joke about kissing me, and I’m comprehensively, irreversibly fucked because those walls are not going back up now.

We don’t talk about it all day Monday. Not when I rearrange my entire office so my desk now looks out the doorway that faces her instead of the window. Not when she glances up and notices that I can now stare directly at her from my place of work. Not when she gets up for a drink and her bare feet sound on the hardwood floor.

When did bare feet become the barometer of home?

We don’t talk about it on Tuesday when she sends me the tax assessment and signs it Viper instead of Junie or Juniper, and I stare at those five letters for so long I go cross-eyed.

We don’t talk about it on Wednesday when she sets a cup of coffee down on my desk so hard it sloshes over the side and leaves a ring on the hardwood, even after wiping it away. That circle is now a permanent reminder of her—as if my mind would ever allow me to forget.

And by Thursday, I realize my mistake.

What the actual fuck is going on with my inbox?

Message from BendyWendy94.

Message from JustTheTits00.

Message from PleaseDaddyMeNow.

I scroll down, but there's no end in sight. My entire inbox is flooded with messages I don't dare open. I hover over one of the senders and the entire link shows up. Be my daddy dot com.

I've been in meetings since seven a.m. This is the first time I've had a chance to check email, and as I scroll, I begin to sweat.

This is Viper at her best. Slowly, I lift my gaze and stare out my open doorway to find her sitting at the conference table, nervously tapping not one pen, but two.

It's unfortunate for her that I've memorized all her tells. And I understand her spite better than anyone.

Viper wants to talk but refuses to initiate the conversation. I want to skip the talking and go straight to more kissing but can't—for reasons that are escaping my mind at the moment.

Lifting the last file she dropped on my desk, I rise, my chair gliding out from under my desk in near silence, but it's as though it shifts the air from me to her, and pretty blue eyes track my movements.

Her swallow is visible as I stalk closer. My little Viper signed me up for a dating site that doesn't appear to care much about the date portion of the evening.

She must know she's playing with fire.

I don't stop until I'm close enough to lean against her table. She sits tall, with her hands hovering over her keyboard now, and she never breaks eye contact, even as I lower the file to the table.

Even as I invade her space.

My fingers brush hers as I hand her the file folder. The air charges with intent. It's a visceral thing, physical in the strength of it as my pointer finger runs over the smooth edges of the oval-shaped diamond on her finger.

Then my gaze snags on her lips. The way her breathing intensifies and her chest works hard to keep up.

The difference between her first day and today is that now I'm allowing myself to look because looking is a reminder of what I tasted, and what I tasted is a reminder of what I want, and what I want is the one thing I've spent years telling myself I can't have.

Now, the one thing I can't have is the only thing I need to survive, and my single goal in life is to find a way out of the mess my life has become.

I've been existing because I feared what would happen. Now, I'll fight because I'm scared of what will happen if I don't.

My control is at a breaking point. Blowing up my life seems to be my only option as my thumb and forefinger grip the diamond on her finger—not to remove it, but to say a silent prayer of thanks that it's still stuck.

Then I lower my head so slowly that she can pull away at any time. But my Viper—she won't back away from a challenge.

When my cheek grazes hers, I inch my lips toward her ear, then close my eyes and inhale her. Sweet and crisp, like freshly fallen snow. A rumble of a memory works through my chest. Junie's the same as she's always been, but better too.

Because now she smells like mine.

"If you want to call me daddy, little Viper, all you had to do was ask." My teeth snap out and clip the soft flesh of her lobe, then I suck it into my mouth to taste as much as to soothe.

She gasps.

I press my luck.

Junie moans when my teeth graze the pulse point in her neck.

I leave a trail of moisture with my tongue.

"C-call you daddy?" She scoffs. "I—I don't know what—"

I bite down on her. Hard. Right where her neck and shoulder meet. It'll leave a mark, but it's low enough she can hide it if she wants to.

"Tell me your game plan, Viper." My lips leave her skin, but I don't pull away. I stand, placing my hands on the armrests of her chair, hovering over her with my chest invading her space, the scruff of my jaw pressed to the softness of hers.

"Did you want me to reply to JustTheTits? Or how about BendyWendy?"

The sound that seeps through her clenched teeth is not a happy one.

I lower my voice even more. "Did you think about the consequences, Viper? Because I don't think you did."

She scoffs, but she starts tapping her pen against her thigh now. Tap, tap, tap.

"Tell me, my little ball of fury. Did you want to call me Daddy, or was Viper…frustrated?"

I'm going straight to hell. Nothing has changed—so why do I suddenly not give a fucking shit about anything but her and me and now?

“Yoo-hoo. Junie, you in here?” Katie’s voice rings through my home like a hurricane warning in a strip mall.

Junie shoves her chair back as I sit my ass on the ledge of the table and clasp my hands in front of myself to cover the erection I have no chance of hiding.

Junie swings her chair to the right, putting some space between us, but not before her gaze catches on the tent in my pants. I unclasp my hands to offer a *what am I going to do* gesture.

Her cheeks flame red before she jumps out of her chair and rounds the table to intercept Katie.

“Oh, there you are.” As if Katie didn’t know exactly where to find my Viper. “It’s time for S&S. Are you ready?” I lift one leg higher on the table and angle myself toward the door. “Are you okay?” Katie presses a hand to Junie’s forehead. “You look flushed.”

“Fine.” Junie swats her hand away. “I’m just hungry. I get…” Her gaze cuts to mine for half a second before returning to Katie. “Cranky when I don’t get what I want.”

I snort. I can’t help it. “That,” I say with a smirk, “is the truth.”

Katie watches us with a knowing grin I’ll answer for later, then drags Junie by the arm while shoving a pile of mail into my hands. “Let’s go. Cole can meet us there. We have some…catching up to do.”

Fuck me. There are worse people for Junie to befriend, but Katie’s the only one here who scares me.

I sit as Junie slips her feet into her shoes and leaves with Katie pressed to her side as though they’re already spilling secrets, then I glance down at the padded envelope Katie handed me.

It’s from Fen. I’d recognize the packaging anywhere. It’s the kind of overkill only Fenway Ashford Jones III would consider appropriate for sending personal items through the mail, but I open it without thinking.

Inside are photos and a Post-it note in Fen’s writing.

Found these cleaning out the extra rooms at the Brookline house.

He means Junie’s house. But no one, not even Junie, has ever called it that around us. It’s always just been…ours.

It’s why I changed my trajectory, why I acted alone. We’ve all needed that house at one point or another. The ghosts it carries are ours. And Junie has a right to decide what happens to it.

Thought Spite-Berry might want them. Or you. Whatever. Don't make it weird.

I knew he and Hudson were taking care of the house for Junie. I didn't know it would come with hauntings from the past though.

The first photo I pull out is all five of us at the kitchen table—it wasn't an uncommon occurrence back then. Junie's probably seventeen. She's mid-laugh, her head thrown back in glee at something Fen said. It was clearly him because he sits in the photo with the smug expression of a job well done. Hudson's head is down, reading. Nolan's looking at me—as though whatever he sees is changing the very fabric of his soul.

What Nolan sees is me watching Junie. My face tells the same story it does now, but I always thought I was better at hiding it back then.

No wonder later that year he told me to stay away from his sister. This is what he watched grow from innocent care to an inappropriate love.

It's what made it easy to sacrifice myself for them.

He was finally in med school. He would've had to drop out—and he would've done it without hesitating. Hudson was in law school and in his own battle with his father who had cut him off financially. Going to him then wasn't an option, and the more time that passed, the harder it became to explain why I was in this position. And while I love Fenway like a brother, there's nothing he could have done.

It had to be me.

Anger vibrates through my chest with new realizations. We're all in this photo. That means…Natalie took this one too.

Whether we knew it then or not, Natalie was always there, collecting evidence. Patient. Strategic. And she leveraged it when she needed it most.

My heart thuds viciously as if I'm back in *that* moment. The instant Natalie laid all the photos out on her desk, one by one, like a house of cards built on a shaky foundation, and asked one simple question…

What would Nolan think?

Then she tossed out the final blow. A video of Junie's mom. She was talking to Junie's dad and the slimy fucking loan signing agent who had come over to close on the loan they were taking out—against Junie's house—and said the one thing no daughter should ever hear come from their mother's lips.

I don't even know why Natalie was there that day, or why she started recording. But it was enough to make me give up everything to fix it. The

worst part is, Natalie held onto that video for close to a year. She didn't bring it to me until three months after Junie's mom had passed away, and Natalie decided that her brother's care was now my problem too.

The corners of the photos bend as I shove them back into the envelope. The anger in my soul makes my writing almost illegible as I write a quick note that says *For Junie* then toss it all on her table.

But as I walk away, I remember which photos were in the stack. Because if Natalie took them, it means she has copies, and I need to know exactly which moments of our lives she's still holding hostage.

A war is coming, and I can only protect Junie if I control all the pieces.

JUNIE SITS IN HER DESIGNATED SPOT BETWEEN KATIE AND DOLLIE, FACING the TV screen I set up this afternoon, so she doesn't see me enter. She and Katie sit with their heads together like a couple of teenagers while Marley keeps shushing them and asking Junie if she's updated her matrix.

After sneaking in, I lean against the back wall. I promised to attend, not participate, so that's what I'll do tonight.

My mind isn't in the right headspace for anything else.

The silence lasts for all of five minutes.

"What's wrong with your face?" Nana Mae asks, dragging a folding chair behind her, alerting everyone to my presence. Including Junie, whose gaze is slowly peeling back the stitches on all my old wounds.

"There's nothing wrong with my face," I grumble, thankful when Katie whispers something to Junie to make her focus on the show again.

"There is. It's doing that thing again."

"What thing?" I ask, taking the beer she offers.

"The one where you pretend you're happy, but it makes you look like you've been constipated for six months."

"I am happy," I grumble.

"You could be, but you're distracted." Nana Mae never lets anything slide. "I've seen you smiling all week, Cole."

"See, smiling means you're happy," I whisper. If Marley shushes me, I might lose my shit tonight.

“Right, and now you’re distracted, which means you’re searching for ways to sabotage that happiness.”

My scowl has no effect on my grandmother.

“She’s always been under your skin, but now you’re terrified because you know what it’s like to have her in your life again, and you’re just waiting for her to be taken away.”

I stare at my grandmother. Sometimes I forget that the woman who engineers fake engagements and enters my designs into competitions is also the woman who raised me—the woman who helped me sell my grandfather’s cars to pay a debt that wasn’t mine.

She understands the architecture of me better than I do, but she needs to stop talking to Bea so much.

“I don’t need to know all the dirty details of what went down between the two of you—though I’ve always had my theories. But I will say this.” Marley chooses that moment to shush us, and Nana Mae mimes locking her lips right before flipping her off. “Your grandfather didn’t think he deserved me either. You know what finally changed his mind?”

“You told his mother you were married.”

She sighs, beyond frustrated with me. “Before that. He realized that protecting me from himself was just another way of leaving. And Arthur wasn’t a quitter. He fought for me. Even when it was hard. Even when it cost him his family.”

The parallel lands like a punch I saw coming but couldn’t dodge.

Leaving Junie was my only choice. That’s the framework that let me sleep at night.

“It’s not the same,” I manage.

“It’s exactly the same. You just have better excuses.” She pats my knee. “That girl’s hurting more than you know. She’s trying, Cole. She’s giving you openings the only way she knows how.”

“There are things you don’t know,” I say. “About why I left. About what it would cost—”

“Then tell me.” It’s the closest I’ve ever heard my grandmother come to begging.

The words hang in the salt air.

I open my mouth, but all the moisture has evaporated, and only two words escape, rough and as wounded as my soul. “Not yet.”

It’s the most honest thing I can say to her. Because for the first time, not yet doesn’t mean never. It means the wall is down and the silence is crumbling and I can see the confession on the horizon, even if I’m not brave enough to walk toward it tonight.

Nana Mae studies me, then nods. “Not yet is better than not ever.” She stands. “But don’t wait too long. That girl won’t stay forever. Not because she doesn’t want to, but because you haven’t given her a reason, and when push comes to shove, she’ll seek safety over silence.”

Nana Mae’s weathered hand pats my cheek, then she turns to join the others at the S&S meeting.

My phone has been buzzing in my pocket this entire time, but I’ve ignored it until now.

Fen & Tonic:

Nolan: I rescheduled my shifts. I’ll be there in two weeks.

Fen: Gangs getting together in Porchlight Cove.

Hudson: Counting breaths with all the sarcasm text messages allow.

I have two weeks to find a solution or get comfortable with the knowledge that all our lives are about to change.

Two weeks, and Junie. Because if Junie doesn’t find proof of my innocence, I’ll go to jail. And if I’m in jail for Devin’s crimes, I won’t be able to pay to shield Junie any longer.

Homes, land, and hearts all rest squarely on my shoulders.

And confessions, kisses, and blackmail have a way of derailing the best of intentions.

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13

ACCOUNTA-FUCKING-BILITY

JUNIE

MONDAY MORNING, I'M HALFWAY ACROSS THE DRIVEWAY WHEN COLE emerges from his garage with a tool bag over one shoulder and his keys clutched between his teeth. It shouldn't be as attractive as it is.

He stops short when he sees me. "Hardware store run," he mumbles around the keys. "Stanley broke the golf cart charger. Again."

"I didn't even know that was a thing."

Cole grunts and moves forward. "Come with me."

When he realizes I'm not following him, he spins back around. "I need a second opinion on cabinet pulls."

I blink. "Why would I have opinions on cabinet pulls?"

He returns my slow blink. "Because you have opinions on everything."

Cole's in a mood today. But he's not wrong, so I climb into his truck without arguing, mostly because the hardware store is next door to Grounds for Celebration so I can probably finagle a free coffee out of this little excursion.

Which is good because Nana Mae's been spiking my coffee with turmeric to "help with inflammation" every time I turn around so I'm opting for anything with a lid these days.

The hardware store is exactly as I was expecting—creaky wooden floors, a cat lying on the register, and an entire aisle devoted to things I can't identify. Cole walks in like a man in church.

He loves it here.

We’re three aisles in when I spot her.

Freaking Lola. She has a full face of makeup at eight forty in the morning, and I’m over here breathing into my palm to make sure I remembered to brush my teeth. She holds a paint swatch card as though she’s picking out a prom dress, and I shiver. Prom with her was probably a very elaborate affair.

I wait for the moment Cole spots her, then study his face. What’s he thinking? Is Lola the type of woman he usually dates? Not that I care, obviously. I’m gathering facts. It’s what I do.

But a snort escapes my lips when he walks right past her. He doesn’t reroute, doesn’t hide, just continues to the end of the aisle because the paint section is not his problem today.

More surprisingly, Lola doesn’t follow. She barely even acknowledges him, and I frown between the two of them while trailing behind Cole.

“At least I don’t have to dodge her in the cereal aisle anymore.” He glances at the ring on my finger and smirks before carrying on to wherever he’s going.

The ring catches the fluorescent light, smug as ever, but at some point, I stopped working so hard to remove it. Even if Cole sees me staring at it and all its stupid happy rainbows that shoot off in every direction, he doesn’t comment on it.

Neither do I—it just joins the long list of shit we don’t talk about.

At 11:14 on Tuesday morning, Grace tags Callahan Analytics in a post. This is the type of emotional warfare she excels at.

I have her notifications on, which is either strategic intelligence gathering or digital self-harm. Or most likely, a mix of both.

The post is a throwback photo of us at a company holiday party. I’d been invited during my internship at Callahan because I held “promise.” Paul was…somewhere, though I can’t remember his excuse now, so I’d dragged Grace along as my date.

We’re wearing matching red lipstick, and she captioned the photo: *Missing my girl. Some friendships are worth fighting for, even when the*

other person doesn't believe in forgiveness… #IAmSorry #accountability #healing

Accountability?

Accounta-fucking-bility?

Has she lost her ever-fucking mind? Never once has she apologized for anything.

She has well over a million followers now. She's building an empire on the back of my heartbreak, and she's using a photo where I thought we were friends to do it.

My thumbs slide across my phone typing out furious thoughts because what I thought would die down over time has turned into a snowball at the top of a very long mountain, and I can only stay silent for so long.

Accountability is a fascinating word choice from the woman who practiced crying in my living room, hoping she'd land on a reality dating show while sleeping with her best friend's boyfriend behind her back. Remember that? I do. I also remember whose credit card paid for that lipstick and shirt you're wearing. But sure, Grace. Tell them about our friendship. Especially tell them how often and how hard you've betrayed me.

I stare at the draft through eyes that are too hot, too itchy. Seventy-one words that could blow her narrative apart, and she would deserve every single snake emoji she got.

My thumb hovers over send.

Old Junie—bar speech Junie, the version who lights matches just to watch shit burn—would hit send and deal with the wreckage later. But this version—the one with a routine and three p.m. coffee exchanges with Cole and the bruise under her collar that she's still hiding, still savoring—hesitates.

Not because the words are wrong.

But because commenting means reentering the arena. Willfully becoming part of the storyline again. Giving Grace exactly what she wants—a reaction she can weaponize into another cycle of content.

And I'm so damn tired of being content. Of carrying other people's trauma. I just want to be…happy.

My thumb hovers over Nana Mae's ring as if somewhere along my twisted path it's become my touchstone for happiness.

The burden of doing the right thing makes me itchy, but I close out of the app, put my phone face down on my desk, and press my palms into my eyes so hard that lights dance like technicolor rainbows.

When I open them, Cole's in the doorway, silently watching me with the expression of a man who sees too much and says too little.

Will he ever speak up? Will I?

"Bad day?" he asks, setting a blueberry muffin in front of me.

It makes my heart feel too heavy in my chest. This man knows my favorite treats, my favorite movies, my likes and dislikes better than I do. But he won't use any of it to ignite the attraction that sparks between us.

"Grace." One word conveys an entire story.

His jaw ticks. "What did she do now?"

Images flash like warning signs with all the ways I could retaliate, but I blink them away and focus on the man in front of me.

"She tagged Callahan in an old photo of us and used the hashtag accountability," I say instead of the spiteful daydreams boxing in my mind. Then I pick up the muffin so I'll have something to do with my hands. "I wrote a reply."

The lashes of his right eye twitch.

"Which I deleted." My tone brings me right back to being sixteen when I thought I had life all figured out.

Cole sits on the edge of the table, close enough to touch, far enough away that he doesn't. "That's good, Junie."

"Good that I wrote it, or good that I deleted it?"

"Probably both." He leans back, resting on his palms. It puts his forearms right at eye level. "Writing it means you're not swallowing it. Deleting it means you're not performing it. That's growth, Viper."

"Don't psychoanalyze me," I grumble. "That's Bea's job."

"Bea charges an exorbitant fee. I'm free."

If only that were true.

"You get what you pay for," I snark to hide my new and wildly unpredictable emotions.

It almost earns me a smile. Then he's gone, back to his desk that annoyingly faces mine as if it's a design choice he made, not an irrational pull he feels.

KATIE FINDS THE POST BEFORE I CAN ASK FEN TO BURY IT.

The woman has a Google alert set for my name, which she announced at last week's meeting as though digital surveillance is a love language.

Maybe here, it is.

"Honey." She holds up her phone during a commercial break. "Your villain is doing a press tour."

The air in the room shifts.

"This is slander," Stanley says, scrolling Katie's phone as though his golf cart license plate that says Enforcer also carries weight here.

"Technically, it's libel," I mutter. "Slander is spoken." I can thank Hudson for that differentiation.

"I'm making a retaliatory video." Stanley adjusts his collar. "Marley, get the ring thingy light fixture."

"Absolutely not." Marley keeps her head down to her own phone. "Cease and desist. I'll write it on community letterhead. I have that authority. We'll make it professional."

"You have HOA authority—very, very minor authority at that," Cole says from his place holding up the back wall. "Grace doesn't live here."

"It's not about the letterhead," Marley protests. "It's about scaring that nitwit into doing the right thing."

Katie squeezes my hand. Quick, fierce, and gone before anyone can accuse her of going soft.

"That girl wouldn't know accountability if it bit her in the rear end." Dollie crosses her legs, then swings them wildly. Pissed-off Dollie is cute, with her little 50s style dress and kitten heels.

Stanley buzzes about searching for a ring light, while Marley mutters under her breath with the intensity of someone who's used to suing landscapers and winning.

They're angry on my behalf, not because they picked a side online, but because they know me and like who I am.

If I don't choose me, who will? That's been my operating principle since the first time my mother forgot to pick me up in kindergarten. But sitting here, surrounded by people who are actively choosing me without me having to do or say anything, I question myself.

Is my principle inherently wrong or just incomplete?

"Show's on," Marley announces with a sharp clap. "We'll get back to Juniper's smackdown at the next commercial."

I don’t know if I want to groan at being the center of attention or laugh because Marley said smackdown as if she’s a wrestling announcer on a Vegas stage.

I do neither because now I’m calculating how to sneak out of here early tonight. A girl can only take so much kindness.

“THEY’RE GOING TO COME FIND YOU, YOU KNOW THAT, RIGHT?”

My foot pauses on the curb. Freaking Cole. I was so close to escaping.

The night is warm, and the marsh smells like salt and something green and alive and I can almost, almost see my staircase from here.

“I didn’t want to be the center of attention anymore,” I admit.

“They have safety protocols for a reason.” Cole’s using a dad voice on me, and it creeps me the fuck out. “I’ll give it five minutes before they realize you’re not in the bathroom and come searching for you.”

“I’ll take my chances,” I say, continuing my short walk home.

He’s at my side, matching my stride a moment later.

“You’ll get through this, Junie. You’ve dealt with bullies before. You’re stronger than you think.”

I trip over my next step. *Did he know?*

I poke a thumb into my ribs because I think my lungs just gave up—it’s like they’re not even trying to work right now.

“What do you mean?” I hiss through clenched teeth.

“Who was that girl in eighth grade? The one who put you on the ‘unkissable list’?”

My lungs punch my thumb away and get back to work.

“And then the girl from your sophomore year who tried to ban you from the yearbook committee because her boyfriend had a crush on you.”

“He did not.” Trevor Masdon was way out of my league.

“Whatever you say, Junie.” Cole bumps my shoulder with his. “All I’m saying is, you’ve handled people like this before. Don’t allow Grace to be the one to break you.”

“Grace could never. That honor goes to Nat—” I snap my lips shut. “No—ah—one. That honor goes to no one because lies can’t hurt me anymore.”

Liar, liar, pants on fire.

The air shifts around us. Dense. Dark. Unfiltered as his stare flips from jovial best friend to pissed-off rhino in the span of a breath.

"Junie," Cole growls. His face is hard, and there's a fire in his eyes I don't know what to do with. "What were you about to say?"

The words are right there. Lodged in the place where I keep the things I'm too afraid to say out loud.

Natalie was the worst thing that ever happened to me. She made my life hell, and you dated her anyway. I never told you because she said you'd choose her—and you did, every day.

That's what I want to say. The sentence that changes everything or confirms my biggest fear—that he knew what she did to me and still chose her.

"Juniper," he snaps. He shutters his expression, but I've mastered the same one. I apply my mask while he stares at me.

I don't think I win either way, and I've already lost too much.

"Never mind," I say, jumping to the first illuminated stair to my apartment. "It's old news. Bullies may always come for me, and I'll always fight. It's what I do, right?"

Two more stairs.

"Junie." His tone is full of gravel. "Why does it feel like you're lying to me?"

Two more stairs, then three.

"There's no lie here, Cole." I say the words without turning around. "Sometimes we just sugarcoat the truth to make it more palatable."

I hustle up the last remaining stairs.

"Goodnight, Cole."

I open my door because I don't bother locking it anymore. The residents of The Haven are better than a security system.

Tonight though, I don't turn on my light.

I slink through the shadows to the window and stare down at the man standing at the bottom of my stairs with his hands shoved deep into his pockets, his face tilted toward my window like he's trying to read a language he almost understands.

But that's the problem with almost—sometimes it just isn't enough.

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14

LOOK AT ME

COLE

She's at the kitchen table when I come downstairs at 6:15, and my steps falter.

This isn't her routine.

Something, or someone, has thrown her off her game, and yet she still doesn't acknowledge me as she sits there with her knees tucked up to her chin. Her bare feet showcase hot-pink toenail polish on her delicate little toes.

She stopped wearing shoes in my home around week three, and I keep actively ignoring why that hits me in the chest like it should mean something.

Bare feet are just that.

Except with her, it feels intimate, and intimate feels right.

Dragging my gaze away from toes that on anyone else would repulse me, I focus on her laptop and open notebook. They sit at an angle that tells me she's already been here working long enough that it's turned sideways with her slanted scrawl so I can't read it.

When she doesn't look up, I move to the French press to make our coffee. There are too many things left unsaid between us, and that chasm is ripping open so fast I'm not sure how to stop the bleed.

It's become our new normal, though I'm aware that normal isn't the right word for us. Normal implies something settled. This is more like…a

crumbling foundation. Everything's structural until you hit the one wall you should have never touched and the entire building comes crashing down.

Perhaps Junie and I were always destined for the crash-landing.

"Q3 vendor reconciliation is about 60 percent clean," she says instead of a greeting.

It pisses me off.

"Good morning to you too," I bite back.

I bet my left nut she's suppressing a smile—Viper loves snark—but she remains silent while I finish our coffee.

She doesn't speak again until I place a mug in front of her. "I found another discrepancy in the Wilford account. It's the third time in four months. Same vendor. Same nine-day lag."

I should've gone for an Irish coffee this morning.

This is why I've needed her though—she fills in the gaps of my knowledge base, so I pull out the chair opposite her while ruminating on what her findings could mean.

Please find the proof I need because I'm not sure anyone will believe in my innocence without it.

Fuck. Even my subconscious is begging for her now.

I had every intention of keeping a professional distance from her, but the second my ass hits the chair, I slide it closer. Professional distance will never work for Junie and me, no matter how hard I try.

"Wilford's the electrical contractor," I say. "They invoice on completion, not on schedule. The lag is normal." At least it should be.

She marks something in her notebook, and I lean forward.

"I'll need the completion sign-offs to document it."

Look at me.

The demand almost slips out, but I keep my jaw clenched tight. The need for her eyes on mine has moved beyond a simple want and morphed into an obsession that will royally fuck me sooner rather than later.

"Cole." How she can imbue my name with so much sass is honestly shocking.

"They're in the supplemental binder," I grind out, not because I don't want her to have the information, but because the internal war of want and need is entering its final battle, and good intentions are no longer in command. "Green tab."

This fucking woman still doesn’t look up, but she nods. That quick, precise acknowledgment she uses when information has been filed and cross-referenced and is already being connected to four other things I haven’t thought of yet.

Look at me.

My emotions are taking over.

Fucking look at me.

I’ve watched her work for four weeks now, and I still find it slightly alarming how easily she compartmentalizes. It’s like watching someone run a diagnostic on a system they’ve never seen before and getting results faster than the engineers who built it.

She’s completely oblivious to the torment pitching my heart against my mind right now.

I never should have touched her.

I never should have opened my heart again because now I fucking know it only beats the correct rhythm when she’s near.

The need to stand, to pace, to get the hell out of here is so strong I can’t think straight.

Fucking Juniper Mercer doesn’t lift her head. She doesn’t address me in any way, shape, or form.

And perhaps that’s what finally breaks me.

I’m at her side before I’ve blinked.

I wrap my hands around the back of her chair before my next breath.

The muscles in my arms burn with tension as I wrench her chair back from the table, drop to my knees between her now open legs, and thrust my fingers into her hair as I tug her face toward mine.

Caught.

Her attention. Mine.

Her lips. Open.

Her breath. Delicious.

I get close enough to feel it—that breath, warm against my mouth, carrying every unsaid thing between us—and I stop.

My forehead finds hers. My hands are shaking, which she can feel because her own hands now cradle my forearms. But she’s not pushing me away, and she’s not pulling me closer. We’re just one inch away from the only honest thing I’ve said in six years.

I close my eyes.

Say it. Just say it. One sentence, and the whole building comes down.

I rise to my feet instead, taking her with me, and cross the kitchen to settle her on top of the island. I'm out of control, or my control has finally snapped.

Her shocked gasp adds fuel to the fire in my belly.

This new position puts us eye to eye. My arms bracket her hips. Her hands white-knuckle my forearms. My mouth's a breath away from hers—and I still don't fucking close the distance.

I can't.

Not without it costing her something she doesn't know she's paying, but I'm weak for her, and I hate myself all over again for it.

My weakness is destroying us both.

"Cole." My name from her lips at this proximity is a specific kind of torture. Her palms slide to my chest, a small pressure warning me to step back. "What are we doing?" she whispers.

I have no idea. That's the honest answer. I know what I want. I've known what I want for years. What I don't know is how to have it without it becoming a weapon someone else picks up.

"Will this be another thing we don't talk about?" It's the hurt in her tone that has my stomach dropping to my knees.

"I—" *I what?*

What do I say to that? All the reasons I can't have her are still valid, even if they no longer feel like a death sentence.

The heat in her gaze slowly ices over.

I've fucked up again.

"The LLC," she says, jumping down from the island and making her way back to the table on unsteady legs.

"Junie." Fuck. I scrub a hand over my face. "I'm sorry."

Her head snaps up, and the glare she shoots my way incinerates me on the spot. "Stop."

My mouth snaps closed.

"You don't get to keep doing this, Cole. Unless you have something to say to me about whatever the fuck happens between us when we're alone, I don't want to hear it. I'm not something you can hide away." She glances down at the table. "Not anymore."

I'm the biggest fucking prick on the planet. "You've never been a secret, Junie."

She lifts her head, confrontation on the tip of her tongue. “Then what the fuck was that?” She points to the island.

Mistake is a lie I can no longer utter. “That’s…complicated.”

She snorts. “No shit, Sherlock. But only for you. Until you can simplify whatever’s happening in your head, don’t do that again. It’s not fair to me, and even I know I deserve better than…this.”

Just tell her. Tell her everything and put yourself out of your misery.

Is that fair to her though? To make her carry the weight of my decisions?

I don’t know how to have her without ruining her. But I’m standing here in my kitchen in broad daylight, my hands still warm from her skin, and I’m starting to understand that I don’t know how to not have her either.

“You told me to stay with the documented vendors. And I am.” Her voice gains strength as she slips back into work mode—the one space she’s always felt safe. Someday I’ll prove to her that she’s always been safe with me too.

Someday.

“But I found a payment pattern in the Q1 supplemental accounts that doesn’t—” She stops. Taps her pen once. “It doesn’t feel like the others. The others are…sloppy. This one is…neat.”

The word *neat* lands like a load test on an already compromised beam.

“Junie.” My mind scatters. “The county reviewer will ask for the documented vendor chain first.” The words come from my mouth on autopilot because my mind is miles away. “That’s the sequence. Everything else comes after we’ve established the clean baseline.”

“You keep saying that.”

“It’s true.”

Four seconds of silence. She counts them the same way I do—I can see her doing it with each tap of her pen.

“Fine.”

The word arrives like a giant red flag. *Fine* from Junie Mercer never means what you think it does. From her lips, in this moment, she’s choosing not to pursue it, but she’ll be back with her game plan in place, and when she comes, she’ll take no prisoners.

“Thank you,” I say. For the moment, we can’t talk about. For making me feel something again. For fixing my mess. For everything.

“Don’t thank me,” she snips. “I’m just following the *sequence*.” She picks up her pen again. “Nolan lands on Thursday.”

My coffee is suddenly the most interesting thing in the room.

“Are you nervous?” she asks.

“No.”

“You’re doing your jaw thing.”

I scoff, and it makes me sound like a teenager. “I don’t have a jaw thing.”

Her glare proves otherwise. “You grind your back teeth when you’re managing something you don’t want to talk about. You’ve been doing it since you were in eighth grade. It’s why you have two crowns now.”

I don’t ask how she knows about the crowns.

“He’s going to have questions,” I say, knowing we’re past the point of hiding the rising tension that grows between us with each passing day.

“He always has questions.” She’s typing now, purposefully keeping her gaze off me again. “We’ll give him the answers that are available, and the rest is nobody’s business.”

My gaze snaps to hers. *The rest is nobody’s business.* I scrutinize that statement, looking for the fail point, but can’t find one.

I open my mouth to give her…something…anything that tells her I’m trying here, but my phone buzzes against the table with an incoming email, and I see the sender before she looks up.

Natalie.

She’s a sliver under my fingernail.

I slide my finger up the screen.

The message is six sentences. Her name. Her title. Her company logo, centered at the top like a flag planted in a territory she stole.

Cole—Marcus had a good month. His team is optimistic about the new program. It appears Juniper isn’t faring so well on TikTok. It’s unfortunate for her, isn’t it? I trust you’re maintaining our arrangement even more thoughtfully now.

Below that is a picture of Junie and her mom together at the beach.

The blood drains from my head.

“Everything okay?” Junie asks as I delete the email and place my phone face down on the table.

“Yup.” It croaks past my lips, and her pen stops moving.

“Maintenance issue,” I say because that’s better than the alternative. I can’t tell Junie the truth until I can protect the secrets that will break her. And I’m about to throw myself to the fire to ensure that I do. So, I look her in the eye and force myself to relax. “Stanley filed another application for enhanced golf cart modifications. I need to figure out which committee handles vehicular aesthetics before he installs a siren.”

She frowns, then glances at my phone.

Did I not erase it quickly enough? My hatred for Natalie and the lies she’s backed me into has never felt so visceral. My patience for her bullshit, for the position she’s put me in with Junie again, is wearing thin.

I’m going to ruin Natalie Moore’s life like she’s done to mine, and then…I’m finally going after what I want.

“There’s a committee for that?” Junie asks.

“There’s a committee for everything. The question is always which one.”

Our conversation sounds normal to my ears, but the shredding of my heart is so loud, it’s hard to concentrate.

“And you hate all of them.” The crinkle of her eyes quiets some of the noise in my mind.

“I hate the ones that send me things in triplicate.” I smile back. It’s forced—she knows it. “Which is all of them.”

She laughs, diffusing some of the tension in the room. Like a window being opened in a space sealed shut for too many years.

She picks up the binder to her right, then she stands, her movements slow and deliberate.

Neither of us speaks.

In my periphery, she tugs the binder to her chest—protection, armor.

“Cole.”

“Hmm.”

“That…touch.” She’s still staring at the binder in her arms. “I don’t—” Her fingernails tap against the plastic in her arms. “I feel…”

“I know.” The admission is my final barrier cracking.

“I just—I need you to know that it…means something.” She says it like she’d read a legal document. Precise. Deliberate. “I can’t do—I mean, I can’t be…”

Slowly, I turn my head to face her but don’t move closer. If I meet her in the space between us, I won’t be able to do the right thing. But when the

morning light catches the diamond on her left hand—Nana Mae's ring, Arthur's ring, the ring that won't come off and the thing we've agreed by mutual silence means nothing and everything depending on who's looking—it throws one small point of light across the table. Connecting us even when I can't reach for her.

"I'm trying," I say. A quiet, heartfelt promise.

She exhales. It's a slow, careful release meant to rebuild her walls that stand no chance against the power of us. "That's almost as bad as fine, Cole." Her words are coated in disappointment. "At some point, you'll have to decide what's important enough to act on."

She escapes the kitchen, leaving behind a bomb of her own.

If only Junie understood that what's important was never up for debate. It's how to protect her and love her that I've never been able to find the solution for.

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15

THE TRUTH TAX

JUNIE

THE THING ABOUT TELLING SOMEONE THE TRUTH IS THAT YOU HAVE TO LIVE with it afterward.

At some point, you'll have to decide what's important enough to act on.

That's what I'd said, and I'd meant it. For so many reasons.

But it's also the truth for me.

I had every opportunity to push him away sooner than I did, and yet I sat in the silence too because I needed him to break first.

I've stared at my ceiling all night, my body betraying everything my mind knows to be true.

The feel of him pressed against me.

The air that we shared.

The pure electricity that shoots between us when we touch.

It has to mean something. Right?

Rolling over, I groan into my pillow as defeat sets in.

Natalie tried to break my spirit.

Grace and Paul knocked me off-kilter.

Cole Whittaker will be the final hammer that shatters my heart made of glass.

My alarm goes off, and that momentary panic of *what now* sets in.

Because the only thing I'm certain of is that the feelings that keep combusting between us are not as one-sided as the six years of separation have led me to believe.

There’s something keeping him from acting, and knowing Cole, it’s something devastating.

His duty to those secrets will always keep him from choosing me, even if I’m 99.9 percent sure he wants to.

God, this is so frustrating, and it’s all boiling over before I’ve even gotten out of bed.

Flopping onto my back, I angrily swipe my hair out of my face when Nana Mae’s ring catches the early morning light.

I glare at it as if it’s the sole proprietor of all my anxiety.

Panic, fear, aggravation, love, and pain all attack my nervous system at once because of this stupid symbol that means too much and not enough.

Off. Get it off now!

My breathing is labored as I jump out of bed, make my way to the kitchen, then thrust my hand into the ice drawer.

Once upon a time, I dreamt of wearing Cole’s ring. It’s the vision of every childhood fantasy I’d ever had. Now it feels like a leash for a man who is incapable of choosing me, and that makes my lungs malfunction.

I tug on the diamond. “Come on. Get off. I need you to get off.”

I don’t need a man to choose me. I choose myself. I always have. How could I have so stupidly forgotten that?

Twisting and turning, the glittering symbol of love and devotion mocks me as it catches on my knuckle, but still, I pull until the skin on my ring finger is raw and close to mangled.

“Please,” I beg. “It’s too much. I need you to get the fuck off my hand.”

Nothing works—not even my brain. That’s the only explanation I have for running down the stairs and bursting into Cole’s kitchen, catching him by surprise.

His hand pauses in the coffee beans, and it barely registers that he’s shirtless.

Whatever he sees on my face has him dropping the canister and gripping my biceps with a firm grip.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, scanning my body for injuries. “What happened?”

He’s too close. This is why we have boundaries. This is why emotional walls were erected in the first place.

“Juniper. Speak.”

His demand snaps me into the present. “I’m not a fucking dog.”

“You’re scaring the shit out of me. You’re pale, you’re shaking, and your pupils are blown wide, but I can’t fix whatever the hell’s going on if you don’t talk to me.”

I scoff. “Talk? Now you want to talk?”

“Junie.” He growls my name. A warning I don’t heed. “What happened?”

This, I realize, is who Cole is. Who he’ll always be.

He’s a fixer who can’t, or won’t, address the elephants sitting on our chests, but he’ll solve the world’s problems to make himself feel like he’s doing something.

“For fuck’s sake, Junie. Did Grace do something?”

I shake my head, then hold up my left hand. A small line of broken blood vessels around the platinum band showcases my pain better than words.

“I can’t wear this. I need it off. Now.”

“Junie.” This time, my name is a plea full of pain, sorrow, and tinged with regret.

It fuels the fire of my anger.

“Get it off me, Cole. This—*this* lie is too much. It’s just too much.”

He nods and leads me over to the sink, then reaches for a jar of coconut oil. Without taking his gaze off mine, he sticks his thick finger into the white creamy substance, and while staring into my soul, he massages the skin I’ve torn up in my quest to be rid of him.

“Jesus, Junie.” I glance down at the finger he’s caressing.

It shouldn’t be erotic. I shouldn’t feel it in my pussy. It shouldn’t break my heart that I do.

“What have I done?” His voice is somber.

“It—it hurts.” My voice cracks, and my sadness is reflected in his expression.

What the hell was I thinking, getting close to him again?

I knew when I showed up here that he had the power to wreck me, and without a shred of dignity, I once again handed him my heart on a silver fucking platter.

He pinches the skin around my ring finger with one hand while gently trying to ease the band over my knuckle.

“How the fuck did Nana Mae even get this on you?”

“Please,” I say, glancing down. I can’t give him more than that. He’s already taken too much.

He douses my greased-up finger in olive oil next. Then he moves on to butter, and finally Vaseline. I smell like a diner at 3 a.m., but we’re no closer to removing the ring.

“I think,” he grunts when he pulls hard on the metal, but his hand slips, and he smashes his knuckles into the cabinet. “I think we’ll have to get it cut off.”

I glare at the offending symbol of love, and a new wave of guilt hits my ribs when I study the pavé diamonds that wrap around the entirety of the band.

Cutting it off will ruin it forever.

It feels symbolic in a macabre sort of way. The destruction of the ring sits in parallel with the destruction of us because if I cut Cole out of my life, this time, there will be no coming back.

“I’m sorry, Junie. I really am.”

I’m numb as he sticks my hand under warm water and uses pomegranate soap to scrub my skin free of all the lubricants we’ve tried.

“I’ll let Nana Mae know and then search for a jeweler who can do it.” He pats my skin dry, then turns to pull down my mug, and continues making our coffee.

I just…can’t.

I move on wooden legs to my office. I don’t lift my head when he sets my mug on the table next to me. I don’t take my eyes off my computer screen when I hear him slowly climb the stairs.

I can’t do this much longer. This in-between, the unwritten rules, the lingering touches that only hold meaning for me.

My one option is to solve Cole’s financial crisis and then get the fuck out of The Haven for good.

With a renewed sense of purpose, I open my spreadsheets.

AT THREE O’CLOCK, COLE ARRIVES WITH MY COFFEE AND A FOLDER. “Wilford’s completion sign-offs. These go back farther than what’s in the green binder.”

It feels like a peace offering.

My fingers twitch to reach for it, but at the last second, I clasp my hands in my lap. I'm done taking risks. "You can leave it on the corner there." I indicate the space with my head. "I'll get to it in just a moment."

His hand pauses in midair, the folder hovering above my desk, almost as if he's waiting for me to look at him.

He'll be waiting a long time though, and he seems to know that but does nothing to move things along.

"Did you need anything else?" I ask.

"No." I can tell by his voice that his jaw is clenched tightly.

But that's fine. It's fine. We're fine.

We're two professionals who can occupy the same airspace and communicate in monosyllables and spreadsheets and not talk about the fact that he had his forehead pressed to mine and his hands fisted in my hair in a way that made my core clench.

Completely.

Fine.

Eventually he drops the folder with a sigh right next to the bottle of water Nana Mae has been dropping off daily—something about sodium and swelling—but it still takes him three minutes to leave my space.

My relief is short-lived though because the next thing I know, he's wheeling his desk chair out of his office, through the hall, and pushing it directly across from me.

"What are you doing?" I hiss.

"Trying to undo my fuckups one step at a time." He drops into his chair dramatically, then opens his own laptop that was tucked under his arm and focuses on his screen. "Close your mouth, Junie. I may be an idiot, but I'm an idiot who's committed to trying."

Committed.

To.

Trying.

Trying what?

Why is he doing this to me now?

He's too close. Too…everything. So I do the one thing I know will push him away. I aim for his sore spots.

"I'm running out of time here, Cole. We know Devin stole from you. We know it's more than what you originally let on. If you don't do

something about it, I'll be forced to."

He clenches his jaw. "That's why you're here."

It's the truth, but after everything else, it hurts to narrow down our relationship in these terms.

"So why are you still dragging your feet?"

"I know what you're doing."

Good. At least one of us does.

"What am I doing?"

"You're pushing Devin at me so you don't have to talk about anything else. This is your chosen method of rebuilding walls."

"This is me telling you as a professional that your entire business is fucked if you don't do something about it now." My voice has risen with each word, and my chest flares with the effort.

"If you or I report this now, the only name on those documents will be mine."

I suck in a breath and deflate in my seat. He doesn't know I believe he's innocent. I see the shame, the hurt—it's all there in his eyes. We've never been able to communicate, so why would his financial ruin be any different?

"There are…things tied to me." Each word rumbles through his chest as though it's slicing through the very heart of him. "Conditions that… People count on me, Junie. If I'm charged with Devin's crimes, the house of cards I've been single-handedly holding together will crumble for more people than you realize—"

"Cole…"

"I'll go down with the ship if I have to, Junie. But I'm really hoping for a save here, and you're the only person I trust to make that happen. So until you tell me we're out of options, I'll keep deflecting and holding off audits while sending up prayers to the Junieverse that I'm not truly and completely fucked here. I can't take the fall for Devin's crimes. I need the proof I can't seem to find. That's why I've been holding you off—why I haven't gone after Devin on my own. I need proof of my innocence."

"But…Cole." I have the sudden, uncomfortable realization that I'm not the only one barely holding shit together. And he's not the only one who messed up. "I found the forged signatures. I know they don't match yours. Have you been—did you think—Cole, I know you'd never do this."

The muscles in Cole's arms coil tighter and tighter, until I can see every vein in his forearms.

His Adam's apple bobs three times while his jaw works back and forth. "Y-you found proof?"

I nod.

"Is it enough? Does it prove my—"

His innocence.

Oh God, Cole. This entire time I've thought he's been withholding information to protect Devin. It was never about Devin.

"I don't know." The pressure he's obviously been under is crushing—I feel it now as if it's my burden too.

"I need you to *know*, Junie."

"Okay." My mind creates its own spreadsheets with next steps already being calculated. "I'll prove the signatures don't match. I read about an expert in college. You can trust me."

Relief has never looked so wrecked as it does across Cole's face now. It makes me even more determined than ever to solve this problem for him.

And whatever else it's tied to.

NOLAN LANDED AT LOGAN AN HOUR AGO, AND I'VE BEEN GLARING AT MY phone ever since.

Somehow knowing my big brother is in the same time zone as me calms my mind but makes my heart shudder unpredictably.

My phone rings, flashing Nolan's name on FaceTime—I knew it would. I debate sending him to voicemail for half a second but know it'll cause more problems than it's worth.

I just wish I wasn't feeling so off-kilter about Cole when I answer.

"You look terrible," Nolan says by way of greeting just as Fen presses his face in close so he can be seen on the screen.

I roll my eyes. "Flattery."

His gaze softens. "How bad is it?"

I don't know if he's talking to me or to Fenway, but I answer anyway. "Thirty-eighth in the state for most humiliating viral moments. I'd been pushing for the top twenty, but the algorithm isn't cooperating."

He stares at me like a doctor used to diagnosing shit and not a concerned brother.

“Cole’s not here right now,” I say, wondering if that’s what he’s waiting for.

“We’ve texted.”

Zero surprises there.

“You really didn’t have to come here for me, Nolan. I’m a big girl. This will all die down eventually.”

“It would if Grace would stop making shit up,” Fen grumbles just out of the frame.

Isn’t that the way life works though? Everything would be so much easier if everyone just did exactly what you wanted them to.

“I didn’t only come home for you, Junie. Yes, you were the catalyst to make it happen now, but you’re not the only reason.”

I frown, not liking the ambiguity in that statement.

“It’s time, Junie. Hudson and I—well, mostly Hudson—have built the business up as much as we could with me away. Now it’s time for me to come home permanently so we can continue that growth. Dad is…angling for a piece of the company again too. It’s not fair to place that all on Hud.”

My father is such a piece of shit. Not only did he run a successful generational company into the ground, but now that Nolan and Hudson have pivoted it and managed to turn it around in just a few short years, he wants back in. But just like when my mom died, he’ll find he has no legs to stand on.

“But…what about Japan? Practicing medicine?” I hate that Nolan’s choosing duty over his heart. He’s always wanted to be a doctor.

“What I’ve learned has been…useful for new products,” he says cryptically. “It will all work out. I’ll be in South Carolina in a few days.”

“We all will be. Family reunion,” Fen says, pushing his face next to Nolan’s again so he can see me.

You can’t see Fenway Jones and not smile. It’s just not possible.

“See you soon,” Nolan says, pushing Fen out of his personal space with a palm pressed to his forehead.

“See you soon,” I mumble, then disconnect the call just as Katie enters my office.

Placing my phone face down on the table seems to give Katie permission to speak while also pulling a bottle of rosé out of her bag.

“Heard you helped Bea at the clubhouse.”

“It’s a little early for rosé, isn’t it?”

“Early?” She scoffs. “It’s seven at night. I knew you were trying to get out of tonight’s S&S meeting, so I swung by to grab you. Cole’s at the clubhouse, setting up the screen, and said you were still working when he—”

She glances down at the chair she’s sitting in that’s directly in front of Cole’s work from today. Leaning back in the chair, she confirms it came from his office.

“Well, now. This is an interesting turn of events. No wonder Cole was more broody than normal.”

“It’s nothing,” I lie. “We had to run numbers together. This was easier than shouting across rooms.”

“Mm-hmm. Then how come I saw him ordering a second monitor?”

Surely he’s not planning to make this move permanent.

“I have no idea. Maybe his broke. Maybe he needs two screens. Maybe he just wanted one.”

“Or maybe,” she drawls, “he’s trying to get close to you.”

I hold up my hand to stop her.

It doesn’t work.

“I’ve got theories, you know.”

“I don’t want to hear them,” I grumble.

“We’ll come back to it. But first, you helped Bea.”

“It was nothing.” Why is she making this such a big deal?

“You didn’t have to.”

“It was no big deal. They were sending her appeals to the wrong office. They needed to go through the regional one, and I found a fax number. That’s it.” I pause because I genuinely can’t believe that in this day and age, a fax machine was the solution. “Faxing it bypassed the standard queue, so it will only take six weeks instead of six months. The health care system is so fucked up.”

I can feel her watching me—it’s a shift in pressure, something changing in the air.

“Bea thinks you’re good for this place,” she says.

“It was a simple Google search,” I mutter, pulling my shirt away from my sweaty skin.

“She also thinks that this place is good for you.”

“I thought you said we were late for the S&S meeting.”

Katie pulls two wineglasses from the tote at her feet and fills them, then hands me one.

“We’re going, but as your best friend—”

“Katie, no offense, but I barely know you. Plus, my track record with friendships is shit. Why the hell do you keep insisting that you’re my best friend?”

Her smile doesn’t fade, but her eyes cut straight through me. “Because I’ve been where you are, Juniper, and sometimes in the face of pain, we can’t see what’s right in front of us. Not all friends hurt you, and not everyone you love will leave.” She lifts a delicate brow at that.

“And sometimes, when they do leave, they return with stories that would break your heart,” she says. “You’ve had enough heartache to last a lifetime, so if I have to be your guide on all relationship-y things, then so be it. I’m your best friend because I’m here, showing up every day to show you that sometimes putting your trust in someone new is exactly the thing you need to grow.”

I drink my rosé.

“You look like you’re actively trying not to feel something right now.”

Damn it. Having best friends is a kick to the lady nuts sometimes.

“It’s called a neutral expression,” I quip.

“Honey, on you, that expression is a confession.” She crosses her legs and dares me to contradict her. “For what it’s worth, Cole’s been wearing the same one since the day you arrived.”

I take another, longer sip.

“He’s emotionally available,” Katie adds as though she’s delivering the final verdict. “If you’re wondering, I upgraded him from a four to a six after the festival.”

“I wasn’t wondering.”

“That’s fine. I’m telling you anyway. That’s what best friends are for.”

“You are aware that you gave yourself that title, yes?”

“Mm-hmm. And as your best friend…” She stands, taking her tote bag and bottle with her. “It’s time to go. S&S is waiting, and we have a new… storyline to discuss.”

“Katie,” I hiss.

She simply loops her arm through mine and drags me to standing, then tugs me along through The Haven and straight into the doors of the

clubhouse, where Cole is once again holding up the back wall.

I should've run away when I had the chance.

"SABRINA'S A SLUT," MARLEY SNEERS.

"Marley!" I rise onto my knees. Perhaps the second glass of wine wasn't a good idea. Katie and her freaking heavy hand. "We do not slut-shame people. The 2000s are over, and in this decade, we support people's choices. Especially women's. If Sabrina wants to play the field, she should. If she wants to experiment, she should. Everyone should. How will you know what you like and dislike if you don't try? Sex comes in all flavors now, ladies and gentlemen. And we don't slut-shame anyone for taking control of their pleasure."

Yup, Katie will never again be my bartender.

Marley opens her mouth to argue because I think that's the only thing she knows how to do, but Katie takes up my plight and explains all the reasons why it's healthy for young women to have the freedom of sexual exploration.

I'm just sinking back into the sofa when I feel a presence behind me.

Cole.

His nose presses into my hair, his hot breath hitting my ear. I'm not sitting in the middle tonight because Dollie wasn't feeling well, so no one has noticed him behind me.

"Have you?" he growls.

I lean back and slightly tilt my head. So much for keeping our distance from each other. "Have I what?" I whisper-hiss.

"Experimented? Explored?" Suddenly, he grips the back of my neck, and my pulse kicks up.

"I really don't see how that's any of your business. What I've done and what I'll do isn't for anyone else to decide. Especially not someone who continually fails to act."

His thumb runs along the side of my neck with enough pressure that I nearly moan.

"Some would argue that not acting is what keeps our world from spinning out of control." His timbre is a low tone that has a direct line to my

core.

Surreptitiously, I glance around to see if anyone has noticed us. As nosy as this group is, it seems implausible that they haven't, but Katie's on a roll about sexual empowerment that has everyone's attention. So much so that they forgot to pause their new obsession, *Hunted for Love*.

His nose presses against the shell of my ear. It's really freaking hard not to react.

"And some," I nearly moan, "would argue that you shouldn't keep knocking on doors if you have no intention of stepping through them."

A low, pained sound escapes him. It only reaches my ears. "Jesus, Junie. Don't you think I wish I could? Don't you think if there were any way, any solution, I'd have barreled through that door years ago?"

He can't keep doing this to me, but the wine has made me bold enough that I forget about my wobbly heart.

"No," I whisper. "I don't think. I don't think anything because you never speak. You run away. You fix problems and retreat. So no, I don't think you'd have done anything differently regardless of the circumstances because you've never shown me anything to indicate otherwise."

I stand abruptly, noticing too late that the entire room had zeroed in on us while I was making my last point, but I'm either too angry or too broken to care, and I slam down my now empty glass, then turn to face him.

"For my own sanity, I have to protect myself, Cole. So…just stop knocking, okay? Just…stop."

Without another word, I flee to the safety of my apartment and intentionally leave the lights off. I'm done waiting for someone to love me.

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16

KNOCKING ON DOORS

COLE

Giving Junie space when she's implanted like an atom in the very foundation of my being is harder to do than I anticipated.

She asked me to stop knocking on doors. She was right to ask. I'm walking a very thin line that's become blurrier the longer she's here.

The problem is, I've never wanted anything the way I want her.

And I'm tearing apart my life to find a solution. I'm blowing up walls and even hired a private investigator to follow Natalie, but it's all leading nowhere.

It's cruel and unusual punishment for a crime I didn't commit, but I've committed to ending this. Even if that means coming clean eventually and hoping for the best.

The only problem I have been able to solve is confirming that Natalie isn't on the guest list for the Meridian Award banquet. Thank God for small miracles because I needed this win today.

Even Nana Mae has been suspiciously quiet since Junie and I became the main characters of The Haven's real-life reality show drama. She dropped dinner off at my desk three hours ago, with a pitying look and an acknowledgment that I look as bad as Junie does.

Now it's nine p.m., and my pencil has just torn through the vellum. Again. My head drops to my drafting table with a thunk. "Get your shit together, Whittaker."

"Sorry."

I snap my head up to find Junie standing in the doorway. It's like I'm intentionally inviting trouble into my life now because I'm not nearly as anal about locking that damn door as I used to be.

"It was open. I just—" Apparently the doorjamb is more interesting than I am because that's where she directs her focus.

My body jerks forward as though it wants to reach for her, hold her, keep her. But my mind shouts at me to stop.

She asked me to stop knocking, and I'm trying. I really fucking am. But when she's in my orbit, two things happen. First, it just feels fucking right. And second, no matter how close I get, it's never enough.

"Fen told me," I say preemptively, assuming she's here because Grace posted another video that shows Junie in all her Spite-Berry glory, but this one was from her sophomore year of college.

My gaze draws to her delicate shoulder she raises as if to say it's fine. "Hudson has already sent a takedown notice. But that's not—I wanted to ask you something."

"You can ask me anything, Junie." *I just wish I could always give you an honest answer.*

She frowns as though she heard the second part of my statement, and since I haven't been sleeping, I hope to fuck I kept my internal thoughts to myself.

"It's about the design competition Nana Mae entered you in."

I dig deep for my composure and nod. "What about it?"

"She showed me the award ceremony invitation."

Fuck. I didn't go downstairs at all today, so I haven't seen the mail, but I have no doubt that Nana Mae has it displayed prominently somewhere.

"Okay." I cross my arms over my chest, and Junie recognizes it for what it is—a defensive stance that makes her stand straighter, preparing for a fight.

"It's sponsored by Meridian."

The sensation of snakes slithering through my bloodstream has the muscles in my shoulders tightening.

"Is that…? I mean, I remember that name."

I stop breathing altogether. "What do you want to know?" My tone carries an edge that Junie doesn't deserve.

Her hands ball into fists on her hips. "I know that once upon a time they were your dream. I know that you didn't get your internship, though I never

understood why. I know that it must have broken something in you when you weren't selected because you left us all shortly after you announced you'd chosen a different path."

She inches closer as her temper flares. "A path that you had never, not once, mentioned in all the years any of us have known you. All I ever heard was that you were going to work for Meridian."

Meridian was where my mother worked. It was her legacy. Something I wanted to carry on…

Junie pokes me in the chest. Hard, her pointer finger feeling as though it's made of steel. "You're the reason I chose my dream job in seventh grade. I'd never known anyone as ambitious as you. And now, here we are."

Barely six inches separates us now and still, she presses forward. "You're invited to an awards ceremony that obviously means a great deal to Nana Mae but must hit you in painful ways too. So here I am, once again, putting myself out there to see if you're fucking okay with going to a fucking gala for a fucking company who never fucking deserved you."

Her chest heaves.

Her eyes shine.

Juniper Mercer, in all her spiteful glory, has never looked more goddamn sexy.

"It's…complicated."

Her nostrils flare, and I recognize my own death sentence in her eyes. "Isn't everything?" She's growling now. So fired up on my behalf, I'd laugh if it didn't hit me in all the sensitive, emotional parts of myself I've locked away.

Junie has always seen past my defenses, and because of other people's choices, I can't show her how much that means to me.

She paces the length of my office before spinning on me and pinning me with a feral-looking set to her jaw.

"I'm here until I've fixed your books, Cole."

That's the kill shot she's been holding onto. And believe me, I fucking feel it.

"Will you be able to uncomplicate things before then?"

I almost lie just so I can remember what she feels like pressed against my lips. Just so I can taste her, experience her, love her.

But I'm already drowning in lies, and I won't do that to her again.

"I don't know."

Her lips turn in as she bites down on them with an aggressive nod of her head, and the painful organ in my chest bursts into flames as she takes a slow stroll around my sanctuary.

Her gaze snags on the scrap paper on my desk.

“That’s not right.” She points to a joint calculation she wouldn’t understand, but she sees the math equation immediately. “The calculation is wrong.”

She’s so damn smart.

Beautiful.

Meant to be mine…but may never get to be.

“I know.” I offer a small smile. It feels like a breaking point between her and me. I can’t move forward, and she isn’t willing to sit in this purgatory with me for much longer—and I don’t blame her at all.

I’d never ask her to do that for me anyway—I have a six-year separation to prove it.

Then she moves to my shelves. They run floor-to-ceiling along the north wall, the one with no windows. Archival tubes stand like soldiers on the bottom, labeled in my handwriting from years ago. Flat files lay haphazardly in the middle. And the top three shelves, running the entire length of the room, hold my sketchbooks.

She knows instantly what they are. She used to sit with me while I dreamed in those pages.

“You still do this?” she asks, proving a point. She knows I don’t dream that way anymore—if I did, she would have witnessed it already.

“No, Junie. Not since…”

Not since you.

Her hand lifts—not quite touching the spine of the nearest one.

“Go ahead,” I say.

Her smile cracks through her defenses as she takes down the first leather-bound volume and settles onto the floor in the corner of the room.

I only watch her for a moment. Three breaths. It’s all I can afford.

Then I stop lying to myself, cross my arms, and stare at the most stubbornly beautiful woman I’ll ever meet.

The book she chose is from my first year of grad school. The same one she studied over my shoulder when she was too young for me to be noticing she was hovering over my shoulder.

“This one.” Her eyes light up in recognition. This, right here, is why I’m watching her. This is a reaction that could quickly turn into an obsession.

She holds up the page she’s looking at with an integrated vertical garden—one of the concepts I was working on before the bottom fell out. I haven’t thought of that in years, but it holds some possibilities for Frank’s greenhouse.

“The load distribution for the green walls. Did you ever resolve it?”

I love the fact that she remembers these details. I hate the fact that it makes me fall for her even more.

“In theory,” I say quietly.

Her head snaps up from the design. “What does that mean?”

It means the math worked out and then the project didn’t. “It means I solved the engineering issue and then moved on to other things.”

A small sound of frustration leaves her throat, and it knocks me sideways.

She moves from the first book to the second, then the third, asking questions the way she used to, before outside forces ruined all hope of what could be.

The next one she selects is from my first year here. My designs are arguably…darker in this one. All my designs were, until I started working on The Haven.

That’s when I was a man who’d traded his career for his family and spent a lot of time drawing things he didn’t intend to show anyone.

I stop watching and stare at the ceiling.

If she wanted to know who I became when I left home, she’ll find him in that book. And because I’m not sure she’ll like who she finds, I turn away from her and focus on the blueprints for the community garden.

I lose track of time as we sit in companionable silence. Well, until her small gasp draws me back to her.

There are so many emotions flickering in her gaze as she stares at something in the sketchbook she’s holding. She doesn’t turn pages, and she doesn’t look up. She just sits with whatever she’s found on the page.

It only takes me two steps to see where she’s landed.

It’s a sketch of a porch. The crude, first renderings of what eventually became the porch on her dream house design. But it’s what sits on the porch that’s caught her attention, her pointer finger hovering just above it—a figure.

Her hair is loose. Down past her shoulders, the way it falls when she thinks no one is looking. The figure sits on the top step with her knees pulled to her chest, her chin resting on them, turned slightly toward the lantern light. The posture isn't specific—it could be anyone, but we both know it's not.

I don't breathe as she studies it for a long time. Far longer than she's looked at anything else. Her thumb is at the edge of the page, ready to move on but unable to do so.

I very carefully study the wall above her head.

"I didn't know you still sketched people." Her voice is soft, controlled, pitched to portray indifference, but fails in execution.

"I don't. I never really did."

I only ever drew her. Before. During. And after. I've only ever been able to draw her.

Slowly, like releasing us both from suffocating bonds, she turns the page, and I exhale a breath that burns like acid.

She studies my designs for another ten minutes. Then she stands and carefully replaces the book.

"Nolan will be here in a couple of days," she says with her back to me.

"Yes."

The boys. Nolan, Fen, Hudson. My best friends. Her family. The people who know us both well enough to see the truths and through the lies swirling around us. They'll be in this house for four days, and I still have no idea how to proceed.

"I should go."

I nod because if I open my mouth, I'll beg her to stay.

She's at the door when she looks over her shoulder. "About the gala…"

I swallow hard.

"I can be your friend if you need one, Cole. If I had to walk into Callahan Analytics right now, I don't know if I could do it—even if I had you at my side. I guess what I'm saying is, just because it's important to Nana Mae doesn't mean it's right for you."

And just because you're meant for me, it doesn't mean I'm right for you.

What I say is, "Would you go? If you were me?"

She glances all around the room, then shrugs. "Probably, but I'm not you. I work best when no one sees me coming. I think the question you

should be asking yourself is, who are you going for? This is one of those times when the answer should always be yourself—no one else.”

It’s a smart answer. A professional one. But all my questions have always led to her. “Thank you, Junie.”

“Goodnight, Cole.”

I don’t think I breathe until I hear the back door swing shut, then I turn to watch her walk across my driveway and up her stairs.

She turns on her light just as my phone buzzes. I dive for it, thinking it’s her.

It’s not.

Fen & Tonic:

Nolan: Thursday. We’re direct into Charleston.

Nolan: Hudson’s coming on Friday

Fen: I’m bringing the good Irish whiskey.

Fen: Tell Spite-Berry to clear her schedule. We’ve got plans, opinions, and the Wicked Witch of Boston to take down.

Hudson: I have more than opinions.

I set down my phone and stare out my window, directly into the eyes of Junie.

I’ve been saying not yet when it comes to her.

Well, not yet officially has a deadline, and she was the one to set it.

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17

HURRICANE FENWAY

JUNIE

THERE'S A PARTICULAR BRAND OF CHAOS THAT ONLY FENWAY JONES CAN generate.

He arrives in a space and immediately reorganizes the social architecture of it the way a hurricane reorganizes a coastline. Not maliciously. Not even consciously. Just…inevitably.

It's how he's always been.

He operates under the impression that people are inherently good, and those who aren't? Well, that's where he shines. It's why he's so good at what he does. He has the innate ability to read people. To know their next move before it's even crystallized in their mind.

There's a reason every professional sports player in Boston is on his roster. It's why Hollywood elite fly to Boston to work with him.

He's just that good.

It's also why he's taking Grace's antics so personally.

As my friend, he'd taken her under his wing more than once. Her betrayal didn't just rock me—it set him off on a personal vendetta, and there's no one I'd rather have on my side.

Within four minutes of stepping onto Cole's property, Fen has ingratiated himself with Dollie, given Stanley ring light advice, determined that Katie needs a signature cocktail named after her, and is currently making a case to Nana Mae for why the S&S group needs its own podcast.

Even Marley's taking notes.

I’m standing on the porch, tucked behind a pillar, watching it all happen. I’ve spent my life being reorganized by Fenway Jones and have made peace with it.

Then Nolan catches me hiding.

I don’t know why it catches me off guard every time I see him. He’s my brother, for crying out loud. But I’ve only seen him in person twice in the last two years, which is not enough, even if neither of us has said so.

He looks so much like our father—a man I only think of in nightmares now, but Nolan remembers him all too well and has done everything possible to be better than the sperm donor who gave us life.

“Hey, Junie.” There’s a comfort in his tone that can only come from a sibling who’s been through hell and back with you.

I step away from my hiding spot and fall into his embrace. He holds on longer than he would if things were fine.

“You look terrible,” I mumble into his shoulder.

“You look like you haven’t slept.”

“Your flattery skills need work.”

“I call it like it is.” He pulls back to scan me. Not the way Fen does with the excitement of seeing an old friend, but a quieter, more reserved way.

His shoulders drop, but the concern is etched in his expression like a brand. “Where is he?”

Guilt slams into me. It makes no sense. I haven’t done anything wrong. But I guess that’s what happens when you hide being in love with your brother’s best friend your entire life.

“Clubhouse.” I nod toward the welcome parade. “Marley filed a formal complaint about the festival parking that required in-person arbitration.”

A small smirk tilts my brother’s lips upward.

“Stanley was the witness.”

“God help everyone.” He chuckles.

Fen pushes Nolan out of the way and opens his arms. “Spite-Berry.”

“Don’t,” I say. But it’s too late. Fen already has his arms around me, lifting me into the air and spinning us in a circle.

This has been our greeting for over a decade. I warn him off, and he hugs me anyway while I pretend to be annoyed but am quietly grateful for the affection he gives so freely.

It’s a better system than the one Hudson and I have. We communicate best with grunts and eye rolls.

“Come on,” Nolan says. “Show me your apartment so we can talk.”

Fenway sets me back on my feet. “I’ll go grab Cole.”

Emotion flickers in my brother’s eye, but he nods, then waits for me to lead the way.

“How is it?” he asks on the stairs. “Being here. With Cole?”

“Fine.” Apparently around my brother, I revert to the sulky teenager he had to bribe to leave the house on the weekends.

I open the door and wait for Nolan to enter before shutting it.

We should’ve stayed outside where there’s more air—and busybodies.

He drops heavily onto my tiny sofa. “You know, Cole used to tell you that fine wasn’t a descriptor for your feelings.”

He’s wearing a curious expression on his face. I don’t like it at all.

“How do you know that?”

His sigh seems to weigh a thousand pounds. “I’m your big brother. And seeing you here now, I know your feelings for Cole aren’t as cut-and-dry as you’ve made them out to be.”

My heart is racing too fast. How the fuck can he tell that by seeing me for five freaking minutes?

“I’m not the same little girl with a stupid crush anymore, Nolan.”

His expression softens. “You may believe that, Junebug. But no one else does.”

“I don’t want to talk about Cole.”

“You never did.”

“Because there’s nothing to talk about.”

“Keep lying to yourself, little sister. At one point, he was the most important person in your life. How is it now, being here?”

“Why? Why are you asking this now when you all but had me dragged here? You didn’t care how I felt about it then.”

“I’ve always cared. Jesus, Junie.” He wipes his palms on his thighs. I haven’t seen him do it since he was in med school. “I don’t want to fight with you. I just want you to know that I understand that Cole was just as important to you as he was to me. And I understand that being here when it wasn’t your choice might be hard, but I also get you. And when your dream plan went up in flames, you would’ve self-destructed if you didn’t get the hell out of Boston. That made here, with Cole, the best place for you. Regardless of what his actions may say, he cares about you and always has.”

I frown at my brother.

What does he know that I don't?

"How are you doing?" God, when did my brother turn into such a gossipy old lady? "And don't you dare tell me you're fine. Grace and numb-nuts hurt you, and you never let people in."

"That's not true. I've already replaced her. I hardly even think about her anymore."

"Junie."

"Fine, I only think about shipping them a broken container of fire ants 600 times a day. Is that what you want to hear?"

"Closer. I'm sorry they did this to you. I'm sorry that you were hurt by their actions."

I shrug and stare out my window. "It doesn't matter anymore. Fen has a plan. She's overplaying her hand and documenting it. When she goes far enough, we'll have everything we need. I just have to get through the fire and wait for the smoke to clear."

"And you're not engaging?"

"I'm not engaging."

He's quiet again. A minute passes.

"You know." There's that tone of his again. The one that warns me to be ready to run. "If you ever—I just mean—have you met Bea?"

I scowl at him. "You can't live here and not have a personal relationship with everyone."

He chuckles. "True. Well, her front porch is a great place to land. You know, if you ever need…anything. Especially Wednesdays at three."

"Her…porch?"

"Trust me. Now, what's going on with Cole?"

My heart rate sprints toward a finish line I can't see. "N-nothing. Why would you ask that?"

Nolan's brows raise as a million questions flicker across his gaze. I'm exposed in a way your brother shouldn't see you. What would he say if he knew Cole and I kissed?

"I mean, what's going on with The Haven? Is he in some kind of trouble?"

Relief makes me look guiltier even as I try to keep my spine straight.

"It's getting there. It's nothing I can't handle. Cole understands the scope of the issue and is trusting me to help him."

Another nod. Another minute.

I've been Nolan Mercer's sister for twenty-four years. I know exactly what he's doing.

"Just say it, Nolan." My palms itch as I stare at him.

"Say what?" He leans back and spreads his arms along the back of my sofa as if he has all the time in the world.

"Whatever you're skirting around. Whatever's been on the tip of your tongue since you walked through that door."

He smiles at me. Warm and full of love. "God help the man who wins your heart, Junebug. He's going to need it. *Whoever* he may be."

My lips turn in, and I gnaw the hell out of the bottom one.

"I think I'm going to be on an apology tour now that I'm home, so might as well start with you," he says.

Of all the sentences I've prepared for, that wasn't one of them. "What do you mean? What do you have to apologize for?"

"With you? Japan." He leans forward to rest his forearms on his thighs. "For the timing of it. For leaving when you were—"

"I'm your sister, Nolan, not your child. You did way more for me than you had to."

"I knew you were still reeling from losing Mom, and…" His gaze catches mine, so many questions he wants to ask. "Cole. I was just so tired of fighting with Dad for a company that was never his and—"

"You don't owe me anything, Nolan. I was fine. I am fine."

"I was angry, Junie. I should've handled it differently. I was never angry with you."

"Nolan." I say it quietly because he's working himself up into the guilt spiral that's a Mercer family design flaw in us both, just different configurations of the same kind of hurt. Mine twirls toward spite while his is self-recrimination. "I was fine."

"Until you weren't." His gaze cuts me down with a truth that's hard to acknowledge.

I nod. "But I know how to pick myself back up now, Noley. I'll be fine again."

"Is that what you want?" Something must happen with my face because he smiles. "To be fine?"

I glance around, confused. "Doesn't everyone?"

The sadness he tries to hide lashes out at me now. “No, Junie. Most people do not aspire to be *fine* because fine is not—”

“A descriptor for your feelings.” If my eyes roll back any further, I’ll have permanent eye damage.

“You’re in a retirement community in South Carolina,” he says. I lift my brow as if to say *so what*? “Hiding from a viral video, and the man you’ve been in love with since you were sixteen is thirty feet away, yet you’ve both been doing an elaborate dance around each other for six weeks now. I thought by forcing you to coexist that you’d finally get your shit together, but that’s not going to happen if you don’t both grow the hell up.”

I stopped breathing the moment he said the word love.

“Don’t,” he orders before I can make a sound. “I’m not going to pretend I don’t see it anymore. I’m too old for that.”

The door slams at Cole’s house, dragging my focus to the window.

“He has his reasons…and I have mine.” It’s as close to honest as I can get.

“He’s always been complicated…especially when it concerns you.” Nolan looks at his hands. “But it’s not only about him. I just wanted to say that whatever’s happening here, whatever you decide, you don’t have to handle it alone. That’s what I should’ve said before I left for Japan. It’s what I should’ve said when Fen showed me Grace’s video. So I’m saying it now. No matter what happens in this life, I’ll always be there for you, and I think Cole will be too.”

My throat grows spikes just to attack the uncomfortable feelings growing there.

“Support has never been the issue, Nolan. It’s everything else.”

“Do you still love him?” He’s quiet in a different way now. Protective. Contemplative.

“It’s hard to say.”

“Why’s that?”

“Feelings are messy. History makes it complicated.”

“That’s life, Junie. You either learn to thrive in the mess or you hide it. We grew up hiding the mess. Is that really what you want for your future?”

Shit. Here I was thinking I was ahead of the curve with our generational trauma. Leave it to Doc McSmartypants to call me out on it.

———

By the time I'm alone in my apartment that night, I'm freaking exhausted but thankful for the peace.

I forgot what it's like to live with Fen—no one goes to sleep until he's ready, and spoiler, he's never ready. Thankfully, Nana Mae scolded him, and he retreated to the guest room so I could slip home.

Silence is a double-edged sword, though. I'm instantly reminded of Nolan's words that have completely rocked what I thought I knew.

The man you've been in love with since you were sixteen is thirty feet away.

That's what Nolan said. Out loud. Like it wasn't a grenade. Like he hadn't been sitting on it for years and just casually handed it to me with the weather report.

I close my eyes and replay my day while massaging my hands with lotion. It's an automatic motion that takes no mental brainpower, for which I'm thankful, and I take my time applying it to my legs before moving to my arms.

When I'm finished, I rub my hands together to use up the remaining lotion, and the ring slides to my second knuckle.

I freeze.

My pulse doesn't. My pulse is loud and stupid in my ears.

I stare at my hand in the mirror. The ring sits high on the joint, not hung up as it's been for weeks. Weeks where I've pulled. Tugged. Twisted. Cursed. Begged. They all ended in the same result, which is stuck.

Tonight, with no attempt, no planning, no intention at all, the ring is asking to come off.

I lift my hand to my face, then give an experimental tug.

The fucking thing slides right off just as Nana Mae had said it would.

It's just the water weight. From the heat…

No struggle. Zero effort. As though it's been loose for days and I hadn't been paying enough attention to notice.

I stand here, holding it in my palm, more unsettled than I've ever been, staring at the small, cold, circular symbol of love and commitment, and my left hand feels…wrong.

I stare at my bare finger, then back to the ring, then back to my finger again, as though one of them has to volunteer an explanation.

The silence is choking now while I have an internal disagreement with a piece of jewelry.

Just give it back in the morning. We don’t have to have a conversation about it, right? Cole doesn’t really care. Leaving it on his desk will be clean. Efficient. Adult-like, even.

I set the ring on the edge of the sink, turn off the light, and make it exactly four steps before I’m backtracking without allowing my mind to ask a single question.

I simply turn the light back on, slip the ring back on my finger, over my knuckle, and nod. Once. Like the decision was out of my hands.

“It’s easier this way,” I reason to absolutely no one.

Even Cole mentioned this ring keeps Lola away, so really, I’m doing him a giant favor here.

It serves a purpose. It’s temporary. Just for now.

I say it the way I say things I need to believe before I can sleep—the lies we pretend are real to make everything just a little easier.

Just for now.

Not yet.

Fine.

I look at my hand in the mirror one more time, the diamond winking at me in the low light of the vanity with the smugness of something that knows it’s won.

Then I turn off the light before the glimmering, shimmering lie can make me believe anything else.

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18

RESONANCE

COLE

HAVING FENWAY JONES IN YOUR HOUSE IS LIKE RELEASING A GOLDEN retriever into a shop that sells handblown glass. He's not exactly destructive, but he does operate at a frequency that rattles everything in the room until it finds its natural resonance, and then he looks around at the vibrating chaos like he's personally responsible for the harmony.

At least Nolan operates on a frequency closer to mine. He stands in the kitchen with silent amusement, watching Fen's chaos unfold like a friend who's spent a lifetime cleaning up his wake.

This is the most normal my house has felt in a long time. Begrudgingly, even I admit it's because we've basically transplanted Junie's Brookline house here.

My house has never felt like a home because it was missing my family.

Which is why I keep waiting for it to all collapse around me at any moment.

Nolan sighs and puts down his coffee. "You're still doing it," he says so quietly that my armor clicks into place.

"Doing what?"

"Holding everything in. Keeping yourself apart from the rest of us. You have to…give a little."

When I don't respond, he releases an annoyed grunt that's typically saved for Junie. The problem is, I don't exactly know where I stand with Nolan these days. With any of them, really.

This is the consequence of trying to cut everyone out. Something they've never allowed, and something I still don't understand to this day. I don't know if I would've continued to put in the effort these guys have when I've so blatantly tried to push them away.

"She slept." He grunts. "At least she said she did, and the dark circles that were under her eyes last night appear less prominent too."

I keep my gaze averted. "Good."

I'm struggling to maintain any semblance of normalcy when everything in me is screaming to make Juniper Mercer mine, knowing that I can't yet.

"Yeah." Nolan's gaze bores into the side of my face, and I'm forced to make eye contact. "It is."

There's something underneath the words that I don't want to excavate this early in the morning, so I refill my coffee, planning to fix the motion sensor on my side gate that's been blinking since Tuesday.

"Don't fuck this up too, Cole." Nolan's words land at my back, causing a hitch in my step.

I don't know what he's talking about. There are just too many fuckups vying for top spot in my head these days—it could be any one of them.

Raising my mug in the air without turning around, I say, "I'm trying."

It's as ambiguous as his warning, but it's 100 percent my truth.

HUDSON LANDS AT 12:43.

When I asked why he didn't arrive with Nolan and Fen, I got a vague answer about helping his sister River's direct support professional. Helping is not organically part of Hudson's disposition, so I have a feeling there's a story there.

I'm crossing the driveway with my toolbox in hand when the door to his rental car opens. The second his gaze hits mine, I have the distinct impression that I'm fucked.

He knows something.

His jaw is set in the way I imagine him during a deposition when he's already operating four moves ahead of whoever's across the table, and he's turned that expression directly on me.

“Cole.” He grips my hand between us while we clap each other on the back in some semblance of an embrace. His handshake is aggressive.

“Hud.” I match his grip.

Eventually he releases me, but not before making a point of staring at the garage apartment, then back at me without saying a word, which is somehow the loudest he’s ever been.

Fen bounds up my driveway from whatever spectacle he’s undoubtedly been participating in and throws an arm around Hudson’s neck with reckless affection that only works because Hudson accepts it from only two people on the planet and Fen is one of them.

It interrupts the tension between us, but doesn’t dissolve it, and Hudson’s frost toward me doesn’t thaw over lunch either. He’s not cold—he’s controlled, which is when Hud is at his most unsettling. There’s no telling where or how he’ll strike, you just know it’s coming.

The longer he and Junie talk, the more I begin to realize that he’s frustrated with me in the way that only people who love you correctly can be—not angry at what I’ve done, but furious by what I haven’t.

That’s fine.

He can get in line.

JUNIE’S DIFFERENT WITH THEM ALL HERE, AND I’M NOT SURE HOW TO internalize that.

She’s not a different person, just…expanded. She laughs more easily, argues faster, wears less of the armor she keeps in place when it’s just the two of us.

At dinner, she and Fen spend forty-five minutes building an absolutely unhinged theory about whether Grace’s entire redemption arc is a coordinated PR strategy that has everyone’s attention.

“The thing is,” Nolan says, “Grace is benefiting from a parasocial attachment loop. Her audience doesn’t actually know either of you. They’ve constructed that parasocial relationship with two characters who happen to share your names. The emotional investment is real for them, but the object of it isn’t.”

Junie just stares at him with an open mouth. “That’s the most clinical and useless thing you’ve ever said to me, and you once described our mother’s funeral as ‘a necessary ritual of grief.’”

“That’s not—” Nolan blushes hard. “I was in med school—it’s not as though I said that during the actual service.”

She tosses a bread roll that bounces off his shoulder. He catches the second one without breaking eye contact.

“Traitor,” she mutters.

“I’m just saying the algorithm—” Fen snaps his mouth shut when she points at him, then Nolan.

“Traitor, both of you. Clinical and complicit.”

Fen raises his glass. “I prefer strategically adjacent.”

Junie lifts her nose in the air as though her word is final.

Nolan keeps talking, but she’s stopped listening with her whole body. She’s using just enough of her brain to track when she needs to weigh in, which is a skill she’d perfected by the age of thirteen after years of sitting through her mother’s pointed digs about how Junie’s mere existence had ruined her life.

It’s something that’s obviously now ingrained deep.

I was there when it became part of her. I was there when she realized it was her biggest asset in compartmentalizing her pain.

Nana Mae refills everyone’s glass and catches my eye across the table. She doesn’t have to say anything. My feelings are written all over my face for anyone who cares to look closely enough, and there’s nothing I can do about it when surrounded by the very people who taught me to let down my walls in the first place.

There’s a knock on the door right before it opens, and Katie walks in. For once, I’m grateful for her pushiness and aggressive cheerfulness as she wedges herself between Fen and Nolan while I clear the table.

Katie’s knack for commandeering a room is also what allows me to slip outside for some air.

Moments later, Hudson appears beside me at the railing.

“She’s looking better,” he says quietly.

“I’m glad.”

The weight of his gaze is as effective as physically pressing against my windpipe to cut off my air supply.

“You look like shit.” He says that as though he expected something different.

“Thanks, Hud.”

“I say that as your friend.” He wraps one hand around the railing. “I know you, Cole. And while I don’t know all the details of what made you leave six years ago, I have a pretty good idea.”

My heart is racing too fast. Hudson can’t be involved in any of this. I don’t know all the legal ramifications of blackmail and coercion, but I won’t be responsible for him being disbarred.

“I also think you’re about two weeks away from doing something about it or pushing her out of your life again, and I don’t have the stomach for the second option. So.” He lifts his glass in a gesture that’s more dare than toast. “Get your shit together.”

Hudson has no idea what he’s asking of me.

And I hate that he’s right.

THE HOUSE SLOWLY DESCENDS INTO SILENCE.

After Katie and Junie each had two glasses of wine, Stanley arrived in his golf cart to escort Katie back to her place, but not before Hudson told him that a golf cart rideshare for the neighborhood would be an excellent source of income.

Now I’ll wake up to twenty emails from Stanley with a new business plan and twenty more from Marley about proper documentation.

Nana Mae ushers Fen and Hudson toward the family room with promises of a nightcap while I slide into the rocking chair on my porch so I can ensure Junie’s meandering actually leads her back to her apartment and not to the ocean’s edge. Giddy and content is a good look on her—but not if it’ll put her in any type of danger.

As her stairs illuminate one after another, I sigh in relief just as the chair next to me shifts.

Nolan drops into the rocking chair like a man with something he’s been working up to for a long time. I know that feeling—I live in that particular waiting room.

Nolan’s sigh is heavy. “What’s happening here, Cole?”

My throat is thick as I swallow, but I don't say anything. There's nothing to say yet. He has a point to make, and my apology will need to fit whatever crime he's talking about.

There are so many to choose from.

"I'm just trying to help." That, at least, will always be true.

"That's not—Fuck, Cole. I owe you an apology."

It's so unexpected that my response lands wrong and hard. "You don't owe me a fucking thing."

"I do though." He leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees. "For my graduation party, and…after."

Everything that makes me a functioning adult goes on hiatus.

"I was…struggling with everything. So many things were changing at once. We'd just lost Mom. My dad was, well, fuck. He's a complication we should have seen coming. Junie refused to celebrate her birthday because she didn't think she had anything to celebrate. I was worried about med school and getting her through life when she wouldn't even talk to me. But then she danced with you, and I saw your face, Cole."

I make a conscious effort to breathe.

"And what I saw—the emotions she'd never been able to hide when it came to you reflected in your expression. Jesus, Cole. I said something I thought was clear at the time, but after seeing you with her now, my words must have completely missed my mark."

That conscious effort is a futile endeavor.

"I told you that night that she's not a trial run—that she doesn't give second chances, not even for you." He looks directly at me now. He must see the fear in my eyes. It's a living, breathing entity that hinges entirely on whatever he says next. "I meant that she would only allow herself to be vulnerable enough for love once, completely, all in with no walls to hold her back, and if you weren't ready to do the same, you needed to wait until you were."

He stands and drags his palm over his thigh, back and forth like he's nervous. "I meant that you were the best thing in her life, even if it hurt me that I couldn't be that for her, and I meant that I trusted you, no one else, with her because of it." He pauses, scanning my face for a lie, a truth, the reason I broke everything good in my life. "I didn't mean you should leave."

The porchlight flickers in the salt air blowing in from the ocean. It highlights the pain he carries that matches my own—just for very different reasons.

He was never warning me away—he was giving me permission.

"Cole."

I've been staring at the lantern for too long. "Yeah?"

"I'm sorry it came out wrong back then. I'm sorry you've been carrying that. I—Is that why you keep trying to pull away from us all?"

I shake my head, my thoughts not organizing quickly enough to speak.

"I'm not sorry I was watching out for her," he says. "I'll never be sorry for that. But if I made you think I wouldn't approve—" He curses under his breath. "That was never the case. And every time I've tried to bring her up since, you shut down. I just thought, now, with you both together—"

"There were…other reasons," I say, the words shattering like broken glass on a silent night. "For leaving. Our conversation wasn't the only one."

"I've wondered," he says, like he has a theory on what went wrong but understands that those reasons belong to me. "But it was the one that made everything else feel inevitable, wasn't it?"

It's not a question—it sounds like a truth he just now understands.

"She plans to leave as soon as she fixes your accounting problem." He rests his hand briefly on my shoulder—there and gone—just as Junie intends to do. "Just so you know what you're working with."

His footsteps shuffle across the porch, then the screen door to my home snaps shut behind him.

I focus on the shadows created by the porch light and the six years of wrong conclusions I've been wrestling with.

Junie's bedroom light turns on, and I cross the driveway without deciding to.

Her stairs illuminate beneath my feet—the warm glow of a fix I made for her without being able to say why.

I knock once.

Two seconds of silence.

Then the door opens, and she's standing before me in an oversized T-shirt I recognize from my hockey days at Brookline Heights High School.

She's wearing my shirt—the one with my name and number on the back—the one I intentionally left in her room when I left Boston behind, and my heart trips over itself trying to reach her.

Her bare feet and bare legs call to the bare truth I want to set free.

My gaze trails up her bare thigh, past the oversized shirt, over her crimson-flushed neck and cheeks.

When I finally meet her eye, she steps back to let me in.

Her apartment is quiet and warm. She's added some colorful succulents that will be nearly impossible for her lack of a green thumb to kill. There are throw pillows in turquoise and a happy yellow that's a stark contrast to her normal disposition.

She may intend to leave, but she's also been making this place a home.

Junie crosses the room, leaning against the bookshelf to put some space between us, which is how I know she understands that something has shifted for me. She's always been fluent in a way I don't say out loud. It's the most inconvenient thing about her.

"There are still things I have to tell you," I say. "Things that will be—" I search for a word that isn't *complicated*. There isn't one. "Hard. And I need you to know that going in."

The sharpness in her gaze doesn't frighten me anymore. It never should have.

"I've been carrying hard things my entire life, Cole."

"I know." I cross the room. Not all the way, just enough to be in the same gravitational field as her, where the air is charged with everything that's always sat there waiting to be named. "That's why I'm not adding to the pile tonight—not everything, anyway."

She laughs. It's not a happy sound. "One day, you'll learn that it's not your job to protect me from every inconvenient truth, Cole."

No, it's not my job to protect her from every pain point. Just the ones that could do irreparable damage to this beautifully broken soul.

"What did Nolan say to you?" There's my girl. The one who narrows her gaze to assess the truth and all possible outcomes. "On your porch just now." She's not the least bit embarrassed about having watched us.

"We talked about his graduation party."

I memorize the flash of uncertainty that darkens her expression before she reels it in. "He did it, didn't he? He said something that made you leave. I was there, did you know that? When he talked to you that night. I saw you both and felt the shift in your body language."

My fists clench at my sides. It's all I can do so I don't close the gap between us and take what I've always wanted.

“What he said and what I heard were two vastly different things.” The admission of my fault is excruciating.

She shifts her weight without breaking eye contact.

“I misinterpreted what he said.” I press forward until I’m invading her space because if I stop now, I’ll rebuild the wall, and she deserves more from me—she always has. “I heard leave, but he meant stay. I—I chose the version that let me run because I already had a devastating reason to. His words gave me the permission I thought I needed.”

“W-what reason?”

I cup her face in both hands. “I’m not here to unpack all of it tonight because there are still obstacles between us that I don’t know how to share yet. But I needed you to know that the version of me who left you, the version who used your brother’s words as permission, made the biggest mistake of his life. I acted on information I didn’t know how to process, and I’ve been paying for it ever since.” I stare into her eyes, as unguarded as I’ve ever been. “I’m not that man anymore, Junie. I’ll prove it to you, if you allow me to.”

She’s quiet for long enough that I prepare for her anger. At the very least for her to send me back across the driveway to lick my wounds in private. “Whatever Nolan said, he shouldn’t have been so cryptic.”

The sound that comes from me is half laugh, half heartache. “No, he shouldn’t have.”

“And you shouldn’t have assumed the worst. Whatever he said, whatever…else made you think leaving was your only option—”

“There’s still a lot I wouldn’t change about that night, Junie. Not for anything. But I was wrong to leave the way I did.” So fucking wrong, and we’ve all paid the price now.

“And I…” Her gaze flickers back and forth between mine, like she’s just now remembered how close we’re standing, and that my rough fingers are cradling her face as though she’s precious. “I should’ve asked you for answers instead of burying my pain as though it didn’t exist.”

She stares at the wall instead of me—as though she can’t afford the cost of that admission.

“You should never experience pain from me, Junie. For that, I will forever be sorry.”

Then I kiss her the way I should have kissed her years ago—not like the storm that brews between us, not like something that escapes before I can

stop it.

I kiss her like a decision.

Like a man who finally understands what he's choosing and stopped being a coward about it.

Like a man who knows that the darkness of his past is about to surface again and the only way through it is with this woman by his side.

She only fights it for half a second.

Then her small hands wrap around my wrists, and she simply falls into the inevitable—she falls into the hope of us.

My tongue seeks entrance to her mouth, and she grants me access on a gasp. It's a slow, sensual claiming too many years in the making.

The kiss is alive in every molecule of my body—the rightness, the love, the earth-shattering sensation that this is where I'm meant to be.

I pull back too soon. There are still tragic truths to lay at her feet, but first, my job is to protect her heart—like weatherproofing a house to save what's inside.

"I want to give you…everything, Junie, but I need time to…" I break eye contact, just for a second, because there's no easy way to explain our past. "Straighten things out, so you have to decide if this, if what I can offer you *now* is something you want in your life."

She stares at me as if that was the stupidest thing I've ever said.

I press my lips to her forehead, and she sags into me.

"I have to go."

"Yeah." She chuckles, but there's no ice in it. Just an understanding that everything's about to change.

Leaving her is still the hardest thing I know how to do, even when I'm planning to come back.

The stairs light up as I make my way to the driveway, where her silhouette passes by her window before her new porch light turns on.

She's leaving it on. For me. Like an open door she's daring me to walk through.

I don't know what comes next. There's still Natalie, the foreclosure, the loans, the blackmail. Then there's the awards dinner, the county tax assessment, and the full catastrophic weight of everything I haven't said waiting on the other side of tonight.

But for the first time in six years, the structure feels sound because we're on the same side now, and for once, I'm not rebuilding in the dark.

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19

A LOVE KNOT

JUNIE

HERE'S THE THING ABOUT *NOT* BUILDING WALLS—IT REQUIRES A DIFFERENT kind of energy than I've ever spent.

Hiding is easy. A reflex. Something I've been building the muscle for since that first time my mother forgot to pick me up in kindergarten and I sat on the curb for forty-five minutes deciding there was something wrong with me.

Even after Nolan dragged the red wagon to the school to get me because I was too small to walk all the way home, it was a lesson I never really forgot.

Not hiding though, that feels like holding a breath underwater with no way to release it without sinking.

I'm still in Cole's T-shirt. When I answered the door last night, I assumed it would be Nolan ensuring I got home safely, and since he saw me sleep in this shirt every night for a year after Cole left, I figured it didn't matter if he saw it now.

I wasn't expecting to flaunt my battered heart to the man who caused the damage or for that man to completely undo everything with a single sentence.

Wrapped in his shirt now, I can almost feel his name across my shoulders, his number on my back. It creates the kind of stupid happiness that spreads through my chest—the kind I've spent twenty-four years training my body to perceive as a threat.

And after Cole left, I stood in front of my bathroom mirror having a very serious conversation with myself about what to do with all of it.

The only conclusion I came to was: Absolutely nothing yet, so it didn't matter if I stayed wrapped in cotton that he once wore, enveloped in that stupid happiness for a little longer.

I think that's enough decisions for a Saturday morning.

Ten minutes later, Fen is up to no good.

Juniper & Her Berries:

Fen: Waffles on.

Fen: Juniper Mercer, get over here.

Fen: Don't make me send Cole after you.

Having Cole in my space again so soon feels like a dare I'm not ready to take, so I fling his T-shirt over my head. It takes me less than three minutes to get dressed and run down my front steps.

Fen has, in fact, commandeered the waffle iron, but by the state of the mess currently smoking around him, I'd say his confidence is misplaced.

Nolan's at the island with a large protein shake and appears to be reading medical charts on his laptop, except he doesn't scroll up or down even once, which I find suspicious, knowing him. He likes to have all the facts before he comes to a conclusion.

Nana Mae is hovering around Hudson at the kitchen table, but it appears she's just trying to annoy him into participating in life away from the legal documents he has spread out before him.

Cole is at the stove and is the first one to notice me. His shoulders shift—that specific reorganization of his awareness. It happens whether we're fighting or not. Whether I've kissed him or told him to stop knocking on doors. My presence in his space has always done something to him, and I've spent years pretending that isn't the most significant thing he's ever shown me.

He turns slowly, as though he's afraid he'll spook me, and his gaze instantly lands on my shirt—more specifically, the lack of his shirt. Disappointment flares before he has time to recover, but he hands me a mug of coffee with my favorite oat milk and goes back to his eggs.

I stand next to him at the counter, my back to my brother, while pretending to add sugar to my coffee. The tilt of his lips tells me he's fully

aware of what I’m doing—creating a moment of privacy in a room full of people.

“Morning,” he says. Low. Just loud enough for my ears only.

“Morning.”

It’s the most ordinary exchange we’ve ever had.

Fen, who has the situational awareness of a cat and the subtlety of a foghorn, swivels away from the waffle iron on Cole’s left and grins so broadly my entire body flushes.

“The first one’s done,” Fen announces to the room, using a voice that’s painfully loud for no reason other than to draw attention to himself. Or in this case, to draw attention to me and Cole.

“It’s raw in the middle,” Nana Mae says. “You have to let it cook until it beeps.”

“It’s a stylistic choice.”

“It’s salmonella waiting to happen.”

Glancing over my shoulder, I catch Nolan’s mouth twitching over the top of his laptop. But it’s Hudson whose attention is evenly dispersed between me and Cole.

My spine straightens, and I carry my mug to sit at the far end of the island and try to remember how to behave normally in a room full of people who love me. It’s harder than it sounds because my instinct is still to catalog the exits, the retaliations, the weapons I can organize and use to protect myself with but am trying not to.

“Eat up,” Nana Mae says, patting my arm on her way by. “We leave for the farmer’s market at 9:30.”

She uses the same energy on me that she used on Cole when she told him she’d entered him into the competition to finally beat Paula Van Holten—cheerfully, without asking, and in a way that makes refusal feel like an unsolvable equation.

“Katie’s meeting us there,” she says, handing me a tote bag with a rope shaped like a heart on it. “You’ll carry this.”

My appetite is gone, so I hold up the bag. “What’s the rope for?”

“Decoration. Mostly. Finish up,” she says. “I’ll meet you outside.”

Nolan chuckles, drawing my attention. He instantly holds up his hands in surrender when I scowl at him. “Don’t mind us. Nana Mae gave us all jobs today too.”

“Come on,” Cole says, cutting the weird tension that’s fallen over the room. “I’ll get you the…stuff you’ll need for the market.”

He grabs a hoodie off the hook by the door, then walks me to the end of his driveway in silence.

“I don’t need anything, do I?”

Cole shrugs as though he can’t quite admit out loud that he just wanted five minutes of my time. “Don’t let Nana Mae buy the preserves from the third stall. They’re overpriced, and she’s been arguing with that vendor for three years and always ends up buying them anyway.”

I frown at him.

He stares back, but there are a million untold stories behind his eyes.

“Okay,” I say. “Is…that it?”

He glances over my shoulder, then jerks his head to the side before hitching at the waist to bring his mouth too close to my ear. “No, but Nana Mae’s watching and there’s too much still between us to say more with an audience. Just…don’t run, okay? Not yet.”

An unidentifiable sensation fills my chest. It’s not warm, it’s not cold, it just…is…sitting there, making me slightly uncomfortable.

“I may run from my feelings, Cole, but you’re the only one who has ever truly run, so perhaps you should be taking your own advice.”

Plus, telling me he has something to tell me without actually telling me is just fucking annoying.

And childish.

His shoulders pinch up toward his ears before he quickly corrects course.

His gaze sweeps over my face, studying me as though he can pull all my secrets into his orbit, but that’s not how this works.

“True, Viper. I’m working on it.” He thrusts his hoodie into my hands, then takes a step back and waves at Nana Mae. Cole stares at the clear blue sky, then shrugs. “Might get chilly when the sun goes behind the clouds.” Then he turns on his heel and stalks back to his home.

Nana Mae clucks her tongue as I shove my arms and head through his hoodie. I only inhale the scent of him once.

Twice.

But who’s really counting?

Nana Mae says nothing at all as she drags me toward the market. She doesn’t have to. Her silence says a million things I don’t want to hear

anyway.

THE PORCHLIGHT COVE FARMER'S MARKET IS EXACTLY WHAT YOU'D expect from a town whose welcome sign would've been rejected by Heartmark. Local honey and sea glass jewelry and a man selling hand-thrown pottery that Katie describes as "spiritually overpriced but aesthetically worth it."

I'm still not sure why Katie thinks it's such a good idea for us to be friends. As far as I can tell, we have nothing in common except for our love of rosé.

Flanked on either side by Katie and Nana Mae, I carry the rope-heart tote and try not to look like I'm enjoying myself.

I am, obviously, enjoying myself. That's the problem with this place. It keeps sneaking up on me in ways I can't protect myself from.

"You're not turning it anymore," Nana Mae says at the flower stall that smells like heaven.

I follow her gaze to my left hand that now feels as though it weighs a hundred pounds.

At some point between contemplating cutting off my finger and now, the ring has migrated from diamond facing inward—my system, my hiding mechanism, my way of pretending the entire freaking situation was temporary and contained—to just…wearing it. Diamond out. Like someone proudly engaged and happy to show it off.

I don't know when I stopped turning it, or why I don't remove it, or what in the fresh hell any of it means—it just feels *important* that I wear it. So I do.

"Nana Mae," I say with a long-suffering groan that she pays no mind to.

She studies me for a moment. "You like sweet peas, if I remember correctly."

My hand lands on my hip, but I don't disagree. That detail could've only come from Cole.

"We need sweet peas." She points to a bucket of them. "For the kitchen table. Cole never thinks to buy flowers for the kitchen table. It's his one design flaw, but I'll drill it into him eventually."

She’s changing the subject, and she does it with such grace that I almost miss it. She’s playing chess while I’m stuck on checkers.

Katie and Nana Mae bicker about…something. I zone out after the flower stall. But as I always do, I keep one ear in the conversation while my mind drifts.

So when Nana Mae curses under her breath, I slowly spin toward her.

Paula Van Holten stands with the posture of a woman who’s been winning at life for a very long time and knows it. But when her gaze falls to me, her persona falters for the briefest moment.

Interesting that she would find me, of all people, a threat. But that’s exactly what her body language indicates.

Lola stands beside her and is—I’m furious to have to admit this—gracefully beautiful in the uncomplicated way of someone who has never had to fight very hard for anything.

Paula glares at Nana Mae. The hostility that passes between those two in the space of a single glance has the density of a decades-long grudge that’s still very much alive.

“Mae Belle.” Paula’s tone carries the sickeningly sweet condescension that many Southern women have mastered.

“Paula.” Nana Mae, on the other hand, is pure ice… and it makes me love her a little more.

Lola drifts toward me. She exudes a friendliness that’s somehow more difficult to deal with than the hostility of her grandmother.

“I love your sweatshirt,” she says in a tone that indicates otherwise. She means Cole’s hoodie that’s four sizes too big and has his freaking name embroidered onto the left-hand side.

If Paula’s the assassin, Lola’s the sleeper cell spy who operates in the shadows.

“Thanks.”

Her gaze dips to my hand. Not…rudely—more like someone who has wanted something for a long time and can’t figure out why she wasn’t the one to get it.

She quickly smooths over her complicated expression, and I find I respect her more for it. At least she’s being honest.

“Cole’s a lucky guy,” she says. Simply. With only the slightest hint of snark.

It instantly puts me on edge.

“He’s working on it,” I say because I don’t believe she really knows Cole at all.

She laughs, then Paula materializes at her side, hissing about the rosemary selection, and they’re gone, drifting toward the next stall with the unhurried pace of women who always manage to get everything they want.

I glance down at my hand with a frown. The diamond sparkles up at me as though it’s laughing at all my strategies and safety measures.

Nana Mae holds out a bundle of sweet peas and once again remains quiet, which I’m finding is her most devastating move. She forces me to sit in the silence of unasked questions, too afraid of the answers to ever ask for the truth.

“I’ll meet you up ahead,” Katie says, jarring me out of my strange thoughts. “I have to go see about a…guy.” She waggles her brows at me, and against my better judgment, I laugh and allow Nana Mae to drag me further into the pits of small-town attention.

The bookstall at the far end of the market is by far my favorite, and it has nothing to do with the fact that it doesn’t have a crowd of people swarming it.

That is, until I run into Bea.

She’s arguing with the book vendor. “This is not upmarket fiction,” she states. “It’s literary fiction, and you know it.”

The vendor appears to have had this same conversation multiple times because he doesn’t address her, he simply looks at me as I step in next to her to see what book she’s talking about.

“Mis-categorizing a book doesn’t make it sell any better,” she says to the vendor, and then to me, without transition, “How are you sleeping?”

I blink. “Better?”

“Mm.” She picks up a paperback, examines the blurb, then sets it back down. “You know what I’ve noticed about people who sleep well for the first time in a while?”

“I’m sure you’ll tell me.” I almost smile. I bet she was such a good therapist because she never let her patients get away with any bullshit.

She nods and lifts another book. “They’ve usually put something down.” She holds the new book out to the vendor and pays for it with exact change, already counted. “Doesn’t mean it’s gone. It just means they’re not carrying it while they sleep. That’s a big step.”

She tucks the book under her arm and stares at me with calm, assessing eyes.

“I didn’t say anything,” I point out.

“No,” she agrees. “But you stopped walking when you saw me, which is its own kind of statement.”

I hate that she’s right.

“The thing about putting down something heavy…” She’s done this long enough that she knows exactly when and how hard to push. “Is that eventually, you’ll have to examine it. In daylight. With all the original context intact. Not the story you told yourself about it—the actual thing that’s been weighing you down.”

A woman passes with a double stroller, and we both step aside. When the gap closes, Bea is already scanning the next stall.

Then she looks down at the tote I’m still carrying. “A love knot. That’s an interesting choice.”

“This?” I ask, lifting the bag to inspect the rope heart more closely.

“It signifies unity and enduring commitment. It represents friendship, everlasting love, loyalty, and the intertwining of lives. Perhaps you’ll want to investigate why those attributes are easier to accept now that you’ve set down some of your pain.”

I scoff. I haven’t set down my pain. I don’t even know exactly what my pain is. “Sorry, Bea. It’s just a bag.”

Her smile says she’s heard a hundred lies to detect the truth. “It’s never just a bag, dear. Sometimes we just need the canvas to hold the lies we’re not ready to examine yet.”

I frown so hard, a headache blooms.

“Good market today,” she says, then walks away.

I stand there, holding the love knot tote and thinking about my pain versus the story I told myself about it. Is six years of “fine” enough of a down payment on something I’ve always wanted, or is it just a very long way of standing on a curb and waiting for someone to find me?

With no clear answer, I drift through the market, knowing Nana Mae or Katie will find me eventually.

But it’s Hudson I run into at the lemonade stand sometime later.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

I nod toward the little girl counting money behind the counter. I’ve been standing here for ten minutes while she explains how she created the recipe

for the raspberry mint flavor and has been iterating it for three weeks.

But it's the girl's mother, who stands quietly in the background, allowing her daughter to shine, that really makes it hard for me to organize my thoughts. The mother's not doing anything remarkable. She's just there, watching, ready—and something about the ordinary ease of it lodges a complaint like a muscle cramp.

I look away before I figure out why.

"Supporting the girl," I say eventually.

Hudson pulls out his wallet and hands the girl ten dollars. "Two please."

We drink the delicious raspberry mint lemonade in silence, watching the market go by.

"You're…different than you were a few weeks ago," he says when the silence finally irritates him into action.

"Good different or bad different?"

"Just…different-different. Less like you're planning your escape route with a spite-fueled exit strategy."

I consider denying it. The problem with Hudson is that he was born to be a litigator and can tell the moment a witness—or friend—decides to lie, and he's never once allowed me to get away with it.

"I'm still working on the books," I say with a shrug. "Probably another couple of weeks minimum before I have Cole cleared, ah, of the mess."

Hudson takes a slow drink of his lemonade, puckering his face at the sweet concoction. "Okay."

I stop walking and gawk at him. "That's it? Okay?"

"Junie." He flashes a sideways glance in my direction. "I've known you your entire life. I was there when you put blue dye into Cole's shampoo because you knew Natalie was waiting to shower. I drove you to every campus tour you went on because Nolan was in clinical rotations and Cole had just—" He stops mid-sentence and releases a long breath. "I know what it looks like when you're plotting someone's demise, and I recognize when you want something you don't think you deserve. I'm just saying, you don't look as though you're plotting someone's demise *at the moment*."

My chest pulls tight with a pinch of nerves no breathing exercise will release.

"That terrifies me," I say because there's no use masking my thoughts with Hudson.

“Yeah,” he says. “Asking for something you’ve always wanted usually does. But you’re still here.” He crumples up his paper cup, drops it in the bin, and walks away before I can figure out where his line of questioning was leading.

I’ve had enough of the market, so I walk home. Except when I arrive at The Haven, it isn’t my temporary home I head to.

It’s Cole’s.

I sit on the top of his stairs. The marsh salt drifts in from the ocean while the noises of The Haven are washed away with the ocean breeze, and I think about what Bea said.

The actual pain versus the story I’ve told myself about it. It could fit so many situations in my life, going as far back as kindergarten.

But if I relate it to the here and now, the reason I’m sitting on Cole’s porch and not hightailing it back to Boston, it all comes down to one truth.

I’ve been here for six weeks, and I haven’t self-destructed.

I’ve made friends I didn’t ask for, didn’t think I deserved, and cannot seem to get rid of. I’m single-handedly stopping a fiscal bleed. I sat on the porch until sunrise with a man who still smells like home, and this morning, I stood in his kitchen and allowed myself to have a normal morning with the family who chose me.

The story is I’m only here until I’ve solved Cole’s financial crisis.

My thumb covers the diamond on my ring finger. It’s hard to decipher where the lies are now.

The screen door opens behind me, and Cole exits with two mugs. He doesn’t ask if I want one. He just sits on the step below mine—the same geometry we’ve always had—and hands mine up to me.

Mango tea scents the air around us as I take it.

The ocean does its thing. The lanterns behind us do theirs.

Everything here has a place, a responsibility, a purpose—even its residents. Perhaps even me.

“I’m not trying to hide things from you,” he says, alluding to what he said last night. Kind of feels as though he’s warning me away while begging me to give him a chance. “I didn’t know that we were an option, Junie, so I’ve never really searched for a solution. But now that I know, I want to fix things and tell you everything. I just need a little time.”

He’s asking me to trust him—knowing he’s broken my trust so thoroughly in the past.

It’s a big ask.

It’s also a big reward—and that’s the reason I agree to his terms.

“Okay.”

He angles his face toward mine and offers the shy smile of our youth. The one that says I can trust him. The one that says he’ll always be in my corner. The one that says he’ll always be mine.

Somewhere inside my ribcage, behind all the spite and the armor and the six years of careful distance, something that’s been holding its breath since kindergarten finally, quietly exhales.

And tonight, that’s my whole story.

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20

EXIT WOUNDS

COLE

THERE'S A SPECIFIC KIND OF QUIET THAT DESCENDS ON A HOUSE AFTER people you care about leave.

Not empty. Empty is neutral. It's…something else. The silence feels heavier when a house that was full isn't anymore, and the home knows the difference. I think it's the way the hush seems to reverberate around every corner and bounce off every door—lonely, and it's about to happen again.

Fen leaves first because he's headed to Los Angeles to meet with a client. Fenway Jones treats goodbyes the way he treats arrivals—at volume, with copious amounts of physical contact, and in a way that leaves the room feeling disorganized after he's gone.

But it's the hug he gives Junie that grates on my last nerve. Or more accurately, it's the look he gives me over her head—it says seventeen things, none of which I'm prepared to hear.

Finally, he lets her fucking go.

"You know where I am," he says with a smirk that's even more irritating than his voice. "There's a pause in Grace's manipulation right now, so we wait. It probably means she's getting desperate and all we need is one more big lie from her to put all the pieces into play."

"Fine," Junie says. Patience isn't a virtue she comes by naturally, but she's lasted much longer than any of us thought she would.

Then he places one hand on my shoulder, and his playful expression vanishes. There's no performance here, just Fen, stripped back to the person

underneath his facade of chaos.

He's letting me know he's serious. That he'll be here when I'm ready. When I need him. When my life potentially crashes and burns.

"I know." It's the best I can do with the boulder he just shoved down my throat.

He nods, and then he's gone. The house is already ten frequencies lower.

Hudson leaves an hour after Fen. He pulls me in and claps me on the back hard enough to land like punctuation. "Don't make me come back here for the wrong reasons."

Our entire brotherhood knows that things are changing, but no one knows exactly where we'll all fall after the explosion happens.

"I won't."

He holds my gaze, making sure I mean it. Then he loads his rental car and drives through The Haven's gate while Stanley narrates the departures into his walkie-talkie for the benefit of no one.

Nolan's the last to leave a couple of hours later—probably by design—and because he and Hud forgot to coordinate flights.

He and Junie have been standing at the bottom of my driveway for close to twenty minutes while I hide on the porch like a fucking stalker.

He glances toward the house, close to where I stand in shadow behind a large column, but before he gets into his car, I step into view.

I'm not sixteen, and we already had our uncomfortable goodbye.

When the car disappears around the corner, Junie remains at the end of the drive for a moment. Not moving. Just…staring off into space. When she eventually turns, I step forward again, expecting to call after her.

But she's not going to her apartment. She's coming to me, to my house, and it settles the hornets buzzing around my chest.

Even my pulse tunes to the beat of her the closer she gets.

Junie sits on the top step but doesn't say anything, so I quietly sit below her—taking our usual spots as though this is how we were created to fit in the world.

"He told me to stop waiting for people to leave," she says after a lot of deep breaths. "As a general rule and new life philosophy."

"That sounds like Nolan." It also sounds like he's actively pushing her toward me without knowing the landmines I still have in place.

She stomps her foot on the stair next to me. “He also said I should order the thing I actually want at a restaurant instead of ordering something safe and stealing half of whoever’s plate I like better.”

I chuckle, and the lightness it brings overpowers my earlier fears. “That’s been a problem for some people since you were twelve.”

“It’s only a problem for Hudson. It’s actually strategic. Why commit to one entrée when—”

“Junie.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She pulls her knees up. The ocean breeze swirls her hair around her face. “It’s a metaphor.”

I nod, then lean back on my elbows. My arm is an inch from her thighs.

After a while, she angles her legs closer to me, the distance between us evaporating like a morning fog. “What did Hudson say to you? It looked like an…uncomfortable conversation.”

“You want the truth?”

She nods, and I catch the movement from the corner of my eye.

“He said to get my shit together.”

I don’t even have to look her way to know she’s smiling. “He’s succinct.”

“Efficient,” I agree.

The air shifts around us. I can feel her wanting to ask the follow-up question—Are you going to? Then she pulls back half an inch. She’s decided not to ask, which is its own kind of answer. She’s trusting me to get there without being pushed into it. It’s more than I’ve earned and the most terrifying gift I’ve ever been handed.

I can’t let her down. Again.

“I have work to do,” she says, standing. Her bare leg brushes my arm.

There’s a chemical reaction that happens between us that can’t be replicated or denied. The harder I try, the stronger the force of it.

“Me too.”

She goes inside. The door doesn’t slam. And she doesn’t look back.

I sit on the porch for another ten minutes, allowing myself to want something without immediately cataloguing why I don’t deserve it.

It’s harder than it sounds. I’ve been dismantling my own wants for so long I’ve almost forgotten the fabric of them.

Almost.

But like all things Juniper Mercer, I'm drawn to her in inexplicable ways, and I follow her path a short time later.

The house has a different rhythm.

It should feel bigger now—fewer people, fewer voices, less commotion. Instead, it feels like a room after the furniture's been rearranged. The proportions are the same, everything just lands differently, and you know it's only a matter of time before you stub your toe on something unexpected.

While my mind focuses on what's changed, my body drifts closer to my own personal metronome.

She's at the conference table with a mug in her hand, and across from her, at the place I've set up to work just to be near her, is one for me. Steam still rises from the top.

Junie knew I'd follow her.

And at this point, I'm pretty sure I'd follow her to the pits of hell if only she asked.

Sliding into my new workspace, thankful that I took the initiative to finally set up the monitor in here, I lift my coffee to my lips and take a long pull.

Only a month ago, I would have been concerned that she'd put MiraLAX in my coffee. We've come so far but still have a cavern between us named Natalie Moore.

"County assessor's office confirmed the extension," she says. "We have six more days."

"Is that enough?"

"It would be if you let me pull the final thread on that LLC Devin set up. It's all we have left, Cole. It's our final play."

Instantly, my body becomes too warm.

"It's not that I won't go after him, Junie. It's that I can't take the fall when we do. I need everything to be in order for the assessment before we proceed."

She lifts her gaze to mine. Hers is shrewd and assessing but also carries a warmth she doesn't offer everyone. "It is, Cole, and I'll have the report from the handwriting expert by the end of the week. She verified that the signatures don't match. I've followed the threads and restructured the false narrative. Every misdeed is accounted for. Everything that's framed to look

like your doing, I have documented to prove otherwise. I need to finish this before we're hit with another problem."

Junie's competence might be the sexiest thing about her, even if wielding it my way has the potential to be my professional downfall.

But she's also right. She's been right since she arrived, and I've been managing the timeline like a structural engineer who knows a wall is compromised but keeps adding load to it anyway because the alternative requires a complete recalibration of the system I've been operating under for six years.

"Give me until the end of the week," I say, hoping that in those four days I'll find some kind of clarity with the Natalie problem—just in case the assessment doesn't go my way.

Her pen taps once. "End of the week."

I nod.

"What do you think will change in four days, Cole? Why are you still trying to protect him?"

"Its…not about him." Not really.

Devin is the first step. Natalie and what happened in Boston is another.

Junie nods. There's no negotiation, no righteous fury. Just Juniper Mercer, giving me the rope and trusting me not to hang myself with it.

Her faith in me is almost harder to sit with than her anger was.

THE INVITATION HAS BEEN MOCKING ME FROM MY DRAFTING TABLE FOR days.

Nana Mae left it there after I refused to acknowledge it downstairs with a hot-pink sticky note that says: You're going. —Love, Nana Mae.

Not a question. Not a suggestion. A unilateral decision she's already made on my behalf.

The Meridian Architectural Design Awards.

Sponsored by the firm that has been operating for six years on the scaffolding of my silence.

The sad thing is, I'm confident my design that Nana Mae chose will win. What I can't predict is what will happen when it does.

I pick up the invitation, feeling the heavy cardstock in my hand, the Meridian logo embossed at the top—their name over my designs, except usually I don't have to look at it so…directly.

The awards dinner is coming up. The entries have been submitted. Mine among them, thanks to Nana Mae.

I drop the invitation face down on the table.

Then I pick it up again.

"I'll go with you," Junie says.

My muscles pull taut, like I've been caught in the act of something nefarious. I almost smile, seeing Junie straddle the threshold to my office. She nods toward the invitation. It's no use hiding it from her now.

"If you want me to." Her snark is nowhere to be found.

I glance down at the invitation before dropping it into my desk drawer, out of sight. As much as I want Junie at my side, the thought of what might happen keeps me from jumping at the offer.

"I don't think you know what you're offering." The locked drawer to my left feels like a living, breathing heartbeat—guilt, that's what it is. A drawer full of guilt signed by Natalie Moore herself.

"People always underestimate what I can handle." She's standing at the edge of my drafting table, looking at my revised garden layout with the precise attention she brings to everything numerical.

Her cheek twitches when her eyes track the adjusted pathway that now accounts for the correct wheelchair radius. The path I fixed because she told me to, three seconds into seeing the design.

Her finger drags over the edge of my desk, as though she's tracing the design before her with a loving touch, but she doesn't comment on the new configuration.

She doesn't have to. The gleam in her eyes says it all.

There's something in the space between us that's new—or not new, but named differently than it was a week ago. It's not the charged silence of two people maintaining careful distance. It's something…easier.

"The awards dinner," I say.

"What about it?"

"I do want you there." It's as simple and as complicated as that. I want her there. With me. "Not as a cover story or as Nana Mae's chess piece." I hold her gaze. "With me. As…mine." My gaze drops to her ring finger, and my chest puffs out with pride or happiness, probably both.

It feels like a symbol of where we would be if Natalie hadn't chosen destruction. And since I caught Junie playing with it the other day and know that she's wearing it because she chooses to, not because it's stuck, it means even more.

I don't pry this secret out of her though. She'll tell me when she's ready.

Junie nibbles on her bottom lip. It does unfortunate things to my cock, and I'm thankful to have the drafting table between us.

"It's hosted by Meridian," she says carefully. "And there's a $50,000 prize attached to first place."

My cock instantly deflates, but I nod.

"Fifty thousand is very close to the number that's been staring at me for two months, Cole. It could be a way to cover—"

"Yes."

"Are you going because Nana Mae is in a feud with Paula Van Holten, or because if you win, The Haven gets out of this mess?" Junie's assessing me the same way she attacks her spreadsheets…like something isn't quite adding up.

"I do what I have to," I say. "I always do."

Sadness changes her expression, and I wish I could take back my words. "Whatever Meridian is to you, whatever happened with them—"

"They're nothing to me now," I say honestly.

She studies me. The intelligence in her eyes is doing its work—assembling what she has, flagging what's missing, calculating what the gaps might mean.

"Is this part of the conversation we need to have? The context from our past that I'm missing?"

Juniper Mercer isn't just smart. She's fucking brilliant. I've been watching her get closer to the truth for two months now, and the thing I can't explain is that it no longer feels like dread. It feels like something I'm moving toward on purpose because Junie isn't a broken teenager anymore, and I'm finally allowed to see the difference.

"It is." I clamp my mouth shut so I don't say more. I'll do everything in my power to keep Junie from more harm—even if that means asking the guys for help.

"Okay," she says. "We'll go together."

Just like that.

Then she heads back to the conference room, her bare feet slapping against the stairs, and I turn back to the problem at hand. There's a solution here, and I'm finally ready to find it.

"MAIL." NANA MAE DROPS A PILE ONTO MY DESK. THE SUN IS SETTING, and I heard Junie head home an hour ago to get ready for the S&S meeting. "You should probably let Junie read these or start returning them to sender." She points a bony finger at the letter on top.

The handwriting is a dead giveaway of what's inside.

I nod while Nana Mae sighs, then exits, mumbling about idiots under her breath.

Even knowing what the letter will say, I open it—a reminder of what's at stake if I don't find a way to end them all together.

And as my eyes skim the page, it's what I expected, except she's added a new warning to the bottom.

There have been some developments we need to discuss. I haven't found my footing as quickly as I'd like. There are actions we need to take to ensure this symbiotic relationship continues. I'm sure you can spare a design or two to make that happen.

She's never going to stop. Her *footing*, as she calls it, will never come because she's never done the work. In college, I helped with her projects. Coached her on exams. Tutored her in class.

She's not finding her footing because she's always been tap dancing on mine.

I ball up the letter and slam it into the drawer with all the others, then focus on the immediate steps I can take.

The prize money will save The Haven from Devin's attack. It's the one fact that holds. The one that keeps me from losing my goddamn mind.

I have to go.

I have to win.

It's the only way to ensure Devin's scheme doesn't snowball into the rest of my lies because if I go down for Devin's scheme, I'll be forced to default on the loan. The one that paid off Junie's liens against her home and

put them squarely onto my five acres of waterfront property—Nana Mae's favorite part of my grandfather's land.

I can get through this fucking dinner—for Junie, for Nana Mae, for The Haven.

Anger curls my fists.

It's one night.

After weeks of indecision, the plan begins to crystallize in my mind.

This is the collision I've been barreling toward. The only way to face it is head-on. The key will be to ensure that I take the hit and Junie never learns about the emotional and financial sabotage her parents committed against her.

As soon as I win that money, I'll tell Natalie I'm done. She can walk away, and I'll keep her secret, or she can release hell on Junie, and I'll do the same to her by showing Meridian proof of her plagiarism.

One blackmail to erase the other. And if it doesn't work, I'll rally our family around Junie to help her absorb the kind of pain no child should ever face and pray with everything I have that she is, in fact, strong enough to handle it now.

Like it or not, my future is at a fork in the road, and it's up to me to ensure Junie and I stay on the same path.

In a little less than two weeks, I'll know if the story of us was meant to be a romance or a tragedy.

And for the first time, it feels less like a countdown and more like a decision I've fully committed to.

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21

SOCK THIEF

JUNIE

I CAN'T SLEEP, AND NOW I'M STANDING IN COLE WHITTAKER'S KITCHEN AT 11:47 on a Tuesday night, wearing his socks that I found in the laundry room because the floor is cold and I refuse to walk back to my apartment to put on shoes at this hour.

And it has nothing to do with the way he said *mine* this afternoon as though I'm his personal forgone conclusion.

Mine.

It echoes through my mind like every forbidden fantasy come to life.

He's a distraction—that's the only reason I'm making so much noise while preparing my tea. It's definitely not because I want to wake him up. The only reason I'm even making my tea over here in the first place is because he has better water—mine tastes like rust or copper or some other mineral I can't name.

Fuck.

He's coming. Everything I wanted and feared in one sexy package.

I hear him—the specific cadence of his footsteps. I've memorized the footfalls of a man who's determined to ruin my sleep indefinitely because even his presence still gives me butterflies.

He stops in the doorway—my breath stops in my throat.

A smile peels across my lips, knowing the first thing he'll see are his socks pulled up to my knees, so I'm thankful I still have my back to him.

“Before you say anything, your socks were in the laundry room, and I thought it would be warmer out.”

One heartbeat.

A puff of air that sounds like it hisses through his teeth.

Then his voice. “I wasn’t going to say anything.”

God, that low timbre does unspeakable things to my self-control.

“You were thinking it.”

“I was thinking you made your tea without asking if I wanted any.”

Painstakingly slowly, I turn to face him. “You want chamomile tea?”

He shrugs. “No, but the principle stands. Maybe I just wanted to know you were here.”

Cole moves to the cabinet, and I step aside to give him room at the kettle, while we do the thing we’ve been doing for weeks now—occupying his kitchen at odd hours, moving around each other with the practiced ease of two people who innately know each other’s floor plan. He reaches past me for a mug, and his arm grazes mine.

Goose bumps rise to the surface of my skin. His hand pauses in midair, his gaze memorizing my flesh.

“Can’t sleep?” he asks. His voice, if possible, has dropped another register.

“I was asleep. Then I wasn’t. Then I decided tea was a better option than lying there doing a full forensic analysis of every conversation I’ve had in the last twenty-four hours.”

There. Honest without being in your face.

And Hudson thinks I’m emotionally stunted. If that’s not personal growth, I don’t know what is.

“Did the forensic analysis reach any conclusions?”

I take a slow sip of chamomile. “Jury’s still out.”

He leans against the counter opposite me with his arms crossed. The kitchen is too small for the both of us when he looks at me like that, like he’s waiting for the verdict with considerably more patience than I have and has no problem intimidating the jury if they don’t come to a satisfactory conclusion.

“You said mine,” I snap, then clamp my mouth shut and suck in both lips to bite on them. Hard. My mouth has always run on its own agenda. “At the drafting table. You said, I want you there as mine. It’s a lot to process after years of being pushed away.”

Jesus, Junie. Get control of your mouth!

"I did." His smile says a million things while his gaze is dangerously close to incinerating my thin pajamas if he steps even an inch closer.

My heart rate increases in steady beats that get more aggressive with each second that passes.

Slowly, he uncrosses his arms, then he's gripping the counter on either side of his hips so tightly that his knuckles instantly turn white.

"Well, okay then. This isn't frustrating at all."

He can't just drop a bomb and then decide he doesn't want to talk about it. And he's been doing it all evening—answering in the minimum number of words that technically constitute an answer while I do all the work of constructing the actual conversation.

"Cole." His name flies from my lips with all the snark and sass he knows me for.

"Junie." My name flies from his lips like a lash from a whip.

Shit. He's not holding on to his control any better than I am.

But I'm done letting him steer this ship. I'm done waiting for him to make a decision where I'm concerned. He either wants me or he doesn't, and since I've spent years under the impression that he most certainly does not want me, I now have nothing to lose.

"I'm going to say something." My voice is clear and smooth. "And you'll have the opportunity to either respond or stand there doing what you've always done, which, by the way, has gotten us nowhere, so I'm really going to need you to choose the first one."

I'm actively choosing vulnerability for the first time in my life, and a flicker of recognition moves behind his eyes. The faintest hint of a dimple. "Go ahead."

I set my mug on the counter. I need both hands for this. Or at least, I need to not spill the tea when my nerves inevitably take over.

"I showed up here with an exit strategy, but I've…stopped running," I say. "I told you I couldn't do the in-between anymore, and I meant it, but somewhere between the ring…" My thumb instinctively moves to it. "Our meetings on the porch and you going to fix Frank's gutters because you couldn't sit still—I'm learning to…stay in the moment, not run from it. I don't know exactly when it started. I just know that I'm here, now, in whatever this is, with you."

I run my knuckles over my chest. My heart is being fucking annoying with its mismatched beats and uncomfortable throbbing. He clocks the movement, the way he always does—intensely.

"And." I slide an inch away from him, and my thoughts clear. "I just think you should know that because you keep warning me away, telling me I don't have the full story yet. Every time you do, I say okay. And I mean that, Cole. But I'm not a patient woman, and I'm not waiting until our story is perfect before I decide. Life has taught me that it will never be perfect, so I made a decision based on the knowledge I have. And, Cole?"

His stare lifts from my lips to my eyes.

"My decision is clear. I know what I want."

The truth behind my declaration is like drawing a line in the sand. I laid down the gauntlet, but I won't cross the line until he does.

"That might be the bravest thing you've ever said to me," he says.

"It's going to be the most embarrassing thing I've ever said to you if you don't—"

He crosses to me in three steps.

His hands come up to my face the way they did in my apartment—cupped, deliberate, like I'm something he's been coveting for a long time and has finally decided to take.

"I've already decided too." His thumb drags along my jaw. "In case that wasn't obvious."

My pulse has lost its rhythm.

I scoff, grasping hold of my snark with both hands—just in case. "Your communication style leaves a lot of room for interpretation."

He chuckles, and his warm, minty breath hits my face like a kiss and a warning.

"Noted." His mouth finds the corner of mine—just the border of a kiss—the pressure of almost. "Is this interpretation clear enough?"

"Getting there," I rasp. "I might need further clarification though."

He ghosts his lips over mine. Our eyes are wide open. This kiss is different.

Turns out, kissing Cole Whittaker when I'm not furious at him is a completely different experience.

Our first kiss was desperation and six years of quiet craving. This—this is a slow masterclass in seduction. This is a man who has decided to take his time and doesn't care that I'm vibrating out of my own skin.

His hands move from my face to my hair to my waist. Each transition is deliberate, like he's learning each piece of me before he moves onto the next, and I have the disorienting sense of being truly paid attention to.

I've been looked at. I've been wanted. I've never been studied. "Cole."

"Hmm," he says against the sensitive skin of my neck.

I moan and angle my head to the side to give him better access.

"If you stop this time, if you pull away and hide from me again, I will put Ex-Lax in every caffeinated beverage in this house for the remainder of my time here."

He laughs against my throat—a full-bodied sound. The real one I've only heard a handful of times since he left Boston. It's low and startled and genuine.

Then he lifts me onto the counter and steps between my knees. His laughter fades into something else entirely.

It's there in his gaze.

The fire.

The chemistry.

The combustible lust.

"I'm not stopping this time, Junie." He's so confident, so…sure.

"G-good." My words tremble past my lips as my hands find the back of his neck. "Just establishing terms."

"Noted." Then he kisses me like a man signing his life away, and I stop the war of words I use as protection because there's no version of what's currently happening to my nervous system that knows what to do with words.

He breathes heavily against my ear as his calloused hands slide under the hem of my shirt. Skin to skin. His wounds to mine.

"Stop thinking so hard." He sucks the lobe of my ear into his mouth and bites down hard enough to evoke a full-body shudder.

"I'm always thinking."

"Stop."

My body immediately listens to his command, but my mouth is incapable of following directions.

"You stop."

He leans back just far enough to look at me, and I immediately resent the distance. His hair is slightly wrecked—I did that. His eyes are dark and

focused so intently on me that I don’t notice his hands sliding up my ribcage until his thumbs skim the underside of my breast.

“Hi,” he says with a crooked smile that settles the fears inside me.

It shouldn’t work. It’s one word. And yet, it dismantles the hesitations calculating in the back of my mind.

“Hi.” My version is shyer, quieter, needier.

I hold my breath as he leans in to kiss me again, and this time I stop trying to maintain the running monologue that usually keeps me a safe distance from my own feelings. Because distance is something Cole and I have had, and now, I fully understand why it will never work.

He pinches my nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, just hard enough to get a reaction out of me, and my body bends to his will when my hips shoot forward, my back arching into him.

The moan that escapes my throat has him groaning in response.

My eyes drift closed, and then he has a hand at my back, dragging me forward so my legs wrap around his waist, evidence of his need pressing into my core, and everything I’ve ever wanted is finally within reach.

“I’ll only ask this one time, and then you’ll truly be mine, so make sure.”

I nod, panting, as I glance up into his stormy eyes.

“Are you sure that this?” His hand on my back presses me against his body again. “Is what you want?”

I blink to clear the cobwebs, but my answer is as clear as anything I’ve ever said. “It’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

His chest rumbles so much the vibration rolls through our bodies, but his gaze—his gaze softens into something I’ve never experienced before—unfiltered love.

Before I can respond, he has two hands under my thighs and is lifting me. I tighten my legs around his waist, clasp my hands together at his neck, and hold on while he walks with me in his arms toward the stairs.

He doesn’t even break a sweat as he climbs to the second floor or when he slams his bedroom door shut with his foot.

I’m not sure he even blinks as he lowers me gently to his bed—the one room in the house I’ve actively avoided. The room is decorated for comfort but with feminine touches too.

Insecurity crowds my emotions for only half a second because that’s when I see it.

Across the room, in a frame. The only photograph I can find in here, and it's of us dancing at Nolan's graduation party.

Cole follows my line of sight, then cringes. "Now you know," he rasps before climbing up my body on the bed.

"Know what?"

"That this is all I've ever wanted too."

He doesn't allow me a moment to absorb his confession because he's lifting my shirt up over my breasts, then over my head and following the path of skin with his lips, teeth, and tongue. When he tosses my shirt to the floor, he backtracks down my torso to the band of my sleep shorts.

"Jesus Christ, Junie." His hands cup my breasts—squeezing, pinching, weighing. He licks, kisses, and nips along my hip bone, across my center to the other side. "You're so fucking perfect."

I can't speak because if I do, I'll say something to ruin this moment—something stupid, or snarky, or just…

My head lolls as he slips his fingers into the sides of my shorts and slowly lowers them. Pressing my feet into the mattress, I help by lifting my hips, allowing him to remove everything until I'm completely bare before him.

For the longest moment, he just stares at every inch of exposed skin. When I'm about to curl into a ball and die of embarrassment, he places his big hands on my knees, then slowly pulls them apart, opening me up to him in every way.

"Look how wet you are for me."

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

Cole Whittaker has always been sexy.

Dirty-talking Cole Whittaker might be my undoing.

"C-Cole." Who the hell am I? I don't freaking…melt. Yet here I am, a giant pool of want under his gaze.

"Here's how this is going to work, baby."

My lashes fly so high I'm sure he can see all the whites of my eyes. It's his tone. It's…different. Dominant in a way I never, ever believed I'd obey.

"You," he rumbles, "fight me every chance you get. I like it. I love it even, but in here?" He strips himself naked and takes all the moisture from my mouth too. I've never actually seen a V like that on anyone. My last romance book called it a cum gutter, but I didn't get it before.

Now I do.

His cock bounces free when he lowers his pants to the floor, and I'm having a hard time paying attention to anything else. It's long and thick with a vein on the underside I want to press my forefinger to just to feel it pulse.

Cole wraps a fist around his thick shaft, and he's never looked more confident.

"Are you listening?" he growls. Cole Whittaker growls at me, and my core pulses to the vibration.

I'm in so much fucking trouble, but I nod, incapable of speech.

"In here, I'm in control."

Yeah, right. I laugh, then realize it's only in my head because holy shit. I think I want him to take charge, to be in control.

He crawls up the bed, spreading my legs impossibly wide. I'm so turned on I can actually feel myself getting wetter, and he hasn't even really touched me yet.

"First," he says. "You're going to come on my mouth. Then you'll come on my fingers. And just when you think you can't take another minute of pleasure, then you'll get my cock. That is when you'll know."

"Know what?" I mewl as his hands slide up the inside of my thighs.

A deviously impassioned grin lights up his face. "That you were always mine, Juniper."

I cry out when he darts forward. He hasn't even touched me there yet, but my core anticipates it, and he chuckles. He's so close to my pussy that his laugh blasts my core with heat that has my entire body twisting in reaction.

But his strong hands hold my hips still, then he tastes me. One lick straight up my center, and I swear sparks fly all around us. Cole groans, long and low in the back of his throat, and me? I fall helplessly, hopelessly, endlessly over the edge.

"What the fuck have I been doing with my life." He sounds pissed, but his fingers are exploring me in a way that steals all my thoughts. Then he reaches up and paints my bottom lip with a wet finger.

My tongue instantly darts out before my mind catches up to what I'm doing.

"Do you taste that?" he demands.

I nod.

“What does it taste like?” One long finger breaches my core, and I groan around the delicious intrusion.

“Me.”

Another finger surges into my center.

“Wrong, Junie.” His lips clamp over my clit and he sucks so hard stars form in my vision. “You taste like mine,” he mumbles around my skin. “Fucking mine.”

“I—”

Cole doesn’t give me a chance to respond. He hoovers my clit while flicking it with his tongue. It’s aggressive, and rough, and everything I’ve never had.

I curl my fingers into his hair just to have something to hold on to because the world is slipping away into a spiral of bliss that shouldn’t be real.

“Oh, baby.” He speaks into my damp flesh. “You’re so close.”

I am. I really am.

He presses his tongue into my center while his long, thick fingers stroke my clit faster and faster, barreling me toward release. Then he uses his free hand to press down on my lower belly, and I don’t know what the fuck happens, but my entire body spasms. My back arches and curls, trying to outrun the electricity shooting through every one of my nerves.

I cry out.

Convulse.

Fall.

“That’s one.” The gravel in those two words tell me that Cole isn’t playing around.

He’s really going to make me come three times tonight, and I’m barely surviving the first.

He crawls up my body, his fingers never leaving my pussy as those rough digits continue their leisurely fucking while he slowly moves his thumb to my clit, adding pressure there before I’ve even begun to recover.

“How about now?” he murmurs. “Am I being clear enough now?”

He kisses my lips, and the taste of me mingles with the taste of him and I lose all sense of reality.

“You came on my lips. Now it’s time for my fingers, baby.” He picks up speed, fingers flying across my clit like a piano player sliding into presto.

“Fuck,” I grind out just before his free hand wraps around my neck. And here I was thinking my eyes couldn’t get any bigger.

His fingers tighten almost imperceptibly around my skin, and I come again. Harder than the first time. I can’t process any of it. My body seizes as white-hot fire zips through my bloodstream, and I cry out—loudly. Loud enough that Cole clamps a hand over my mouth, his eyes dancing with everything we’ve never said.

“That’s two. Am I clear yet?”

My pussy spasms again with aftershocks I can’t control.

Even my nipples are throbbing.

I’ve never had an ab workout like this before. I’m going to feel Cole’s prowess for days.

His long fingers tap against something deep inside my pussy, and I’m thankful his free hand is still covering my mouth because I scream so hard tears leak from the corner of my eyes. Then he withdraws his thick digits, and the slurping sound my pussy makes has me squeezing my eyelids tight.

“Oh, baby. You come so prettily for me.”

My chest is heaving, wrecked, gasping.

How did we get here so quickly? It’s like he has a map to every fantasy I’ve ever dared dream.

Or maybe…

Maybe he is the fantasy.

He slides over me. Covering me with his delicious weight. Cradling my head in both his hands. Memorizing the way my face contorts as I struggle to recover from back-to-back intense orgasms that have shredded my mind, tortured my heart, and surrendered my body to whatever sorcery he wields.

“Fuck, Junie.” He stares at me in awe while I’m struggling to focus my eyes.

Everything’s blurry with white halos dotting my vision—hell, maybe this is heaven.

“You ready for me?”

Panic goes to war with lust in my belly. I want him, but I’m not sure I’ll survive it.

“You can handle it, baby,” he croons.

That’s when I feel it. The blunt head of his erection probing my still-throbbing entrance.

He presses in but stops short, staring down at me with a frown. Pulling out, he slowly starts to rock back in but bites down on his bottom lip before straightening to watch where his cock is entering me.

“Jesus,” he snaps. “Fucking. Christ.”

Instantly, I assume something’s wrong and attempt to sit up, but he knows me too well. Anticipating my move, he shoots his hand out, long fingers splayed to the center of my chest, and presses me back down.

“Two fucking orgasms and you’re still so God damn tight.”

Is he—angry?

“Damn, baby.” His expression is thunderous with a carnal desire I’ve never witnessed before. “Fuck. Condom?”

“Pill.”

Green eyes bore into mine. Then he nods because that’s all the conversation we need about this. We’re choosing trust. Maybe blindly. Probably stupidly. But trust just the same.

He thrusts deeper this time, and my hands claw out for his chest, his waist, his arms—I just need to hold on to…something.

Somehow, he knows what I need even as my vocal abilities have gone on hiatus because he leans forward again, resting his forearms near my head so I can clutch him to me.

But it’s his eyes, the way they watch me, the way they’re learning how every drag of his cock affects me, that tells me we’re just getting started.

“How about now? Am I being perfectly”—he thrusts in another inch—“clear”—one more—“now?”

“Clear,” I gasp, and he smirks.

“Good. Because here’s a truth you should know.” His hips move at a leisurely pace, the shallow movements keeping me on edge. “I’m about to ruin this pussy for all others…just as you’ve ruined my heart and soul. There will be no one else, Juniper. Only you.” He slams into me so hard, he pushes me up the bed by my pussy. “Only me.”

“Yes.” I’ve long lost the ability to control myself. I whine and beg and plead—he reacts as if it’s all gospel to his ears.

“How’s that for communication?” he taunts.

“So good. So. So good.”

Keeping our chests pressed together, he rolls his hips, grinding into me as far as he can go.

He slips his arms under my shoulders and uses the hold as leverage to do exactly as he promised—ruin me.

“Do you have any idea how many times I’ve thought about you?” he rasps into my ear.

I claw my nails down his back. He’s so deep inside me that every twitch and thrust is an intentional invasion.

“How many times I’ve imagined tossing you over my desk and fucking you raw?” His thrusts are uneven, powerful and focused. “How many times I’ve wanted to strip you naked and slap your ass for even daring to think that I didn’t want you?”

I sob incoherently into his neck. Not with tears, but with emotion I have no control over.

“How many times I’ve jerked off to thoughts of this sweet fucking pussy, your smart-ass mouth, your ass?” He groans, his entire body tensing as though he’s holding off his orgasm.

“Has anyone ever been inside your ass, sweetheart?” He snakes a hand down my back, lifting me from the mattress in his descent south while never breaking stride with his cock buried deep.

“No.” I don’t have the wherewithal to speak in full sentences.

Then his finger presses against that forbidden hole, and holy mother of fucking peace. I come. I come harder than the first two times combined.

I don’t even see stars this time. My body just…explodes.

“Yes,” he roars. “Fucking yes. You’re going to break my dick, sweetheart. Keep—” He grunts with three fast, hard thrusts. “Squeezing me. Just like—” He slams into me, then still as a statue, he comes.

He orgasms so hard his cum leaks out around the sides of his thick cock, and he continues to slowly slide in and out of me, and I can’t bring myself to worry about any of it.

But I do smile.

Even as my eyes drift closed.

I smile.

Even as he collapses on top of me.

I smile.

And when I hear him whisper, so quietly I don’t think it was meant for me, “I love you, Junie. I’m just terrified of what loving me will cost you.”

I smile.

If only he knew the cost of loving him was already paid years ago.

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22

CENTER OF GRAVITY

COLE

I PEEL OPEN MY EYES, ALREADY KNOWING IT'S SOMEWHERE CLOSE TO SIX a.m.

My body's been keeping this appointment for a decade and doesn't care that the rest of my life shifted on its axis last night. My new center of gravity is currently asleep on my chest, with her hair in her mouth and one leg hooked over mine, breathing slowly against my sternum.

It's making it unreasonably difficult to stay still.

Juniper Mercer.

In my bed.

Drooling on me.

Awake, my little Viper has her claws deployed, ready to strike at a moment's notice.

In sleep, she's at peace, calm, gentle in a way I've rarely ever seen.

So I fight to remain still.

The ceiling fan above us turns a slow quarter-revolution while a gull complains over the dunes. The light behind the blinds is still the gray kind that hasn't committed to being morning. I used to hate this hour—the one that makes thoughts in my mind scream into the silence of my life—but today, I can't muster up the energy to hate, well, anything.

It's a strange sensation to get what you've always wanted and yet still want more.

For today though, this is good enough.

It’s a step in the right direction.

It’s also what motivates me like nothing before to put an end to the shackles of my past because I can finally envision the future, and now I’ll do anything to have it.

Good enough will never be good enough for Junie.

I love you, Junie. I’m just terrified of what loving me will cost you.

Those words should’ve remained in my head, but the events that led to them make me weak. I’d whispered them into her hair, needing her to know them, but I was unprepared for the fallout.

Junie’s breathing didn’t change with my admission, which means she either didn’t hear me or she did and decided mercy was the cheaper option at one in the morning. I don’t even know which fucking option I’m praying for.

Both have teeth.

She shifts in her sleep, muttering something unintelligible, and I grin—her sour disposition makes everything in my life feel lighter. Even in sleep, Junie finds something to complain about.

The leg hooked over mine tightens.

Her hand is fisted in the sheet that rests over my naked torso, and she pulls as though she’s worried I’ll go somewhere.

I won’t. And as soon as I fix this shit with everyone else in our lives, I’ll make sure she knows it.

I ease the strand of hair out of her mouth. She makes the small, annoyed sound of a woman who protests in her sleep on principle and burrows closer.

“Stop. Moving,” she says into my chest. Her eyes are still closed.

“I didn’t.” Not really. Ensuring she doesn’t end up with a hairball seems like the gentlemanly thing to do, even if what I did to her last night would be considered anything but gentlemanly.

My cock stirs to life, so I redirect my attention.

“You were thinking about it,” she mumbles.

“Thinking isn’t a crime, Viper.”

One eye cracks open. Bloodshot. Deeply suspicious. Sexy as fuck. She stares across the room, then at my bed as though she’s just realizing she’s not in her room. Then her curious expression lands on me.

She stares at me for the longest moment before closing her eyes again.

“Okay,” she grumbles with her normal amount of early morning irritation.

“Okay?” What the hell is she talking about?

“Not a dream. Confirmed. Processed. Calculating. Proceed.”

My chest does something I don’t have a word for. Crackling, maybe? Aching, definitely. Expanding, a certainty. I kiss the top of her head before my brain can tell me not to. The window for doing that without having to explain myself feels narrow, and I intend to use every inch of it.

She sighs against my chest.

I memorize how right it feels as we lie here.

I don’t even know how much time passes. Long enough that the light outside commits to a sunrise. Long enough that her breathing evens out again, and I’m not sure if she’s fallen back asleep or if she’s pretending, hoping to avoid discussing complications like the morning after or the walk of shame.

Though there’s no shame here. At least not for me.

It’s right. The most right thing in my entire fucking miserable excuse for a life.

I don’t say it outright, but it rumbles in my chest like a tidal wave.

For years, I’ve been dismantling my own wants one by one. You can’t miss what you don’t allow yourself to name. You can’t lose what you never let yourself have.

Turns out that system has limits, and this one has just expired.

BY SEVEN, I’VE MANAGED TO EXTRACT MYSELF FROM THE BED WITHOUT waking her, which should qualify me for some kind of engineering commendation.

She sleeps like a woman who’s filed a grievance with gravity, for fuck’s sake. Arms flung wide. Mouth open—with hair in it again, which, after twenty minutes of watching her breathe around it, apparently bothers me more than it bothers her. The sheet is kicked down to her waist, not that I mind the stunning view, but I pull it up over her shoulder because if I stare at her bare back for another second, I will climb back into that bed and fulfill every dirty desire I’ve ever harbored for her.

Instead, I yank on a pair of sweatpants from my dresser, leave another pair along with a T-shirt for her on the edge of the bed, then pad down the hall, thankful that the house is still quiet.

Which means I've got maybe forty minutes before Nana Mae shows up and comes to conclusions I'm not prepared to discuss.

I move on autopilot, making coffee while last night flashes through my mind with a very explicit highlight reel that forces me to think of every unsexy thing I can imagine just to get my erection under control.

In hindsight, sweatpants after a night with Junie are a terrible idea, so I put all my focus into making two cups of coffee.

Hers with too much oat milk. Mine, black, like I've tried to make my heart, only to have her chip away at the char to find the bruised bits beneath. Then I stand there, barefoot on my kitchen floor, staring at our two mugs sitting side by side as though they represent a future I could have—as soon as I remove the obstacles.

My phone buzzes on the counter next to them.

I don't even look at it.

The rhythm of these buzzes, the cadence of this particular interruption that I've been receiving for six years, has never, in any universe, been good news. The phone can wait as long as it takes for us to drink the coffee I'm placing way too much significance on.

It buzzes again.

Fucking. Annoying.

I flip it face down without reading the notification and stir Junie's mug to evenly distribute her sugar and milk.

Whatever the notification is will only make my day worse, and today is one of the best ones I've had in a decade. I'd like to keep it that way for at least as long as it takes for the woman upstairs to wake up and decide what happens next.

That is not, in the grand scheme of things, too much to ask.

But then it buzzes again.

And again.

And. A-fucking-gain.

I exhale through my nose, then flip the powder keg over.

The lock screen shows a preview from a number I recognize. I don't open it. I don't have to. Natalie doesn't call unless she wants something specific, and she doesn't text unless she wants it now.

Below that is a missed call from the same number.

Below that, the follow-up text I don't intend to read, but the preview flashes again.

Don't ignore me, Cole.

I flip the phone back over hard enough that I'd welcome a cracked screen. I should've gotten a new number years ago.

Nothing has changed.

That's the part I can never get used to about Natalie—that she can reach into the middle of any moment that's just beginning to feel real and press her thumb to it while nothing ever outwardly betrays what she's done.

My morning is the same as it was five minutes ago. The same kitchen. The same coffee. The same woman upstairs.

The only person who feels the pinch is me.

I take a sip of my coffee, the bitter taste anchoring me to my plight.

Everything is coming to a head, and I haven't told anyone. This has been my pattern for six years. One I'll have to break, and I'm going to break it before Natalie does it for me, but none of that can happen in the next ten minutes, and I'm not going to figure out my shit standing in my kitchen in goddamn sweatpants.

With a scowl, I pick the phone back up, delete the offending messages without opening them, and then toss it face down into the junk drawer with all the other shit I'm not ready to deal with yet.

My fists clench at my sides. The fear of not accomplishing the only goal that matters makes my teeth ache with the effort of holding all this shit inside.

"Cole?"

Mine.

Junie stands in the doorway in my clothes. Not the shirt I laid out for her, but the one I wore last night, and an irrational amount of pride pushes every other thought out of my head.

Her hair is a civil war on top of her head. There's a crease running from the corner of her mouth all the way to her temple that she's going to be furious about when she looks in the mirror, and my T-shirt is bunched in one fist that's propped on her hip.

She is, by any measurable standard, a disaster—and the best thing I've ever seen. I have a sudden, concrete understanding of why men start wars for the women they love.

“Morning.” The word leaves my lips like a desire tasting its target for the first time.

Junie squints at me, then at the two mugs, before refocusing her suspicious glare my way.

Fucking. Perfect.

She’s perfect in her grumpy, jump-to-conclusions, spite-fueled manic energy.

And she’s mine.

Almost.

“Did you make coffee?” No one growls like Juniper Mercer on too little sleep.

I don’t even feel guilty for keeping her up all night. Not when I can still hear her orgasmic screams like my favorite playlist.

“I did.” I smile at her, unable to keep it inside.

“The good stuff?”

“I’m nearly thirty, Junie. I only make the good stuff. I even added the right amount of oat milk.”

She frowns, her arm outstretched but not yet taking her mug in her hands.

“Juniper.”

“What?” she snaps back.

“I’ve been bringing you coffee every afternoon.” I step closer. Close enough that my body heat makes her shiver. “I know what you like.”

She considers that while I study her reactions.

A sigh escapes me when she steps forward on what I can only describe as tentative legs—like she thinks the rules might be different in the morning and nobody has briefed her on the new ones yet.

“I assume this is where you tell me that we made a terrible mistake.” Her tone is flippant, dry, protective.

My little Viper, searching for the exit.

Her hostile energy vibrates off her, so I press my hands to either side of her hips on the edge of the counter and lean in until her face is three inches from mine and she has nowhere else to go that isn’t…me.

Her throat works overtime, emitting a soft, garbled sound of distress.

The muscles in my face and neck relax. “Not a mistake, baby.”

“Cole.”

I never knew my name could evoke such panic in that single syllable.

“Not a mistake, Juniper.”

“I’m just—”

“Not.” I press in closer. “A. Mistake.”

“What I’m saying is—”

“I know exactly what you’re doing. You forget, baby, that I. Know. You. I understand you as Juniper. As Junie. As Viper. As Spite-Berry. I *get* all versions of you.”

She closes her mouth, furrows her brow, then opens her mouth again, only to close it a second later.

The next time she opens it, I kiss her.

Slow. Unhurried. The kind of kiss you give when you have the whole morning and no intention of rushing a single damn thing. Her mouth tastes of my toothpaste.

“Did you use my toothbrush?” I ask against her lips.

“Your mouth touched every inch of me last night.” She shrugs. “It seemed like the most sanitary thing we’ve done in the last twenty-four hours.”

I choke on a laugh, and she fists a hand in the front of my shirt, then she kisses me back, and for about thirty seconds, there’s nothing in my kitchen except the two of us and a growing question about what’s next.

Then she bites my bottom lip. Lightly. A warning shot.

I pull back an inch.

“That was…efficient.”

She’s breathless, and my inner caveman beats on his chest.

“You started it.” Jesus. Is there anything better than verbally sparring with this woman?

“I literally did not.” She scoffs, but the flush of her cheeks tells a different story.

“You came down here wearing my clothes, Juniper. That’s a policy statement.”

She laughs. Full, throaty, startled. It settles the beast inside because it’s her real laugh. The one she still doesn’t give freely, and it lands in my chest like I was holding space for her happiness.

Then her expression makes one small adjustment. She’s swallowing what she wants to say. Then does it again and again, until I have no idea what comes next.

Unease creeps up my spine like icy fingers against heated skin.

She focuses on a point on the wall across the room. “So, what now?”

Three words carrying the weight of the world.

This is the kind of honesty I’ve been waiting to earn from her.

“Coffee,” I say gently. “Then work. After that, whenever you’re done, we’ll have dinner. I’ll even cook.”

She lifts one sculpted brow. “You’ll cook.”

I nod while she chews on this information.

“Something that isn’t eggs?”

This fucking woman. “Something that isn’t eggs, Junie.”

She narrows her eyes. “Can you do that without poisoning us both?”

I flash all my teeth at her now. “Are you asking me to prove myself to you, baby?”

“No one gets the queen for free, Cole.”

Fuck. Me. She’s magnificent.

“No, no, they don’t, do they? Be in my kitchen at seven.”

“I’m already in your kitchen.”

“Seven p.m., smart-ass, wearing something other than my shirt.”

She rolls her eyes, and I vividly imagine spanking her, knowing immediately that she’d like it.

“That’s a very aggressive dress code for a dinner you’ll most likely burn.”

“Juniper.” Her name vibrates through my ribs.

“Cole.” She could have said *duh*, and I would’ve heard the same thing.

We could go back and forth all freaking day.

Instead, I kiss her.

Softer this time. Just the corner of her mouth. It’s the moment she realizes I’m not pulling away from her. I’m not softening the morning into something we never talk about again. I’m not doing everything I’ve always done.

I’m staying.

In the small, unglamorous, dinner-at-seven sense of the word.

“Come sit on the porch with me.” I use the same tone I used when I told her to strip, and it has the desired effect.

But Junie wouldn’t be Junie without some of her fire melting through the haze.

“I’m wearing your clothes, Cole. Are you trying to get the gossips gossiping around here?”

“Gossip is only a negative thing when it’s untrue. Porch,” I say, lifting our coffees. “With me.”

The last thread of my sanity follows her out the door.

She sits on the top step instead of the rocking chairs. It’s a callback to our history. Maybe this is my chance to correct our future, so I sit on the step below her and watch the sky brighten the way it does in the first few days of summer. Everything’s blue and happy and hopeful.

The only sounds are of nature and the occasional slurping of coffee, but I don’t fill the silence because her brain is working a million miles an hour, and she’ll do it herself. When she’s ready.

“I meant what I said last night.” She didn’t take nearly as long as I thought she would.

“I know.”

“About not running anymore.”

“I understand.”

“And you just, what? Trust me?”

I nod, unsure of where she’s going.

“Because, just for the record, I don’t. I know myself, Cole. At some point, I’m going to want to run, to sabotage…this. And while I want to say it won’t happen, it will, and if we’re doing this.” She waves a hand in the minuscule space between our bodies. “Then when I do, I want you to—” She pauses to suck in a large mouthful of air, then allows her shoulders to droop. “I don’t know what I want you to do. I’m not good at this part.”

“When you’re ready to run, tell me.”

She glances down with a frown. “What?”

“When you want to run, tell me that’s what you’re doing. Don’t do it silently. Don’t do it like I did. Just—tell me, and then if you still want to run, we’ll figure the rest out.”

What I don’t say is that I’ll follow her. I know that about myself now. One taste of her will never be enough. I just don’t work without her. I probably never did.

Her eyes flicker with a million different thoughts that she’ll never say out loud.

Then her thumb presses against the engagement ring that has never felt so right. “That’s a high bar, Whittaker.”

“It’s really not. I just made the mistake so you don’t have to.”

She exhales through her nose, but my attention is stuck to her thumb as it pushes the diamond around her ring finger—it's an automatic tell she probably doesn't even notice.

"I'll try."

"Yeah?" This must be what hope feels like.

"Yeah. I'll tell you." She sips her coffee. "Just…for now, anyway."

I don't know what she means by for now, and I don't ask because it sounds like something she's testing out—a sidebar to our conversation, an exit strategy if all hell breaks loose. And maybe that's my fault. I haven't given her much reason to trust me, and I know better than to poke at something she's still working through in her head.

So we sit.

Side by side with the pulse of the ocean on one side of me, and the heartbeat of love on my other.

Somewhere behind us, the phone I hid in the drawer still carries the weight of Natalie's threat, and the county tax deadline looms, while a banquet has the power to solve one problem but not the other because our past still has a thumbprint on our life.

But I'm done being a spectator in my life, so I silently vow to dismantle every lie I've kept hidden.

Starting with Natalie Moore.

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23

MINE

JUNIE

I DON'T MAKE MISTAKES AT WORK. EVER.

Yet here I am, correcting the same calculation error for the third freaking time.

And it's not because the math is hard. Math is, in fact, the easiest thing in my life right now. No, I'm fucking up because my brain is stuck on one word and one word only.

Mine.

Not just the word, but how he said it. Low. Graveled. Throaty.

Determined.

He said *mine* while I shook apart from the sheer force of my orgasms and decided I no longer had a functional nervous system.

Fucking possessive bullshit that I have no business being turned on by.

Yet here I am.

And now I've been typing the same vendor reconciliation email for forty-five minutes.

I really need to get a grip.

No, what I need is for my brain to stop replaying the exact moment Cole said *tell me you're running* and start doing basic arithmetic again. I am a professional. I have a CPA credential and a grudge against the IRS on Cole's behalf. I can do this.

I close out of my spreadsheet. Take a deep breath, scan the area to make sure that Nana Mae isn't once again sneaking around the corner on a fact-

finding mission, and purposefully avoid looking into Cole's open office door.

Only then do I open a new spreadsheet.

It doesn't help that I can hear Cole on a phone call in his office or feel his gaze on me while he speaks. His voice has a flatness he uses when he's pretending to pay attention, but it only takes one syllable for me to know he's not.

I don't know who he's speaking to, and I'm aggressively not thinking about who it could be. It's not my business. We haven't reached the *who are you talking to* stage of this…whatever this is.

Though considering the ring on my finger and the hickey just above my collarbone, I suppose the argument could be made that we are well into… this.

The lines of my spreadsheet blur before me, so I stomp out of my office and head for the coffee machine, all the while feeling Cole's focus on me until I'm out of sight.

It's a strange thing to feel someone watching you. And it's really inconvenient when it reminds you of nothing but what his tongue can do to your most intimate places.

Jesus, who the hell am I?

I'm Juniper Fucking Mercer, and I do not allow men to derail my career.

Humph.

That little pep talk almost clears my head. It's clear enough to do basic math anyway. Now all I have to do is block out all other sensory input.

Headphones it is.

I also angle my monitor to the far wall for good measure.

And finally, I get to work.

My first real breakthrough comes an hour later—an address.

One of Devin's shell companies routes through an LLC registered to a PO Box in Charleston. A quick plug into GPS tells me that it's only ninety minutes from here. Close enough that somebody, at some point, drove there on purpose. Close enough that this is not a man who disappeared into the ether with his spoils—this is a man who set up shop a tank of gas away, living off the fruits of someone else's labor.

And it pisses me off.

I stare at the address for a long time.

I could go ream this guy a new asshole. I'd even enjoy it.

Six weeks ago, I would've already been halfway there because Viper does not sit on information that can be weaponized.

At least not when someone so clearly deserves it.

My fingers move over the keyboard of their own will. It's like an out-of-body experience I have no control over as they click a few buttons to email myself the address.

Then I stare straight ahead and sit on my hands so I don't grab my keys.

Cole asked me to give him until the end of the week. That's three more days. He asked me, to my face, for three days, and he doesn't ask for anything, ever. My mind is attempting to rebel at the idea of giving it to him because I was raised on Fen's operational philosophy of ask forgiveness, not permission.

But Cole isn't Fen, and this isn't a college prank. The Junie that would've driven to Charleston by lunch is not, apparently, the version of me that got out of his bed this morning.

I drum a solid beat against the grain of the wood table I work at every day, and the engagement ring I shouldn't be wearing catches too many damn rays of light.

Old Junie wouldn't be wearing the ring, and old Cole wouldn't have asked for three days.

That's progress, so I close out of the damn spreadsheet, and give him the damn three days.

I don't know how to reconcile pre- and post-Colegasm Juniper.

Or when I started thinking about myself in the third person.

This is, I'm pretty sure, what people mean when they talk about personal growth, and I would like it noted for the record that it's supremely annoying.

My phone buzzes, and for once I'm thankful for the distraction that is Fenway Jones.

Right up until I swipe across the screen and see his message.

Fen: Don't freak out.

I slowly spin my chair so Cole can't see what's happening with my face.

Junie: What did I say about telling me not to freak out? You need to work on your freaking delivery, Fenway!

Junie: Telling me not to freak out makes me freak the fuck out.

Fen: Fair.

Fen: Okay, freak out. A little. A controlled freak-out. Like a prescribed burn.

Oh my God. Am I breathing in shards of glass? I must be. Right? That's why my throat feels this way?

Fen: Grace is cooked, Spite-Berry.

I stare at my screen while my fingers tremble over letters.

Junie: Explain.

Fen: I told you.

Fen: I fucking told you she was playing her hand too hard. It's the timeline contradiction.

Fen: She did three interviews, three different versions of when you "attacked" her. I fed the discrepancies to a creator I've worked with before, and she cut a side by side. It's at 2M views and climbing.

No. No. No.
Yes, I want Grace to fall.
No, I do not want to be included in a fresh wave of ToxicTok.

Fen: The Scout Report quietly pulled the original piece this morning. Their legal department reached out to mine to "clarify the factual basis of the prior reporting."

Fen: The Unfiltered Hour just issued a statement.

Fen: The baby registry is still up btw. A king among thieves.

Junie: Holy. Shit.

Fen: I told you.

Fen: Never doubt me, my infamous little Spite-Berry.

Fen: I'm currently crushing a glass of champagne with Hudson. Well, I'm crushing one, he's scowling at his phone.

Fen: If you were here, you'd get a hug that would dislocate your shoulder.

I set my phone down because my fingers are a live wire of electricity searching for an outlet.

I read the messages again.

The anger that always propels my spite takes a little longer to surface this time. Interesting what happens when you have no cause to reach for it for extended periods of time.

Vengeance dances across my chest with fiery tips though. It's a joy with teeth. It's the joy I've been storing in a jar under my bed for two months as the Internet called me names while Grace profited. It's the joy I'm *owed*, and every cell of my body is preparing to claim it.

I open Instagram and scroll. It feeds my rancorous heart in seconds.

Then I move onto TikTok and the hunger grows, manic in its ascent and vital to my exoneration.

My fingers move on muscle memory to my drafts folder where there's a seventy-one-word reply to Grace I've been accidentally maintaining, lovingly, like a sourdough starter.

I stare at it, and the glow shining in my heart moves outward toward my limbs as I add a seventh sentence.

P.S. The "natural" cry face you're using in your TikToks is the one you practiced in my bathroom junior year before your Falling for Love *audition tape. The lighting's better now. The chin wobble's the same.*

It's mean.

It's extremely gratifying.

It is, objectively, the best sentence of the entire draft.

My thumb hovers over send.

And then, unbidden, Cole's voice enters my mind.

"Tell me."

I shake it away. Cole meant tell him when *I'm* about to run. Not tell him I'm about to stick a knife in my arch-nemesis.

"Tell me."

Fuck. He's like an annoying angel on my shoulder.

But if I do this, I'll have to explain it to everyone, not just him.

Not that Cole would forbid it. He won't. Cole has never forbidden me anything in my life, and if I sent this right now, he'd probably watch the

fallout with exasperation and concern, then fix the leaky faucet in my bathroom.

So he's not the problem here.

The problem is that I'd want to defend my actions.

Constantly defending means you're never moving forward.

If I act, then I'd be defending my pattern of metabolizing pain by lighting it on fire.

I swallow thickly.

I don't know what I'll do with all these new…epiphanies.

This is why I suck at adulting, and it's not something I want to discuss with Cole Whittaker.

It's not something I want to discuss with anyone. Ever.

It's something that Bea would have a freaking field day with.

My thumb is still hovering over my screen, and then I delete the draft. For real this time.

I think my guts are actually quaking. It's like being on a rickety old wooden roller coaster that jolts every splintered beam straight through your bones.

I've never in my life deleted a weapon I'd spent so much time honing.

Junie: I won't react.

Fen: …

Junie: I trust you to do your thing.

Fen: Who are you, and what have you done with my Spite-Berry?

Junie: I deleted my draft, but I have it memorized if you want to read it.

Junie: It was Spite-Berry's crowning jewel.

Fen: THAT'S MY GIRL!

Fen: …

Junie: Just drop it, Fen.

Fen: You know that's not my style.

Fen: Seriously, Junie. I’m proud of you.

A lump forms in my throat.

Fen: Cole will lose his shit when he finds out.

I drop the phone into my lap, and my thumb lands on the diamond without me asking it to.

KATIE ARRIVES AT FOUR WITH ZERO WARNING. MY HEAD IS PRESSED against the table because I’m not myself and Cole stormed off… somewhere, hours ago, so I slipped across the drive to lick my wounds without Nana Mae snooping for information on the *state of relations*.

Katie, my self-appointed BFF, doesn’t knock, she just clomps up my stairs and into my home in her wedges like she paid for them with a share of my apartment. Her bottle of rosé tells me she has suspicions.

“Dollie told Stanley who told Marley who told me about Grace,” she announces.

“Of course.”

“Stanley hinted to Marley who told me that she thought you and Cole were…bumping gennies.” She winks. “And I may have run wild with my own theories there. Sorry in advance. But tell me, does he have the moves we all think he does? There’s a pool going that says he’s packing and knows how to use it.”

I groan to hide my horrid blush. “Who the hell calls sex bumping gennies?”

“So…you did.”

I glare harder.

“What? I even brought the good rosé for this. The one with the French label I can’t pronounce. It’s a double whammy of a celebration.”

“Katie.” I drag out her name to six syllables.

“Hold that thought. I’ll pour, then we’ll talk.”

“Katie.” This time I get my shit together.

She stops and looks at me, and for a woman who introduced herself to me six weeks ago by telling me that Cole rates a jalapeño at best on her

emotional availability scale, Katie is, I'm learning, absolutely fluent in reading rooms.

She sets the bottle on my counter, caps it, and puts it in my fridge as though that's where it will live now.

"Okay," she says cautiously. "Not today. Got it."

"I'm sorry, I just—" I just what? Since when do I care about hurting the feelings of a friendship I didn't get a say in?

"Don't apologize, honey. I showed up at your house with wine and an agenda. I'm a whole lotta personality. You're allowed to have feelings about that."

I truly am the world's most miserable excuse for a friend ever. "Katie, it's not—"

"The wine's in your fridge. When you're ready, it'll be there. If it takes you a week," she pauses and taps her chin. "Well, if it takes you a week to drink it, I'll bring back some fresh stuff because gross. But the wine will be there for you, and so will I." She pats my arm with a hand that has way too many rings on it. "Now, I'm going to go bother someone who has the bandwidth for me today. Maybe Stanley. Stanley loves me."

"Everyone loves you, Katie."

She pauses, and looks over her shoulder at me, almost like she's hiding a part of herself now.

"No, sweetheart. Not everyone. But the ones who count do."

She clomps back down my stairs in her wedges, and that lump in my throat punches me for being a dick.

What the fuck is happening to me here at The Haven?

I stand and watch her teeter down Cole's driveway.

That's when it hits me. Katie Rodriguez—who I met six weeks ago and mostly tolerate—read me better in ninety seconds than Grace ever did in our years-long supposed friendship.

I can't file this away in any of my usual places.

I don't actually know where to put it at all.

UNABLE TO SIT STILL, I WALK THROUGH THE HAVEN ONLY TO LAND IN front of Bea's house.

I’m not sure what I’m doing here, but she sits in her wicker rocker on her screened in porch, smiling as though she knew I’d come.

She doesn’t even say hello. She simply stares at the empty chair next to her and waits for me to decide.

Eventually I do, and she nods, once, succinctly.

“You look different today,” she says.

Great. She’s heard about Cole’s prowess too.

“I used his shower and he didn’t have conditioner and I’m still wearing his T-shirt under my sweater.”

Now why the fuck did I just blurt all that out? I scowl in her direction. Bea’s mouth twitches. It’s not really a smile. It’s the upper-middle-class equivalent of one though. “That’s not what I meant.”

I grunt in response.

She simply raises a brow because she expects real words.

“I know,” I mumble.

“Do you want to tell me what I meant?”

“No.”

“Okay.” This damn woman just…waits.

I can wait a long freaking time for petty revenge, but this is different. This is loaded and too heavy to hold.

She waits so long that I’ve checked my phone twice, watched a bumblebee knock itself into the window screen three separate times, and counted the rings on Bea’s fingers twice. She has four. Bea’s patient the way ancient trees are patient. I have no way to win this waiting contest.

“Grace got caught,” I blurt. “In a lie. About me.”

“I heard.” I expect her to ask me how I feel about that, but she doesn’t. She simply sits quietly.

“I almost posted a response.” My words are a near whisper as they leave my lips.

“And?”

I shrug. “I didn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because—” A small group of butterflies land on her hydrangeas. They’re almost playful. Then I turn my head to study Bea, who is still doing her freaking ancient tree thing, so I drop my gaze to my hands.

“Because I don’t want Cole to know that I…that I enjoy it.”

There it is. My deepest, ugliest truth, and I'm spilling my secrets to a woman who harbors so many I'm surprised her head doesn't explode.

"You enjoy hurting people?"

"What?" I gasp. "No, I enjoy getting even. Sticking up for myself."

She hums quietly, like she's considering my words. "Sticking up for yourself and getting even are two different things. One happens in the moment, and one happens with lots of planning and hate."

"I don't—I'm not a hateful person." I shake my head. "I don't want to be a hateful person," I amend. "I don't want to become my mother."

Now that I've said this big, terrible, horrible thing, I wait for the panic to come, but it's suspiciously absent. Instead, what I'm feeling is…relief, and relief makes me suspicious because it's not, historically, something I can trust.

"I'm going to ask you something," Bea says. "And I want you to know that the answer doesn't have to be for me. You can say it and leave it here and I will never ask about it again, or you can think about it and take it with you."

Now I'm fucking nervous. "Okay."

"Do you often throw things away?"

I close my eyes.

She asked me this on my first day here.

Do you often throw things away, or only when someone you love betrays you?

I've thought about that question more times in the last six weeks than I've thought about my own mother. Strange that my mother is all I can think about now.

"I was fourteen." My voice betrays me, speaking words I don't say out loud. "When she told us she had colon cancer."

Bea doesn't move, but she does hand me a travel-sized tissue pack that she might've pulled from her bra.

"For three years, everyone kept telling her to fight. Hold on. Don't give up. I said it too. I said it every day, even when I didn't mean it. I said it when I was so tired of saying it that I could feel the words getting bitter in my mouth. I said it at the kitchen table, the oncology appointments, and when she stopped being able to sit up on her own. I said it when my father would come by, pushing her to sign various documents. I said it in hospice,

when the nurse asked me if I wanted a minute, but my brain was screaming something else underneath it."

"What was your brain screaming, Juniper?"

"You know what it was screaming." Bitterness slithers around every word.

"I do. But I'd like you to say it."

I glare at her.

Bea's eyes are the color of weak tea. She isn't smiling or frowning, she's just here, in her chair at her house, holding space for me to put something down that I've been carrying for years.

"It was screaming, *just go.* Just. Go."

Bea pats my hand, but I hardly feel it. What the fuck am I doing? And why can't I stop?

"When she died." The words tumble out like a dam blown wide open. "What I felt—under everything else—was relief. Because she wasn't in pain anymore. Because I didn't have to be the outlet for her pain anymore. Because she couldn't say horrible things to me anymore. Because I was so tired of hiding and I wanted to know what it felt like not to hide. And I thought—I thought if she died, all of that would go away. My anger. The fights. The bills. The fear. The hurt. The embarrassment."

"And did it?"

A tear slips down my cheek, and I angrily swipe it away. I've shed these tears. I'm not about to do it again.

"For about a week," I say. "Then it came back in a different color, and I…held on to it."

Bea nods as though she understands, but she doesn't. What kind of person feels only relief when their mother dies?

"I've never said that out loud," I say.

"I had a feeling."

"Not to Nolan. Not to anyone. Not even—"

"Not even?" she gently pushes.

"Not even myself," I say.

"Relief and grief aren't opposites, Juniper. They're roommates. They share a bathroom. They take turns. You're not a monster for feeling both. You were a child doing the work of an adult for years, and your body registers the end of that work the way bodies do. Grief doesn't come with

an etiquette manual. Not for you, not for anyone. But I can tell you, I don't think you were alone in that shame spiral."

I frown at her.

"Nolan told me you might end up here, and he said it was okay to tell you that he too sought me out his first summer visit here after your mother passed away."

"But Nolan's not a monster." Fuck. I didn't mean to say that.

Bea's eyes soften at the corners, her wrinkles more prominent when she's not peeling back the layers I keep hidden. "Neither are you, Juniper."

"It feels like a monster-type of thing."

"That I can understand."

"If anyone knew—"

"Who would you tell?" Bea's eyeing me curiously. Does she expect me to tell Cole just because we had sex once?

"No one." The bite in my tone is uncalled for, even I know it.

"You will, eventually," she says. "The right person. When it's…safe."

"I don't…this doesn't even have anything to do with Grace. I don't know why I said all that."

"You'd be surprised, Juniper, by how our minds categorize pain." I stare at her like she has sixteen heads. "Wounds of a different flavor can still produce the sweetest cake when baked properly."

I don't answer. I don't know what to do with her question or her confirmation that my brother has been tracking me from six thousand miles away, or her weird wound analogies. I just know that her question about me throwing things away has been a thorn in my side for weeks, and now I'm unmoored by my inability to throw spite at Grace the way she deserves.

We don't speak until her alarm goes off.

"Time's up."

My jaw drops. Was she charging me this entire time?

"Dinner." She smirks. "Time to get my chicken breast in the sauté pan."

"Oh." I jump to my feet. "Right. I'll just—" My legs are wobbly as I stumble down her stairs.

"You know where to find me, Juniper."

I wave over my shoulder, not caring if it's rude. I just need to get back to my apartment.

By the time I'm standing in front of my closet, I'm so over silence that I want to scream simply to fill the void, and my closet offers no advice.

I've only filled half of the space, and now we're well into July and I have nothing to wear. One side is full of sweatshirts, and the other side is what I packed on impulse the night before Fen and Hudson drove me south.

Somewhere in the back of this closet is a dress in a color between moss and sage that's made of the softest cotton with beautiful gold buttons down the front. The tags are still on it because I don't even remember buying it. But I do know I was pissed off at myself when I shoved it into my suitcase, reprimanding myself because Cole Whittaker didn't deserve to see me in a dress.

I packed it anyway.

Past me knew something.

Pushing aside my hoodies, I drag out the offending dress, then rip the tags off with my teeth and slip it over my head. Then I curse myself while drying and styling my hair—something Cole has probably only ever seen in person a handful of times.

I straighten my shoulders in the mirror.

The girl staring back at me in a pretty green dress in a garage apartment that has started, without my permission, to feel like somewhere I belong is… a glimmer of someone I might like. Someone I could respect. Someone who might deserve the happiness she's watched others find.

It's everything I never thought I could have.

"For now," I tell her.

She doesn't believe me either. But I put on my shoes and pretend anyway.

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24

RESERVATIONS

COLE

I DON'T KNOW WHAT I WAS THINKING.

Sure, I can cook. If by cook, you mean toss a block of meat on the grill and not let it burn.

Is that what I offered Junie?

Fuck no.

I had to go and shoot my shot by offering to cook dinner.

And not just cook dinner, but I took it up a notch by insinuating that I can cook well.

Now I'm sweating like a man about to face punishment for missing curfew and trying to make sense of Google's recipe for manicotti.

"Pipe in the filling?" What the hell are they talking about?

I'm halfway to the garage for a piece of PVC when a new Google search stops me in my tracks.

How do you pipe food?

Returning to the kitchen, I blindly open cabinets.

In lieu of a piping bag, a gallon zip-top bag may be used.

At least I know where those are.

Why the hell didn't I ask one of the literal hundred grandmothers I have in this neighborhood for help?

Because you're a stubborn fuck-face who would rather bite his own arm off just to prove he could.

I've been talking with Hudson too much lately.

“Cole Whittaker! What in the ever-living hell are you doing?”

I’m elbow deep in a Ziploc bag and a questionable ricotta mixture when Nana Mae’s voice has my shoulders rising to my ears.

“Just…” I turn my head as her mouth drops open.

She’s wearing a blouse that means Dollie’s playing her wing woman tonight at bingo, and now not only do I need to figure out dinner, I also need to bleach out my eyes, ears, and memory.

The last time Dollie played wing woman, Nana Mae ended up with three dates and some deliveries from Tender Mercies. I will never live it down if Nolan and Hud find out that my grandmother ordered products from their—ah—*self-care* business.

“What happened in here?”

“I’m making dinner for Junie,” I growl.

“Don’t you sass me, young man.”

Before I can tell her I’m fine, she’s already putting an apron over her head and pushing up her sleeves.

“You’re going to get shit all over you,” I say.

“You fool,” she mutters. “Why are you so damn stubborn? What time’s she coming over?”

Nana Mae hip-checks me while taking the leaking mess of ricotta from my hands and holding the bag open so I can dump the rest of the mixture in.

“Seven.”

She glances up at the clock, then shakes her head. “Damn stubborn fool. Can’t ask for help to save his damn life.” Her muttering continues, then she dips her finger into the cheese. “Well, at least you followed directions. This is real good, Cole. Seasoned nicely.”

Who knew I still needed Grandma to boost my confidence?

“Thanks.”

She glances over her shoulder at the drained noodles I have sitting on the counter and hums. “Junie’s going to love it. Now here.” She hands me back the bag and grabs a pair of kitchen scissors and the noodles. “I’m going to cut the corner off the bag, then all you have to do is hold the noodle at an angle and squeeze the ricotta in.”

“I googled a few videos,” I tell her.

“Good. Get to it.” She watches me fill two noodles, then works around me to clean up some of my mess—something I’m only now realizing I wouldn’t have time to do myself and still have everything set up for Junie.

“Thank you,” I say quietly when the clinking sounds of her cleaning fade away.

“Cole, the biggest obstacle in your life is you,” she says, tossing her drying towel back onto the hook. “The sooner you remember how to lean on those who love you, the sooner you’ll be able to have the life you’ve always dreamed of.”

She opens a drawer and pulls out a spoon to taste my sauce that’s simmering on the stove, adds a bit of salt and a green herb, gives it a stir, then turns off the gas.

“You’re good to go, my boy.” She steps up next to me, then pats my cheek. Something she does far less these days but was a constant form of affection when I was young. “Don’t let the betrayals of your past be the thing that ruins your future. I raised you better than that.” One more pat of the cheek, then she lowers her arms, takes off her apron, and exits my back door with two bottles of wine I bought yesterday.

I chuckle. Two bottles of wine are the least I can do for the help I never asked for but obviously needed.

By the time I get the manicotti with sausage and peppers into the oven, a light sheen of sweat dots my spine.

I have just enough time to light the candles and open the bottle of wine that Hudson bullied me into buying a few years ago. It’s more than I’ve ever spent on a bottle of anything, so it’s sat in my wine fridge like I’ve been saving it for this moment.

I’m lucky Nana Mae and her wine-obsessed companions never touched it.

I set the table and then stand back. Something’s off, but I can’t tell what. I quickly switch the forks with the knives, but it doesn’t fix it. I can’t believe I’m second-guessing tablescapes, but it’s a detail Junie will notice, and I want to get it right.

I peek out my window again. More specifically, to the lights in Junie’s apartment.

Get your shit together, Whittaker.

I’m not even a little surprised to hear Hudson’s voice in my head right when I don’t want it. Why can’t it be Fen’s voice that keeps me in check? At least he’s a cheerleader, overzealous though he may be.

I should not be this nervous.

Except, I am. I’ve already fucked up one too many times, and I know it.

She knocks at my door, and it's so unexpected I grip the back of the chair just to have something to ground me. Junie hasn't knocked on that door in weeks, but there's no doubt that it's her.

With a final breath, I cross the room and open the door.

And promptly forget how words work.

Juniper Mercer is standing on my back porch in a dress the color of moss after a rainstorm, and her hair is down. I fucking love her hair down. I especially love how it's pulled over one shoulder, creating a visual line of interest to the cut of her dress. It's just low enough to flash a hint of cleavage. A promise of what's beneath that's ruining me with its simplistic beauty.

Or perhaps that's just her.

I scan the length of her and pause on her shoes.

Somehow, this is the detail that stumps me. I love how long and sexy the low heel makes her legs look, but there's something about Junie barefoot that feels…real.

"Stop it," she says, fidgeting from foot to foot.

"Stop what?" I do another slow perusal of her body, taking in every detail with painstaking effort.

So. Damn. Beautiful.

"Stop staring at me like that." Her tone is shy, quiet in a way Junie never is with anyone else.

I like it.

Scratch that, I love it.

"Like what?" My lips try to curl into a smile she won't appreciate, and it's a real effort to hold back.

"Like I'm a puzzle that doesn't fit."

"Oh, you fit, Junie. Trust me. Every inch of you fits."

"Cole." She's aiming for pissed, but her breathy tone gives her away.

"Juniper." Shit. Seduction leaks from my voice without even trying. Her cheeks flare pink, and I bookmark that tone for future use.

"It's just a dress."

"It's not."

Her eyes flash like sapphires. "It's all I brought from Boston, don't make a thing of it."

I unleash my smile as I lean in to kiss her cheek, reveling in the hitch of her breath when my lips skim her soft flesh. "Oh, Junie," I whisper into the

shell of her ear. “I’m going to make a thing of it. And then I’m going to do something I’ve never, ever done before.”

“What’s that?” Her cheek twitches, and I pull back enough to see her lick her lips. Her tongue leaves a glistening trail along her bottom lip that has my thoughts spiraling straight into a ditch.

“Buy you a shitload of dresses.”

She rolls her eyes.

“You roll your eyes all you want, but seeing you in a dress? It’s my new favorite thing.”

She makes a small, irritated noise that’s been a characteristic of hers since she was ten, pushes past me into my house like she owns it, and stops short at the sight she finds at the kitchen table.

Her chest rises quickly as she scans the room while her dress swishes around her legs. If I didn’t know it before, I do now—Juniper Mercer is ruining me.

“You…set the table.” With her back to me, I can’t see her eyes, but I’m certain there’s confusion in them.

“I said I’d cook.”

“You did,” she says slowly. I bite my bottom lip to keep my smirk in check when she absentmindedly rearranges the silverware, so the fork *is* on the left side of the plate. “But you didn’t say you’d do all…”

She glances around the room again, pausing on the candles, the wine, the linen napkins I hand-rolled and stuffed rather poorly into the napkin rings Nana Mae always uses for special occasions.

“Juniper.” My chest is on fire, and I fight the urge to scratch at it.

“Cole.”

She says my name like she’s trying to regulate her breathing with it, so I give her a moment while I move around her to the island and pretend to toss the salad. At this point, it’s already been tossed so much that the tomatoes have shed all their seeds and I’m in danger of making a mashed salad if I don’t ease up.

Her focus catches on the wine next to me before flicking back to the candle, and that’s when it happens in real time. Juniper Mercer needs more information and is steeling her spine as she sits at my table, then folds her hands primly as though she’s a woman who’s been invited to a negotiation and not a date.

Unfortunately for her, I expected nothing less.

“Can I have a glass of wine, Whittaker?” Shoulders back, eyes straight ahead, I can almost hear the gears working over all the possibilities in her mind.

“Of course, Viper. Anything for my *date*.”

Her gaze snaps to mine. There’s the flame dancing in her ocean-blue depths.

Welcome to the game, Junie.

This time, I’ve come to win.

She watches as I move around the kitchen, open the bottle of wine, and pour two glasses. I soak in the tenable energy that clicks, catches, and redirects between us.

This is how we work. Somewhere between the shots fired, we’ve always existed behind a shield that was created just for us.

I hand her the glass but don’t let go until she lifts her gaze to mine. Her plump, kissable lips are a distraction, but I force my focus on her eyes because, unlike those fucking lips, her eyes don’t lie.

“Cheers,” I say. “To beginning again.”

She frowns, glances down at the empty plate before her, then lifts her chin. When I release her glass, she holds it up in silent agreement.

Silent, but it’s still an acknowledgment of what this is.

I leave her to her thoughts while I place all the dishes on the table. I could’ve positioned us so we were each on an end, but I wanted to be close to her, so I set the table with one place at the end and one just to the left.

It’s no surprise that Junie chooses the head of the table. Honestly, it doesn’t fucking matter to me where I sit as long as I’m next to her, so I sink into the empty place setting and dish out the food.

A few moments later, a low moan slips from her mouth, and I lift a brow.

“This is annoying,” she mutters, further ratcheting up my interest in how tonight will play out.

“What is?” I place another bite of manicotti into my mouth. The flavors, thankfully, are amazing. As is the chunk of sausage I spear next.

“How is this so good? I thought I’d get to spend the entire meal mocking you.”

A bark of laughter overpowers the low hum of background music I have playing in surround sound. “Better luck next time.”

“I even prepared material.”

Not surprising. “Deploy it. Give me your best shot. I’ll even take notes.”

“It’s dry,” she says casually.

It’s not.

“Try again,” I say, wearing a smile that makes my cheeks hurt.

“I think I’m getting food poisoning.”

“I have a list of all ingredients used. The doctors will be able to suss out all your ailments quickly.”

“Ugh. See? I’ve got nothing. Where did you learn to cook like this?”

“Somehow I ended up on the Italian cooking side of Instagram Reels.”

“You’re not on Instagram. I mean…” She scans the exits, and my interest is officially fucking piqued. “Are you?”

Juniper Mercer doesn’t make mistakes, but she’s just slipped, and watching her squirm is more fun than I thought it would be.

“Junie, have you been cyber-stalking me?”

“Ugh,” she scoffs. “No, but since Fen tags me in literally everything, I figured if you were on Instagram, I would’ve seen it. You know, through him.”

“Right. Through him.” I stuff my mouth full of manicotti. She’s right—this is fucking good.

“In case you haven’t noticed,” she sasses, “I’m off social media. I wouldn’t know if you were dancing naked in Barbados or posting cat videos. I don’t follow you.”

“No naked dancing, but I’m sure Fen tagged The Haven, which does have an Instagram account, in a photo of us fishing. Definitely shirtless.” Her face heats again. She’s seen those photos. They’re the same ones Hudson added to the Juniper & Her Berries group chat a few summers ago. “What about you? Any topless videos I should be aware of?”

She chokes on her food, and I’m quick to pat her back, even if it’s just an excuse to touch her.

Junie swats me away, and reluctantly, I remove my hand.

“Not topless,” she says stiffly, cutting into her manicotti. “But there’s a sex tape floating around somewhere.”

It’s my turn to choke, for my face to turn a mottled red color—I don’t have to see it to know it’s true. Heat rises to the surface of my skin from my forehead to my toes. Rage. That’s what it is.

She says nothing for ten excruciating seconds.

Then fucking Viper explodes into peals of laughter.

It takes my mind another ten seconds to catch up.

Junie's fucking with me.

Another ten seconds pass before I can unclench my hands.

Ten more before she stops rocking in her chair.

Ten more still before I can bring myself to breathe.

My foot hooks into the leg of her chair, and I drag her around the edge of the table. The sudden movement snaps her out of her giggle fit when we're nose to nose.

I use my thumb to wipe the happy tears from her cheek. Even if they're at my expense, even if they're happy ones, I hate seeing her cry.

"That was funny to you?"

She swallows and makes a gurgling sound before she nods. "That was too easy," she says.

"Sweetheart, you can take a piss out of me anytime you want, as long as I'm here to see this smile." I kiss her softly. Quickly.

Now is not the time to push for more.

So I stand and drag her back into position, where she immediately stuffs her mouth with cheesy manicotti.

She takes two more bites, then she starts blabbing nervously. I listen while she tells me about Stanley's latest attempt to get Marley to sign off on the rideshare business for golf carts. How Dollie has started referring to us as *the kids*. How Katie, despite her best efforts, is actually starting to grow on her.

I don't tell her that I got all this information from the multiple newsletters she signed me up for, or the numerous visits I get from The Haven residents daily because I like watching her talk.

I don't know that last time I listened to someone talk like this without trying to solve something.

I'm not even doing anything with all the useless information she's giving me. I'm just…absorbing it.

The shape of her mouth when she says Screen & Steam.

The way she laughs at her own joke halfway through, completely forgetting to give me the punchline.

The specific frequency to which Juniper Mercer is alive is something I've been oriented toward my entire life and never allowed myself to enjoy until this moment.

“You’re not eating,” she says, interrupting my inner musings.

“I am.” My tone is too low for the ease of this conversation, but I can’t control it any more than I can control the way my body reacts to her.

“You’re staring. Again.”

“Admiring. Don’t be a pain in the ass. Just…let me.”

“Cole.”

“Juniper.”

She sets down her fork, and unease unfurls in my gut when she refuses eye contact. “I need to tell you something.”

My mind quickly takes inventory of what the hell she could say right now.

Whatever it is, I’ll fix it.

There’s nothing I can’t help her address. Resolve. Take care of.

“I got the document from the handwriting specialist. It’s notarized, and she’s been used in numerous court cases, so she’s reliable.”

My shoulders unlock with one long exhale I hope she doesn’t notice.

“Okay, that’s good.” Really fucking good. So good, I worry for a moment that the flood of relief coursing through my veins will make me miss something important.

“There’s more.”

I stare at her, waiting patiently while my insides do the exact opposite.

“I found an address,” she says.

It takes me a moment for my brain to comprehend what she’s saying.

“Devin,” I rumble. That asshole hasn’t ruined enough for me? Now he’s ruining my first date with Junie?

Figures.

“I found it yesterday. It’s for a PO Box in Charleston, and in order to get a PO Box, you have to give them a street address…so one exists. We just have to find it.”

I’m chewing on the inside of my lip while my mind recategorizes and restructures one clusterfuck after another.

“Okay,” I say cautiously.

“I almost went to check it out.”

I suppress a smile. Junie likes information even more than her coffee. Sitting on this must have been torturous. “But you didn’t.”

She shakes her head.

“And you really wanted to go. You probably had visions of stakeouts, complete with snack choices.” It’s a guess rooted in history.

“Just because you think you know everything about me doesn’t mean you need to always share with the class.”

“I don’t think, sweetheart. I do know everything about you—everything important anyway.”

“Didn’t Nana Mae teach you to be a gentleman? Sometimes it’s okay to let things go, Cole.” Her scoff attacks my nerve endings with a pleasurable shock.

“Like you did with your stakeout plans.” I’m no longer in control of my tone. It’s low, silky, and intended to undo her.

“I’m giving you your four days. I should at least get credit for that, by the way. Noted for the record at the very least. I’m giving up a fundamental piece of my identity by not going after this information.”

“Noted,” I rumble. “Tallied and recorded for posterity’s sake.”

She picks her fork back up, but I’m not sure if it’s to continue eating or to use it as a weapon.

I’m finding I like the unknown of Juniper Mercer even more than the snark and sass of Viper. Since the day I met her, her modus operandi has been to react first and worry later. Yet here, at The Haven, she’s given me four days because I asked for them.

Not because she was convinced.

Not because it was strategic.

But because I asked.

I don’t know how to handle that—but I’m willing to learn.

“Go to Charleston,” I say.

The fork she’s been playing with stops against her plate as she slow-blinks. “What?”

“Go tomorrow. Have Katie go with you if you want backup. Find whatever it is you need and bring it back. We’ll file on Thursday.”

She flops back in her chair, reminding me of Nolan when the Red Sox lose, but she’s doing it while wearing a dress that will tease my dreams for an eternity.

“You’re…sure?”

Am I sure that everything’s about to change?

Yes.

Am I sure that I want her rooting around in Devin’s shit?

Debatable.

Will I hold her back from solving my mess when sorting through financial ruins is one of her greatest joys?

No.

“I’m sure. I’ve read every report you’ve given me, Junie. This morning, I saw how you methodically followed money trails I couldn’t decode. Even if we can’t find Devin, you’ve proven that the lines leading to me were faked.”

How honest can I be? How vulnerable?

“I tried,” I say. “I knew I didn’t do this, but I couldn’t fix it.” Admitting that is a kick to the nuts I wasn’t expecting. “I—I was terrified that no one would believe me. But you did. You saved my career, Juniper. My reputation. You’re so fucking good at what you do. You saved me.”

And what she doesn’t know is she may have saved herself a whole lot of pain in the process.

Her smile, the real one, the one that’s unhindered by expectations and social niceties, spreads across her face like sunshine after a long, dark winter.

She’s beautiful.

And mine.

She has to be.

“Okay.” She’s still grinning as she takes another bite. “We’re going to nail him for this.”

I smile at her. One disaster nearly averted, a hundred more to go.

“Then,” she says, “we can tackle restitution and get the money back in the coffer for The Haven or figure out next steps.”

I tilt my head as I stare at her. “You care about the people here.”

She shrugs and breaks eye contact. “I just don’t like when innocent people pay the price for bad actors. Plus, Nana Mae’s a little terrifying. I don’t want to be on her bad side.”

“Nana Mae reserves her bad side for people who deserve it. That will never be you, Junie.”

She nods but sets down her fork.

“Are you done?”

“Yeah, I’m stuffed. I’m kind of glad I wore a dress now.” She smiles, and all feels right in our little bubble.

“Why don’t you sit on the couch?” I say while clearing our plates. “I’ll bring us some wine.”

Junie opens her mouth, then closes it.

“Go,” I say. “I have zero expectations for tonight. I just don’t want it to end yet.”

“You’re still bossy as ever,” she grumbles but heads for the family room with my bark of laughter trailing her.

Moments later, I find her on the couch, her pretty shoes kicked off under the coffee table. I’m struck again with a sense of rightness. Here, with her, is what home is supposed to feel like.

I sink down next to her, and she leans into me like a reflex. I bend my neck to rest my chin on top of her head, and then just…breathe.

“Do you remember the house on Cape Cod?” she asks.

I’m glad she can’t see my face—memories of her mother are not my favorite. “The rental? With the porch?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“You were young. Thirteen, maybe? That summer, your mother was very…”

“Nice?” Junie shrugs. “Or as nice to me as she could be, I guess.”

“I was going to say *involved*,” I grumble. “She was never nice to you the way she was to Nolan. But yes, she did seem to…try. I remember she insisted on everyone learning to play cribbage.”

Junie laughs, a small, rough sound against my collarbone. “She was on a mission. She said it was going to make a comeback, but I think she already knew she was sick. She wasn’t great with sharing details. But I’ve thought a lot about it. I think it was her way of making amends when she could.”

I wish that were the truth. Anna Mercer was never trying to make amends with her daughter—she was just allowing her the illusion of it. The truth was much darker.

“She told me I was the worst cribbage student she’d ever had.” There’s no sadness when she speaks of her mother now—only a resolute understanding of a toxic relationship. One I’ll ensure stays buried.

“She told me…” I say, as a memory I’d buried floats to the forefront now. “Do you know what she said to me after that week?”

My throat is unnaturally dry as Junie angles her pretty blue eyes to face me. Then she shakes her head, the smallest movement—I would’ve missed

it if I wasn’t paying attention.

“She told me that I understood you in a way most people never would and to protect that bond.”

Air whistles through Junie’s teeth. “That almost makes it sound as if she cared.”

We both know she didn’t.

“At the time, I thought it was creepy. I mean, you were thirteen, and I was a freshman in college. But she didn’t make it weird. It was just…”

“Something she knew to be true.”

I stare down at her. “Yeah.”

“And are you?”

Tiny fissures crack behind my ribs. “Am I what?”

“Protecting what we have.”

“Sometimes, I think it’s the only thing I’ve ever done right.”

She hums as though the story of her mother will remain an unsolvable riddle. Then—and this is the one thing I’ll remember about this night, long after I’ve lost track of what the pasta tasted like or how often I wanted to kiss her—she starts talking about her mom.

With me.

Not the heavy stuff. Not hospice, or everything she’s been carrying alone, but the stuff she collected outside of the pain her mother created. Like the way Anna hummed when she cooked. The way she couldn’t balance a checkbook but was uncannily good at trivia. The rare afternoons of affection when she’d braid Junie’s hair while telling her to stop slouching because “a woman leads with her chest, never an apology.”

According to the Boston boys, Junie hasn’t talked to anyone about her mother in years.

But she’s doing it now, with me.

She doesn’t do second chances, Cole. Not even for you. Nolan’s words vibrate through my mind now with more urgency than ever.

“Mom wasn’t perfect,” Junie says, and I clear my thoughts to give her the attention she deserves. “She was selfish and inconsiderate. She put me in the middle of her love-hate relationship with my dad my entire life. She blamed me for everything that went wrong in her life, but when she was capable of love, I think she tried to do it well.”

She plays with the button of my shirt, but she has no idea that her mother was never capable of love. Not for her. And this is why Natalie’s

blackmail works. Junie can never know how fucked-up her mother really was.

"I—I've never said it, and God knows she never would have, but we both appreciated what all of you did for us. You know, giving up your normal college life to help us keep the lights on and the house in the family when she got sick. I wouldn't have even been able to afford the taxes on that place without all your help."

My arm wraps around her then, pulling her into my side as close as I can get her. "That's something you never have to thank me for, Junie. There isn't anywhere else I would have wanted to be." I glance down at her. At the mist in her eyes that she blinks away. The heaviness she holds on to because she doesn't trust anyone to help carry the weight.

But for now, she's talking. So I listen. I listen the way I've never been able to before—without trying to fix anything.

A million stories flicker in her eyes before she buries her face into my side, and relief relaxes my muscles.

I may be fucking some things up, but this? Here, holding her, I'll always get this right.

"The gala is in eleven days," she says into the quiet room.

I grunt.

Eleven days is my own *The Tell-Tale Heart.*

"What do you even wear to something like that?"

"We could skip it? Hide out in a hotel for a couple of days…naked." Hope blooms in my chest.

Junie snorts. "Nana Mae would never allow it."

My moment of joy is crushed with that statement because she's right. Nana Mae has her own reasons for wanting to win—and I don't think many of them actually have to do with Paula Van Holten but everything to do with my mother.

"She'll try to get you to wear something you don't want to wear." I pull Junie closer and tug her leg over my thigh. "Resist her. You're allowed to resist her. I've done it. It is possible."

Junie laughs a full belly laugh this time, right into my chest. "You forget, I've met her. I can't imagine it's all that easy."

"I've been doing it for years. I'm an expert now." Or I know where the best hiding spots are, at least.

“You’re not as slick as you think you are. When I was looking for you last week, she told me you were hiding behind the shed. She knows all your tricks.”

Well, shit.

“She’s pretty terrifying,” I admit. “Maybe bring Katie along. With them at the opposite ends of the spectrum, you might land somewhere in the middle of appropriate.”

“Ugh.” There’s humor in her tone as she finishes off her glass of wine.

I remove the glass from her hand and set it on the table in front of us while she burrows further into my chest, and I allow myself to enjoy the quiet moment.

Her weight against me gets heavier, but I don’t move. Not even when I hear her soft snore.

Somewhere in the last hour, I’ve stopped being afraid of what I left behind and have started to fear the unsettled future that feels almost within reach. Not because I don’t want it, but because I’m terrified that I want it too much and don’t yet deserve it.

But I’ve run out of time. The only way to keep Junie is to act and hope that we survive the fallout.

As much as I didn’t want to involve him, there’s only one man who might be able to help me now. And he’ll probably hate me for it. My reasons for keeping him in the dark are still valid, I’m still terrified of ruining anyone else’s life, but I also know that the way I’ve been protecting Junie is no longer working. The game has changed, my pieces are moving without me, and if I don’t learn the new rules, my six years of silence will have been for nothing.

Junie jostles in her sleep, like she dreamed she was falling. So I lift her easily and cradle her against my chest. I walk through the kitchen to grab my phone, then carry her upstairs.

She doesn’t wake as I lay her down, as I pull the sheet over her, or as I plug in her phone. She just curls toward the space where I should be, and a frown mars her face when she doesn’t find me.

I shed my clothes faster than I ever have and climb into bed beside her. Junie’s body finds me in sleep the way magnets find iron, and I kiss the top of her head because I can, then send the one text message I never wanted to send.

Cole: I need your help.

Not even thirty seconds go by before three dots appear.

Hudson: Done.

No questions. No lectures. He just picks up a shovel, ready to bury the body.

Cole: Can you make time for me tomorrow? I need to invoke attorney-client privilege…for reasons.

Hopefully that will keep him out of trouble if he can't help me.

Hudson: 1 p.m. I'm clearing my schedule now.

I have no doubt Hudson will do whatever he can. He just may not like me anymore after he finds out what I've done.

Cole: Thank you.

He doesn't reply, but that's Hudson. Tomorrow, I'll send him copies of everything I have. It will either decimate my life or set me free.

For tonight, I place my phone on the nightstand, hold Junie tightly, and close my eyes.

For the first time in six years, I don't bother with an alarm.

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25

FLIGHT RISK

JUNIE

Run.

That's my first thought when I wake up with my head plastered to a very naked chest. A chest that smells like cedar and laundry and something achingly familiar.

Don't run.

That's my second thought when I register the weight of a heavy arm draped over my waist with a large hand pressed into my back, holding me close, even in sleep.

Think.

The clock on the nightstand says 7:45. Holy shit. We both slept in.

I take inventory of myself.

I'm still in my dress from last night, even if it has ridden up around my hips in sleep. Heat curls my toes when I recall the way Cole reacted to seeing it for the first time.

But a freak-out is on the horizon. It starts deep in my chest. Old habits attempt to protect me—I could sneak out, leave a pile of shaving cream in my place, and hope he rolls over in it.

Is that who I want to be?

Reacting poorly is what led me here in the first place—My knee-jerk reaction to Grace and her lies.

Retaliate before they can break me.

Strike first. Ask questions later.

My thumb twirls the ring I still haven't removed, and something shifts—a slight change of perspective.

Or maybe it's me that's changed.

I don't know when it happened. The day I stopped fucking with Cole's coffee? When I stopped calling him Whittaker? When I let him in?

I let him in.

Last night, we talked about my mom after he acknowledged we were on a date.

I just…gave in.

I took that first step.

I told him things about my mother I haven't said out loud in years. And Cole—he listened the way I've always needed someone to, without trying to fix it.

But while I was expelling ghosts, he held on to his. He still hasn't told me about Natalie, or what's keeping him in a glass cage.

Maybe I've been too selfish. Maybe I've been scared to ask. Now, not asking feels like a character flaw too, and I file it away the way Cole does everything else—for later. Not today, but soon.

I wasn't a crier before I landed in The Haven, but moisture burns my eyes, and it's starting to feel like a betrayal too.

The reality is, I'm finally getting to know myself without all the… armor. Without the walls and anger.

With Cole, I'm a version of myself that's almost hard to recognize, mostly because I think I might even like her.

I'm not sure I've ever liked myself before.

Is this what growth feels like? Painful but necessary?

Six months ago, knowing that someone was keeping a secret from me would've sent me spiraling, running, and setting off bombs before their secret could hurt me.

Last night, I sat at dinner with a man who has already hurt me, who acknowledged he's keeping a secret, and I…stayed.

Somehow, I knew it was different than all the betrayals of my past because when Cole causes pain, he hurts himself too.

I'm sure of it.

He has his own demons—ones he isn't willing to share yet—just like I do.

Twisting in Cole's arms, I find my phone charging on the nightstand. Not only did he carry me to bed, but he also…took care of me.

Warmth spreads through my limbs, uncomfortable and unfamiliar.

I need a distraction. My brain is trying to spiral the way it does when it can't solve a problem—and right now, I have many to choose from.

I can't force Cole to tell me his secrets.

But I can fix the issue with Devin.

I glance over my shoulder at Cole, who has adjusted his grip and now has his forearm pressed to my belly, his hand loosely curled around my sternum. He's cocooned around me like a spider monkey, and I don't hate it.

I never would've guessed that Cole Whittaker was a cuddler—or that I'd welcome it.

What would it be like to just…stay here forever?

Jesus. For the first time ever, the pull to stay is stronger than my need for answers.

I don't want to go to Charleston.

I want to stay here.

With him.

Wrapped in his arms.

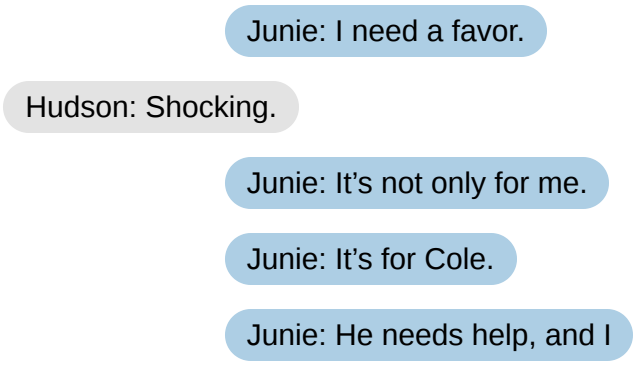
Having the kind of morning that happy, content lovers get to have.

My mind swirls through possible solutions, and I can only come up with one.

In order to stay here, to face the morning with this man and all that will come from that decision, I need help locating Devin.

And there's only one person with the resources and willingness to help me—regardless of how many times I fuck up his day—who can make it happen.

I open my text thread with Hudson.



Junie: …

Junie: I don’t want to do this alone.

Junie: I’ve unraveled the paper trail. Mae’s nephew was stealing from him.

Junie: Cole gave me the green light to track this guy down. I have an address in Charleston. But I need someone to prove that Devin’s there, collecting money that’s not his.

Junie: Hud?

Hudson: You’re choosing not to follow through on this yourself?

Freaking Hudson. Why does he always have to read between the lines?

Junie: I want to be here.

Hudson: With Cole.

It’s not a question. It’s an acknowledgment.

Junie: Yes.

I stare at the screen for long minutes. Hudson’s an asshole who sleeps for less than five hours a night. He always has on principle. So he’s probably already been in his office for at least a couple hours.

Three dots finally appear.

Hudson: Send me everything.

Hudson: And I can’t stress this enough, Juniper: DON’T do anything stupid before I call you back.

Hudson: …

Great. What’s he going to accuse me of now?

Hudson: I’m proud of you, Spite-Berry.

I stare at the screen until my eyes are so dry I fear they’re stuck. *Proud of you* is not a phrase that regularly comes out of Hudson’s mouth, and it strikes my chest in a location I didn’t know I had real estate for.

Cole groans behind me, and it spurs me into action.

Opening my Google Drive, I forward Hudson everything. The LLC files. The shell structure. The address. The property management company I'd found. I send him the timeline, the dates, the forged signatures. It's all laid out in so much detail that not a single piece of evidence could be refuted.

I made sure of it.

And Hudson will know exactly what to do with all of it—he always does.

I put the phone down on the nightstand, and my spine unknots by about 15 percent.

Huh.

A deep breath, and another 15 percent relaxes.

I asked Hudson for help, and he…showed up. Even knowing he would, I'm still surprised. Is that another character flaw? Not only did he agree to help, it took him less than ninety seconds to do so.

I've spent a lifetime thinking of these guys as a hindrance to my life, but what if I got it all wrong? What if they're an asset I refused to lean on because of my own stubborn insecurities?

This is definitely growth.

Cole's hand wraps around my left breast in his sleep—a tether tying us together—and I nearly jolt in place.

Not from his touch.

But because now that I've acknowledged my fault line, I know Cole suffers the same affliction—he doesn't ask for help either.

Not even from friends he's had since elementary school—even when they show up day after day.

Fen runs PR for The Haven.

Hudson's firm handles their legal matters.

Nolan calls him on his shit because that's what brothers and best friends do.

But they do it all *in spite of* him, not because he asked.

I can't even recall a single instance where he's asked them for help.

I just did the one thing he's never done.

"Oh, Cole. How did we fall so astray?" I whisper, rolling once again to study his peaceful sleeping form.

We've been doing things all wrong, and I don't know if I'm strong enough to make him see that.

Asking for help might be the Achilles heel that finally does us in for good.

"Your thoughts are louder than Stanley's megaphone," he rumbles without opening his eyes. "Why are you awake?"

This close, I memorize the texture of his face, the start of crow's feet at the corner of his eyes, the freckles that show how often he spends time in the sun.

"It's late," I whisper. "You didn't set an alarm."

As if he followed my voice to my mouth, he leans in and swipes his nose against mine with a sigh that feels like forever.

"No," he rumbles. "I didn't."

"On purpose?"

He nods.

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to know what it felt like."

"What *what* felt like?"

"This." He pulls me flush against him. "Waking up with you without the pressure of everything coming at us."

His hand slides down my spine, landing on my ass, but he doesn't do more.

I want him to do more.

So. Much. More.

And I've never been very good about waiting.

With surprising speed, I sit upright and climb onto his lap.

His eyes are open now. Open and hungry. Flames dance in his irises as I lift my dress over my head.

"Juniper."

I can almost feel the growl in my core.

"Shh." I toss my dress to the side and unclasp my bra, allowing the straps to slip down my arms, but I don't remove it completely. It just… dangles there.

"You don't know what you look like." Cole's breathing is shallow, and the muscles in his chest and arms strain to be set free. I like that he's having a hard time controlling himself.

Cole Whittaker unleashed is a powerful thing—and disastrous for my ovaries.

“I don’t. But I know what you look like staring at me right now. Trust me, that’s a much better view.”

His mouth curves, barely, before he clamps his lips. For a man whose whole identity is built on saying too little, he’s uniquely capable of saying everything without uttering a single word when the moment calls for it.

His silence now is an entire thesaurus of kinky endeavors.

I lean in. His lips are warm. His hand at my back is warm. The whole damn room is warm, and it has nothing to do with the temperature of the air.

It’s the fire that ignites between us—unburdened and unrivaled, destined for destruction and rebirth.

His free hand twitches at his side, and I lift it with mine. While his gaze tracks my every move, I press his hand to my body.

Exactly where I want it.

No guessing.

No question.

Just right.

His breath breaks against my collarbone as he sits up, pressing my chest to his, and his body is harder than I’ve ever felt it.

It’s as though I’ve given him permission for something he wasn’t sure he’d be allowed to have again, and the gratitude I find in his eyes is everything.

Cole Whittaker has been waiting for me to tell him what I want, and I took a page right out of his own playbook—I did it without saying a word.

“Sweetheart.” The command, the plea, the complete honesty in his tone tugs at my core.

I lower my mouth to his ear. “Slow,” I whisper. What I mean is, intentional.

We’ve fucked, and it was everything I needed.

Now, I need to know what it all means.

“As slow, as long, as hard or soft as you want, baby.” His hands roam free across my skin, and I arch into his touch.

I roll my hips against his hard length that’s still covered by cotton.

“All morning.”

He flips me onto my back. “And then some.”

His mouth moves down my body the way a man moves through a house he built with his own hands—every turn deliberate, nothing rushed, every pause and nip intentional.

He knows my body as though he wrote the code for my pleasure.

I scrape my nails over his scalp, and he growls against my hip bone.

“You’re perfect. So.” He presses a kiss along the elastic of my panties. “Fucking.” Another kiss lands at the apex of my thighs, and I groan. “Perfect.”

His gaze lifts to mine right when his fingers slip beneath the elastic of my panties. He’s waiting for permission, and I nod greedily.

It seems as though that was the last barrier he was waiting on permission for. The second I’m free from the damp silk, his large fingers open my pussy. His tongue, his glorious, magical tongue, licks a line straight up my center.

“Cole,” I gasp. That’s all I can form because he flicks my clit with his tongue until the tortured bud is swollen and throbbing. Then he bites it, and my legs tremble.

“Slow,” he reminds me.

I’ve made a grave error in judgment.

One finger enters me, and I sag in relief, but relief is not what he’s offering today. Today, it’s a slow lesson in seduction.

A slow lesson I all but demanded.

“I—I’m running the show today.” There’s zero conviction in my words.

He chuckles, and the vibrations nearly send me into an orgasm, but the jerk pulls back at the last second.

“You’ll get your turn, Viper.”

He seals his lips over my clit and sucks and sparks tingle along my spine. Without warning, he enters me with two fingers, scissoring, exploring, reaching for a button he apparently has the GPS coordinates for because he locks down on my G-spot a moment later.

“C-Cole.”

“I think I’ve waited my whole damn life to hear you say my name like that.”

He licks again, and my hands take purchase in his hair. I tug and pull and beg without words, but he goes…slow.

Nightmarishly slow.

My hips buck against him when his magical fingers press inside me again. My upper body twists and turns as he fucks me thoroughly, unhurriedly, languishingly.

Every inch of me rolls in time with his seduction. We're so in tune with each other that when he sparks, I light. When he licks, I shudder. When he pulls, I push.

It's why I'm caught off guard when pressure slips between my cheeks.

I think I scream when his thumb slips past the ring of muscle.

"You wanted slow, baby, and I want a first."

I've lost all sense of space. Somehow he's fucking my ass and pussy in time with his finger and tongue, and while my brain wants to work out logistics, my body gives in to sensation.

"Is this a first I can have, sweetheart?"

I blink as though I'm suddenly blinded by light. I'm a mole facing sunshine when I was expecting a long dark tunnel. I only vaguely hear a drawer open and close before his gaze is crashing into mine again.

"What?" I snap. The release of negative energy feels so fucking good because my body is waiting for the last thread to break.

His thumb circles my back entrance again, and my body trembles with the kind of pleasure I thought only happened in my romance novels.

"Are you—" Holy shit. Breathing is hard. "Are you asking to fuck my ass, Cole?"

"That mouth," he growls, and then takes no mercy on my clit.

His fingers are everywhere, turning me into a live wire shooting sparks into the ether, waiting for the explosion.

"Come," he demands while his teeth have my clit trapped. The vibrations, the puff of hot air, his fingers pulling pleasure from the deepest recesses of my core, all send me spiraling into an orgasm I won't recover from.

And he doesn't let up.

Somehow, he keeps moving in a slow, delicious dance that only he knows the steps to, and my body is the conduit for his music.

Tears leak from my eyes as the orgasm tightens muscles I didn't know I had.

"Beautiful," I hear him murmur. "Mine. Beautiful. Mine."

He's chanting, and I wonder if I passed out as feeling creeps across my limbs.

Cole's above me, staring down with a strange smile I've never seen.

Mine.

That's what his smile says.

And he's right.

I am his. There's no fighting it. There's no denying.

I was born to be his.

And he was born to be mine.

His fingers move again. Fuck. He's still inside me.

And he asked me a question.

"I've never had anal sex." I can't believe I don't blush. Or perhaps, my entire body is just too flushed from an orgasm I swear sent me straight to heaven.

"But do you want to?" He's so gentle, so…Cole.

Do I?

"Why do you? Is this like…a thing for you? Should we go over kinks now?" *Please say no. Please say no.* The slow roll of his fingers inside my body is priming me for another release, and I think I'll agree to anything at this point, so long as it's with him.

"Not a thing of mine normally." His voice is almost hypnotic. "But the idea of sharing a first with you, like this?" Something wet and cold lands on my overheated skin. Whatever digit he has buried in my ass makes itself known before he attempts to slide a second one in. "Is something I want desperately."

"Why?" Curse me and my need for answers. My body wants whatever the fuck Cole wants, but my mind is unsettled.

"Because I lost so many firsts with you, Junie." He adds more lube and a moan escapes my defenses. "Knowing I can have one now, it feeds a need inside me I never knew I had until this very moment. I didn't get to be your first partner, your first kiss, your first anything. But this?"

I moan long and low as he rims my ass again.

"This I want to share with you. It's ours—something no one can take away."

He says it as though it has so many deeper meanings—as though someone has taken me away before—but now is not the time for those answers.

And I want a first with him. "Yes."

“Yes?” He cocks a brow, like he thought I’d deny him something he wanted so badly.

“We’ll have to go—”

“Slow.” A wide, seductive smile slips across his lips. “I think you’ll find I’m more than…proficient at slow.”

He hauls me to him with warm hands as he drags us up the bed. He’s leaning against the headboard, and now I’m straddling him again.

“You go as slow as you need, Junie. As long as I get to see your eyes as you sink that beautiful full ass onto my thick cock, I’ll die a very happy man.”

With my knees splayed wide, I lift up so he can remove his boxers, and when his cock releases between us, I pause.

The fat head of his dick is red and glistening. He’s so hard and so thick, I can practically feel the burn of him tearing my ass in two.

And maybe I just have a Cole-kink because suddenly, that’s the only thing I want. Pleasure and pain. Push and pull.

Him and me.

Wrapping a hand around his base, I guide him to my back hole, but his hand wraps around mine.

“Get it wet first, Junie. Use your come as lubricant.”

I frown but rub his tip through my pussy, my eyes fluttering closed when his cock presses against my sensitive clit.

Then I let nature take over. He slips inside my pussy, and I ride him, hearing the proof of my earlier orgasm every time I grind against his pelvis.

“You got so wet for me, baby.” He presses against my clit, and I shudder. “Does the thought of taking me in your ass get you turned on?”

I can’t answer. I can’t.

“Or was it the way I ate you out, like I’ve been waiting years for a single taste?”

My body rolls against his, but his palm at my lower back controls the pace. Then he presses his lips to my ear.

“Spoiler, I have,” he growls. “I’ve spent years imagining what you would feel like spasming around my cock. Years pretending that my hand was a suitable substitute for your perfect cunt. Years fucking myself in cold showers while imagining it was your lips, your pussy, your come soaking me.”

“Oh, God. Oh. Oh. God.”

“No,” he roars. He presses his fingertips into my hips, holding me steady. “Do not come until I say so.”

“Y-you’re out of your damn mind.”

He holds me still while his fingers weave around my back and once again plunge into my ass. I’m so…full. The need to move, to grind against him, to seek release is so overwhelming I whimper against his neck.

“Please, Cole. Please.” He made me beg, and I’m not even mad about it.

Slowly, he lifts me off his cock and eases me onto my back. He’s holding my thighs open, and he just…stares.

I’m so on edge I can’t take another minute, and my hand slides down my stomach, trying to relieve the pressure by pressing hard on my clit.

Cole smirks down at me, then he slides forward. The head of his cock bobs, and he rests my right leg against his shoulder while he guides himself to my ass.

I stare in awe as he uses his hand to hold himself to my hole.

Pressure. Pleasure. Pain.

I tense, and he clucks. Fucking clucks at me. “Relax.”

“You relax,” I spit back.

“I’ll never hurt you, Junie.”

Again. He’ll never hurt me again.

And I believe him.

He presses in, just an inch, and when I cry out, he gives me a minute to acclimate.

“Fuck. I wasn’t prepared for how tight, how right, how fucking incredible this would feel.” He moves a minuscule amount, just a slight rocking of his hips to open me up to him. Then he glides in another inch, and another, while I commit to breathing like women on TV who are about to give birth.

It burns until it doesn’t. There’s a release, and then he’s all the way inside me, his gaze wild and unmoored as he studies my face for every reaction. When I smile, just a tiny lifting of lips, he kisses me hard.

Teeth and tongues collide, and whatever control Cole was wielding snaps. He fucks me. He loves me. He never takes his eyes off mine.

It’s the merging of two souls that were always seeking permission to hold space for the other.

Permission has been granted, and when I come this time, it’s earth-shattering in a whole different way.

My walls are down, and now I'll learn to love Cole the way we've both always deserved.

Together.

Forever.

Cole comes with a roar that's sadness and hope in equal measure. Giving each other a first must have brought him to a similar earth-shattering realization because the expression on his face says it all.

Everything has changed.

I WAKE WITH A START, AND IT TAKES A MOMENT TO REGISTER WHY.

The sun is high in the sky now, but Cole is still next to me, holding me.

Watching me.

"Creepy," I groan, then glance at the clock and nearly jump out of my skin for a second time. "Cole!" I shriek. "It's almost noon."

He grins. "Benefit of sleeping with the boss. He's all for playing hooky."

I'm…stunned. Cole is as much of a workaholic as I am.

Then his playful smile loses some of its shine. "But I know you want to head to Charleston today. I'm not intentionally keeping you from that mission. I fell back asleep too. I only woke up about ten minutes ago."

I think I've made huge personal strides in the last twenty-four hours, and studying his expression now, I can't help but wonder if he's in the middle of the same kind of metamorphosis.

"Hey," I say, reaching across the mattress to cup his face. "I'm not going."

He rears back—shock clear in his expression.

"I'm not shirking my responsibilities," I say quickly. "Early this morning, I called in reinforcements."

Cole frowns. Then he wraps his large palm around my fingers that are cradling his face. "Someone qualified?"

"Qualified and trustworthy."

He closes his eyes, and his breathing evens out. Is he…going back to sleep? "Juniper?" He doesn't open his eyes.

“Yeah?” Did I do something wrong? I wanted to spend time with him, but maybe I shouldn’t have outsourced the Devin problem?

“I’m proud of you.”

At my gasp, his lashes flutter open.

Four words. Stripped clean. *I’m proud of you.*

He doesn’t give me a moment to get my thoughts together.

“For solving my financial crisis. For asking for help. For…” He kisses the palm of my hand. “For talking to me about your mom.”

I swallow down the emotions threatening my composure.

“We still have a lot to talk about,” he says. “A lot to do. Some things that are…some that will be hard. I’ll get there, and I know I’m being vague. But…”

“You’ll tell me when you’re ready.” It’s another absolute truth.

He’ll tell me when he’s ready.

Whatever’s haunting Cole now is riding him hard.

Patience and I have never gotten along, but to help Cole through what obviously pains him, I’ll try, so I form a checklist in my head.

- Get a status update from Hudson.
- Make Devin pay for what he did to Cole.
- File The Haven’s records with the county—clear Cole’s name.
- By the time the county processes the statements, we’ll either have the award money or we’ll have a solid case on the books against Devin—preferably both.
- Check in with Fen—make sure Grace’s drama stays far away from me.
- Maybe tell Cole that I’m wearing the ring because I want to, not because I have to? Or just remove it? Think on this. Hard.
- Get through this gala in ten days and then, finally, get Cole and me through whatever’s still holding him back.

Easy.

I’m a results-driven woman, and the reward has never mattered more.

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26

BOOB TAPE

COLE

My plan is simple.

I've replayed it in my head every waking moment for the last ten days, and it hasn't changed. It's still the best option I have. I've tested it against every variable I can imagine—even worse-case scenarios that are so unlikely, they could be science fiction—and my plan holds.

It's solid.

Hudson may be barely talking to me, but he's helping. He's ensuring Junie won't get hurt. That's what matters. I've been friends with him for twenty-five years. We'll get through this.

Hopefully.

My one small mercy is that Natalie's name still hasn't appeared on the publicized guest list. These things always have a receiving line, and if she were there, she'd be waiting for me.

Not having to avoid her all night is a relief I desperately needed.

Now we can say hello to the CEO, then head straight to our table to wait for the nightmare to end.

We'll get through dinner, speeches, awards, and then, as soon as I win, I'll get Junie the hell out of there.

And the moment Hudson gives me the okay, I'll confront Natalie privately. Tell her it's over.

She'll fight me on it. But I'd rather know I've done everything possible to be with Junie than continue the lies that keep me from her for another

minute.

If I hadn’t been so young and terrified six years ago, I never would’ve agreed to leave in the first place.

This is one night.

Fifty thousand dollars.

Everything on the line.

I can do this.

Junie has done her part. She’s cleaned my books. Filed the paperwork that will clear my name.

Now it’s my turn.

I will fix this.

Junie will never have to know how close she came to emotional and financial ruin, or that the secrets she never knew existed were weaponized by my ex.

That stops now, and I feel more centered than I have in six years.

The moment I step outside, I see Junie on her stairs.

Behind her, Katie is still fluffing her hair, and I smile at the frustration billowing off Junie in waves.

Perhaps I should’ve warned her that the entirety of The Haven was invested in seeing Junie shine like the last standing bachelorette from one of their dating shows.

“Just one more thing,” Katie huffs, but this time, Junie flees, practically flying down her stairs, and my next breath lodges itself in my throat as I race to catch her.

Visions of Junie tumbling down those steps have me moving faster than I have in years.

We collide like titans at the bottom of her stairs.

She releases a huff of air that almost sounds like a word. My hands clasp her bicep on instinct, holding her steady.

“Jesus, Cole. You’re like a fucking brick wa—” The words die on her lips when she gapes up at me, but I’m the one knocked off my axis.

Juniper Mercer is breathtaking.

Beautiful.

Exquisite.

“Gorgeous doesn’t do you justice, Junie.” I step back to take her all in.

She’s wearing a dress in a deep smoky purple. She’s a midnight sky. The dress is fitted through the ribs and hips, then gets loose from the knee

down with a neckline that means every time she moves, my entire year readjusts. The C-cut is so dramatic, it's practically to her navel.

"Wait until you see the back," Katie taunts.

Without looking away from Junie, I spin her in place and bite off a groan. The dip back here is even lower. She's basically wearing two scraps of fabric that keep her decent but make my imagination conjure very dirty things.

"How is this even staying on?" My words sound like a battle raging in a field.

"Boob tape," Junie snaps. "She fucking boob-taped me into this thing."

Katie shrugs as she makes her way down the stairs with multiple tiny suitcases and what looks like four curling irons. "It gets the job done. And stop being a big baby, it doesn't even hurt. Plus, your tits stand out on their own, they don't even need a bra."

"Katie. Don't talk about my girl's tits."

"And that's my cue to get out of here." Katie lifts her pinched fingers to her lips and kisses them. "Perfection. My best work yet." Then she saunters down my driveway in the weird heels she's always wearing.

"I should've bought my own dress instead of trusting Katie to lend me one of hers," Junie grumbles.

"She's not getting this dress back. I'll pay her for it. This"—I run my palms up her bare arms—"this is… You're stunning, Junie."

Her long blonde hair is pulled high into a sleek ponytail that shows off…everything. I can almost feel the silky strands wrapped around my wrist. She's not wearing a necklace, but her dangly earrings shine like diamonds that have my gaze drifting to her ring finger.

I'll have to do something about that soon. It needs to be a permanent fixture, not a problem seeking a solution.

That's a situation for future Cole to figure out.

Then I notice the thin gold bracelet she has on her right wrist. It's the one I bought her for her college graduation but wasn't sure if she kept it or even if she ever received it.

"Don't," she says when she sees me eyeing it.

"Don't what?"

"Don't start things we don't have the time to finish. Plus, if Nana Mae catches us, she'll turn this into a photo shoot like we're heading off to the damn prom."

I glance around the driveway because I suddenly want those photos. “Juniper.”

“Cole.”

I hand her the clutch she’d left on my kitchen counter. She takes it without meeting my eyes. That’s good. If she does, I won’t pass a decency test in any county in South Carolina.

Nana Mae materializes on my porch wearing lipstick that means war and a dress that means Paula Van Holten is going to have a very bad evening. We purchased four tickets to this thing, and in hindsight, I should’ve purchased an entire table to hedge my bets.

“Are you going to tell me who your date is now?” Junie asks Nana Mae just as Hudson’s rental car pulls up the driveway.

The number of things that Hudson’s pissed off at me about are too numerous to count, but the one I feel worst about is asking him to keep this a secret from Nolan. But my reasons for keeping the secret haven’t changed. I don’t want Anna and Tommy Mercer’s actions to hurt their children—my family.

“There he is,” Nana Mae says. “Cole.” I stand up straighter. “Fix your bowtie. Juniper, stand up straight. We’re not walking into that ballroom looking like a funeral procession.” Then she tilts her head to the side. “Though, Junie, I think you just might start an inferno. You look beautiful, dear.”

Junie flushes on every inch of visible skin. “Nana Mae—”

“Don’t Nana Mae me. This is the night I beat Paula in a room of three hundred people and Cole finally gets the recognition he deserves. I need both of you to comport yourselves.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Junie bites back a smile.

A car door closes behind us, and when I meet Hudson’s glare, it’s like meeting a stranger. I’ve never felt this level of hostility from him.

“Oh, Hudson,” Nana Mae gushes. “Look at you. You do clean up nice. Now, let’s get out of here. Can’t be late.”

“Can’t have that, now, can we?” Hudson holds out his elbow for my grandmother without so much as a hello for me.

“Did you know *he* was coming?” Junie whispers.

“Yeah,” I say because there are already too many secrets between us.

She peers up at me, waiting, but it’s all I can give for now.

As the two most important women in my life enter Hudson's rented BMW, I allow myself to have one uncomplicated thought.

This is what I'm fighting for. This is mine.

Almost.

After tonight, this is mine.

THE BALLROOM AT THE LA FOIRE HOTEL IN CHARLESTON IS OPULENCE IN understated tones. I haven't been in this building in years, but my body remembers. The cold breath of the HVAC. The specific glimmer from the chandeliers. The way the acoustics swallow your voice when you stand near the south wall.

"I don't know what the fuck you did, but I can't find Junie's name on anything," Hudson hisses in my ear while Junie and Nana Mae select a glass of champagne. "Fucking nothing. Are you sure her name was on the original loan?"

"I sent you what I had. When I beat the shit out of Tommy, he specifically said that the house and the loan transferred to Junie's name the second she turned eighteen. Isn't it good that you can't find her? That means that the asshole did what I told him to do."

"You don't get it, Cole. There's always a paper trail. Alw—"

Junie slides her hand around my elbow, and Hudson plays chaperone to Nana Mae as if we hadn't been mid-conversation.

He barely spoke the entire drive here, instead allowing Nana Mae's constant chatter to fill the space. But his gaze met mine in the rearview mirror more than once, filled with fire for all I've done.

The weight of Junie's hand in the crook of my elbow is a fact I can focus on.

Nana Mae peels off toward a table of women her age, two of whom are probably watching the door for Paula, but thankfully, she drags Hudson with her, and the first fissure of doubt sweeps across my palms.

"Twenty minutes," I whisper to Junie. "Receiving line, greet the hosts, go to our table to the left of the podium. Then we sit and wait it out."

"Jesus, Cole. You said that in the car three times. I've got this."

She does.

Everyone does.

Everyone except me.

Every time I repeated my plan, Hudson's brow lifted further in the rearview until I was sure his head would explode.

He has a million and one reasons to be angry with me, every one of them valid, but he also knows what's on the line. So no matter how much he may want to kill me, he'll do everything he can to help me first.

That's why guilt sits like spiky talons in my throat. I've now implicated him in my crimes. He said I should've done it sooner. Maybe he's right, but here we are now.

And we both know that I'll set fire to anyone to save Junie—I just hope it doesn't come to that.

"I'm reassuring myself," I say, absentmindedly scouting the layout.

She squeezes my arm once, which is more reassurance than I deserve from a woman I haven't been truthful to in six years. Shaking my head, I force that thought to the back of my mind because if I let myself feel the accumulation of my fuckups, I'll stop functioning, and functioning is the only thing I have to offer this evening.

"This way," I say, and Junie easily falls into step beside me.

Feeling a presence at my back, I glance over my shoulder to find a scowling Hudson ushering Nana Mae right behind us.

Regardless of how much he hates me right now, he's still here, at my back, supporting me. He's probably still carrying the shovel, but now it'll be my body he buries.

He quirks an angry brow, and I move forward as though my limbs are in quicksand.

We've always supported you, you dumb fuck. You're just too stubborn to let us in. His voice in my head is so real, I would've thought he'd uttered the words if I hadn't been staring at him.

At the receiving line, I greet the managing partner, the senior VP of design, and two junior associates. I accept their handshakes and offer a smile I hope doesn't resemble a grimace.

Junie is pleasant and reserved beside me. One guy holds on to her hand long enough to make it uncomfortable, but before I can rip his arm off, Hudson interjects, forcing the asshole to release her.

That's when I spot Natalie.

Fuck. Fuck no. She's not supposed to be here. What the hell is she doing here?

"Stay calm," Hudson whispers so low and dangerous his tone could be a weapon. "Let me do my job, Cole."

Which means *do nothing*. It's the thing I suck at most.

Natalie's at the end of the line, wearing a black dress and a smile that's been calibrated for the room.

This close, I can see what the last six years have cost her. She looks tired—like a person gets when they've been running too long on borrowed fuel.

I can't believe I was ever attracted to her.

The line moves too fast for my liking, and Junie's fingers dig into my forearm.

"Cole." Natalie's voice peels away layers of my skin, and I clench my jaw to hide my reaction.

"Natalie." I didn't know my voice could throw darts with each syllable.

"I'm glad you came."

I say nothing. I can't. My mind is too busy recalculating all the ways this can go wrong.

A flicker across her face—not anger—something closer to curiosity. Then her gaze slides over Junie, and every fight I've ever suppressed roars to the surface.

"Juniper." Her confused gaze slides to mine for half a second. "This is an…unexpected surprise. It's…good to see you."

"Sorry I can't say the same. All I have are bad-tasting memories," Junie says flatly.

Natalie's smile doesn't move, but her eyes darken ominously.

"Enjoy your evening, Nat." Hudson says, stepping so close that Junie and I are forced to move.

Natalie frowns when she spots Hudson, but neither he nor Nana Mae stop to give her airtime.

"Actually," Natalie's voice coils like a whip as she steps in front of me. "Let me show you to your table."

"Not necessary," I grind out.

"But I insist," she hisses, holding her arms out wide enough that it's clear what she's doing, and if I walk away, I'll be snubbing a senior designer at the firm sponsoring this event.

Holding Junie close, we follow her through tables to the other side of the room, far away from where our table should be. I studied the fucking layout six times.

Then Junie stops.

Dead.

She's staring at the east wall, and now I know why. It's like Natalie's knives are twisting in my gut but I can't remove them.

Natalie's smile turns into a snarl. This path was intentional. She knew that even if Junie didn't recognize the design, she wouldn't forget the name. She heard Junie and I talking about it enough times for it to become a point of contention in our relationship.

Now it makes sense why it was also the first design that she stole.

"Junie."

She doesn't move. Even Hudson has closed in.

Along the east wall is a display. A long, illuminated panel that runs the length of the room, featuring a selection of the firm's work. I knew they would—this is as much about showing off Meridian's miracles as it is honoring new designs—but I had no idea they'd showcase…older work.

Now, I'm forced to look at it because the centerpiece is a design that started this all.

The veterans' memorial stands as the firm's shining glory.

It's enlarged, bigger than the rest. Rendered in a high-quality print, mounted under gallery lighting, *The Whisper of Souls Memorial*. It's attributed to *Natalie Moore, Lead Designer, Meridian Group.*

Junie's eyes never leave it.

My stomach drops through the floor into the parking garage below.

"Cole."

I press my palm to her naked back because I can't speak.

"That's the veterans' memorial."

"Junie—"

"The one that sings in different tones depending on the season. The one you designed for your internship application. The one *I saw* you create at my kitchen table. The one we talked about six weeks ago."

Every word is calm. Every one a nail going into a coffin she's building in real time.

"Not here."

Natalie saunters off toward an associate, happy with the bomb she dropped in my lap.

"It has *her* name on it."

"Please, not here, Junie."

She looks at me, while Hudson scans the room, keeping track of Natalie. I don't even know where Nana Mae is.

Junie doesn't look angry. It's worse than angry. This is the look of a woman who's just been handed a key that unlocks a door to everything I haven't told her.

"Why is your work on her wall?"

Every honest answer I have would unspool the last six years in the middle of a ballroom full of people. The foreclosure. Her mother. The loan. Marcus. The letters. The video. The locked drawer. Every protection I've constructed around Junie's safety is dependent on this not being said out loud in a room full of architects and industry press until I've managed the fallout in every direction.

And I'm trying. I fucking asked Hudson for help. But none of that matters when I see the pain on Junie's face.

So I say the stupidest thing I've ever said in my life. "It's complicated."

"You fucking idiot," Hudson growls.

But I don't look at him because Junie's slipping away from me like rain on a windshield.

I've spent a lifetime memorizing her reactions, so I know what it looks like when Juniper Mercer locks down.

The expression that raced across her irises when she was fifteen and found that her mother had been lying about the bills—my first inclination that something was wrong.

The one she wore a month after Nolan's graduation party, when he told her I was gone and she didn't know I was hiding upstairs to make sure she was okay.

The one she's spent weeks telling me, without words, that I'll understand when I finally cross the line she can't forgive.

I've crossed that line now. I glance at Hudson, but he understands a sinking ship as well as I do.

"Let's go outside," he offers.

Junie doesn't remove her hand from my arm, dragging me along with her. Her destination is clear before we reach it.

Natalie.

Hudson tries to step in front of her.

“Don’t.” That’s all she says to Hudson, and we both see the crash before the accident’s even happened.

We cross the room. I’m in a haze of panic because I can’t find a solution fast enough. Nana Mae’s head turns toward us from her table of allies, and Hudson never leaves my side.

“Whatever you do, don’t say a word,” he seethes.

Natalie looks up from a group of three men as we approach. Her smile is already prepared. She’s a woman who fights dirty and has years of experience anticipating underhanded tactics.

“I have a question about the memorial,” Junie says without waiting for pleasantries.

“Fuck. This is going sideways fast.” Hudson’s hissed words are drowned out when Natalie’s smile shifts a fraction.

“The—”

“The veterans’ memorial. On the wall.” Junie gestures without looking. “I was admiring it just now.”

“Oh. Yes.” One of Natalie’s associates smiles at her. “It’s one of our most celebrated pieces. Natalie outdid herself with the design.”

That’s when Natalie registers Junie’s spite, and she attempts to excuse herself from her colleagues.

“Ms. Moore, I’m curious about the acoustic design.” Junie’s battle-ready tone doesn’t match the serene smile on her face.

My world is about to implode, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it without causing a bigger scene.

Beside me, Hudson’s thumbs move across his phone with frightening speed.

Meanwhile, Natalie’s smile holds. She obviously thinks I’ve either warned Junie or assumed Junie knows what’s at stake. Both are my fault.

Sweat gathers on my forehead, and I scan our surroundings, hoping to find a distraction big enough to pull Junie’s focus from her latest discovery.

“The building is designed to produce tones as the wind moves through the central corridor,” Junie says. “Different tones depending on the time of year. I was hoping you could tell me how you achieved that.”

Silence.

A very pointed, lethal silence.

The men Natalie had been speaking to turn, interested in an answer they didn't know existed because she built the damn thing facing the wrong direction.

"It was ah—a collaborative process," Natalie says after a beat.

"I'm sure it was," Junie placates. "I'd love to hear about the specifics. Are the tonal intervals a function of the spacing, the corridor width, or both? I've been reading about acoustic architecture, and I just find it so *dang* fascinating."

Natalie blinks. Her eyes flick past Junie to find mine.

Natalie finally understands that the woman on my arm is no longer the teenager she knew, but a woman with a built-in arsenal locked on one single target.

The three men wait while Hudson's irritated energy pulses between us.

"Cole," Natalie says lightly. "You were consulting on the acoustic calculations. Since you're here to showcase your own *inspired* work, perhaps you can fill us in? I'd hate to misremember the details."

There it is.

The gentlest possible handoff. A request for a rescue framed as a compliment.

If I refuse, Natalie spins it as me being difficult—the person here to win tonight's prize money.

If I answer, Junie watches me protect Natalie in front of her for the last time in our lives.

"We have to go," Hudson says.

The ballroom closes in on me.

Every beat I have planned for this evening disintegrates.

"It's a combination," I hear myself say. The explanation leaves my lips on autopilot, and Junie does not move.

She doesn't breathe.

She watches as I become irredeemable.

And it's not the fire I've always loved in Junie's eyes now. It's the absence of it. The specific stillness of Juniper Mercer retreating to the place she goes to when things end.

"Thank you, Natalie," Junie says, her voice perfectly level. Then she turns on her heel and, with more grace than Natalie has ever possessed, walks out of the ballroom.

Hudson curses in my ear as we hurry to follow. He gets a step ahead when someone grabs hold of my elbow.

“Cole,” Natalie hisses. “A word.”

“No.” I shrug her off and spot Junie with Hudson near an interior garden at the end of the long hallway. She’s running now.

My feet won’t move fast enough, but the click-clack of heels tells me Natalie’s still following and this is about to get so much worse.

“Cole, you can’t run from me.”

“I said not fucking now, Natalie.”

“Yes, now. They’re going to fire me. The board is voting on my renewal in three weeks, and I need—”

I reach Junie, but the leech is still at my side. “Later,” I hiss.

Hudson stands at Junie’s back. I should be her support beam, not him, but I already know I’ve lost that honor just by her body language.

“We will not talk later.” Natalie’s composure has snapped, and now Junie has a front-row seat to it. “This is what you signed on for. I need designs. Three. By the end of the month. I won’t lose this job, Cole. It’s the only thing—”

“No.”

The word drops between us.

Natalie’s eyes narrow, and whatever she finds in my reflection has panic shadowing hers. “No?”

“Cole,” Hudson warns. He doesn’t have his case against her locked down yet.

I’m not sure that it matters anymore.

Hudson can’t find Junie on the paperwork. I have to take that at face value now.

“I’m fucking done, Natalie. I’m not giving you anything else. Ever. You’ve taken too much. It’s done. You’re dead to me.”

The air grows thick between us while Natalie calculates if the leverage she has is still enough.

“Come on, Junie,” Hudson says more gently than I’ve heard him in years. “Let’s—”

“Did he tell you about our arrangement?” Natalie asks, stepping closer to Junie.

My arm snaps out to ward her off. “Fuck. Off. Natalie.”

“About the foreclosure? About Marcus? About your mom or why he’s been—”

“Stop,” I growl.

“Sending me designs for six years. Why he allows me to claim them? Why he subsidizes my career to help cover the cost of my brother’s care in exchange for my silence?”

“Fuck,” Hudson mutters.

But my world stops.

No one moves.

Somewhere behind us, the master of ceremonies directs everyone to their seats.

“Silence for what?” Junie asks. Her voice is as monotone as her expression.

Natalie’s face curls into the ugliest grin. “Let’s start easy, shall we, with a copy of the vlog you created the night your mother died. The one where you said you were thankful she died. *Thankful*.”

“A video,” Junie says, slowly.

“But that wasn’t enough,” Natalie says.

“Stop. Just fucking stop, Natalie.” It roars out of me, and I don’t care who hears.

Hudson attempts to pull Junie away, but she digs her heels in. I try to block Natalie, but she threatens to scream. We’re at an impasse. No one moves.

“I knew it wasn’t enough to keep Cole in line. Not when everything he’d ever done for our entire relationship came in second to *you*. So I hung around. I paid attention. I collected what I needed.” Even knowing what she’s capable of, the venom in her voice is shocking.

“What did I ever do to you?” There’s still no emotion in Junie’s voice.

“Come on, Junie. We can—”

Natalie cuts me off. “What did you do? *What* didn’t *you* do, you selfish little bitch? While I was home dealing with my father’s gambling debts and my brother’s care alone, you had everyone and everything at your fingers, and you never appreciated it.” It’s as though she doesn’t even care who hears her as long as she gets to hurt as many people as she can on her way down.

“That’s enough.” I reach for Junie, but she sidesteps me, curling into Hudson’s side.

My heart stops beating.

"Oh, I see." Natalie's voice cuts like glass. "He didn't even tell you the worst of it. What I found out and why he's sacrificed himself for you, once again." She presses a button on her phone, and before I can stop her, she holds it out for Junie.

On her phone screen is a video of her mother in Junie's very own house.

"Shut it off," I shout, lunging for Natalie, but Hudson holds me back.

The video begins.

"*You realize that when you die and this hasn't been repaid, Juniper will lose everything?" Junie's dad says, sliding papers toward her mother.*

"Like you care," her mother says. "You've never spent more than a few days with her, and you're getting half the payout. Just make sure none of it falls back on Nolan's company."

Her father laughs mercilessly. *"You're a coldhearted bitch, Anna."*

"Say what you want. I'm going to enjoy the little time I have left. I don't give a shit if that oxygen thief loses everything, and I definitely don't care that she'll be stuck with the repayment. It's two million dollars—she'll have a lifetime for remittance. She owes me this."

"No sympathy for your only daughter?" Tommy Mercer is cut from the same cloth as his ex-wife.

"I don't care what happens to her once I'm gone. She could jump off a bridge, and it wouldn't affect my day one bit. I hate that girl with every fiber of my being. She ruined my body, my life, our relationship. I should have aborted her when I had the chance."

I rip the phone from Natalie's hand and throw it against the wall.

"Were you hiding in the butler's pantry to record this?" Hudson growls.

Natalie shrugs. "Not at first, but as soon as I heard Anna saying what I always knew to be true, I hit record. At first, I thought I'd use it against Anna, but by the end, I realized she hated Junie almost as much as I did."

My right eye twitches. I haven't hit anyone since I beat the shit out of Junie's dad after forcing him to help me buy out the loan and get Junie's home out of foreclosure, but I'm close to losing control now.

I only gain my composure when Junie steps forward. The devastation she tries to hide puts me in a chokehold.

"You came into my home," Junie says robotically. "And you rifled through my private matters as though you had a right to."

“Oh, but you haven’t even heard the best part yet.” Natalie’s voice is colder than I’ve ever heard a human before. “Mommy Mercer wasn’t the only villain in our story. Cole and his savior complex couldn’t stop at abandoning me and our plan to live in NYC together.”

“We were never going to live in New York together, Natalie. I’d already broken up with you.” I step forward, but Hudson grabs hold of my elbow.

“Because you needed the money you’d saved to get *her* house out of foreclosure. The same reason you sold all your grandfather’s antique cars.” Natalie turns her hatred back on Junie. “But even that wasn’t enough. Because when your mom got sick, Nolan made sure your name was on the trust for the house. That means your parents needed your signature on the loan. You were complicit, and you know your father has a bad habit of skirting the law to get what he wants.”

Junie shakes her head. “I was a minor.”

“You think someone willing to throw their own daughter under the bus would care about that?” Natalie’s digging her own grave and burying me with her. “So guess who took a play right out of Mommy Mercer’s handbook? Cole sold his soul to save you. Again. Go ahead, ask him. He has all the proof. I ensured it.”

I open my mouth, and Hudson cuts me off. “Cole, I swear to God. Don’t say a fucking word.” Hudson’s now in attorney mode, but I need my friend.

“He left me for you over and over and over again, so I took matters into my own hands. Cole said he’d agree to my terms so long as I turned over all my evidence, but I’ve never been stupid.” Her nasty gaze cuts to mine. “It appears he’s going back on his word.” She shrugs. “Whatever will I do?”

“Terms,” Junie says. Plainly. Like two plus two equals four.

Natalie’s completely lost the plot and has zero situational awareness. People are staring, and she doesn’t seem to care. “The terms were simple. I wouldn’t do anything with this treasure trove of information, and in return, all he had to do was supply me with designs that would elevate my career. I have a brother to protect, you know.” She licks her lips. “But my favorite condition? The one that gives me *such* pleasure? He had to stay the fuck away from broken little Junie Mercer.”

Junie isn’t giving Natalie the satisfaction of eye contact. Her gaze cuts through mine with every word Natalie spews.

“Is it true?” Junie asks, her gaze pleading, her fire igniting, but not in a good way. No, this is the ignition that will blow up the entire house.

My mouth can’t form words.

Hudson’s cursing into his phone but staying within arm’s reach.

“Cole,” Junie warns. “Is. This. True?”

Every weight I’ve ever carried begins to crumble, cutting off my vocal cords. “Yes.”

One word. It falls from my lips like a wrecking ball.

“All of it?”

“Yes.” Shame makes it hard to keep eye contact, but for her, I do. I owe her that.

“You’ve been paying my worst bully, my worst tormentor, for years without telling anyone?”

Hatred has my gaze cutting to Natalie, who finally takes a goddamn step back.

What the fuck does she mean, Natalie was her worst bully?

“What?” Hudson raises his voice, and the hair on my neck stands on end. How did none of us know this?

“All to protect me,” Junie says with no intonation. “From hateful words of a mother who never loved me, from fraud I didn’t commit, and from losing a house so haunted it can never be a home?”

That’s not—

“Yes.” I’m raw and exposed. “You have to understand. If I didn’t get your house out of foreclosure, if I didn’t take over the loans, the legal repercussions would have impacted both you and Nolan regardless if it was true or not. Boston is a small city, Junie. You have that kind of thing following your name, and you never would’ve been able to live out your dream. Nolan would’ve dropped out of med school. Hudson was only in law school. I—”

“You fixed it. While blowing up your life and actively breaking my heart. And tonight, you stood out there and protected her by explaining your own memorial like you were a consultant and not the creator.” Junie’s fingers wrap around the diamond on her left hand. It slides up to the middle of her knuckle, then back down. It happens once, twice, three times.

It’s as though her body is releasing me along with her heart, and all the structures I’ve used to lift us up crack under the weight of what I was trying to do.

I close my eyes. “Yes.”

When I open them, I don’t find the locked-down fury I’d braced myself for. Her expression is something smaller. Something that looks like a door quietly closing on the other side of the world.

“I need you to *not* follow me.”

“Junie—”

“Cole.” Quiet. Final.

“Listen to her, Cole.”

I chance a look in Hudson’s direction. His fury still burns, but it’s lined with a sadness I rarely see from him.

“You said to tell you when I wanted to run. I’m respecting your wishes. I’m telling you I’m running. Now I need you to respect mine and stand here until I’m in a car,” Junie says, and the fissures in my heart crack open wider. “I need you to stay here and collect the money for The Haven. I need you to finish this evening for Nana Mae because you’ve both already lost too much. I need you to not touch me, and I need you to not come after me. Do you understand me?”

“Juniper, please.” My whole heart gives up. It just ceases to work.

“Do. You. Understand. Me. Cole?”

I nod.

I can feel Natalie’s hatred at my back, but she has no idea what she’s just detonated—she never did learn to account for the blast radius.

Her career was over before we ever stepped into this hotel—she just hadn’t realized it.

Junie doesn’t spare Natalie a single glance. She doesn’t acknowledge Hudson either.

She simply stares at me as if she’s seeing me for the first time and doesn’t like what she sees.

Then she walks away.

She doesn’t run.

It’s the measured walk of a woman still preserving her dignity because the man who loves her wasn’t able to.

She doesn’t pass the ballroom, instead turning toward the lobby.

“I’ll take her home,” Hudson hisses. “Call a car for you and Nana Mae.”

I stand where I am.

I keep this one promise.

And it’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done.

“Cole.” Natalie sounds as though she’s underwater. “I—that’s not how I wanted this to—”

“Get. Away. From. Me.” Of all the shit she threw into the universe, one thing haunts me above all else.

Natalie was Junie’s childhood bully. The one she told me about late at night. She was begging me to see the truth, and I was too blind and stupid to see it.

“You’re the one who tormented her when she was younger? A fucking child, Natalie? A kid who lost her mom slowly over years? That’s who you chose to bully?”

“She always had more of your attention than was right.”

“Get the fuck out of my life, you wretched, conniving bitch. Stay away from my family. Stay the fuck away from Junie. Don’t contact me again. Don’t call. Don’t write. Prepare yourself for the wreckage you’ve just unleashed because I won’t be your safety net anymore. I’ll stand in the fire just to watch you fucking burn.”

I step close enough that the chemical scent of her perfume permeates my nose like the toxic piece of shit she is. “And I will watch you fucking burn, Natalie. You have no idea who you’ve turned me into these past six years, but you’re about to find out. You’ll burn in the fire *you* started.”

Her hand covers her mouth. I think she’s crying, but I don’t spend another second on her because it’s taking every ounce of my willpower to keep this promise to Junie.

I stand where I am.

Inside, the MC speaks. At some point, The Haven is recognized.

I don’t move.

And that’s where Nana Mae finds me sometime later.

“She’s gone,” I say.

Nana Mae drops the award she had in her hand to the floor. “Hudson just called.”

“She told me not to follow.”

She purses her lips, then wraps her arms around my waist with surprising strength. “Let’s go home.”

I nod because *home* has no meaning anymore. For the first time in six years, I’m operating without a plan, and the only thing I can do is keep the one promise that’s already killing me slowly.

The only thing I can do now…is wait and pray that she'll give me a chance to explain.

And even that may not be enough.

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LIGHTS OFF

JUNIE

I DON'T REMEMBER GETTING IN THE CAR.

That sounds like a tragic love song, but it's the truth. My brain deleted the thirty feet between the hotel lobby and Hudson's car. One moment I was on the marble floor of an atrium, holding the hem of a dress that Katie duct-taped me into, and the next I was buckled into the passenger seat with the engine running and Charleston sliding past my window in streaks of yellow and red light.

Hudson's driving.

I'm not sure if he's even spoken since he opened my door.

I feel the burn behind my eyes, but the tears don't fall. I'm not sure why. If ever there were a time for tears, surely, this would be it.

Instead, I sit numbly. My body has been replaced with someone else's, and I'm operating it from behind a veil with a ten-second delay.

My hands rest heavily in my lap.

The gold bracelet on my wrist is cold.

The ring on my hand burns, the skin around it is itchy.

Why didn't I throw it at him? That's my default, right? React, engage, apologize?

A better woman would've tossed it to the marble floor. A woman who knew what she was doing would've handed it to Natalie as a parting gift—a final fuck you, you can have him.

But I'm not that woman tonight.

For the second time in two months, I don’t recognize this version of myself.

“Do you want me to talk, or do you want silence?” Hudson asks as though he too can’t bear the heaviness a moment longer.

“I don’t know.” I sound like my mom. Detached. Cold. Empty. The exact opposite of every intention I ever set for myself.

“Okay.”

The silence suffocates us again, but this time because he asked, it’s different. Like a choice we made together.

Time passes with no meaning. A ninety-minute drive happens in flashes of snapshots.

Charleston gives way to the marsh. The marsh gives way to the highway. Then the highway turns into the two-lane road that runs through the Lowcountry back toward The Haven.

The trees close in, the moon hiding in shadows behind them.

When Hudson first drove me to Porchlight Cove, I was a different woman.

I’m morphing into someone new again, and this time, I’m not positive I’ll like the transformation.

“Hud.”

“Hmm?” His gaze cuts to mine, assessing, planning, taking my measure.

“Did you know?”

He exhales through his nose. A long, slow exhale. The kind a man uses when he’s trying to decide which version of the truth will hurt the least.

“He texted me the night before you did, asking for help. I had my suspicions when he left Boston, but I had no idea it was all…this. I can almost understand why he didn’t tell me back then, but if he had, if he’d thought to even go to my motherfucking father, we wouldn’t be in this situation.”

“Does Nolan know?” I press my cheek against the cool glass of the window beside me. My internal body temperature makes it feel like I’m boiling alive in my own skin.

“No,” he says, using the least Hudson-like tone I’ve heard from him in years. There’s no bark, no fight, just the tone of a man who has always cleaned up my messes while ensuring I learned a lesson.

“I— The repercussions of this could be…bad, Junie.” I feel his focus on me, but I don’t turn his way, and he releases a harsh breath. “Your parents are truly… But this? I had no idea Cole was carrying this. I knew Natalie had stayed in contact with him. I knew he was…holding something back. I knew that something changed him on a molecular level when he left Boston, but I was too much of a coward to push a friend I’d known since kindergarten, even though that’s obviously what he needed at the time. We all…let him walk away without understanding why.”

“You’re not a coward, Hud.”

“Maybe not, but I let him be one, and that might be worse.”

I have nothing to say to that.

Hudson’s hands tighten on the steering wheel. His jaw clenches until he’s one giant wall of muscle. He’s not crying. Hudson doesn’t cry. What he’s doing is worse—he’s revising in real time twenty-five years of his own behavior. I watch it happen in his profile. The line of his jaw. The flex of his forearm.

He’s rewriting what he thought he knew to now include all the facts.

“Junie.”

I’m almost scared to hear his conclusion. “Yeah?”

“I want you to know something. Before we get back.”

Blood whooshes in my ears, but I nod.

“Everything your mother said is wrong. *Everything*. She was a horrible human who lost her heart long before you were born. You’re not responsible for what that cunt of a woman, Natalie, did to you either, and you’re not responsible for what she’s done to him since. You’re not responsible for whatever fucking bullshit your father pulled. And…” He meets my eye. “You’re not responsible for Cole’s silence.”

I open my mouth to stop him. It’s too much, but as is Hudson’s way, he steamrolls over me.

“You’re not responsible for any of the six years he spent sacrificing himself, or whatever idiotic thing he did to protect us all. Do you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“I’m saying this as your friend, and I’m saying it as your lawyer. But the thing I really need you to hear, as your family, is that had any of us known what Natalie was putting you through, we would’ve stopped it—Cole would’ve stopped it. I promise you that, Juniper. You are the biggest

pain in my ass, but you're my family, and we will find a way out of this mess."

Holding off tears is suddenly a lot harder to do.

"Whatever you decide to do—whatever version of Juniper Mercer you need to be tonight—you're allowed. You have a right to that. Not that you need permission, but you're allowed to process however you feel is best. The people who love you will still love you in the morning. Including me. Including Fen. Including Nolan. And, God help us, including the man we just left behind."

"Hud." *Please stop. Please stop talking. I'm not strong enough tonight. I'm just not.*

"I'm not telling you what to do, Juniper. I'm simply telling you that whatever you choose, you won't be alone."

My chest cracks then, and tears escape—but only for a count of ten. Silent, graceless, embarrassing tears that I wipe off with the back of my wrist, then swallow them down and call on my strength because Juniper Fucking Mercer does not break.

Hudson doesn't look at me. He keeps his eyes on the road, but he does reach into the breast pocket of his tux and pull out a handkerchief, which he hands me.

"Where the hell did you get this?"

"It's a lawyer thing."

I shake my head. "Hudson Tenney carries a handkerchief."

His signature smirk slips into place. "For clients. And, apparently, for you."

I laugh. One short, ugly barked sound. Then I fold the piece of cloth in my lap, press my head back to the window, and close my eyes.

We don't speak again until Hudson walks me to my apartment.

"You want me to come up?"

I shake my head. My mind is too full of warring statements for me to be coherent.

"Are you sure?"

Violent, sad, confused, angry, heartbroken emotions all vie for a chance to escape my lips. Instead, I nod.

"I'm so pissed off at Cole that I can't stay at his place tonight, but I'll be at the hotel in town. I'll be there until you tell me to leave. If you need

anything—anything, Juniper, I don't care if it's tampons, a lawyer, or a getaway car—I'll be in this driveway within ten minutes. Do you hear me?"

My conflicted mind settles on the getaway car. The image of stuffy Huddy driving a getaway car is apparently the motivation I need to use my voice. "I hear you."

"Okay."

He hesitates. Then, against every instinct Hudson has ever had about physical contact, he reaches out and hugs me once, quick and hard, and lets go before I can react.

Hudson walks back to his car without looking back. Then he waits in the driveway with his headlights flooding the darkness until I'm inside my apartment with the door locked behind me.

His lights cut through my apartment, and then he's gone.

What the hell do I do now?

I stand in the darkness for a long time. It feels right, allowing the darkness to swallow me. But eventually, I peel off the dress and leave it in a pool on the floor.

It's a three-hundred-dollar piece of fabric, but I can't bring myself to care. I need a shower. I need to clear my mind. I need a plan of action.

The water scalds my skin, and I scrub every inch of my body with soap that smells like lavender. I stand under the spray until the water runs cold, but I don't react. I've already used too many emotions with the tears I shed on the way home.

I go through the motions. I get dressed in Nolan's Boston College sweatshirt I stole when I was in high school and a pair of leggings. I pull my hair back into a damp bun on top of my head, all while Juniper, Junie, Viper, and Spite-Berry merge into someone strong enough to handle this shit.

Then I walk into the living room with my laptop in hand.

Even with the lights off, the diamond on my hand still winks at me.

I don't remove it.

It feels intentional. Like I've had so many decisions made without my consent that this is one minor thing I can control. It's a specific decision, and I stare at it hard because I need to make sure I'm making this choice for myself. Not because I've forgiven him. Not because I'm his fiancée. Not because Natalie thinks she's won. But because I *have not decided yet* what my future will look like.

And I always decide.

Which means it’s time to build my case.

I log every detail Cole’s ever told me about the veterans’ memorial. I create spreadsheets and timelines. I scroll architecture press and google Natalie’s name.

Forensic accounting was my focus in school. I’ll be one of the best eventually, and this is where I thrive—where my need for spite and facts converge on one specific goal.

Except this doesn’t feel like spite. This feels like…retribution for all the pain that she caused.

Spite would be for me, but this is for Cole because he never should have carried the weight of my pain.

I cross-reference Meridian’s portfolio with Natalie’s name and everything that overlaps from the last six years.

I build a paper trail out of scraps of conversations the way another woman builds a sweater out of yarn. I spend three hours building a case, which proves easier than I would’ve imagined when I dig back through my old vlog—something I only thought to do because of fucking Natalie—and find the proof I need.

Video evidence of Cole working on the veterans’ memorial. Cole working on a bridge that Meridian debuted last year, naming Natalie as the head architect. And the library, the one Cole designed with light in mind. He created these from his heart, and Natalie destroyed them with hers.

By the time the clock ticks past midnight, I’ve built a file that’s hard to refute. This is what I do. It’s in my pathology. I find holes and document them. I may not always act on them, but I always document them.

And today, I’ve decided to act. Vengeance and heartache make a girl dangerous, and I’m about to become the villain of Natalie’s nightmares.

My shoulders pull away from my ears. My spine unlocks, and my lungs fill with the freshest air.

Everything falls into place once I open my web browser.

I navigate to Meridian’s corporate website and find their Ethics and Compliance contact at the bottom of their About page. Then I click. Just one quick press of my finger, and a pop-up appears.

Then I type.

I attach my file.

I share my proof.

And I pause.

With one more click of a button, everything will change. Again.

The process of hitting Send has the power to create or destroy.

I've been on the receiving end of both.

I could choose to close the window, walk away, and go to sleep, secure in the knowledge that Cole will wake up tomorrow to a broken fake engagement to a woman who may or may not be at The Haven in a week. And Natalie's career will die at its own pace, on its own schedule, the way careers built on stolen work typically do.

I'll have done the adult thing.

The mature thing.

The correct thing.

But then I remember who I was. The little girl who lived in the shadows of shitty people's decisions.

That version of me has been called the poor girl, the charity case, a mistake, and garbage by a woman who broke me down before the real trauma of my life could finish me off. That version had her notebooks destroyed, her lunch thrown in the trash, her name written on bathroom stalls in permanent marker, her number posted on a dating site for disgusting men when she was only seventeen.

That Juniper Mercer sat out of a decade of social functions because the mere thought of being in a room with Natalie Moore or anyone like her was enough to make hives break out across her skin.

That Junie hid.

This Junie will not.

This Junie just learned that for six years, the man she's loved for more than half her life has been paying Natalie Moore—with his own work, with the mind I fell in love with at every Mercer Christmas—to keep me safe from the very woman who created me.

Cole's been paying for Natalie's silence.

With his art.

For years.

No.

If human metamorphosis is a real thing, I'm about to become a motherfucking phoenix.

I type out the message.

To whom it may concern…

I’m careful. Forensically careful. I don’t editorialize. I remove all emotion. I don’t call Natalie a thief. I don’t mention the blackmail because the blackmail isn’t my evidence to deploy—it’s Cole’s. And whatever happens to me, I won’t be the one who took that from him. But Natalie has made a career at the expense of my heart, and she’s a threat I’ll readily disarm.

I think about Cole. About his decision to choose Natalie all those years ago. Then I think about tonight, and how he chose her again right in front of me.

I hit send.

The screen loads.

Message Sent.

I stare at the confirmation. I wait for satisfaction, for the rush of it, the *I got you,* the thing that always lights up my nervous system when I retaliate.

It doesn’t come.

What comes instead is the quiet dropping of my stomach. The overwhelming sense of loss. The total and complete destruction of my heart.

I close my laptop and rest my hands on the lid.

I committed revenge against someone who truly deserves it, but it isn’t delivering the payoff I expected.

It’s just made me tired.

So. Damn. Tired.

But I don’t sleep. I sit, folding in on myself, staring out my dark windows, unable to formulate my next steps.

For the second time in a matter of months, I’m well and truly lost, adrift, alone in a sadness I thought I’d already outrun.

Headlights cut through my space at 2:11 a.m. I don’t move from my spot on the couch, but I see the sleek sedan anyway.

Cole exits alone. His bowtie is gone. His jacket is off. He’s carrying something in his hand.

An award?

I hope he won.

He turns and looks straight up at my window.

He knows I’m sitting here. He can’t see me, but he knows. That connection that ties us together is frayed but not severed. Not yet.

He doesn’t cross the driveway.

He doesn’t call out.

His broad shoulders are drawn. There’s a sadness to him that I never thought he’d show.

Then he sits down on his porch step. The one that’s always one below my spot.

And he doesn’t leave.

He’s keeping his promise. He’s not coming after me—but he’s waiting.

Time moves slowly in sadness.

The clock slides into 2:45, then 4:40, and I realize with a stupid, flooding sensation that he’s going to sit there all night.

He’s keeping his promise as literally as he can.

Goddamn him.

I press his grandmother’s ring to my heart and hold it there, watching the man I’ve loved since before I could drive, and I have no idea how any of us will proceed now that the wall of lies has come crashing down.

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BROODING

COLE

THERE SHOULDN'T BE A CHILL IN THE AIR AT THIS TIME OF YEAR, BUT IT'S settled in, bone-deep, like a fever that won't break.

The sky should be turning shades of pink and orange by now, but it's clinging to the gray like a fucked-up metaphor for my life.

The award that Nana Mae collected on my behalf sits beside me—a monument to what I've lost. I'm not even sure why I kept it except to punish myself.

Junie never turned on her lights, but I know she's up there. I feel her.

She's either asleep or she's been sitting in the dark, and I'm not sure which option is worse. My eyes feel like sandpaper because I've been staring at her window since I stumbled out of the car.

Not once did her curtains move. Not a flicker of a shadow or hint of manufactured light.

It takes every ounce of self-control I possess not to cross the driveway, but this is a promise I have to keep.

I don't go to her.

I don't call.

But I do set in motion the takedown of Natalie's career by filing a grievance with the American Institute of Architects. Contacting the AIA board has been phase two of my plan, but my plan's gone to shit, so now I'm all in. And this is just the beginning. Fen's typically the one to go scorched earth, but my earth is already on fire, and now I'm the gasoline.

The squeak of the screen door behind me breaks the painful silence.

Nana Mae steps out onto the porch in a bathrobe and slippers. Her gray hair is undone for the first time I can remember in years, and she sets a coffee mug down beside me without a word.

She doesn't sit, but her heavy hand rests on my shoulder for a long minute. I have a feeling that she's staring at Junie's darkened window too.

The touch causes flashbacks to when I was five years old—sitting on a sofa with her—finding out she was now my entire world.

"Cole."

I crane my head to peer up at her.

"I'm going to say something, then I'm going to make breakfast because the boys will start arriving soon, and you're going to need food before they get here."

"How do you—"

"Hudson's been sending updates to Fen since the receiving line. Don't let your emotions cloud your judgment. Hudson Tenney doesn't chaperone the women in his family without a *plan*. They started mobilizing the moment your walls began cracking."

She's right, I'm not thinking clearly. When one of us falls, we rally. It's been this way since elementary school. It makes my years of silence feel more weaponized than I'd intended.

"What did you want to say?"

She squeezes my shoulder this time—I had no idea she still had this kind of strength.

"Sometimes asking for help doesn't feel like a victory. It feels like falling. You have to learn the difference between falling and failing, Cole. They're not the same thing."

I stare up at the woman who raised me—always so wise and straight to the point.

"I want you to be straight with me now. Are we going to lose Papa's land?"

Guilt makes bile rise in my throat. I never told her I took out a loan against that land. It appears Hudson has been busy.

"No, I swear it. Between my inheritance, selling the antique cars, and the money I'd saved for my internship, I was able to get Junie's home out of foreclosure and lower the loan to something mostly…manageable."

I've never seen my grandmother look at me with such disappointment.

“We willed that land to you so you’d always know home. I gifted you The Haven land so you wouldn’t be lost. When you asked me to help you sell Papa’s cars, why didn’t you tell me you were going to borrow against the land too? Did you think I wouldn’t want to help?”

“That’s not—I—I had to do some things I’m not proud of. If it didn’t go to plan, I…didn’t want anyone else to get into trouble. As a family, we needed you to hold us together. Hud had to finish law school. Nolan was suffering, and he only found peace in med school. Fen was attempting to rebuild his father’s company—and thank God because look what he’s done for Junie. The personal risk to all of you was greater than it was for me.”

“Cole,” she says sadly. “When your dad rushed into burning buildings, he at least remembered to put on his own mask first. If you don’t learn to mask up before you help others, you’ll be no good to any of us.”

It’s not the first time she’s compared me to my dad. My father was a hero, a first responder. I was just trying to keep my family together the only way I knew how.

“Listen up, Cole. This is important.”

I keep my focus on her, though my guilt makes it excruciatingly difficult.

“You’re not allowed to disappear into your grief about this. I’ve watched you do it once. I won’t sit silently and allow it to happen again. Whatever those boys say to you today, you sit in it. You feel it. You let them in, and you learn from it. Do you hear me?”

“Yes.” The truth of that word feels raw and dangerous against my lips.

“Drink your coffee.” She’s gone before I can reach for it.

Hudson’s rental car wasn’t here when I arrived last night. At first, I panicked, thinking Junie was gone, but my heart says she didn’t leave—she didn’t run. Not yet anyway.

Hudson must’ve stayed at a hotel last night, which means he’ll be even more pissed off than normal.

“You let them in.” Nana Mae’s words ring like a warning of what’s to come.

With a heavy sigh, I lift my phone from my pocket and turn it on so I can prepare for the wrath of my brothers.

The moment the screen lights up, it begins to vibrate like a live thing. Forty-four notifications. Most are from a single sender. I scroll without reading, and the timestamps tell their own story.

11:47 p.m. **Natalie:** We need to talk…

12:09 a.m. **Natalie:** Cole, please…

12:33 a.m. **Natalie:** What the fuck is this email?!

1:14 a.m. **Natalie:** They'll put me on administrative leave…

2:27 a.m. **Natalie:** What the fuck did you do?!

3:11 a.m. **Natalie:** I'll release everything…

3:52 a.m. **Natalie:** What about Marcus?

5:18 a.m. **Natalie:** If I go down, so does she…

What the fuck?

6:30 a.m. **Email from Meridian's Compliance Office**

I ignore everything from Natalie and open the email.

Dear Mr. Whittaker,
Recent events…
Authorship of designs…
Natalie Moore…
Please call my office at your earliest convenience…

I skim the message because the blood rushing in my ears makes me dizzy. There hasn't been enough time for my grievance to make this kind of noise. This came from…

Junie chose reparations—for me.

Her window remains dark.

She chose to fight for me knowing the wreckage Natalie could do to her life.

Junie set fire to the lies, accepting she'd be burned by the flames.

The one thing I always wanted to protect her from.

I scroll back up to Natalie's texts.

What about Marcus?

If I go down, so does she…

Natalie’s been my secret, and I’ve been hers. We’ve been holding each other’s worst across a six-year ledger that benefited no one except her brother.

But he isn’t the only innocent here.

And he’s not the only collateral damage of a war ignited by his sister—but he was never my burden to carry.

Natalie’s going to fall, and with her destruction, Marcus will suffer. It doesn’t sit well with me. If Natalie had actually done any of the work herself, her brother’s future wouldn’t be in limbo now.

Her decisions have endangered her brother’s care.

But my decisions have cost me everything.

So now, I act.

Not because I’m forced to—this was always going to happen as soon as I won the award—but now I’m doing it with no promise of tomorrow, and it hardens me in a way she can’t prepare for.

My thumb hovers over Natalie’s name until a pop-up box appears.

Then I block her.

There’s a peacefulness that falls over me once it’s done. Like a million-pound weight has been removed from my neck…but the fight is just beginning.

Hudson pulls in at 7:15, and I’m still on my front porch, in my tux from last night. The empty plate of food that Nana Mae tried to shove down my throat sits off to the side.

He gets out of the BMW in a fresh suit, sans tie, with his jacket open, holding a cardboard tray with three coffees. He lifts them to me as he climbs Junie’s steps, places one cup on the floor in front of her door, then knocks.

Hudson is halfway down the stairs when her door opens. I’m on my feet in an instant, anything for a glimpse of her.

All I get is an arm, but the expression on Hudson’s face as he stares at her tells me everything I wish I could fix—she’s hurting and shutting him out too.

My breathing turns shallow while he mutters words so low I can’t hear. I clutch the porch railing as he walks back to me. I fall to my ass on the stairs when he hands me my coffee.

Then he slumps onto the stair above me. “You’re my brother.”

“Hud—” I nearly crush the cardboard cup in my hands.

“You are my brother, Cole. I’ve known you since I was five years old. I’ve lied to our family for you. I’ve driven you to the airport in the middle of the night when you looked like everyone you loved had died. I covered for you because I knew you *must* have had a reason, and I’ve never once asked questions because I trusted you. That’s the trust you broke while I’ve been waiting silently in your corner. Yet you still hold on to the pain as though you’re the only one who can handle it.”

I can’t speak.

“Look at me,” he growls.

When I do, Hudson’s eyes are red.

As though he’s been crying.

“You didn’t ask me for help until it was nearly too late,” he says. His voice is unsteady in a way the great Hudson Tenney never allows. “Do you understand what that is, Cole?”

“Hud—”

“It’s a fucking insult, Cole. When my world was falling apart, you were the first to show up, banging on my door and refusing to let me go it alone. When Nolan was drowning in the company he inherited, you’re the one who came up with the fix to shift gears. When Fen questioned his ability to take over his father’s firm, you’re the one who put together a fifty-five-page PowerPoint presentation with all the ways he would succeed.”

I swallow hard.

“You show up, even when you’re drowning in your secrets and lies. Yet you don’t trust any of us to help you.” He doesn’t raise his voice, and that makes it worse.

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s not enough, Cole.”

“I know.”

“So try a-fucking-gain.”

My fingers wrap around the paper cup, and I stare across the way at her dark windows. “I should’ve told you years ago, Hud. I should’ve told you when she stole the memorial, and I should’ve told you when she came to me with her…arrangement—”

“Blackmail,” he seethes. “Don’t sugarcoat what actually happened.”

I nod. “I didn’t tell you because I convinced myself I was protecting you from what I had to do to get Junie out of debt, and then I didn’t know how to get out of it without putting us all on Natalie’s radar. Especially because I

suspected that the way Anna and Tommy obtained the original loan wasn't exactly legal. I didn't know how to admit to you, or anyone, that I'd failed."

"Jesus Christ, Cole."

"We all would've protected Junie from that video, Hud, and you know it. If Natalie realized that, she would've gone after all of you too. Can you honestly say you wouldn't have at least thought about agreeing to her terms?"

The morning is very quiet, and Hudson barely moves. "I don't know, Cole. And I never will because we weren't given that choice. We've been giving you our all while you've been creating layers to keep yourself safe since you were five. But never, not once since the day you walked into that classroom, have you been on your own."

"I—I'm starting to see that."

"Are you?" He stares at me with such intensity I can finally understand why everyone crumbles under his pressure in the courtroom.

"Yeah."

Hudson's hand finds my shoulder the same way Nana Mae's did earlier. In the small, displaced corner of my brain still capable of registering anything, I finally understand what it is my family does—they fill in the cracks. They're the screws that hold my walls up and the hammers that knock them down when they're no longer needed.

And I've missed out on so much by keeping them at arm's length.

"The check from Meridian last night won't clear because of Junie's email," Hudson says, fully into lawyer mode now. "As your attorney, I was sent a copy of the…claim."

"Junie chose spite." My lips curl at the corners.

"Junie chose justice."

It's a distinction I needed to hear.

"I've already filed for an injunction to release it. The prize cannot legally be withheld as you haven't done anything wrong. Also, she probably hasn't told you, but The Haven passed the county assessment—Junie was thorough. With the award money, the books will be balanced by the end of the week." When Hud took the bar for both Massachusetts and South Carolina, I thought he was just an overachiever. Now I understand it's how he protects those he loves. "My PI found Devin. As soon as you give the word, I'll file the paperwork to bring him in."

I nod. "I have to tell Nana Mae first, then…do it."

“You never had to do this alone, Cole. Do you understand that? We each bring a different set of skills to this little fucked-up family we’ve created. All you had to do was ask. The not-asking is what caused all this…harm.”

“I know that too.” I stand and tug at my collar. It’s like I can’t get enough air. “Everything has changed, Hud. I—I need help.” Fuck, I hate this. I hate putting everyone in this position. “I don’t know what Natalie will do now. I made sure I took Junie off everything but the deed to the Brookline house, but you’re right about a paper trail. If Natalie—”

“Give me access to everything.” He’s already typing into his phone. “Every shred of evidence you have. Especially the loans you took out—”

“If I hadn’t taken over the debt, Junie would’ve lost her house. Her credit wouldn’t have recovered for years. Her dreams would’ve been shattered because she would’ve pushed, and when it came to light what her parents had done, the way they falsified the loan documents, she would’ve been implicated too—they made sure of it. No one would hire a forensic accountant with that kind of shit on their record. She would’ve been held responsible for the defaulted loans, Hud. Her name was on everything, and she was about to turn eighteen.”

It’s so similar to what Devin did to me. Hudson must be thinking the same thing because he peers up at me with questions floating in his eyes.

“I think Devin found my files,” I confirm. “He saw what Junie’s mother had done, what I did to fix it, then turned around and did the same shit to me. He had a drinking problem in college, but I thought he had gotten sober. Now, I’m not so sure.”

“We’ll deal with Devin. I just have one question.” A hint of a grin appears on his face. “Are you the reason for Tommy’s missing teeth?”

I close my eyes. “I beat the shit out of him in the back alley of a bar in Southy. No one stopped me, and I’m sure there are witnesses somewhere.”

Hudson shakes his head. “You’re a better man than me, Cole, because I’m pretty sure I would’ve killed him. If you give me access to everything, and I mean fucking everything, I’ll bury him another way.”

Reaching into my pocket, I hand him my keys. “It’s all in the bottom drawer of my desk upstairs.”

“I let Natalie know last night that if she does anything else with the legal documents she has, she’ll be complicit, and I’ll go after her with everything I have. It should at least buy us some time there.” Hudson can be terrifying.

Hudson pockets the keys. He doesn't hug me. He doesn't say it's okay.

It's not. Nothing is okay right now.

But for the first time in hours, I can almost see the prospect of okay.

FEN ARRIVES AROUND NOON FROM CALIFORNIA WITH A LEATHER DUFFLE bag, a portfolio of crisis-management material he prepared overnight, and the worst expression I've ever seen on Fenway Jones.

He stands at the bottom of the stairs I still haven't moved from. The glare he sends my way tosses a boulder at the guilt that's been building in my chest.

"You absolute fucking *coward*."

Hudson has apparently joined us on the porch because I hear him chuckle behind me.

"Hi, Fen."

"Don't *hi, Fen* me, Cole. Don't you dare *hi, Fen* me. Do you have any idea what I've been doing for the last twelve hours? Any idea?"

He tosses his duffle onto the ground, grimaces, picks it up, and throws it to the porch.

"I've been on the phone with my personal publicist about your fake fiancée while you were being blackmailed by my literal college nemesis over something your fake fiancée's mother did."

He takes three long seconds to glare at me. "I've been doing damage control for Junie's career while you were paying that witch with your own fucking designs and the fucking Mercer parents from hell with your soul. I'm a crisis communications pro-fess-ion-al and I've been crisis managing your girl's image for six weeks while not knowing an entirely new crisis was happening inside the same room! You know what that is, Cole? That's malpractice."

Hudson clears his throat, but Fen presses on.

"On you, not me. You committed malpractice on my friendship." Actual spittle flies from the corner of Fen's mouth.

"Fen."

"I am not done."

"Okay."

Hudson moves closer. He might expect Fen to take a swing at me. Who knows, maybe he will, but I won't fight back. Not about this.

Fen climbs one step.

Just one.

"Do you remember the night three weeks after Nolan's college graduation party? Do you remember coming in at three a.m. with your jaw clenched and your eyes red, and you wouldn't tell us where you'd been? The night that we pulled an all-nighter because we were terrified that you'd do something we couldn't rescue you from?"

"Yes." It's the nightmare that's plagued me ever since.

"You'd been erratic for a full week before that night, then you came home with your hands bloodied and swollen, and you wouldn't tell us what happened. But that night, the night we all stood watch over you because you were breaking and we didn't know why, that's the night Natalie did it, wasn't it? The blackmail. This whole fucking mess started that night, and you chose. *You*. *Chose*. Not to tell us."

"Yes."

It's also the night I beat Junie's dad in a back alley.

He climbs another step. "Did you know that the three of us didn't sleep for days after that? Each one of us taking turns talking the others off the ledge of what's happened to our brother. We watched you lose yourself. We felt you pull away. We did everything to cling to you, to tie you to us, so we didn't lose you forever. We were there. We've always been there, this entire time, and you never once said a word. You absorbed the cost of their shitty decisions when it was always a price we could've afforded if we'd paid it together. Don't you get that, you giant fucking asshole?"

Where Hudson is calm and composed, Fen is full of emotion and fiery to a fault.

Two explanations for the same hurt that I caused.

He takes another step, then flops down dramatically next to me as though he's already expended all his energy. "You let us love you wrong for years, Cole. We were loving you wrong because you didn't trust us to love you whole."

Fenway wraps his arm around my shoulder and hangs on tight. Hudson sits on my other side.

"We're here now," Fen says. "And this time, we're going to erase all those years of fuckups."

I’m not sure where Fen’s going, so I stay silent. He could be planning a literal attack or ordering takeout…it’s just that hard to tell with him sometimes.

“What’s the plan?” Hudson asks.

“Protect Junie with everything I have and hope that someday she might be able to forgive me.”

“This is…a different kind of love, Cole.” Hudson’s controlled in a different way now—quieter, maybe. “You and her. If you don’t fight for it now, you’ll lose it forever.”

“I’ll never stop fighting for her. I never have.”

“Good,” Fen says. “Because the fight is just beginning. Now that she knows the truly fucking terrible thing you’ve been trying to shield her from, the emotional wreckage will take time. Hud, I’m assuming you’ve got the legal side of this covered?”

Hudson nods. “I don’t trust Tommy Mercer as far as I can throw him, but so far, it appears that he finally did right by her because her name isn’t appearing on any of the defaulted loans. But I doubt any of that happened…legally.”

“That’s what I’ve always feared most,” I admit.

“I’m working on it,” Hudson promises.

“And now that I have all the pieces, I’m going to do my actual job. Unlock your phone, Cole.”

I do, then hand it over to him.

Hudson and I lean in as Fen opens Instagram and types in Natalie’s name.

It’s a sucker punch I wasn’t ready for.

“Fucking hell,” Hudson growls. “I threatened her with the illegal shit. I didn’t think I’d have to threaten this too. She’s lost her damn mind.”

Natalie’s taking a page out of Grace’s fucked-up handbook.

She’s posted a picture of herself—her face arranged in studied devastation.

“What the hell is wrong with our generation?” Hudson growls. “This is why I don’t do social media.”

Fen flicks to the next slide, and her fictional tale unfolds.

“How is this happening again?” I demand. “Does no one take accountability anymore?”

Fen raises a brow.

“I’m taking accountability!” Shouting isn’t called for, but I haven’t slept.

“Now,” Hud mutters under his breath.

She’s pitting herself against Junie—someone with a public history of unstable behavior—regardless of the truth.

Fen moves to the next slide.

Natalie’s tagged Junie’s *I’m.Not.Sorry* account on a photo of her disabled brother. She’s making sure that anyone who saw Junie’s TikTok will draw their own conclusions about who has a vendetta and whose brother is now paying the price.

“That bitch,” Hudson growls.

“She just tagged Junie an hour ago,” Fen says. “She’s desperate.”

My gaze snaps back to Junie’s apartment. She’s had this notification for an hour. She’s seen this. Junie’s up there alone, in the dark, knowing the woman who tormented her in school, who blackmailed me, is now weaponizing her disabled brother in the war she’s waged against Junie for longer than I’ve realized.

Junie’s going to have to decide what to do with that. And I can’t protect her from it.

“You can’t try to fix this, Cole.” Fen’s tone has gentled, but he doesn’t leave any room for argument. “Junie will survive this, but you have to let her.”

“What do we do in the meantime?” Hudson asks. “Because this defies reason. How is it even possible for it to be happening again?”

“Don’t engage, don’t comment,” Fen says. “Don’t even look at it again until I tell you to. The strategy here is to let Natalie dig herself a deeper hole, and I know that goes against your every instinct, Cole, but it’s tactical. Trust me. I’ve already confirmed that the Meridian story will break early Tuesday morning.” He waggles his brows. “I’m not above a little bribery for our Spite-Berry, and when it goes live, Natalie’s post will age very, very badly, very, very quickly. I already have the statement drafted that will go out under your name when that happens. Are you with me?”

My gaze hasn’t left Junie’s dark windows. “I’m with you.”

“Good.” He stands and looks across the driveway. “She still in there?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ve been stalking her window?”

“All night.”

Fen exhales. “We’ll get her back, Cole. Not today. Probably not next week. But we’ll get her back because she’s family and you’re family and that’s what we do.”

I have no doubt that we’ll keep the family together. I just don’t know what my relationship with Junie will be when that happens. One option is eternal light, and the other? Well, the other option will just be a different shade of hell made from the same foundation as my last six years.

NOLAN DOESN’T ARRIVE UNTIL ALMOST NINE THAT NIGHT. I’VE ONLY LEFT my position to shower, and that was just because Hudson forced the issue.

My friend has been on planes for nineteen hours. Tokyo to Detroit to Charleston, with a layover so tight he had to run through two airports—at least that’s what I heard from the Juniper & Her Berries group chat.

According to Fen, Hudson not-so-subtly told Nolan it was time to come home last week after both Junie and I asked him for help. He rallied the troops before he understood the war.

By the time Nolan rolls out of the rideshare in the dark, his shoulders are slumped, and it’s not from the weight of the small carry-on in one hand or the phone charger dangling from the other. He’s hampered by truth.

The driveway floodlight catches him, and he pauses to look up at me.

He doesn’t say *you fucking idiot*. He doesn’t call me a coward. Nolan simply walks up the driveway with the slow, careful gait of a man whose body has been crammed into an airplane for too long and whose heart is being pulled in two different directions—north, where his sister’s been broken in public twice now, and south, where his best friend is waiting to have their first fully honest conversation in years.

He climbs the porch steps in silence and sits next to me. “Hey, Cole.”

“Hi.”

He looks toward Junie’s apartment. Her windows are still dark, but thanks to Nana Mae and Katie, we at least know she’s awake, moving, and has food, even if she’s not eating it.

Nolan doesn’t ask me to explain. Hudson has undoubtedly done that.

And he doesn’t raise his voice, but I hang on his every word when he speaks.

“Hudson said you’ve been paying Natalie to keep a whole lot of Junie’s shit private. Then Junie called to tell me that she’d sent an email that will end Natalie’s career. Justice, she’d called it. Not once did she mention the blowback that would hit her on the tails of Grace’s betrayal. I’m honestly not even sure if she thought about the repercussions to herself—she just wanted Natalie and our parents to pay for their crimes, not you.”

I close my eyes. Junie really didn’t choose spite. She chose me.

“I sat in the airport lounge and tried to figure out which one of you I was angrier at, and honestly, I couldn’t decide. I’m so angry at the both of you for different reasons. Junie should’ve told us what Natalie was doing all those years ago. You should’ve told us the instant she tried to blackmail you. Junie, Hud, and Fen told me all of this, but I got nothing from you. Not even a text. For fuck’s sake, Cole. My parents set this in motion. Junie’s my sister. If anyone should’ve been protecting her, it should’ve been me.”

“Nol—”

“So I got on a plane. And on the way here, I had a lot of time to think. About Junie. About you. About the past six years and every moment I knew something was wrong but never pushed. About every time I let you tell me you were fine. About every time she looked sad when she thought no one was watching. All of it.”

He turns to me with all the pain that secrets can cause etched deeply into his expression. “And I decided that I forgive you, Cole.”

His words land in my chest like a live grenade.

“You had your reasons for doing the stupid shit you did. For the record, I don’t agree. You gave us all a future at the expense of your own, and that’s…it wasn’t your decision to make, but I understand why you did it, and I’m not your judge. But the silent savior bullshit is over—now you let us in and we fix it together.” He glances at Junie’s window. “All of it.”

“Just like that?” I ask.

“No, not just like that,” he barks. “It’s a decision I had to make, and I did it because I love you, but more importantly, I know how much you love her.”

“I do, but—”

“You broke my trust. I love you, but I don’t know if I can like you for a while. My parents fucked us all. My own mother said horrible shit no child should ever, ever hear. They fucked with Junie. *My sister*, Cole.

“Not that long ago, I practically gave you permission to love her, and I do believe that you do, but you also, in a fucked-up way, hung on to the two people who hurt her even more than Grace.”

He runs his hands roughly down his thighs. “And you allowed Junie to walk into that ballroom last night unprepared. You basically walked her straight into an ambush, and that’s not protection, that’s trying to cover your mistakes and hoping no one gets hurt. But Junie did. She was hurt by Natalie, embarrassed by you, and worst of all, when push came to shove, you chose to protect Natalie, not Junie.”

My eyes are so hot, I expect them to overflow at any moment.

“Junie needs time, Cole. I need time. My mother…fuck, my own parents!” He runs his hands over his thighs again like a nervous tick. “And I have to figure out what kind of brother I can be to you right now. Not whether, what kind. I’ll always be your family, but now the shape of us has changed, and Junie comes first. Too many people have failed at that—putting her first—me included.”

“I—”

“I believe you thought you were putting her first. Hell, you put all of us first, Cole, but you pushed us all away in order to do it.” He stands and stares back at her apartment. “She needed you then, but now she needs someone who will lift her up, not someone who will babyproof her path.”

Nolan walks down my stairs.

“She’s stronger than any of us ever gave her credit for,” he says. “I’m—I’m going to go see her now.”

My foot slides to the step below.

“You’re not coming with me.”

“I—I just want to know if she’s okay.”

“I’ll let you know.”

I sit motionless as he climbs the steps to Junie’s apartment. He knocks, and the door opens. Then the silhouette of my friend disappears into the apartment of the woman my silence broke last night. The door closes behind him while I sink back into the darkness.

I have no plan.

I’ve been told I’m loved.

That I’m a coward.

That I’m forgiven.

But I also know that forgiveness means nothing if I don’t make up for my mistakes with Junie.

I don’t know if she’s crying.

If she’s angry.

If she’s taking care of herself.

If she’s slept.

If she’s still wearing my ring.

I don’t get to know.

Fixing things myself came at a price I could never afford.

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REINFORCEMENTS

JUNIE

THE KNOCK AT MY DOOR IS…CALM.

It means my brother has arrived.

I knew he was coming.

After the shock of last night, Fen didn't take any chances and has been updating me privately on literally everything.

So when I open the door and Nolan steps inside with his arms held out wide, I fall into his embrace.

He doesn't ask me how I am or what I need him to do.

He just…holds me.

And it's exactly what I need.

I forgot how much I miss my big brother.

"Junie?"

I squeeze him tighter because if I let go, I'll cry. I'm not ready to cry yet. Crying means something ends.

"Junebug, I'll hug you for as long as you need, but it's getting late, so please tell me you have food because I haven't eaten in a very long time and I have no idea how late delivery works out here in geriatric world."

I sniffle against his chest. I do not cry. "I have plenty of food. They have an entire committee devoted to it, I think." Finally, I release him and lead him by the arm to the small kitchen that I've rarely used.

Somehow, I just always ended up in Cole's.

"Sit. I'll see what they brought over."

“I honestly don’t care what it is at this point. Just feed me, Junebug, because I’m about to eat my own arm off.”

Nolan’s the only one who ever called me Junebug. He stopped using the name when I was in high school and the mean girls started throwing bugs at me in the hallway. I never did prove that Natalie facilitated that attack, but no one else spent any time in our home, so she’s the most likely culprit even though she had long left high school.

I open a Tupperware of what looks like a pesto pasta, and Nolan rips it out of my hands.

“Geez, Dude. You want a fork?” I ask as he stuffs a big bite into his mouth with his fingers.

He shrugs, but I hand him one anyway.

“Do you want to heat it up?”

“No. I just need sustenance.”

He’s such a dork. It’s such a doctory thing to say.

I sit next to him at the two-person island as he demolishes three-quarters of the container, drinks two glasses of water, and finally washes his hands, all before he turns his blue gaze my way.

His smile is as sad as mine.

“Noley.” Just one word bleeds with all my pain. “You came. All the way from Tokyo.”

“I’ve heard, yes. It’s a bitch of a flight.”

“Mom—” I choke on her name. It’s as close as I come to admitting that she’s hurt me in ways that will never fully heal.

Nolan looks at me with our mother’s eyes and our father’s nose, his elbows resting on the counter between us.

“I’m here, Junie. For you. For Cole. For us. Always. Cole and Hudson will make sure that we all get through this. Fen is going scorched earth against Grace and Natalie now. And I’m here for you.”

That’s when I stop holding it in.

Not the tears that escaped without permission in Hudson’s rental car.

Not the ones that blended in with the water in the shower.

This time, I cry properly, with my whole body, as I slide to the floor just so I won’t fall off my stool.

It’s a release—a lifetime of hatred and never feeling like enough, of never knowing who I was or where I belonged.

And it’s a lot.

Nolan wedges himself in between me and the island, his back resting against the dishwasher, and pulls me into him without speaking. He holds me to him like he did when I was eight and the boys at school had figured out my mom had forgotten me again, and I weep into the front of his wrinkled button-down.

He doesn't shush me. With one hand on the crown of my head, he lets me ruin his shirt while he waits.

When I finally pull back, Nolan doesn't meet my eye with any judgment.

"I—" Hiccup. "I'm sorry about your shirt."

"I have other shirts, Junie."

I don't know what to say next. I'm…untethered. Emotionally. Physically. Lost. "You ate all my pasta."

He chuckles quietly. "You have other pasta." He hands me a tissue from a box he managed to grab at some point and stares at me while I blow my nose like a toddler—with no shame and zero fucks to give. "Tell me what you need, Juniper."

"I—I don't know." I sound pitiful. "I really don't."

"Okay." It doesn't sound okay though.

"Whatever you want to say, just say it, Noley."

He huffs, but it's not really a laugh. "So damn pushy. But fine. I need you to know that I'm angry with you both. I want to be clear about that. I've spent the last twenty hours trying to decide which of you I was angrier at, and I gave up somewhere over the ocean. It's a tie. But I'm here. I love you. And I'm furious."

Unease swirls in my gut. "You're furious? At me?"

"Yes."

"Why?" I sniff.

"Because you didn't tell me, Junie. It was my job to take care of you. Literally mandated by the Massachusetts family court, my job to take care of you, and you didn't tell me."

"About—" This could go so many ways.

"About Natalie. About what she did to you when you were a fucking teenager. About—Jesus, Junie—all of it. I'm your brother. My job is to protect you. Cole, Hud, Fen, they all feel the same way. If you had just used your goddamn voice to tell us about Natalie, she never would've been

allowed into your life or our home in the first place, but you didn't say a fucking word."

I close my eyes. "I—"

"I'm not asking you to defend yourself. I'm telling you what I've been stewing about while cramped on an airplane because if I don't, I'll explode. And I might actually fucking kill Tommy."

Tommy. Not Dad. He's lost the privilege of being our father, though in truth, that was something he lost years ago.

"I'm not surprised by mo—Anna's words." My chest feels like it's cracking in two. "And Tommy's part in it doesn't even scratch the surface of my pain because he's never been part of my life—not really, anyway. But it still—it hurts. It hurts so much."

He grunts. "I'm so sorry, Junie. Honestly, I wish I could go back. I knew Anna treated you differently, but I had no idea it was like…that."

"It wasn't your fault, Nolan."

"It wasn't yours either."

Dealing with the complicated emotions around my mother will take more time and energy than I have in reserve right now, so I simply nod.

"I don't know exactly what Tommy did," Nolan says. "But from what Hud has explained so far, it wasn't good. If Cole hadn't intervened, it could've really fucked up your life. And I hate to admit it, but I think any of us would've done the same thing."

I frown up at him.

"Seems we all want to protect you but missed that somewhere along the way, you grew up to be a fully capable adult." He blows out a harsh breath. "I have a lot of guilt over this, Junebug. About all of it. And I hate that we allowed Natalie into your home when you were vulnerable. None of us ever saw it."

I bump his shoulder with mine and lower my voice. "Natalie was very good at…manipulating me when I was younger. I truly believed if I spoke up, Cole would hate me, that it would cause a rift between all of you, and I didn't want to be responsible for that."

"Nothing and no one could ever come between us. And I promise you, had any of us, Cole especially, known what was happening, we would've stopped it. Please tell me you believe that."

"I-I do. Now."

"Good."

He pulls his knees up and rests his elbows on them. The cold cabinet behind me presses into my shoulder blades, but I'm too drained to move.

"We fucked up," he says on a harsh exhale.

"No, you didn't. You were also dealing with Anna and med school. Cole was—he is who he is. The boys were holding us together. I didn't—I didn't want to add *Cole's girlfriend is torturing me* to anyone's plate. I didn't always want to be the little girl you all had to worry about."

He rakes an agitated hand through his hair. "It wasn't your call to make. You were a child, Juniper."

"So were you. Maybe not legally, but neither of us walked out of that house without scars."

I'm not even sure why I keep it. That house was haunted by sadness long before I inherited it.

"I was your legal guardian, Junie. You should've known you could always come to me. I failed you there."

"I don't see it as a failure, Noley. I think…we were both just doing the best we could."

"But you've had years to tell me since." The hurt in his tone makes my stomach turn.

"I did."

He's quiet, as if he's reorganizing his thoughts, so I let him. "You made a decision about what the guys and I could handle."

"It wasn't a giant leap, Nolan. You were all in college, figuring yourselves out while also dealing with our dying mother and a teenager who was less than cooperative on any given day."

"You know who else has been making decisions for years about what we can and cannot handle?"

"Cole."

He nods, clasping his hands over his knees. "Cole."

I've done to Nolan what Cole did to me. Different scale, same mechanics, same psychological trick.

The mirror is exact, yet I'm sitting on my floor furious at Cole, and Nolan is sitting next to me, making me see reason.

"I'm sorry, Nolan."

He turns his head against the dishwasher and looks at me sideways. "I know. Now, should I be worried about the muffled buzzing coming from your couch cushions?"

“Honestly, the way my life’s been going lately, probably. We should just leave it there—that much buzzing never leads to anything good.”

He slowly shakes his head. “We’re not hiding anymore, Juniper. Our entire family is on this property now. We’re going to face everything that comes our way, together. For you and for Cole.”

Sadness crawls up my neck at a glacial pace.

“Are you going to check it, or do you want me to?”

I get up off the floor, slowly, as though I’m ninety, and retrieve the phone. I drop onto the couch, and Nolan follows a moment later, so I unlock my phone and hand it to him.

“It looks like a lot of Instagram notifications,” I say.

My big brother scrolls.

And scrolls.

And scrolls.

My anxiety is at a bursting point when his face turns a shade of red that isn’t healthy. And that’s saying something because he’s spent years perfecting the doctor face that gives nothing away.

“Junebug?”

“Hmm?” My thumb finds its way to my teeth, and before I can think better of it, I bite my nail. I haven’t bitten my nails since high school.

“This was posted nine hours ago.”

I almost roll my eyes.

“It has five thousand comments.”

“Yup.”

“Natalie fucking tagged you.”

“Geez, I know, Nolan.” What the hell does he expect me to do about it?

I may be the first to reach for spite, but the women in my life are masters at controlling their narrative.

“Why didn’t you lead with this when I walked in?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It seemed like we had more pressing, urgent family issues to get through first. Next time, I’ll know to prioritize the catastrophes in my life before you walk in my door.”

He looks at me with wide eyes. Then he laughs—once, dry, like he’s aiming for humorless but can’t quite master it.

“Fair,” he chuckles.

“I thought so.”

He flips through Natalie's slide show, pausing on her caption. *The cost of one woman's vendetta.*

"She's desperate," he says flatly. "She's trying to profit off the bullshit audience Grace has already built. That's the only way a post like this serves her. You, my little Spite-Berry, are once again collateral damage."

I shrug because it's something I've already come to terms with.

"She's using a photo of her disabled brother for fucking engagement. That tells us all we need to know about the kind of person we're dealing with."

"Well, that or when she wrote my number on the stall door at Fenway Park in a black Sharpie and encouraged people to call me for a good time. But yeah, her brother was a dead giveaway too."

"Jesus, Junie."

"It is what it is."

"As a medical professional. I'm—I'm genuinely— I cannot."

"She's a horrible human."

"You do seem to collect those," he grumbles.

"But her brother is innocent."

"So were you," he growls. "The fact that she's using a vulnerable adult who has not, to our knowledge, consented to being on a public platform as a prop, isn't a personal grievance. That's… Junie, that's not just gross, that's potentially actionable, depending on what his guardianship status is and who has the right to consent for him. This isn't Natalie having a bad day on social media, this is her making a choice."

He hands me my phone.

"Her brother's going to be collateral damage because of my decisions, Nolan."

"No. Nope. He's in this position because of the choices his sister made."

"I know that, but…" I've never even met this guy. I don't know what he's like, or if he's kind. I don't know if he's aware that life as he knows it is about to change or if Natalie has any kind of contingency plan in place.

"If I hadn't—"

Nolan opens his mouth to argue, but I put my hands up to stop him.

"If I had just thought, for a few minutes, I could've made the same choice but with less damage, I could've looked into her brother a little more. I could've…"

"You could've what? Saved him? Protected him?"

“I don’t know, okay? I just know I don’t like how I feel right now. I don’t deserve this, but neither does he.”

Nolan studies me as if I’m a zoo animal.

“I sent the email to take down Natalie. She hurt me, yes, but she hurt Cole, and that wasn’t something I was willing to accept.”

“The question is, why were you willing to accept that she hurt you, but not Cole?”

“I—” His question genuinely stumps me. What did he do, take a bunch of psychology classes in Japan? I scratch at my neck like I can’t breathe. “It’s what I knew, I guess.”

“And now you can unlearn that behavior because that shit isn’t healthy.”

“Yes, okay. Fine. But my point is, I sent that email to take down Natalie, not Marcus.” That’s the point I’ve been struggling with since she tagged me in her post. “Marcus isn’t collateral I’m willing to accept.”

“Okay.”

I stand and begin to pace in front of my window that overlooks the driveway, and pause mid-step because freaking Cole is still on his damn porch. I jump behind the curtain and then continue to pace from the couch to the island and back again.

“There must be something I can do, right? Some way I can undo what I’ve done? Not completely. I still want Natalie to suffer—Spite-Berry is ingrained deep—but for Marcus? There must be safety measures and services for people who need help. Right? They won’t just…toss him out on the street?”

“Why do you feel so compelled to help a man you’ve never met?”

I scoff. “Did you switch specialties? I thought your focus was on women’s health, which is weird as fuck, but whatever. When did you become a shrink?”

“Answer the question, Juniper.”

Why? Because guilt is heavy. Because I’ve been on the shit end of a social media takedown? Because me helping Marcus would be pouring salt on Natalie’s wounds?

No. While I admit that last one is a tiny bit gratifying, that’s not why I’m focused on helping him.

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” I finally say.

“It looks as though Natalie’s raising a lot of funds through her GoFundMe account.”

I cringe. “She is. But…the truth always comes out. When people learn the truth, they may not come through with the funding they’ve promised.”

“That’s true.” He catches my arm right as I’m about to pace back to the kitchen. “You’re sure this is what you want to do?”

“I am. I don’t have a lot of resources right now, but I want to at least try.”

“You know this is something I can help with, right? Even though I’ve been in Japan, I still have a large network through my med school colleagues. Social workers, case managers, disability advocates.”

“You’ll help?”

He nods.

“Thank you, Nolan. For…everything.”

He chuckles and pulls me into a hug. “I’m your brother—this is the kind of shit you never have to thank me for.”

I hug him tighter, not ready to let go.

“I’m going to make some calls, okay?” He rubs my back, and I release him. “It’ll take some time, but I’ll do what I can for Marcus.” He pulls a laptop from his bag and a phone from his pocket, then sets himself up at my coffee table.

While he works, I actively avoid the front windows, and instead take the longest, hottest shower of my life. By the time I emerge an hour later, Nolan has a baseball game on my small TV, his feet up on the coffee table, and a beer that makes me wonder if Katie stopped by.

“Done?” I ask, squeezing in beside him.

“For now,” he says. “His actual care plan will likely take months to implement, but I called a friend at Mass General who worked in disability law before switching over to medicine. She called a colleague in New York.”

“Is that legal?”

“It is. After speaking with my friend, it’s likely that Natalie has guardianship of Marcus, which gives her the legal right to post whatever she wants. Whether it’s ethical is another question entirely. Regardless, my friend’s colleague in New York will dispatch a case worker to check in on things and offer assistance—that’s all we can do. But it’s much more than most people would do, considering your history with Natalie. And while I’m still not sure how I feel about it, I am proud of you.”

“Nolan.”

He shifts his weight to give me his full attention.

“You did all of…that…in an hour?”

“Junebug, that’s the least impressive thing I’ve done in an hour in a very long time. But no, I didn’t do it all in an hour. The reality is that this will take time. And due to privacy laws, we may never get an update. What I did in an hour was set things in motion. I’ve given them a course to follow. It will be up to Natalie and her ego as to how smoothly it will go.”

I laugh. A small one. The sound is wet and tired.

“Marcus will be okay—more than okay. You did that, Juniper. You can do incredible things, baby sister. And you can do even more when you remember to let us all in.”

“What are we going to do about Tommy…and the house? The loan?”

“Tommy will never hurt you again. He’ll pay for his part in this one way or another. The loan, we’ll work out as a family. And the house? That’s completely up to you.”

I can’t speak, and thankfully, when he reaches across the space to squeeze my hand, I don’t have to.

“Life is going to be…messy for a while. But we’re all here, right behind you, with the tools to help sweep it all away. All you have to do is let us.”

“O-okay.” I drop my head to his shoulder because I don’t want to cry anymore.

“I’m going to stay over here tonight,” he says against my head.

“You can have my bed.”

“No. The couch is fine.” It’s not. It seats two people, but his tone is final, and I’m probably not going to win.

Outside the window, Cole’s porch light is on, and he’s still there.

I can’t see him from this angle, but I feel him.

“I’ll get you some blankets,” I say, easing out of my brother’s comforting hold.

When I return, Nolan’s at the window, staring out into the darkness.

“Can I tell you one more thing?” he says. “Then I’ll shut up and let you sleep.”

My hands clench in the blanket. “Sure.”

“Cole has been on that porch since he returned home. He hasn’t slept, he’s pissing in his bushes and only changed his clothes because Hudson muscled him into the outdoor shower and soaked his tux. He’s been sitting there, with all of us coming and going. He’s forcing Hudson to bring all the

files outside so they can work. He's attempted to send everyone to you because he thinks you need us more, and he hasn't come to you because you asked him for space. But…he's hurting too."

"Don't, Nolan."

"I'm not telling you to forgive him. I'm not telling you to do anything. I'm just telling you what's true because he spent six years culling the information you received, and I'm not going to follow that pattern. But honestly, I don't think he will either. My job as your big brother is to give you all the information and then support you in whatever you decide."

I didn't know that your lungs could actually tremble, but it feels like mine are now. "What's true, Nolan?"

"He's across the driveway, breaking, and hasn't once asked me to fix it. He didn't ask me to deliver a message or plead his case. He listened when I told him what he needed to hear, but he's staying there, away from you, because he's keeping a promise to you in the only way he knows how. That is—that's how he loves, Junie. By fixing problems, but this isn't something he can fix without you. But don't for one minute ever think that he isn't down there loving you."

He turns to face me, my own pain reflected in his eyes.

"I didn't understand the depth of it when we were younger, but I do now," he says. "He loves you in a way that goes beyond reason and right or wrong. He loves you even though he spent years believing he was a monster for doing so. That's a love to think on."

He leans down, kisses my forehead, then folds himself onto a couch that's far too small for him. "I love you too, Junie. Now it's up to you to decide what your future looks like."

He turns off the lamp, plunging us into the type of darkness that has shadows dancing across the far wall as the light from Cole's porch bleeds in through my windows.

I walk on wooden legs to my bedroom and peer into Cole's darkened office, only illuminated now by the moonlight.

Exhaustion weighs on me in a way that only happens after a full and complete emotional breakdown. It's something I've felt before, when my mother died and when Grace lied. But it's never hit me so fully before.

Through everything I've endured, Cole is still the only person with the ability to break me beyond recognition.

Now I have to decide if I can trust him with that much power.

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ALMOST THERE

COLE

THE SCUFF OF NANA MAE'S SLIPPERS ALERTS ME TO HER PRESENCE BEFORE she becomes visible in my driveway. Her hair's down, and she's in her bathrobe. I don't think I've seen her this disheveled twice in a row since I was small enough to fit in her lap.

She huffs when she sees me but pulls one of the rocking chairs to the edge of the porch to sit next to me.

The card table Hudson set up with all my files sits next to her. We're working out here because leaving my post feels like giving up on Junie, and I won't do that.

"Drink the coffee or don't," she says, eyeing the mug she gave me yesterday that now has a gross film on it. "But stop staring at it like it owes you an apology."

"Nana Mae—"

"I'm not finished. And I'm not as fragile as you think I am, so spill it."

Swallowing the guilt, I start slowly. First is the story of how I found the foreclosure notice to Junie's house when I was in charge of organizing all our bills there, and what I did to clean up that mess by tying it to a piece of my grandfather's legacy with a loan I'll be repaying for years. Then I move on to Devin, the ledger he found that gave him the blueprints to steal from us.

When I'm done, the silence of an early coastal Carolina morning settles around us. I'm both lighter and more devastated by my actions than I can

begin to process.

“Cole.” She isn’t crying. Nana Mae doesn’t cry where you can see it. “I’ve known about Devin—to some extent—since the second quarter, when I started organizing your paperwork.” A chill hits the air that has nothing to do with the temperature.

“Then why—”

“Because I was waiting for you to come to me.”

Oh.

“I knew you needed to be the one doing the protecting. You’ve had this need in you since your parents died.” She shakes her head. “You’re built like your mother, you know? Your brain, your empathy, your drive. But you have more of your father in you than I gave you credit for. The thing that was in his blood and had him running into that burning building to save your mother is the same thing coursing through you now with the need to protect, to fix, and to do it yourself. Papa and I saw it in you then. It’s why we decided that I’d move to Boston with you so you could stay in the only home you’d ever known. And I see it in you now—the way it’s crushing you not to fix what’s broken.”

If I so much as blink, my emotions will spill out, and I’m not sure I’ll be able to stop them.

“Do you ever regret it?” I ask, my voice too hoarse to be heard far. “You missed out on Papa’s last few good years to be with me in Boston—”

“Papa and I knew we’d made the right choice the moment you started kindergarten and you came home with three new best friends. You didn’t realize you were letting them carry the load when it got too much for you, but we saw it. We saw how Fenway would pull you from the darkness when the sadness got too much. We saw how Nolan silently cared about if you had a seat at every table. And we saw how Hudson bulldozed you into new experiences. And for that alone, we knew it was the right decision. We may have lost our daughter when you lost your parents, but you gave us a piece of her that we would’ve moved heaven and hell to protect.”

“You did.”

“Mm-hmm. But somewhere along the way, you forgot that family means leaning on each other. It’s time, Cole.” She pats my shoulder with a heavy hand. “Gotta go see what those boys are up to before they burn down your kitchen. Think about what I said.”

With my emotions all over the place, I press my fingers to her bony hand and nod. The soothing sound of her slippers scuffing across the floorboards is the last thing I hear before my phone starts vibrating again.

Fen & Tonic:

Hudson: Injunction filed at 9. Meridian's general counsel called forty minutes later. They're dealing with the fallout of Junie's email and don't want more bad press. The prize money will clear by Wednesday at the latest.

Hudson: Next time you want to go after Natalie, fucking warn me. I just got the copy of your AIA filing.

Hudson: Drink some fucking water.

A bottle of water hits my back.

I drink it, then hold up the empty bottle. The screen door slams shut behind me.

Fen: Story confirmed for Tuesday. Rolls out at 8 a.m. Eastern. Two outlets. Your statement is locked and loaded.

Fen: (Heart eye emoji)

I fucking hate sitting here doing nothing. I hate it with every fiber of my being. But I do it because they're the experts now. And I asked for their help. They're doing what I can't, and sitting here while they do it is the second hardest thing I've ever done in my life.

I'm about to turn the phone over when a message from Nolan comes through.

Nolan: She slept. Ate some eggs. She's working at her kitchen table. That's ALL you get.

I read Nolan's text three times.

She slept.

She ate.

So I allow my brothers to fix the shit I cannot control while I mentally draft plans to fix my relationship with Junie.

AROUND FIVE, HUDSON APPEARS AT MY SIDE IN HIS NATURAL STATE OF angry.

"Get up," he barks.

"Go away."

"I swear to Christ, Cole. If you don't get your ass up and into a shower, I'm going to hose you off where you sit. You can't sit vigil in a destruction you caused."

I bristle at the truth in his brutal assessment.

"Jesus," he groans. "What I mean is, get your shit together. You're not doing anyone any good sitting out here like a sad fucking puppy. Get inside. Get yourself cleaned up. And get. Your. Shit. Together. Before Nana Mae calls the fire department. She's already threatened it, so don't test her."

That almost makes me chuckle. And I do need to use a bathroom that isn't a bush, so I stand, swaying slightly on my feet, probably from dehydration as much as exhaustion.

"For fuck's sake." Hudson opens the screen door, then holds out an arm as though he expects me to fall. "Listen, Cole. I know sitting on the sidelines goes against everything in your nature—it would mine too—but you're doing the right thing. The only thing. Trust us to untangle this mess, and in the meantime, decide what you can do to stabilize your future."

My future is only a future if Junie is by my side, but I bat his arms away and head inside.

The house instantly feels…wrong. Unused, barren, lonely. Like I've been gone a month and the rooms have started making decisions without me.

Nana Mae is murmuring with Fen somewhere in the belly of the house, so I move in the opposite direction and head for my upstairs office.

The moment I enter, my gaze jumps to the window for any signs of life across the way, but nothing has changed.

Not yet.

Those words have been my crutch for years. The thing I told myself every time I *almost* let her in, *almost* asked Hudson for help, *almost* confided in Nolan.

Not yet was a door I kept locked because I was afraid of the room behind it.

There's no door there anymore though, and now it's time for me to walk through it.

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ARE YOU OKAY?

JUNIE

NOLAN IS STILL PASSED OUT ON MY COUCH IN A WAY ONLY DOCTORS AND soldiers sleep—fully, instantly, with the assumption that someone will wake them in case of emergency.

He got up to use the restroom at one point when I was working. Then he forced me to eat with him before saying he was just going to rest for a few more minutes. He's been out most of the day, and the only place in this entire apartment I should not be is at this window.

Yet here I am, staring straight into Cole's office.

I'm stuck in a war inside my head. There's a version of me who wants to charge across the driveway in my pajamas, demanding answers, and another version of me who wants to file the questions under quarterly review and never address them.

And somehow, in this battle, everyone is losing.

So instead of picking a lane, I open my curtain—an olive branch.

He leaves his light on—like hope.

As I climb into bed, I decide both things can be true, even if we end up at different destinations in the end.

"WAKEY-WAKEY." KATIE'S SLIGHTLY SHRILL VOICE STARTLES ME FROM A deep sleep, and I almost roll right out of bed.

“Sorry,” Nolan grumbles. “She said she’s your best friend and deserves to see for herself that you’re okay.” I don’t have to open my eyes to know he’s staring at her with suspicion. “I only let her in because Fen corroborated her BFF status.”

“Debatable,” I groan.

The sun has decided on happiness today, and I want to throw a trash bag over it to plunge us all back into darkness.

“Come on, spill.” Katie flops herself onto my bed, tucking her arms behind her head like this is a completely normal thing for a forty-year-old woman to do. “I can only hold off the Safe Haven Wellness Committee for so long. You gotta give me something, otherwise they’ll all end up on your doorstep again.”

Cracking one eye in Nolan’s direction, I almost laugh. He’s somewhere in the middle of tossing Katie out on her ass and letting her bamboozle me.

“It’s fine,” I tell him. “She won’t go away until she gets what she came here for.”

Katie’s purse clinks as she holds it above my prone body. “I brought mimosas.”

“Ah.” I don’t remember seeing Nolan ever look this uncomfortable. “I do have to go check on some…things.”

I nod and drag myself to a semi-sitting position.

“Nana Mae set the boys up at the clubhouse,” Katie says while dragging two collapsible champagne glasses from her bag. “Fenway and Hudson have an entire war room set up.”

“Why? How long are they staying?”

The panic must show on my face because Nolan offers a placating smile I hate.

“Indefinitely,” he says. “We all are.”

I wasn’t consulted on this. But I’m also probably too tired to fight it.

Freaking Boston boys.

“Fine,” I sigh. “Go do what you have to do.”

Nolan comes close, then kisses the side of my head so he can whisper, “I won’t be far. If you need a rescue, call me.”

Katie snorts. She’s practically on top of me, so there’s no way she missed Nolan’s words.

“We’ll be fine,” she says, handing me a mimosa she poured from a small hot-pink thermos.

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” he grumbles, but he leaves me alone with my annoying best friend.

I eye the mimosa, and then Katie. “Do you have a drinking problem I need to be aware of?”

“No.” She rolls her eyes. “Bea says I use alcohol as a social crutch because I don’t trust that I’m interesting enough on my own to hold anyone’s attention. I blame my ex, but we’re not here to talk about me.”

“Katie—”

When did I turn into someone who can’t recognize when someone else is hurting? This is definitely a character flaw to work on.

“No bullshit,” she says, and I’m not prepared when she levels me with the most serious expression I’ve ever seen on her.

Her bubbly concoction helps me swallow my nerves.

“There’s no testosterone here now, no family bonds forcing you to make peace. It’s just you.” She furrows her brow. “And me.”

I take another small sip.

“Are you okay? And remember, I said no bullshit. I don’t want a manufactured answer. I don’t want what you’d tell Nana Mae, your brother, or those man-children all trying to outmaneuver the cunts in your life. I want the honest, broken, real answer, Junie. Are *you* okay?”

As far as best friends go, I could have seriously done worse. I have done worse, actually. Way. Way. Worse.

For all of Katie’s quirks, she’s only ever tried to be there for me. And she’s never once asked for anything in return.

I’ve never had a friendship where I wasn’t carrying all the weight of it.

That’s the only reason I have for opening my heart and telling her the truth. “I don’t know.”

She nods like she understands. Like she’s been there before and knows what it’s like to feel lost.

And she doesn’t judge.

She simply allows me to…be.

Katie just might be the friend I never wanted but have always needed.

NUMBERS HAVE ALWAYS MADE MORE SENSE TO ME THAN PEOPLE. BUT BY two that afternoon, even numbers need a translator.

Somehow, instead of the Q3 spreadsheet I was trying to get lost in, I end up following a rabbit hole of small business owners who have all been taken advantage of.

Many of them are from women-led companies.

Most of them simply trusted the wrong person—which focuses my anger and sadness into something almost productive.

Because I know how that is.

The deeper I dig, the more alive I become.

Variance analysis.

Pattern recognition.

Reconciling figures that should match and don't.

This, I can do.

There's something deeply, unfashionably comforting about a spreadsheet that doesn't require me to have feelings about it. The spreadsheet doesn't care about welcome baskets, or windows, or lamps that remain on. The spreadsheets have columns and the columns have rules and the rules always apply, which is more than I can say about any other system in my life.

What if *I* help these people?

Before I can go full Juniper Mercer and create a complete business plan, there's a musical knock at my door at the same time that my phone rings. Taylor Swift's "You Belong with Me" blaring from my phone speaker can mean only one thing—Fenway Jones gained access to my phone.

And the irony of the song he chose isn't lost on me either.

"Fen."

"Hi, Spite-Berry." His tone is off, and my hackles are officially raised. "Since you haven't left your apartment, I figured I'd come over to give you an update. You gonna let me in?"

With the Berry Brigade of Meddlers, it was only a matter of time before one of them found their way over here. Today, I'm glad it's Fen.

When I open the door, he's chuckling, and I put down my phone. "Yeah," he says. "You look about as good as Cole does."

"Thanks. I think. What's all that?"

"Don't say no until you've heard me out." He pushes past me into my kitchen and sets his stuff down on the island. "This is iced coffee with two

sugars and a splash of oat milk."

It feels like a bribe.

"This portfolio…" His nerves show when the muscle in his cheek twitches. "Contains the next two hours of your life. We're going to write, role play, and record the thing you've been putting off."

"Fen." Acid floods my stomach, so I set down the coffee.

"I haven't finished my proposal. This isn't a press release. It's not a statement. It's whatever you decide it will be, but it's time for you to tell your story, and I'm here as your friend, your unpaid PR consultant, and the person who's been sitting in a war room with your brother and our lawyer for way too many hours waiting for you to be ready to rewrite your narrative. The thing you don't understand—that all of us see—is that you *are* ready. You've always been ready. You've just been waiting for permission when that permission should've always come from you."

I reach for my water bottle with a shaky hand. "I don't have a good track record with posting shit, Fen."

"We're not posting anything…yet. First, we're going to storyboard the fuck out of it, and I won't let you make a bad decision today. Then we're going to record it. After that, I'll edit the hell out of it like it's the next Hollywood blockbuster because I come with receipts. The cost of trying is zero, but the price of doing nothing is too high."

He opens the portfolio and then starts taping sheets of paper to my kitchen cabinets. Under those, he tapes up pages of notes in three different colors of ink. Grace's timeline in red. Natalie's GoFundMe with Cole's projects written in blue. Screenshots from my own vlog and social media with notes for each in a vibrant purple.

It all lays out the destruction of my life in a rainbow of truths and lies but leaves out a key detail—my parents.

"When did you do all of this?" I ask, my fingers trailing over a screenshot of a vlog I made when I was sixteen. It's frozen on Natalie's face and the sneer she threw my way right before she said something vile. When he asked for permission to go through them, I didn't realize they'd end up as wallpaper.

"Sunday night and most of Monday morning. Hudson annotated my notes behind me, fact checking everything three times. We've been waiting for you to invite us in, and you haven't, so I'm coming at you like the Kool-Aid Man. Sit down."

I sit. “We’re not discussing what my parents did?” I ask, staring at the storyboard.

He shakes his head. “That might have legal ramifications for you and Cole, so we’re not going to take chances with that until we have to. But trust! Cole, Nolan, and Hudson are being vicious about it.”

There are too many possibilities to fathom.

“That’s their problem to solve, Junie. This is yours.”

Right. I have a job to do too.

“Tell me what you want people to know, Junie. Not what you want to say. What you want them to *know*. They’re very different things.”

I open my mouth, and he stands, pulling markers from his bag and walking to the first sheet of paper taped on my cabinet.

“I want them to know that I…was wrong.”

He frowns. “Go on.”

Collecting my thoughts is like catching fireflies. They blink brightly and fade just as fast. “Um…I guess they should know I was wrong for waiting so long to stand up for myself. That by the time I did, the only way I knew how to move forward was to react. I want them to know that…I’m not who they tried to create. I’m not the villain.”

“Junie, you’re not the villain. You’ve just learned to be your own antagonist. We can work with this, keep going.”

And for the next two hours, we do.

“This is really good,” Fen says, stepping back from the storyboard we’ve created.

His phone chimes, The Clash’s “I Fought the Law” playing loudly in my small kitchen.

“Hudson hates this song.” He laughs while checking the message.

“Hudson says, and I quote, ‘Tell her Cole and I went through all Natalie’s old blackmail, and we can prove duress using her threats against Junie. We’ll handle the foreclosure, loan, and any legal ramifications once I obtain a warrant to get proof that Tommy processed the original loan illegally. Cole filed an AIA ethics report, naming himself the documented author of three projects, and he included proof of authorship, so this goes beyond Meridian now—he’s going after Natalie’s license. The article goes live at eight tomorrow morning. Don’t be cute, Fen, tell her verbatim.’”

My stomach crawls into my throat—I was just dropped off the top of a roller coaster I wasn’t prepared for.

Cole is…all in?

“He filed,” I say.

“Without telling anyone,” Fen confirms. “Including me. We only found out because he listed Hudson as his attorney, so he received an email confirmation. Cole signed his name to the public record on his own work. He made a choice to go against Natalie. He made a choice to fight—even before the gala.”

He doesn’t say *to fight for you*, but that’s what I hear.

“Wait,” I say, standing, then clenching my fists at my sides while my brain catches up. “Can he get into trouble? He did, technically, give her those designs.”

“Under duress,” Fen clarifies. “And Hudson now has the receipts that prove it.”

“Receipts,” I say under my breath.

“Junie.” Fen sets down his marker. “Do you know what this means?”

“Cole chose spite?”

He laughs. “No, I think he chose you. Again.”

I stare at him warily.

“Think about it, Spite-Berry. Cole has just done the public-record version of what you did with the Meridian email. He matched your move and raised you another by going after Tommy too. He isn’t expecting you to do anything with that information—he doesn’t even know I’m telling you. The only reason I am is because if you found out from tomorrow’s press release, you’d be furious we kept it from you.”

He’s right. I know he is. So why do I still feel the mountain of emotion crushing my windpipe?

“Talk to me,” Fen says. Part of the reason he’s so good at his job is that he’s so damn good at reading people.

“There are so many people to be mad at right now, but I can’t figure out my next move because I don’t know whose voice is telling my story. Does that even make any sense? I’ve been Spite-Berry for so long I genuinely don’t know what I want to say when I’m not bracing for impact. I-I still don’t know who I am. The Junie who arrived in Porchlight Cove is gone. I’m not even sad about that. I’m just— I don’t know who replaced her.”

“I can understand that.”

“And, as much as I love Cole, I don’t think he knows who he is either. Not now, when the rules he’s lived by have just come crashing down. How

could he?”

“What are you saying?”

“I-I can’t be here.”

“Junie—”

“At least, not right now. I need time, Fen. I need space.”

Fen looks devastated, but I can tell he understands. “Are you sure about this?”

I nod, even though I’m not. I’m not sure about anything except that I’m confused and hurt, and I need spreadsheets for my spreadsheets to sort through this mess.

With a heavy sigh, Fen tosses his marker onto the counter. “What do you need?”

I stare at the storyboard behind him. I know that’s step one.

He seems to understand because he nods. “What else?”

“After we do this, can—can you just…let me go?”

“Jesus, Junie.” It pains him, but I know he’ll do it. “I can, but I don’t know if they will.” He jerks his thumb in the direction of Cole’s house.

“I just need a little time,” I plead. “To figure out who I am without all the…everything.”

He crosses the room and hugs me so hard I can barely breathe.

“I’ll do what I can. But trust me, a week is possible. Two’s pushing it. Longer than that, and I can’t be held responsible for what any of them do. And you have to promise to check in. Every day.”

“I will.”

“They’re going to kick my ass.”

“You run faster than any of them.”

“Good thing too. One more thing. You have to tell them that you’re leaving. We’re not running away anymore, okay?”

The promise I made Cole pushes against my ribs, so I agree. “While I… record this, can you gather the guys?”

Fen purses his lips but does as I ask.

I’ve read the script that Fen and I created five times. I know it’ll take approximately three minutes to read, so I head to my bathroom to wash my face and do my hair the way I do every other day of my life—haphazardly, like an afterthought.

Then I place my phone in the tripod that Fen left, open the video app, and press record.

I deliver it in one take.

It’s not polished or perfect. My voice cracks in places I wish it hadn’t, but I own it when it happens. I stare directly into the camera, even when my eyes fill with too much moisture. There’s nothing practiced here.

It’s raw. Painful. Honest.

When I’ve finished, I watch it back, only once. It’s not pretty. It’s not viral-ready. But it’s me.

It’s my story.

My truth.

Then I send it to Fenway, knowing he’s going to splice it with proof of my timeline of events, then I turn my phone off completely and walk back to my bedroom in the dark.

Cole’s office light filters in through my window, not brightly but a beacon just the same.

My hand hovers over my light switch. If Cole’s light is a beacon, mine will send a message, and I don’t know what I want it to say yet.

I leave it off, but I do plug in a nightlight. The LED is meant for a child but illuminates the space just enough to say I’m lost, but I’ll find my way.

It’s as much as I’m able to give for now.

Then I pack a small bag and walk outside.

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BROKEN HEARTS

COLE

I STAND ON MY FRONT PORCH, NUMB, WHILE MY HEART BLEEDS AT JUNIE'S feet.

I was too late to fix it.

She asked Fen to gather us all here. Hudson and Nolan flank me, probably to hold me back if I go after her.

Because I will. And everyone here knows it.

"I'm sorry," she says. She's speaking to us all, but her focus is entirely on me.

"Where will you go?" Nolan asks. His words are gruff when he's upset.

"I just…" Her piercing blue eyes cut straight to the core of me. "I have some ghosts to chase before I can be whole. Before…I can make any decisions. About anything."

"Are you coming back?" My words are so soft I'm not sure she can hear me from twenty feet away.

"I—" She breaks eye contact for the first time since she came to stand in front of me five minutes ago. "This is my family. I don't know how I'll fit yet, but I'll come back. I just…can't make any promises about who I'll be when I do."

I have no right to ask anything of her. But I do it anyway. "But you will come back?"

"I…will." The fingers of her right hand tug on the engagement ring.

“Don’t.” The word cracks and shifts in the air like it can’t find the right tone. “Don’t do that. Not yet.”

She clasps her hands together tightly, then turns on her heel, climbs into her car, and drives away with every piece of my soul that matters.

My drafting table has my forehead imprint on it, and the lamp next to it has been on for so many hours it’s probably becoming a fire hazard.

Nolan clears his throat in my doorway, and I lift my head. He’s wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt that looks like mine. I forgot what it was like living with all these guys. Nothing is off-limits.

He enters my domain looking like he isn’t sleeping much better than I am.

We’re both feeling the effects of Junie’s departure.

“Mae wants us all downstairs in fifteen minutes. She’s on her way over,” he says. “The article drops at eight, and Fen’s been up all night editing Junie’s video. He scheduled it to go live at 8:15. We’re going to watch it together.”

My erratic heartbeat causes another fissure between my ribs.

“Okay,” I say.

“She made it to Boston.”

I nod because I’ve been attached to the Juniper & Her Berries group chat since she left.

“I’ll put some coffee on. It’ll help.” He looks me over again. “And I’ll add some protein powder to it.”

I barely contain my cringe. Juniper would never desecrate coffee that way.

He pauses at the door. “Cole?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t agree with how you went about things, but…thank you. For always looking out for Junie…and for the rest of us.”

“You’re my family.”

“And you’re ours. But…”

I tense, waiting for the hit.

“What comes next will be hard. For all of us. And you need to prepare yourself. The article isn’t the hard part.”

“What is?”

He shakes his head. “You’ll see.”

I hear his feet on every step, and I follow his path to my family room with dread weighing me down.

Nana Mae is fluttering around the space, placing scones, cinnamon rolls, and breakfast sandwiches anywhere she can find room. It’s what she does when she’s nervous—she stress-bakes and flutters when something’s bothering her.

Hudson sits in the center of the couch with his laptop open in front of him and a yellow legal pad beside it. Fen sits next to him, close enough to annoy him but not close enough to touch. He’s holding an iPad in one hand, watching three things at once like a child who just discovered cartoons. Nolan stands against the back wall with his arms folded across his chest, not making eye contact with anyone.

Nana Mae spots me first. “Sit,” she says, then points at the open space next to Hudson.

It’s as if we’re fifteen again and she’s scolding us for sneaking out on Papa’s boat in the middle of the night when we visited him during spring break. That was a mistake we only made once. I’d never seen her so mad.

Without a word, I take my seat next to Hud.

“Someone tossed us a Hail Mary,” Hud says once I’m seated. “Tommy’s made some enemies at PC Trust, so when they heard there was a warrant coming, one of them pulled every hard copy she could find and even highlighted everything she thought was suspicious. I skimmed them, and even a quick look indicates that Junie’s house wasn’t the first time he benefited from a shady loan.”

Fucking Tommy. Hudson’s right. I should have done much more than knock out a couple of his teeth.

“This woman reached out to me quietly. I won’t gain access to any of it officially until the warrant is submitted. But she also did me a favor and looked into the loan you obtained to buy out the original one.”

“Hud, don’t do anything that can get you disbarred.” That’s exactly why I didn’t go to him in the first place.

“Have some faith,” he grumbles. “The good news is, Tommy does appear to have kept everything about your loan aboveboard. That means,

regardless of what he told you, you didn't do anything illegal. That doesn't mean it's right—you should've still come to us—but it wasn't illegal."

I've spent so many years worried that I wouldn't be able to protect Junie that I had no idea some small piece of me was also worried that I would be implicated in her parents' fraudulent schemes. The relief nearly knocks me over.

"Hudson?" Nana Mae says.

"Eight on the dot." His eyes haven't left the clock on his screen. "*ArchDaily* refreshes on the hour. *The Architect's News* is two minutes after." It doesn't stop him from obsessively refreshing his screen.

The TV mounted above the fireplace is turned on but holds the Apple emblem idle on the screen. Fen must be planning to stream Junie's video so we can watch it unfold life-sized.

At eight, Hudson's screen refreshes, and he pushes his laptop to the center of the coffee table so we can all see it. The headline is clean. Direct.

"Architects at War."

The subtitle is less flashy, but just as direct.

"Architect Cole Whittaker Files AIA Ethics Report Naming Himself as Author of 'The Whisper of Souls Memorial' and Two Other Projects Credited to Meridian's Natalie Moore."

Hudson slowly scrolls as we all read. The article is six pages long. It doesn't name Marcus or the blackmail. It simply states public records as fact. I read it once, the way you'd read your own obituary if it had accidentally run early.

Nana Mae huffs. A small, satisfied sound. "Good. That's that."

"That," Fen says, looking up from his iPad with an expression I don't like, "is not all."

Every head in the room turns to him slowly as he presses some buttons on his iPad, and my TV freezes on a recent image of Junie.

I might actually be sick. She looks sad. And so fucking lost. All I want to do is fix her.

"It's live," Fen whispers.

"This is going to be fucking brutal." Hudson curses.

Nana Mae doesn't even scold him for the swear because her gaze is locked on Junie too. Every person in this room loves her.

"Be warned," Fen says. "She sent it to me last night. I cleaned up the audio, and timed the b-roll, dropping it in the queue. It's going to—" His

gaze lands on mine. “It’s going to hurt to watch it.”

You could hear a pin drop as Fen presses play.

Junie’s sitting in her apartment with her hair piled in a messy way on her head. It’s how she looks when she thinks no one’s watching. This—the real Junie—is who she’s presenting to the world, and it chokes the life out of me. She’s wearing no makeup. She’s not using a filter. She hasn’t done a single thing to look ready for the camera.

Then she looks straight into the lens, and it’s as though she’s staring straight into my heart.

“My name is Juniper Mercer,” she begins. *“You know me as the villain in many tales, but we all know every good story has three converging points. You’ve heard theirs. Now I’ll tell you mine. Then you can decide the truth.”*

“Oh, sweetheart,” Nana Mae says.

Hudson sets down his pen.

“I lost my mom when I was sixteen years old. We had a complicated relationship, but it was ours. At twenty-four, I now understand that she loved me the only way she knew how—with timelines, requirements, expectations, and limits. But she was my mom, and I witnessed her die slowly over the course of three years.”

“Fuck.” Nolan drops down beside me.

“I bore the brunt of her sadness. Her pain. Her anger. I took the verbal hits and called them hugs. I took her rants and called it love. Because that’s what good girls do. Right?

“When she finally died, I felt an overwhelming sense of relief. I no longer had to witness her pain. I no longer had to carry her scars.”

I ball my hands into fists so tightly that the blood flow constricts.

She took the hits and renamed them hugs. She was sixteen! Sixteen and sitting in the same kitchen with me, and I didn’t know how bad it was—with her mother, with Natalie. I didn’t see it. I thought I was witnessing her grief, but I was really watching her survive.

Nana Mae releases a broken sob and doesn’t apologize for it.

Fen, Hudson, Nolan, and I all hold our collective breath. This is a failure for us all. But I was closest to her. I should have known. I should have seen.

“At sixteen, I didn’t know what to do with these inconvenient truths. I didn’t have any friends. I had a bully who made sure of it. Natalie has

always moved in shadows."

The sound that escapes my lips is more animal than human, and Nolan presses his hand to my shoulder. Solidarity.

"But I had my brother and his best friends. They took care of me and shepherded me the best way they knew how. My brother mostly kept his protective big brother persona. One of his friends became the enforcer—he made sure I didn't color too far out of the lines. One friend became my biggest cheerleader—he instilled questionable amounts of self-confidence in a girl who had never been shown her worth. The other guy, well, he became my best friend. My confidant. My first love even before I knew what love truly felt like."

The room falls into a stillness only known in death.

Hudson's the first to speak, his words thick and broken. "I'm the enforcer."

Fen's even quieter. "I'm the cheerleader."

Nolan doesn't have to say anything.

My eyes can't leave the video, but my heart has left the scene. It's floating somewhere outside of myself, searching for the one who can stop the bleed.

Nana Mae clutches my forearm. She's wedging herself between me and Hudson on the sectional, and I hadn't even seen her move.

"But they were young, with lives of their own. They had classes, and girlfriends, and stressors. It's where my bully thrived. While smiling at the boy I loved and tormenting me behind his back. Then, she drew a line in the sand that changed my found family forever. It ripped us apart. It broke my eighteen-year-old heart."

A numbness creeps over my limbs, making everything cold and uncoordinated.

"I learned at a young age that spite was a quick remedy for pain, and I leaned on it often. When the world first learned who I was, it was during my second heartbreak. I'd just learned my best friend, Grace—my only friend, really—was having an affair with my boyfriend. Trust has never come easily to me, and you saw me choose spite because they had ripped apart my spirit in ways I didn't know it could tear."

Fen spliced the video here. It's a montage of video clips showing Junie and Grace's friendship over time. Then it cuts again to Junie on the bar top,

a bottle of liquor in her hand that she's pretending is a microphone. He cut it down to twelve seconds, but it's twelve seconds too long.

"Mother of God," Mae murmurs. "Look at her face."

I did. It's burned into my memory for all time.

"Then you saw the aftermath. The I'm not sorry versus I am sorry without ever having the full context. Social media spins in favor of beauty and lights and smoke and mirrors. Not the broken girl with the broken heart who wasn't mature enough to simply call out bad behavior and move on. So I did what I do best—I hung on to my anger. I ran."

She ran to me.

"I fell in love with my brother's best friend all over again."

"Oh, fuck." It slips from my mouth because every ounce of anger I've been holding onto evaporates with that one line.

"But sadly, this isn't the brother's best friend story many of us love to read. This is real life, with real villains and real hearts."

What? No! No, no, no. We don't end here. We can't.

I hadn't realized I'd stood until Nolan's loud exhale is muted by Hudson's louder growl.

"Suddenly, I'm filling your screens again, only this version of me is that scared sixteen-year-old who had just lost her mom. That version of me was used to create a new narrative of spite. But in my story, I was taking something stolen and returning it to its rightful owner."

She just repositioned herself from someone who chooses spite to someone who chooses what's right.

"That fissure that happened when I was eighteen, my first love and my first bully, all converged in a mess of tangled limbs that spread six years of pain. Natalie, like Grace, only told you the version of the story that gave her the outcome she desired. She didn't mention that she attached her name to stolen designs. She didn't tell you that she stole my private moments, pilfered from my home when she was there as a guest. She didn't tell you that every time I react, it's because I've been pushed to the point of destruction. Social media is a powerful tool, but it also carries the weight of total loss and despair that keyboard warriors often ignore."

Nana Mae breaks down, but she doesn't stop watching.

Fen spliced the video again here. It's something from Junie's teenage vlog.

Fuck me. It's from my birthday party.

Tears fill my eyes as she hands me her gift. A cup she painted at a local pottery place. She meant it to hold my charcoals. I have it upstairs.

The video scans and lands on Natalie.

Rage like I've never experienced rips from my chest in a roar that no one questions.

"You're pathetic," Natalie hisses. *"You should have died instead of your mother."*

Every man in the room lunges for the screen—our only outlet for a pain we didn't know existed but are now seeing with our own eyes.

It's devastating.

The video returns to Junie, but none of us takes a step back. We stand shoulder to shoulder as though we can carry her pain.

"She didn't tell you that while she's creating campaigns, I've been silently filling out forms, applying for grants, and ensuring that her brother, an innocent in all of this, did not pay for her poor choices. I've lived that pain—he shouldn't have to."

My stomach heaves, and I nearly double over.

Junie's protecting Marcus. She's doing the exact thing I've been trying to do for her for six years, but better, faster, without the possibility of anyone getting hurt.

"He'll be fine," Nolan says quietly.

"Once again, you only had part of the story. Theirs. Now you have mine."

"Jesus, Junie." Nolan's voice falters.

When I glance around the room, I understand for the first time just how Junie's confessions have shattered us all for different reasons.

"And when I sign off today, it will be without social media. Natalie and Grace can continue with their false narratives that make them feel powerful. But I won't be part of it. From this moment on, I'm removing myself from their stories, and they can find a new villain to blame. And now, you can decide the truth. I'm at peace with mine."

The video ends.

The black square that sits on the TV where Junie's face was a second ago is the loudest thing in the room.

Hudson stares at his hands.

Fenway studies his blank iPad.

Nolan’s eyes are closed, as if he’s trying to block out the pain we just witnessed.

Nana Mae holds a hand over her mouth.

None of us knew that this is what Junie’s carried.

I find myself standing at the window, staring at nothing, because the collective guilt in this room is suffocating.

“I—I need help.” My voice cracks like a wheel that hasn’t been greased in fifty years. I don’t try to correct it. “I’ve spent the last six years fighting for her from afar. Now, I need—please help me fight to get her back.”

I turn to face them.

Each of my friends has a melancholy type of smile, like they’re remembering the girl she used to be before the world stole her spark.

“I’ve been designing a house for the memory I had of her. I have hallways wide enough for her to walk through while reading so she doesn’t run into the wall because she used to do that every day—”

“She doesn’t do that anymore,” Nolan says.

“No, she doesn’t.” I run a hand through my hair. “Now she sits on her knees when she gets excited about a TV show. She waves wildly with both hands when she’s fired up about a theory or telling a story. She retreats when she feels threatened and she sighs when I hold her.”

I can tell by the blank stares that no one is following me.

“When I left Boston, my feelings for Junie had changed, and Natalie had recognized that long before I did. She weaponized it, collecting evidence while I had no idea we were at war. And what she did with that knowledge changed the course of all our lives.”

Nolan tries to hand me a bottle of water, but I ignore it.

“Then Junie showed up here. She’s spent the last two months becoming a woman who dismantles sabotage because her mind was built for forensics the way some people were built for marathons. She just told a million people that she’s removing herself from social media and she doesn’t give a shit what they say about her. She’s not going to want a reading nook under the stairs. She’s going to want—” My mind is working faster than I can speak. “We’ll need an office big enough for two. Light that creates shadows and rainbows in equal measure.”

Behind me, Hudson clears his throat. “What are you asking us, Cole?”

I face him with manic energy making my limbs twitch. All four of them stare at me wearing the same expression—like a family who has finally

staged an intervention that worked.

And in some ways, it did, because I'm asking for help.

Again.

"I need help building a new model quickly because I've already wasted too much time and I don't know how long she'll be gone. But she's coming back. I know she is."

"And if she doesn't?" Nolan asks.

"Then I'll go to her."

"What scale?" Fen asks, rolling up his sleeves. They watched me learn to build these things for long enough they know the basics.

"One to fifty by the end of the week. The full footprint—as best we can do. The elevations, the interior partitions. I'll do the drafting, and I know the land by heart."

"Papa's fishing hole." Nana Mae's smile is watery.

"Yeah," I say. "As long as I don't lose it because of how Tommy tied it to the loan. It feels…right."

"That's because it is," she says, then excuses herself to the restroom.

"I can't make any promises about the loan and the land, Cole." Hudson has shed his anger. He wants happiness for our family as much as I do. "But I'll do everything I can to put an end to this. All of it."

I know he means it.

"We have to talk about that loan, Cole." Nolan stands before me with his hands on his hips.

"We will. But first, please help me so I don't lose your sister for good this time," I plead.

"I'm extremely good at doll furniture," Hudson says, rolling his shoulders back. "River made sure of it." His sister's his only weak spot.

"I have a contact in Hilton Head who has a 3D printer and owes me 6,000 favors," Fen says. "I also get to choose the paint colors, that's not negotiable."

"Put us to work, Cole." Nolan grins. "The apology has to come from you, but we can help with the gesture."

He has no idea how much his words mean to me. None of them do. It's like a helping hand after you've spent years digging out of a bottomless hole.

"Boys," Nana Mae says, reentering the room with a handful of tissues. "The garage. Now. I'll bring in the food, and I'll call in the reinforcements."

Lord only knows what that will entail, but if it gets Junie back, I'm all for it.

———

"WHERE THE HELL DID YOU FIND THOSE?" I ASK HUDSON.

He's sitting at a long folding table in my garage with a magnifier and a set of tweezers.

"Nana Mae. It's amazing what she can get done when she sets her mind to it."

I cross the garage to peer over his shoulder. It's taken him two days to build some bookcases, a table that wobbles, and two chairs from scrap materials he's collected from some of my other projects. They're… functional.

"I think you missed your calling."

"Fuck," he hisses, then sucks on his thumb while dropping the hot glue gun to the table. "Pass. I'm only doing this for you." He looks toward the ceiling. "And her. This is a hell of a lot easier when it comes out of a box, has instructions, and snaps into place."

"Thank you." I make a guttural sound somewhere between a laugh and something I mean with my whole heart.

Hudson nods. "Fen should be back soon with the 3D printer. Once it's set up and calibrated, it'll be a hell of a lot easier than this bullshit."

Nolan stands in the opposite corner, staring at my original blueprints that I've kept hidden for years. It was surprisingly easier to share them than I thought it would be.

"You really know her," Nolan says without lifting his gaze. "I don't see what you'd need to change here."

I stare down at the old blueprints. "These were a monument to someone I thought I could never have. These," I hold up the start of my improved design, "are what happen when our lives converge." I spread them out over the top of the sawhorses, and Nolan lets out a low whistle that even draws Hudson closer.

"This," Hudson tilts his head so he's almost upside down. He has no idea what he's looking at.

I take pity on him and walk him through the first stages of the new design.

"This used to be her reading nook. I moved that upstairs. It's smaller, but cozier. Now this space is an office for us to share. The light will filter in from the north and the south depending on the time of day."

Hudson's eyes glaze over as I continue, but I don't stop until I've explained every change I plan to make and why—each one hinges on who Junie is now—and who she can be in the future.

Fenway walks in and gets to work with Hudson creating furniture for every room while I attack the new design with my charcoal and vellum.

At 1 a.m., Nana Mae kicks us all out.

"You're going to be no use to her if you're half out of your mind delirious. Get some sleep. We'll get back at it first thing."

Fenway walks her home while I carefully protect my new design.

Hudson and Nolan grab the leftover food and carry it back to the house.

But I linger a little longer in the driveway.

Junie's apartment is mostly dark. It feels ominous. Especially since the only communications we get are two-word check-ins over text. *I'm fine. I'm good. Don't worry.*

Nolan said she still needs time, so I'm doing my best.

As I round the corner to enter the back door, a small speck of light catches my eye, and I instantly look up at her bedroom window. There's a low, warm, steady glow I hadn't noticed before.

The kind that only comes from a nightlight.

The kind a kid keeps on so the darkness doesn't win. This isn't a signal we've used. It's not a code we've agreed on. It's just a small light that has decided to shine tonight when it never has before.

I try not to interpret what it could mean.

I'm not owed anything.

But I can't stop the hope that brightens the darkness in my chest.

It has to mean…something.

And when she's ready, she'll see that I'm trying.

For her.

For me.

For us.

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33

THE CRUMBLING HOUSE

JUNIE

THE HOUSE BEFORE ME IS A CRUMBLING MONSTROSITY THAT'S BEEN HANDED down through my mother's family for six generations, and if the family fables are to be believed, each generation was only slightly less toxic than the last.

When Nolan and I were young, we made a pact to be better than our parents. Now I wonder if that's possible when the past keeps you shackled to their pain.

The property was always a source of pride for everyone who lived here, but pride has a way of tainting reality.

I step inside, waiting for that sense of…home to hit me. With all its ghosts and painful memories, I still thought I'd feel…something. But the second I close the front door, I know I'm wrong.

This place is as cold as it's ever been. Haunted by people who never healed.

The only place I've ever felt at home was…the only place I've ever felt at home was with Cole.

I walk the halls, dragging my fingertips along wallpaper I never chose. Drapes that hang with the heaviness of generations past.

It's a sad house that even the Berry Brigade never managed to cheer up.

It's always felt like the end to me—there was never a hopeful beginning here. Why did I not understand that before?

My phone vibrates, and I pull it out, expecting the group chat, but instead, it's…

Cole: I'm glad you arrived safely.

Cole: I understand your need for space.

Cole: I'll be here when you're ready.

After six years of silence, he tries. It means more than I can dissect right now.

Junie: Thank you.

Turning off my phone, I stand in the kitchen—the meeting ground for the only memories of this place I want to keep.

The good memories didn't come from my parents.

They came from the family who chose me.

They came from Cole.

I sit in the chair that had always silently been mine and in a blink of an eye, every private moment between us plays in technicolor as I soak in the warmth.

Do you often throw things away?

I do.

I did.

But now, sitting here in this sad, empty house, I know how to keep what matters.

I also know what I have to do to get there.

I SPENT TWO DAYS PACKING UP ANYTHING I WANTED TO SAVE AND LEFT THE rest untouched.

Today, I walk in the Boston summer heat to the Kent Street T-stop that will take me to Washington Square. It feels like a lifetime ago I rode this train every day.

I didn't think I'd miss it, but there's more nostalgia on this train than in my childhood bedroom. It's…odd.

Rush hour ended an hour ago. If Grace is still working for the family she nannies for, she'll be along any minute.

I find a bench facing Square Tavern and wait.

It doesn't take long.

Twenty minutes later, she crosses Beacon Street, staring at her phone, lost in her own world.

I wait for the moment she spots me. And when she does, it's worth it. She stops, glances around us, takes a step back, then one to the side. From fifteen feet away, I watch the color drain from her face. She doesn't know what to do—or perhaps she doesn't know what I'll do.

It's fair.

"Grace," I say first. I am the one waiting for her, after all.

Her hands fall to her stomach protectively, and I roll my eyes. I've never once been a violent person, and she knows it. But she scrambles to unlock her phone, and I know instantly that she's recording me.

I don't care. I'm not here to make a scene.

"What are you doing here, Junie?" She's so nervous her phone rattles in her hands.

"You wanna sit?"

She frowns and shakes her head. I simply shrug.

"Why'd you do it?" It's the only question I have for her. I won't be satisfied with whatever she says, but I need to hear her say…something.

A single tear falls down her face, but this is a woman who can cry on demand, so I don't even blink.

When she doesn't get a reaction out of me, she pockets her phone.

"Isn't it exhausting?" I ask. "Pretending all the time?"

Grace brushes away another tear. "Paul and I just…happened. I didn't mean for it to get so…out of hand. I was," she peers around as though searching for her next big break, and I sigh. "Your video went viral, and I was…jealous. I had nothing and you were getting the attention and—"

"You had nothing because you betrayed me." I don't shout it. I don't show any emotion at all. I simply state facts. "And the truth is, I would've done anything for you."

Whatever I needed from her no longer exists. I just needed to witness it. "Now you have to live with what you threw away in favor of strangers on the Internet who change opinions like most people change underwear. The

approval you want can’t come from them, Grace. It’ll never keep you happy for long.”

I walk away, back toward the crumbling house of ghosts I’m finally ready to exorcise.

“That’s it?” She calls at my back. “You’re not going to yell? Or call me names? Anything?”

I keep walking. That’s the reaction she wants, and it fills me with happiness when I don’t give it to her.

Who knew taking the high road could feel better than spite?

THE DOORBELL RINGS AT 12:03 THE NEXT DAY. IT’S FOLLOWED BY A LONG string of curses that belong to my father.

“Damn it, Juniper. Open this damn door.”

He’s pissed off that I had all the locks changed. This is no longer a house with a revolving door for people to take advantage of.

I’m not that person either.

Instead of opening the door, I slip out the side and meet him on the porch.

“Juniper, you’re the one who asked me to meet you here. I—”

“I’m here,” I say.

He spins, and I get a good look at him for the first time in years. I don’t actually remember the last time I was this close to him. My mother’s funeral, maybe?

“Let me in.”

I do remember his entitled tone though. “I won’t be doing that.” I sit on a stone pillar that’s to the right of the old stairs.

“This is still my house—”

“Actually, it’s not. It never was. It never will be.”

“Your mother owed me—”

“I’ve seen the documents, Tommy.” I’ll never call him dad again. “You married her knowing that you would never have a legal claim on the business or this property. Yet you tried to steal it anyway. Or at least, you tried to steal the value, and you didn’t give a single shit about what happened to me while you did it.”

“You don’t have any idea what you’re talking about.” His face is a mottled red color that happens when someone spends their life drinking away their problems instead of facing them.

“I do though. You never had a legal claim to anything. And you never will. But I do know what you tried to do to me. I’m here to tell you that you will pay for what you’ve done. Regardless of whatever ‘proof’ you attempt to bring forward, I will win.”

“You have no idea what I have on—”

“Cole?”

He blanches.

“Or are you talking about the loans with my name illegally attached? Because I know everything. Nolan knows everything. I asked you here today so I could look you in the eye because regardless of what you and Anna put me through, I’ll never be like either of you.”

“Open this goddamn door, Juniper. You have no right to keep me out.”

“I do, though. Everything you see here is mine. It’s my house, my land, my decision. You’re just the sperm donor I learned spite from. You’re nothing, Tommy. You never will be.”

“You listen to me—”

“I won’t be doing that.”

His hands ball into fists, but for some reason, I’m not scared of him like I was when I was a child. The monster is older now, gaunt, vicious in tone but not in action—there’s nothing he can do to me anymore.

“Then why the hell am I here?”

“Because I want to know *why*?” I ask the same question I asked Grace. The same one I asked Natalie. But as soon as it’s out of my mouth, I have an epiphany.

I don’t need their reasons. I just needed to find the confidence to believe that I’m not someone they can walk all over ever again.

And standing here, on the porch of my childhood home that raised me more than my parents ever did, I finally understand.

My voice has always been my own. It’s good enough. It’s loud enough. It’s strong enough all on its own because it’s mine.

It all happens in less than three seconds, so when Tommy opens his mouth to rage against me the way he did in my youth, I simply walk away.

The house is locked up. My feelings are decoded, labeled, and stuck in the appropriate columns.

I can turn the page now, content in the knowledge that Nolan and his friends are building a case that will take away Tommy's choices like he tried to take away mine.

SURPRISINGLY, I PULL INTO THE HAVEN THREE DAYS LATER COMPLETELY undetected. There's no welcome committee this time, no Stanley, only silence as I make my way down the peaceful streets and park at the clubhouse.

I've only been gone a week, yet everything has changed.

I'm not sure why I don't go straight to Cole's, but honestly, sneaking in will give me a little more time to figure out what to say when it's time to face him.

I'm not even surprised when I end up outside of Bea's house. It's Wednesday, but I'm thirty minutes late, and Bea isn't outside.

"Juniper," Bea calls, out of breath and rushing onto her porch before I can make it three steps. "I was just reading and needed, ah, I'm here." Perhaps I didn't arrive undetected after all. What did this old lady do? Run a mile to make it look as though she's been ready for me all along?

"Hi, Bea." For some reason, when she places a book upside down in her lap, I smile.

"You missed tea," she says conversationally, finally getting a grip on her panting. "It was at three, dear."

"Sorry," I mumble.

"Don't be. The kettle doesn't require an audience to boil." She turns a page in her book she only now realizes is upside down but stubbornly refuses to fix it. "You'll come next Wednesday. Or you won't. Either way, the kettle will boil."

"Okay." I study her for a moment while she continues to pretend she's reading. "Bea?"

"Hmm?"

"What do you do…when you don't know who you are?" It's like tiny dinosaurs are dancing on my chest.

Bea doesn't look up from the book she's not reading.

“You go talk to the people who know you,” she says. “Not so they can tell you who you are, but so you can hear yourself say it out loud to someone who won’t flinch. The hearing yourself say it is the work, sweetheart. The flinching is the test.”

She turns another page without bothering to right the stupid book, so I leave her to her non-reading and walk home.

The flinching is the test.

What does that even mean?

It’s still running through my head when I’m almost to the apartment staircase, but laughter makes me pause.

Hudson’s laughter, specifically. It’s a sound that occurs in nature roughly four times a year and is the sound of a man who’s too tired to maintain his typical professional restraint. Or when he’s with his sister.

The laughter is coming from the open side door of Cole’s garage.

Keep walking, Junie. Just keep walking.

“My colleague at the firm thinks the cases are connected,” Hudson says, making me pause. “We won’t even have to do much.”

“He can’t be that stupid.” That’s my brother’s voice. “She thinks Tommy’s done this before?”

“Yes,” Hudson says. “She said he’s probably been doing this for over a decade. If it’s true, we won’t even have to get our hands dirty. Just a few strategically placed—fuck, that hurt—tips, and he’ll go down without ever having to involve Junie, the Brookline house, or what fucknuts did to cover it all up.”

“I don’t care what we have to do,” my brother growls. “Tommy will pay.”

I’ve never heard Nolan sound so…vicious.

“Goddamn it,” Hudson curses again, and I round the corner to peek inside.

The men in Cole’s garage all appear to have been drafted into a small war.

Hudson’s at a folding table with both hands bandaged. Two of his fingers brandish fluorescent green Band-Aids that look as though they were applied without supervision, and a hot glue gun sits in front of him like a weapon he hasn’t defeated yet. There’s a cluster of small wooden objects beside him.

“Hurry up,” Stanley whispers. “I’ve got to get it over there.”

What the hell is Hudson doing that he burned himself that many times?

Fen is on the floor with paint covering every available surface—his forearms, the back of one hand, a streak across his cheekbone, the entire knee of his pants. He's holding up three different swatches against a tiny piece of wood. And he's muttering. In French.

Fenway Jones does not speak French.

Nolan's in the back of the garage with dirt up to his elbows, a smear across his forehead, and what is unmistakably a small green sprig of holly caught in the collar of his shirt. He's holding a tray of something miniature. Model trees, maybe? Shrubs the size of a thimble? And he's planting them onto a small foam square with the focus of a surgeon. There are freaking leaves in his hair!

My brother—the doctor who took great pride in "scrubbing in" all throughout his residency—has leaves in his hair.

They're all so busy that none of them notice me. Not even when Stanley and Hud have a tug-of-war with a pile of scrap wood that Stanley wrestles free before fleeing the garage with it.

Why would Hudson willingly wreck his hands? Or Fenway? He thrives on his public perception, yet here he is, covered in freaking paint.

And the only other time I've seen my brother get dirty like this was when they tried to build me a she-shed in our backyard so I would have somewhere quiet and private to go to study.

"Jesus Christ." Hudson sees me first.

He drops the hot glue gun, which somehow doesn't start a fire. Fen looks up, and his paint deck slides out of his hands. Nolan, who usually has the most situational awareness of anyone, sees me last, and only because everyone is now staring at me.

"Junie," Hudson says. He's panicking. Hudson does not panic.

"Ah, you're bleeding." I point to his forearm.

"I'm aware."

"Why is there a leaf in Nolan's hair?"

"Landscape design," Fen says. "He's making the entire foliage from scratch because we broke the 3D printer. He's been at it since dawn, so go easy on him. The landscaping is a…complication."

"Why is your face purple?" I can't seem to take everything in. There's just too much to look at.

“Two coats,” Fen says. “Provence Lavender. It’s for the front door, and I will not apologize for the choice.”

“Why is Hudson wearing reading glasses? In public.”

Hudson finds his aging eyes a weakness he can’t wrestle into submission.

“He’s refused to admit that he’s been prematurely presbyopic for three years,” Nolan says, finally putting down his tray. “Today, the doll furniture won.”

I stare at all three of them as if I’m meeting them for the first time. They look haggard—as though they went up against a tornado and the tornado said *hold my fucking beer*.

There’s movement to my left, and when I turn, Cole steps out from behind the larger of the two long tables.

He’s holding a graphite pencil, there’s a smudge of charcoal on his temple, and he has dark circles under his eyes.

My heart hurts a little at the sight of him.

This isn’t the version of Cole who’s hiding something but the Cole who’s working with his hands because his mind can’t calculate next steps yet. And he let all his brothers in to help him.

“Hey, Junie.” He’s subdued, reserved. I don’t like it at all.

“Hi.” My hand lifts to an awkward wave that’s so reminiscent of when I first showed up here that I want to slap myself.

“I…” Cole drags out the syllable, like a man choosing each word as he watches for landmines. “Can I show you something? I mean, if you’ll come with me. It’s…” He glances at my brother, who not-so-casually shoos him on. “It’s not finished yet. But it’s far enough along that I can show you, and I’d rather show you imperfect than wait until I have it polished and pretend I had it under control all along. I—don’t. But I’m learning as I go.”

“Where?” I ask as Hudson drags Fenway through the open door.

“Papa’s fishing hole,” Cole says.

On his other side, Nolan’s nodding, silently encouraging me to take this chance, but his eyes tell me he’s on standby if I need him.

“Okay,” I say, and Cole’s entire face changes. He doesn’t smile per se, but his shoulders straighten and some of the exhaustion is replaced by… something else.

PAPA'S FISHING HOLE IS A CLEARING AT THE BACK OF THE HAVEN'S property where the marsh opens to the inlet and the cordgrass goes gold in the late afternoon light. I've walked by here multiple times, but I've never ventured far into the overgrown grass driveway sheltered by an arch of trees.

We make our way deeper down the drive in silence. When the trees open up again, it's to an old wooden dock that's probably been there as long as Cole's been alive.

The light hits the water at an angle that makes the surface look like it's been hammered by hand. And unlike the rest of The Haven, there's no one else here. Cole's kept this private, untouched and unsullied by the community he created.

At the end of the dock, there's a small folding table with a sheet draped over it.

Cole walks me toward it, directing me over a piece of wood that looks like it needs to be replaced, but he doesn't touch me. His hand doesn't find the small of my back, and he doesn't perform any of the choreography we've learned about each other over the last couple of months.

I find I miss it more than I thought I would.

We're standing shoulder to shoulder at the end of the dock. Mere inches separate us, but they feel like miles.

Cole removes the sheet.

It takes me a moment to process what I'm seeing. Then the corner of my lips twitch without permission. It's a really rough version of a small house, similar to the ones he used to make at my table in Boston. There's a plywood foundation, balsa walls primed but not painted. The roofline is sloped one way, and not the other. It's a Lowcountry detail Cole would never get wrong.

It shocks me how much I remember about this process.

You can tell the other guys helped because it's kind of a mess and not the strict attention to detail Cole demands. This was built with love by all the guys who stand in my corner.

And the more details I take in, the more…personal it feels.

It's the footprint of a house someone could live and be comfortable in even if the walls are dripping glue and the table wobbles with the waves beneath the dock.

There’s a porch facing the water, and a cutout where I hope a window will go. Along one wall is a long room with two desks set perpendicular to each other under a shared cork wall. The desks have crooked joints, and a good strong wind would probably knock them over, but I get the gist.

Two desks.

Light from two directions.

One office.

“What is this?” I finally ask.

“This,” he gestures toward the model. “Is us, in structure form.” He speaks so quietly I lean in to hear him. Then, he lays a roll of blueprints next to the model. “These are designs I’ve been working on for six years.”

Six. Years.

“I’ve been designing a house for the teenage version of you I knew. Every time I missed you, I worked on a new room. Every time the guys would mention you in a text, I’d perfect another corner. I was building a museum for the person I lost.”

At some point, my gaze shifted so I’m looking up at him and not out at the water.

“But then,” he clears his throat. “You made that video. And I understood who you’d become, and in real time, the dream home I was designing for you became…wrong. I knew I didn’t have a lot of time, so I asked the guys for help. We’ve been in that garage every hour Nana Mae hasn’t dragged us home to sleep. We did our best, but it’s not perfect, and it’s not even close to finished.”

He tugs on the back of his neck. “We kind of had to rush it over here when Marley told us you parked at the clubhouse.”

My gaze slides from him to the model. Everyone had a hand in this.

“It’s not for me,” I say, reading the rooms like my favorite book.

“No.” He shakes his head. “It’s not.”

“It’s—”

“For us, Junie. If you want it. If you’ll take the risk with me. I’ve held on to this piece of land, even when it would’ve been easier to sell it because I knew in my heart it was always meant to hold something…more. I’ve been holding on to it because it was meant for us. It’s always been ours.”

I must sway on my feet because Cole reaches out a hand to steady me. It’s the only time he’s touched me, and it’s over before I process the shock to my heart.

Slowly, I slip off my flip-flops and lower myself to the edge of the dock.

It seems to have become a thing since I've been here. I never went barefoot in Boston.

The wood under my thighs is warm from the sun and old from years of use.

Cole sits down beside me, then places his hands on his thighs. The poor guy doesn't even know what to do with his hands, but he won't allow them to do the talking either, so instead, he holds on. "I'm so sorry, Junie. And I'm even sorrier that I don't know, when it comes to your parents, if I would do anything differently if I had to do it all over again. But I do know that I wouldn't run. I shouldn't have the first time. I was young and scared. I'm not scared anymore."

"Cole."

"I'm sorry that after everything, you were still hurt by your mother's words. I'm sorry that I adopted your father's mess and that it will take time to unravel. I'm sorry that I didn't see how Natalie hurt you and that I allowed her to make the rules that hurt you more. And I'm so fucking sorry that I hurt you when all I wanted to do was protect you."

"Cole."

"Junie." There's such a sweet smile in his tone that I almost cry.

What I'm about to say will break his heart. I know it because I'll feel it too. But I don't know any other way forward.

"I'm here, Cole, but I don't know in what capacity. I—I still think we need a break, but Boston held too many ghosts and I—my family's here."

Cole doesn't flinch.

The flinching is the test.

Cole. Doesn't. Flinch.

He doesn't react. He doesn't try to fix me. He sits there, breathing in time with the lapping of waves, keeping both hands flat on his thighs.

"Tell me what you mean." The vein in his neck bulges with each word, but he keeps his tone even.

"I don't know who I am right now, Cole." My throat burns. "The Junie who showed up in your driveway at the end of May is gone. I'm not sad about that. I'm just—I don't know who replaced her yet. In my head, I'm running a forensic accounting firm that doesn't even exist. I'm letting Bea ask me questions I don't have answers to. I'm letting Katie lie in my bed with me while I cry. I-I'm a person I've never met."

How do I explain this to him when I don't even understand it myself?

Cole wraps his fingers around the edge of the dock, like he's holding on or is ready to jump. I'm not sure because I can't read him anymore either, not the way I used to.

"And—"

He turns his vibrant green eyes my way. For a moment—just a moment—I'm sixteen again, when everything hurt but felt so simple too.

"I look at you, and I—" I stare back out over the water. "I worry you're just as lost as I am. You spent six years organizing your whole life around protecting me. Without that weight on your shoulders, do you even know what you want to do next? You can't. There hasn't been enough time to figure it out. As far as you knew, you'd be spending the rest of your life pushing me away to save me from a threat I didn't know existed."

"Junie—"

"I've never saved myself, Cole. I have to learn to save myself."

"You don't understand."

"I do though, and we can't both figure out who we *are* for the first time in the same room without feeling the pressure of who we *were* to the other person. What if in six months, we realize I'm so damaged by the hate I've held as my truth that you can't stand the woman I become? What if you realize you were always meant for companies like Meridian and women like Lola—"

"That's never going to fucking happen."

I hurt. This hurts so much.

"What if you realize your infatuation with me ended when your duty to me did? I can't—I can't stay just to lose you all over again, Cole. I can't and I won't." I only stop because I'm out of breath.

"That," he says slowly, "is the first thing you've said to me since the banquet that I can work with."

"You-you can?" Fuck, why does that sucker punch me in the gut?

"I can. Not all of it. But part of it."

"It's true." My defenses rise. Spite still lingers too close to the surface.

"Okay," he says with a careless shrug. "Let's say that it is true. All of it. Does that make the part where you want a break your *fix* or your *trauma* telling you to run?"

"I-I—" I'm blindsided by the one question I never anticipated.

Cole didn't flinch. I did.

“I’m going to ask you something, Junie. Not to argue with you or try to fix you. I’m just going to ask. Got it?”

God. Is he trying to piss me off? “Yeah, got it.”

When he turns his head, I can see the hint of a smirk trying to break free. If it does, I will absolutely shove him off this dock.

“What will we learn about ourselves while apart that we couldn’t learn together?”

So. Much. I had a whole system. A spreadsheet of reasons. But when I try to recall my list, I come up blank. Delete all. Poof. Gone.

“Because I’ve already done it your way, baby.” The endearment is the least offensive thing he’s said so far. “I lived without you for six years. I thought I needed to figure out how to fix everything without dragging you into the mess of it.”

My shoulders curl in, and I swing my feet wildly below the dock.

“But we are the mess of it, Junie, and the mess is where we grow.” His tone is the calm between the ripples. “I already chose a break because I thought it was the right thing to do, and it nearly broke us both. I lost six years of loving you instead of standing in the mess and fighting beside you.”

He folds his left leg in and turns his entire body my way while I stare at the imperfect model. It’s a metaphor for what he’s asking me. He’s not offering perfection. He’s offering to stand in the mess with me and build a life from the ashes of what we’ve overcome.

“And this is what I need you to hear above all else, Juniper Mercer. I love who you were before, but I fell in love with who you’re becoming. You’re leaving because that’s what you’ve been taught. Everyone you love leaves, me included.”

Juniper Mercer is officially a crybaby.

“I’m not asking you to know who you are, Junie. I’m just asking you to figure it out with me in the room. I’m asking you to do the work in the same house, not at the same desk.” He points to the model. “One room. Two desks. You’ll be at yours, and I’ll be at mine, doing my own work. I won’t make your growth about me, Junie. I’ll just be the sounding board and shoulder you lean on if you get stuck.”

He lifts his hand from the death grip he has on the dock, but he quickly shoves it under his thigh. Like he needs the weight to keep from reaching for me.

“And I’m asking you to do the same for me. Don’t watch me become someone from the sidelines. Stand with me in the dirt, plant roots with me, and watch us both grow within the parameters that were always meant to be ours.”

When I don’t budge, he sighs, and the sound scrapes across my raw, exposed heart. “I’m not asking you for forever. I’m asking you to try while we figure out what’s next.”

“Not a promise?” I ask, thumbing the ring I really need to remove. My voice is so small I hardly recognize it.

“No,” he says gently.

“Just—the room.”

“Two desks,” he says. “That’s all I’m asking for, sweetheart. Two desks.”

We sit side by side while the sun bathes everything in shades of pink and gold.

I don’t say yes, but I also don’t say no.

Instead, I scoot to the very edge of the dock and place my bare feet in the brackish water, then close my eyes and allow the water to do that calming shit it does.

After a moment, I hear movement beside me. Then the unmistakable sound of one shoe, then the next, landing on the dock behind us. I crack one eye open just as Cole slips his feet into the water beside mine.

I came to this spot today thinking we were over before we began.

But I’m still here.

And I haven’t promised to stay. Both decisions feel very Junie-coded. So I sit with them. Mull them over. And then realize I can’t decide anything today. The new me needs to make a pros and cons list before reacting.

It feels very mature for Spite-Berry, so perhaps she’s behind me after all.

“Cole.”

“Junie.”

“I’m not calling this fixed.”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

“Hmm,” I hum. “I’m going to see Bea on Wednesday.”

His relief is palpable. “Wednesday. As in, a week from now?”

I nod. Okay, so I just agreed to stay. For one week, not forever.

Not yet.

“That’s great, Junie.”

“And I think I want to start my own firm.” The heat of his stare scorches the side of my face. “Something small. I kind of fell down a rabbit hole the other night and realized how often small businesses are taken advantage of. I think—I think I could help them.”

Whatever power Cole Whittaker holds over me, it drags my gaze to his now.

“You’ll be amazing.” He means it too. It’s there in his eyes.

“I’ll have to work in Charleston some weeks.”

His expression never shifts. “There are a lot of small businesses there, so that makes sense.”

“I’m not ready to talk about the ring.” The confession is merely a whisper kissing air.

He looks at my ring finger. “About the fact that you could’ve taken it off already or the fact that it’s yours and has been since the day Nana Mae told me she was saving it for the woman I love?”

A very undignified scoff exits my mouth as I splutter. “Wha— I don’t know what you mean.”

He bumps my shoulder playfully. “I saw you a few weeks ago in your office. You were playing with it, but your mind was a million miles away. It came off, and you put it right back on.”

Heat floods my cheeks. “Nana Mae was right about the water weight,” I grumble.

“Nana Mae’s right about a lot of things. But we’ll have *that* conversation, Junie, when you’re ready. Until then, please, just keep it. I don’t even care what finger it’s on. I’m not asking you to commit to it—yet—but it is a ring that lives on you. You should wear it.”

“Okay,” I say because truthfully, removing it feels like a divorce, and I’m not ready to file yet.

We sit while the day fades into night and the stars twinkle like our own secret language.

Cole didn’t flinch.

Two desks. Two people. Light from two directions.

And finally, I think we’re ready to be in the same room.

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34

I HAVE FEELINGS

COLE

Six Months Later

IT'S STILL DARK WHEN I COME DOWNSTAIRS.

February in the Lowcountry is not winter the way it is in New England—there's no snow on the porch, no breath visible in the kitchen—but at five forty-five, the ocean has a low silver fog over it that hasn't been lifted by the sun yet.

It's the calm after the storm of us, and I remind myself to be grateful for everything we have now.

After making two cups of coffee, I walk down the hall to the office.

Our office.

Not our forever one, but the one for now.

The first thing we did when she agreed to move in with me, exactly two weeks to the day after I sat on Papa's dock and asked her to try, was tear down a wall and build this office.

The kitchen door flies open, and Junie starts tossing suitcases in.

"Ah, what's up?" I ask.

"Don't be smug."

I stand from the table and watch as she marches over to the garage and lifts one of the boxes Fenway sent from the Brookline house.

"Are you moving in with me?"

“Ugh, like the Boston boys haven’t already placed bets. Listen.” She drops a box at my feet, then reaches into her back pocket, where she pulls out a wad of papers.

Closer inspection reveals color-coded spreadsheets.

“There’s a matrix. It calculated our success rate, and I decided it was worth the risk.”

I had flipped through the pages. All sixteen of them. To this day, I can’t figure out how the math *mathed*, I’m just thankful it did. That was the longest two weeks of my life.

Since then, she’s Junified this entire home. Our temporary one. The place we sleep until our forever home is finished at Papa’s fishing hole.

The entire first month she lived here, she tested everything.

She spent an entire week in Charleston long before it was necessary for her new business because she was worried the distance would be what caused us to fracture.

I showed up for dinner two of the six nights.

We built our office, and she spent an entire month falling in and out of her Spite-Berry ways to test if we could truly be around each other all the time and not want to kill each other.

I’ve had more sex on my desk than I ever thought possible.

Fen has since demoted Spite-Berry to Petty-Betty, but the reality is, for the most part, she keeps her petty private these days.

Except for with me.

I hear about every time she runs into Lola at the grocery store. Every time Marley questions a new scorecard. Every time Nana Mae describes the shit Paula Van Holten has pulled over the years. Every time Hudson spams her inbox with messages that all end with: Needed by EOD.

I’m pretty sure when Junie hears “end of day” now, her fingernails turn into weapons.

Placing Junie’s coffee on her desk, I smile at the three open folders she has on it for her new clients—two of whom she gained after her farewell social media video went viral. But the spot I linger on is a small corkboard that has a printout of a women’s small business advocacy article from December where Junie is quoted by name.

She’s the force of nature that these businesses have been waiting for. I always knew she’d do great things, I’m just happy that now she can see it too.

On my desk is a half-finished elevation drawing for a public library renovation. This one is special because the original design was one of the first my mother was ever commissioned for. Next to it is the AIA award letter I received in November but haven't figured out what to do with and a small wooden model of a bench I built last weekend for the library to commemorate my mother's original design.

Just as I sit at my drafting table that's now in our shared office too, I hear her grumpily trudging down the stairs.

Junie's not a morning person, but she joins me every day for this—the quiet moments before The Haven wakes and takes over.

"Morning," she mutters, making a beeline for her desk. Or more accurately, the coffee sitting on top.

"Morning, sunshine."

She closes her eyes briefly when the first taste of caffeine hits her lips. It's the same thing every morning—and I never miss a single one. There's something about the way her face relaxes with that small joy that makes whatever happens next worth it.

And what happens next, like clockwork, is business Juniper. "I'm having tea with Bea today at three."

I hide my smile, knowing she won't appreciate it. "I know."

She clicks her mouse aggressively approximately four hundred times before her screen wakes up, and she hasn't even sat down yet. "And Charleston tomorrow." This is where she thrives. "The chocolatier wants her ledgers gone over twice, and she's decided that the man who's been embezzling from her since 2019 will confess if I push him hard enough."

"Do you think he will?"

"Probably." She shrugs. "I have a face. People crack."

I cross the room, unable to stand the space between us for a moment longer, and wrap my arms around her waist, mindful of her coffee that she has no intention of putting down.

"You do have a face." I grin down at her.

I smile harder when I feel her twist the diamond on her finger against my side. It's been there for two hundred and thirty-four days now, and while they say a diamond is forever, it's not enough for my Junie.

The ring I haven't shown anyone is the one that will make Junie and me an Us forever.

Now I’m planning the perfect moment that will be in no way perfect, but it will be perfectly us.

“Are you going to just stare at me all day or kiss me? Because some of us have work to do, Whittaker.”

I kiss her.

I’ll always kiss her.

“Stop trying to butter me up,” she says, pulling back an inch, breathless. I love her like this. “I have a chocolatier’s books to crack, and you have a window to be smug about.”

The window in question is for our new home. And I was correct that it needed to be bigger. Junie’s just a sore loser.

“I’m not smug, sweetheart.”

“Cole.” Her eyes narrow. “You are. Go…work or something. I have spreadsheets that won’t code themselves, and the boys will all descend on our morning soon enough.”

“I love you.” Every time I utter those words, it feels like the first time.

Her face softens, the sentiment still catching her off guard sometimes. “I love you too.”

My smile dances across my face. I’ve never felt happiness this viscerally before, but today I have my entire family staying within a two-block radius, and this time, everyone is slotted into the positions they were meant for.

By two thirty, we’ve already been interrupted numerous times. The first was when Hudson barreled into the room requesting a phone charger like his life depended on it. Next Fen spammed our group chat with an update on Grace, whom he just learned was dumped by Junie’s ex because she had faked the entire pregnancy and now has the TikTok mafia after her for the baby registry she benefited from.

Karma is real. Not only did Junie’s farewell to social media gain her a ton of new business thanks to Fen’s maneuvering, but it did its job in silencing both Grace’s and Natalie’s narratives.

It was almost as good as the news that Nolan gave us after he moved back to Boston a few months ago. He called to tell us that Natalie was

applying for an executive assistant position at their company without realizing they owned it.

Hudson did some digging and found out that she had lost her architecture license and was appealing it, but it didn't look good. He also confirmed that Marcus was in a new facility and was thriving, thanks in part to Junie's ministrations.

We lost interest in Natalie after that because Junie decided it was time for her to move forward and let go of the past.

I still wanted to go after Natalie for the blackmail, but Junie has suffered enough, and I'm not willing to put her through a trial that would expose her even more. It doesn't mean I like it though.

Now Junie has her headphones in to "block out the boy noise" that happens when all the guys are here visiting, and I have a pencil between my teeth as I stare at the library blueprints.

My mother was twenty-three when she designed this library for her hometown.

I'm twenty-nine. I'll be thirty when the renovation is complete. There's a math in that I can't say out loud without sounding like a man who has finally forgiven himself for being alive.

Junie pulls out one earbud. "Don't overthink it. She'd be proud of you, Cole."

"I'm not."

"You are. You think I don't see you, but news flash, Whittaker, I made an art of seeing you without being caught before you could even drive. I see you. Be proud of what you've done and who you are. I am."

Perfectly Viper.

"Yes, ma'am," I say with a mock salute.

"And make sure you're ready for dinner at Nana Mae's tonight. She wants everyone to be on time."

"On it."

"I'm heading over to Bea's."

"I'll be here when you get back." I've learned not to make these departures emotional. She'll have all she can handle during tea with Bea. Instead, I keep my head down and pretend that I don't hurt when she does.

At four thirty, Junie's back with red eyes. It's a routine we've mastered. She walks in, drops her phone, sits at her desk, and I wait for her to make a move. Sometimes she wants to talk, and other times, she doesn't.

This is her journey, and I'm learning to support her the best I can.

"I told her about kindergarten today," she says quietly.

My pencil slips from my fingers. We've discussed this multiple times, and each time, I've gently nudged her to talk to Bea about it. She hasn't been ready.

Today, I guess she was.

I'm hesitant to speak, but finally ask, "All of it?"

"All of it."

Holy shit. That's a big step for her. Really big.

I've had my own sessions with Bea, but I went in and laid everything on the table, so my sessions are different than Junie's. Mine are like digging through a junkyard, while hers are more like…excavating a cemetery.

"It was okay," she says. Her eyes are glassy, and her voice is the one she uses for things she's not sure about yet—the small, careful tone she's been using for the last six months when she's actively choosing thoughtfulness over spite. "I think I might possibly be almost done with that ghost." Her hands fly up in a defensive move. "Don't quote me on it. I'll let you know next week."

Junie's hands hover over her keyboard, but she doesn't type a word. She doesn't even attack her mouse. Instead, she falls back against her chair and stares at the ceiling. "I told Bea what I've always told myself—that my mother forgot me."

Daggers to my eyeballs would hurt less than watching my girl process these feelings.

"And I told her the thing I never allowed myself to hear, which is that I sat on that curb and decided no one was ever going to forget me again because no one would be allowed close enough to hurt me." Slowly, her sad gaze crashes into mine. "I made a deal with my five-year-old self, and I've been honoring it ever since. I think I'm—" She crinkles her nose. "I think I'm un-honoring it. Or, you know, whatever the verb is. Bea will tell me the verb next week."

"Okay," I say, knowing she'll process this information for a day or two, and then, when we're tucked safely into our darkened bedroom, she'll tell me.

And that's more than I ever thought I'd have.

NANA MAE'S LITTLE COTTAGE SMELLS LIKE A HOLIDAY, SOUNDS LIKE A BIG happy family, and feels like the home we've all needed.

She stands at the head of the table she's currently placing food on. She's made a roast chicken because it was on sale. Macaroni and cheese because Hudson has, in one way or another, requested it every time he's seen her since he was six. She's even put out the good plates and is wearing her good cardigan—which is exactly like all her others except she adds a pearl pin to make it fancy.

She is, in every way that matters to Nana Mae, presiding, which is exactly what she needs after visiting Devin in prison yesterday. He has yet to apologize, and I don't know that he ever will. But she'll continue to visit him because she loved her sister.

I've offered to go with her, but she declines every time, saying that "family is complicated."

Hudson's to her left with a yellow legal pad beside his plate, which means Nana Mae hasn't seen it yet and he has about ninety seconds before she removes it from the room. Fen's in the kitchen, refilling wineglasses while talking to her over his shoulder. Nolan's on the back porch on the phone, speaking in a hushed cadence that reminds me that he and Hudson have a big deal on the table, but neither is willing to spill the details yet.

Junie's still at the kitchen island with Katie, who's wearing a pink sequined minidress and is aggressively gesturing at something on Junie's phone.

Junie laughs. It's my second favorite sound of hers, and I'd burn down a building to keep the sound around.

Katie notices me watching. "Whittaker." She's a pain in my ass. "Tell your woman she's wrong about the green tile."

"Excuse me," Junie says without looking up. "Tell your woman? I'm right here, Katherine. No one tells me anything."

I chuckle and bow out of this fight.

"All right, all right," Nana Mae says. "Everyone sit. The chicken doesn't care about tiles, but it is getting cold."

A chorus of "Yes, ma'am" fills the room, followed by the sounds of chairs scraping and people vying for elbow room.

I tried to have this birthday dinner at my house, but Nana Mae wouldn't hear of it.

Everyone's gathered and ready to eat. That's when Nana Mae snatches Hudson's legal pad and tosses it on the credenza.

"It's one note," Hudson says.

"You may collect it after dessert."

He mutters under his breath but doesn't argue.

"You'd think a man who billed eight hundred hours this quarter would know better than to argue with Nana Mae."

"You'd think a man who hasn't paid an attorney fee *ever* would know better than to cast stones," Hudson says evenly without looking up.

"Speaking of," Junie says. "I've made a decision about the Brookline house."

Everyone who was still standing silently drops into their chairs.

Four months ago, Tommy Mercer was arrested for running a scheme similar to what he'd done with Junie's mom, but this time there was so much evidence, he has no chance of getting off.

As a family, we collectively decided to let that stand as punishment for all his sins once Hudson confirmed there was no way for Junie to get into trouble for the loan her parents took out. It was better than chasing shadows, and the risk to Junie wasn't worth it.

But the Brookline house, her childhood home, has been weighing heavily on her.

I place my hand on her thigh in silent encouragement. I don't even know her decision yet. It's the one thing she hasn't let me in on.

"I want to sell it," she says. "It isn't fair for you all to keep helping me pay the taxes on a property none of us want to live in."

Everyone nods in agreement. We all have different feelings on our time in that place, but we all respect that it's Junie's decision.

"But not just sell it." She bites her nail, and I sit taller. "I think we—I think we should develop it."

"What did you have in mind?" Hudson asks, leaning forward.

"Well…" She's so nervous, her voice wobbles. "The house isn't worth much, but the land itself, about half an acre, one block from Beacon Street, is worth somewhere between three and five million." She chokes on the number. "That alone would pay off the loan Cole took out and—"

"No," I say instantly. "We've already worked out that repayment plan. We're all contributing to the loan now."

Junie shakes her head. “That house has carried more trauma than memories. I want to…build something. Something that will pay off a debt that was never ours…and something that will honor a loss that was stolen.”

“Baby,” I whisper. “What are you saying?”

“I want you to build a new version of your veterans’ memorial, Cole.”

Nana Mae sniffles.

“Junie.” My throat is tight.

“Just listen,” Junie says. “You can honor your parents and their love in the place where mine never succeeded. That overrides all the negative energy there because love always wins.”

I blink rapidly just to see her through the emotion of what she’s suggesting.

“I think you can do it on a scale that will still allow us to build a small high-rise on the rest of the property. Luxury condos, even if it’s only six to ten of them, will sell for a pretty penny in that location. We can pay off the debt, and everyone can start fresh, free. The way we always should’ve been. And if the memorial happens to sing in the direction of Mr. Fissell’s house, even better.”

Hudson groans as she turns to her brother with a small smile that wavers. “Is—is that okay with you, Nolan? It’s your childhood home too.”

His eyes glisten. “It was never a home, Junie. I think…” He lifts his glass in toast. “I think that’s the fresh start this family deserves.”

I raise my glass, but my gaze never leaves Junie. She still has no idea how much she gives this family every day.

“Do you agree, Mr. Whittaker?” Junie whispers at my side.

“Jesus, Junie.” My emotions are on a rollercoaster.

“Watch your tone, Whittaker, or Junie will divorce you before the ink is dry on the paperwork,” Hudson chuckles.

“There won’t ever be a divorce,” I snap.

“That’s what they all say,” Fen teases.

Not funny.

In fact, I’m feeling a little rage-y about it.

Katie, who is helping Nana Mae serve side dishes, chimes in. “Ten bucks says Cole’s been carrying a ring in his pocket for at least two months.”

I drop my fork on the table.

Nobody else seems to have noticed that I've stopped breathing. Junie doesn't even look at me. Fucking Katie.

"I'll take your ten and raise you a twenty that he's had it for four months," Fen says.

No one is getting out of this room alive.

"Fifty says he's had it six months or more." Nolan smirks.

Et tu, Brute?

Fucking traitors, all of them.

"That," Junie says mildly, "Is the kind of thing that gets people uninvited from birthday dinners, *Katherine*."

"Doesn't make it less true." Katie shrugs. This is why they're best friends. They don't allow each other to get away with anything.

"Junie," I say, ignoring the way everyone leans in to listen. "Thank you. I love your idea and if it's truly what you want, I—well, it means the world to me."

She smiles sweetly. "I wish I could have known your parents, Cole."

"They would have loved you dear," Nana Mae says. "Katie, pass the potatoes and move on. I can only handle so many tears before my heart gives out."

"What the hell, Nana Mae?" Nolan mutters. "I saw your bloodwork. You're perfectly healthy."

Nana Mae shrugs and then engages Junie in a discussion about the new dock that's being built this week.

Nolan leans into my space and very, very quietly whispers, "I didn't say anything."

I whisper back. "No, but you just cheated your way into a win with that bet. You only know I have the damn thing because I did the right thing and asked for your fucking blessing."

Fen sits across from us, clocking it all.

Nolan tips back in his chair and laughs. It's a good sound to hear coming from him. Work or life has been stressing him out lately, and he isn't inclined to share yet.

I go back to eating and try to mute the entire dinner and pretend that Katie didn't just almost blow up my entire plan.

Junie kicks me under the table.

Once. Lightly. Just to let me know that she's fine.

I tap her back with my foot.

Fen, clearing his throat, clinks his wineglass with a fork.

“Don’t,” I growl just as Nana Mae says, “Sit down.”

“I cannot sit, Nana Mae. I just have one thing to say.” He raises his glass in the air. “To Nana Mae. For being our rock—and for forgiving us, mostly, when we deserved less.”

We all raise our glasses to my grandmother.

“That was a good one, Fenway.” She takes off her glasses and sets them on the table, and eyes each of us in turn.

“You kids got me to seventy-four. I don’t know how useful I’ll be for the next decade, but I’ll always be your rock until the day you bury me with them.”

“Jesus,” Hudson grumbles.

And with that morbid toast, I raise my glass. “To Nana Mae.”

“To Nana Mae,” everyone says in unison, but she’s already scurrying to the kitchen, muttering about dessert when we haven’t cut the chicken yet.

We drink to her anyway.

While everyone else is busy with their wine, I lean in and press my lips to Junie’s. It’s a check-in. A confirmation that we’re still on the same page. A meeting of two souls that we’ve somehow perfected over the last six months.

“That was a lot,” I whisper against her lips, thankful that, for once, our family is ignoring us.

“It always is.” She smiles back at me so sweetly my teeth ache.

“Tonight.” It rumbles from me with a hint of lust.

“We’ll go slow.” She places her lips just to the corner of mine.

“As slow as you want.” It’s a promise for later tonight, for tomorrow, for our future.

And she hears it exactly as I mean it because for the first time in my life, I’m perfectly in tune with who I’m supposed to be—hers.

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TEA AND TISSUES

JUNIE

Bea's wearing a lavender cardigan when I walk onto her porch at nine. It's the color I've noticed she wears when she decides we're about to do something difficult. And now the early morning session that has never once been an early morning session makes sense.

She wants to have the entire day free to drill into me whatever lesson I need to learn.

There's also a box of tissues where our tea usually sits.

I contemplate running home for all of three seconds. Something tells me beyond reason that this old lady would chase me down and drag me right back here.

"Juniper."

Good lord. Full first name.

"Bea."

"Sit down. We're going to finish what we started three weeks ago." She stares at me with a don't-fuck-with-me expression until I trudge up the steps and flop into my seat.

I bet she writes off these sessions on her taxes even if she doesn't send me a bill. We'll talk about that later.

"Three weeks ago, you told me you'd been keeping a promise to your five-year-old self."

"Just jumping right in today, huh, Bea?"

“You said you wanted to, and I quote, ‘un-honor it,’” she says, ignoring my sass. She’s become proficient at it lately. “Then you asked me what that verb was. Do you remember what I told you?”

“You said the verb didn’t matter. It was whatever I needed it to be that day.”

“Mm-hmm.” She begins to rock in her chair, a slow, steady rhythm. “Well, that damn verb’s been giving me trouble too. So I’ve been thinking, and I would like to offer you one, on the condition that you take it or leave it. You don’t have to use it on this porch or anywhere else, but if it’s useful, you may take it with you.”

“Okay.” I’m now on high alert. This sounds like some kind of witchcraft, and witches have historically not fared well.

“The verb,” Bea says calmly, “is releasing. You’re not breaking the promise you made to yourself at five. Promises we make ourselves are generally important, and it makes it hard to forgive ourselves if we break them. But you can release yourself from the five-year-old who needed it. From the service of it. The duty. From the job of running your life. That little girl’s been at the helm for nineteen years, sweetheart. She’s tired. You can help her off that ledge.”

Every inch of my body has broken out in a light sheen of perspiration. “Releasing.” I test the word.

“Releasing.”

“That’s better than un-honoring,” I say dryly.

“It’s a much better verb, yes. You may keep it or trade it in.” Bea says it as though she’s talking about a used car and she couldn’t care either way. Except I know Bea now—she cares very deeply.

“And—” I stare down at my hands, where my knuckles are white from holding my fists too tightly. It takes a few seconds for me to unclench them. “What happens to the five-year-old if I release her?”

Bea smiles. She stops rocking, leans over, and places her bony hand on top of mine. “She goes back into your memory where you’ll keep her safe. Where she belongs, dear.”

“The lavender cardigan was a good call, Bea,” I say through a choked sob.

Bea hands me some tissues and rocks next to me while I…release.

The fear.

The shame.

The anger.

The sadness.

By the time my tears dry, I'm exhausted.

"Tell me what you're doing this weekend," Bea says. The subject change throws me for a moment, but I appreciate what she's doing.

We did the hard thing.

Now comes the softness.

"The boys fly in tonight. Cole's giving me a tour of the new house tomorrow morning. The asshole hasn't let me inside for over a week. He said it'll ruin some open-house thing that Nana Mae's cooking for, and Katie's apparently been party planning for it but refuses to share a single detail."

Bea's lips curl up as though she knows something I don't.

"Bea." I've been in The Haven so long now my scary voice is failing me—it's just not needed here.

"Yes, dear?"

"What do you know?"

"Nothing. It sounds like a wonderful weekend. I'll see you on Wednesday."

That's it. She dismisses me and walks to her front door.

Well, that proves it. Bea's in on it.

Whatever *it* is.

COLE'S NOT HOME WHEN I GET BACK, AND I TRY NOT TO BE TOO disappointed by that fact. He didn't know Bea was going to give me the greatest gift today.

Or maybe he did, since she knows what the hell is going on.

There's a note on our office door.

Library install. I'll be back at three. Stay away from the house. I love you.

Hmm. That's fishy. I check his calendar. The custom shelves weren't supposed to be ready until next Friday. And sure enough, on his old-school paper calendar, next Friday is crossed out and today is hastily filled in with *Library*.

He knew I'd check his calendar.

Stay away from the house is like waving a red flag in front of a bull. It's basically taunting me to check it out, right?

For fuck's sake. I thought he knew me better than that. I may be working on making my soul all Zen and shit, but I'm still a nosy asshole.

My phone buzzes in my pocket.

BFF and Me Group Chat:

Everyone in my life has lost their damn minds around group chats.

Katie: Brunch. My place. Now. Don't argue. Do not pass go. Do not collect $200.

Junie: It's 11:30.

Katie: I've been able to tell time since the first grade, Juniper. I also know you're about to do something stupid involving the new house, and I'm instructing you, as your best friend, to get your hot little ass over here.

Katie: Now.

Katie: Brunch.

Katie: Mimosas.

Katie: I even made a fruit plate, for fuck's sake.

Junie: YOU'RE IN ON IT TOO?

Katie: I have no idea what you're talking about. My house. Now.

I only go because I'm nosy. And, if my nosiness gets me into trouble, I have a better chance of taking down Katie than I do Cole.

So here I am. At her house that's like a full-size version of Debutante Barbie's dream home.

And she's made two mimosas roughly the size of fish bowls. Hers is already half gone, which means she's nervous.

Her job is obviously to keep me on this side of our zip code.

"Where's Cole?" I ask.

"Last I heard, he was headed to the library."

“The shelving for the library wasn’t supposed to be ready until next Friday.”

“Hmm. Yay for meeting deadlines early. Drink your mimosa.” Her gaze darts around her home. Katie’s always a little flighty—God love her—but this is a lot even for her.

“Katie.”

“Just drink your damn mimosa, okay?”

I take a sip and choke. “Since when do you add vodka to your mimosas?”

“Since forever.”

“Katie—”

She doesn’t let me get another word in. The woman has prepared talking points and barely breathes.

She tells me a long-ass story about Stanley’s golf cart needing a new battery. An even longer story about Marley joining the bridge club, Marley getting kicked out of the bridge club, and then Marley taking over said bridge club. Then she moves on to a completely fabricated story about how Bea was once engaged to a man she met at the post office, which I don’t believe for a second, but Katie commits to with such force that I assume she’s under duress.

“Katie,” I jump in the second she takes a break long enough to suck down a quarter of her fishbowl.

“Hmm,” she hums around her straw.

“You wanted the role of my BFF, so we *will* have a conversation about how you’re lying to me.”

“I’m not lying.”

“Maybe not about all of it, but you are lying. Spectacularly. With dedication. I respect it. That’s the only reason I’m not going to acknowledge it further. For now.”

Katie has actual tears in her eyes, and it hits me how much our friendship might mean to her too. I’d just always assumed she’d taken me under her wing like a broken bird pushed out of the nest by its mother. “I love being your best friend.”

“I know.” I allow a large smile just for her.

“You’re being very generous about the lying,” she grumbles. Katie likes being called out even less than I do.

“Only because I can tell you’re under a lot of pressure today and I don’t need to add to it.” I lie back on her couch. “Just pour yourself another mimosa, sans vodka, and we’ll sit here drinking our faces off while I wait for whatever *it* is to happen.”

She finishes her drink before I’ve finished speaking.

COLE FETCHES ME AT THREE FIFTEEN WITH SAWDUST IN HIS HAIR, MY favorite expression on his face, and a smudge of something gross and gray under his chin.

“It’s installed?” Thankfully, I only drank one of Katie’s special mimosas, or I’d be slumped over and swaying like she is.

“Yeah.” He tugs on the back of his neck and breaks eye contact. “You going to be okay, Katie?”

“Finally,” she slurs with a big smile on her face. “You owe me. I need a shower and some water. Oh, there’s water in the shower.” She giggles.

“Is she going to be okay?” he asks when she’s out of sight.

“Fine. She’s not that drunk. I cut her off after one of her fishbowls, and I hid the vodka before she could make another.”

“Smart girl,” he says, crossing the room in two strides. He takes my face in his large hands and kisses me with the kind of slow precision he uses when building a very special model.

“Cole,” I say when he rests his forehead against mine. “What the hell’s going on today?”

A slow, devious smile spreads across his face. “Put this on and then meet me in the car.” I hadn’t noticed anything when he walked in, but that’s because he must have hung it over the banister the moment he entered.

“My green dress?”

“My favorite dress,” he says. “Meet me in the car.” Cole practically runs out of Katie’s house, and with her in the shower, I have no choice but to do as he says.

THE DRIVE TO PAPA'S FISHING HOLE TAKES LESS THAN TWO MINUTES, AND that's only because Stanley has a procession of golf carts crisscrossing the road in front of us. They only fall away when we turn onto the dirt road that leads to Papa's land.

Six months ago, it was just land and a dock. Now it has a house that's almost ready to become a home—our home.

I've walked this drive more times than I can count now. I know what's at the end of the road. I've memorized it.

But…it's not like it was even a week ago.

The driveway has string lights, and someone has added paper lanterns to the trees. They hang in low, warm clusters, lit even though it's not yet dark.

The house comes into view. The porch we redesigned six times until we were sure it was perfect is covered in flowers—small arrangements in every color sitting in mason jars in various sizes. Each and every one of them has sweet peas.

I don't realize my fingers are digging into his thigh until he turns my hand palm up and laces his fingers through mine. "Trust me, sweetheart."

"Cole."

"Yeah?" He puts the car in park.

"What did you do?"

He chuckles. "I built you a porch."

"Is that all?"

He kisses the tip of my nose. "Not even close. I made you a porch. And the residents of The Haven are about to clap from across the marsh because they can't help themselves, and Stanley got a megaphone he's been forbidden from using, and Bea has, against her better judgment, told me what verb to use. Nana Mae is sitting somewhere with a glass of wine, pretending she had nothing to do with this, and I'm going to need you to go up those steps with me, Junie, because I've been planning this for months and the alternative is I burst into flames."

"Bea told you the verb?"

"She did. She said it would be helpful for us both."

"Today?"

"This morning," he confirms.

"Freaking Bea. She should've just sent me home with the whole damn box of tissues."

"Don't worry, I've got you covered. Now, let's go."

The floral-covered porch smells like the best day of my life. Glowing lanterns frame our wide-open front door, showing me the entry I helped design.

Cole takes my hand. “Junie.”

I tear my gaze away from the home I’m impatient to see.

“I had a speech,” he says shyly.

“Did you?”

“I did. A really good one too. Hudson helped me write it. Fen added his…Fenisms. Nolan threatened to read it aloud at the rehearsal dinner if I screwed up the proposal, which suggests Nolan is more confident than I am that there will be a rehearsal dinner.”

My throat is too dry to speak.

“The speech was…” He glances over my head. “It was fine. It had three sections. Supporting evidence. An emotional hook. A solid theory. But now that I’m standing on the edge of our forever, I can’t remember a single word of it, so I’m going off script.”

I’m going to cry. Again. More proof that the new Junie is a freaking crybaby.

“I’ve been in love with you for longer than I’ve ever allowed myself to acknowledge. I fell for you in stages, over many life events, and years that crossed like lifetimes. I’ve loved you longer than I’ve been doing anything else in my entire life. I built houses to give to you. I built a community to keep you safe in. I built a quiet, full, terrified life around the absence of you, and I built it well enough that I almost convinced myself I was fine. But I wasn’t. I am, as it turns out, only fine when you’re within shouting distance.”

“Cole.” Oh, God. I sound like a frog.

“I’m not done.”

Good. I’m not ready to speak yet.

“You sat on my grandfather’s old dock with your feet in the water, and you told me you didn’t know who you were and that you didn’t think I knew who I was either. You told me you wanted a break—”

I shake my head, and a tear slips free. He wipes it away with his thumb and continues speaking.

“But then, you didn’t take one. You stayed. I’ve spent the months since that night trying to be the man who deserves the version of you who stays. I’m a work in progress, but I can promise you that I’ll try. That I’ll keep

trying every day of our lives because you're it for me. You are my forever, and I'm asking you to keep letting me try."

He reaches into his pocket while dropping to one knee, and my throat holds air hostage.

"You've released your ghosts, Junie, and you've helped me harness mine." Cole pulls out a small velvet box. "Those are some pretty good verbs, huh?"

I choke on a garbled laugh as he opens the box.

What's inside isn't a replacement.

It's so much more.

Three bands of pavé diamonds. The top and bottom sparkle in their symmetry. The middle row is slightly bigger than the others. Somehow, the three work in perfect harmony.

"Three bands," Cole says. "For our past, our present, and our future. I want you to wear it on your right hand, because Nana Mae's diamond is where it was always meant to be. But this one, this one is us. It's our messy beginning, our hard-earned story, and our happily ever after all together, just as we were always meant to be."

My tears are coming so fast I can barely make out his face.

"Juniper Mercer. Will you marry me?"

In less than three seconds, I take inventory of my feelings.

I'm not tempted to run.

No part of me is trying to lash out.

Every part of me is screaming yes.

"Yes," I say.

Cole's face warms in a way I will think about for the rest of my life.

"Yes," I say again louder when he doesn't move. "Yes, Cole. Yes. But I need you to put that ring on my finger and kiss me before I start making up stories about what's happening here."

The ring is a perfect fit.

His lips are the perfect touch.

Our hearts are the perfect match.

"She said yes," he yells out over the marsh.

And as anticipated, The Haven residents respond exactly the way I'd expect them to—with cowbells, golf cart horns, and Stanley's whoop of joy through a megaphone.

“We have about four minutes before they come racing up that driveway,” Cole says.

I laugh and hug him tighter.

They arrive in less than two.

“Junie.” Nana Mae reaches me first with the help of Hudson.

“Hey, I thought you weren’t supposed to be here until tomorrow?”

Hudson winks. “You think we’d miss this?”

Behind him, Nolan and Fen are helping The Havens out of their golf carts.

“You said yes,” Nana Mae says. She doesn’t say anything else for a long moment. She kisses my hands, the right and then the left. Then she kisses Cole’s cheek. She takes one long look at us before she assigns herself mayor and starts handing out champagne.

Nolan and Fen join us next.

“I drafted a prenup,” Hudson says, hugging me awkwardly. “Cole rejected it. But I want it on record that I tried.”

“Noted,” I say. My eyes roll so hard they ache.

Fen hugs me next. His is longer, and true to character, more theatrical. He lifts me off my feet and swings me around. “What are we going to call you now that we’ve retired Spite-Berry and Petty-Betty?”

“Oh,” I laugh. “I’m sure you’ll come up with something.”

“I don’t think she’s lost the Spite-Berry side of her,” Nolan says. “I think she just finally learned when to utilize it.”

Fen sets me down on my feet. “That true?”

I shrug. “Maybe.”

“I love you, you little menace.”

“Love you too, Fen.”

Nolan stands off to the side with his hands still in his pockets. Then he pulls them out and opens his arms wide. I fall into him just like I did when I was five. “Junebug,” he whispers into the side of my head.

“Noley.”

“I think,” he keeps his voice low. “You’re the most amazing person I know, Junie. Despite who Anna tried to make you, you chose love. That’s something she was never able to do.”

I hug him harder. Over the last few months, I’ve opened up to him and Cole about what Anna used to say to me. I think it broke my brother in ways he’s still trying to come to terms with. But opening up to them did

what Bea's trying to teach me to do now—it released the shackles caused by a hurt woman who only knew how to hurt others.

"I'm so damn proud of you for fighting for this, Junie. This love that you and Cole have? Not everyone gets it. I'm so happy you found it and let that love in, baby sister."

"Thank you, Nolan," I sniffle into his chest. "Thank you for always loving me, even when I made it nearly impossible."

Cole growls at my side right before he pulls me back from my brother. Stinking Neanderthal.

"You were never impossible to love, Junie," he says, staring straight at my brother.

"He's right," Nolan says. "Loving you is the one thing I think we all did right."

Behind us, Stanley shouts into the megaphone while Marley chases him with a ticket in hand. Dollie and Nana Mae are setting out food while Frank photographs everything. Katie stands with Bea at the punch bowl, but it appears Bea is forcing coffee on Katie, and her cackle of laughter tells me she's tipsy enough not to care.

Music plays from speakers strategically placed throughout the property to blend in with nature. And Cole leads me in a dance, right here on our front porch with all our friends and family watching.

"To Cole and Juniper," Nana Mae says over the crowd with the help of Stanley's megaphone.

With the side of my face pressed into Cole's chest, I've never felt so… content.

"Welcome home, sweetheart." Cole's words kiss across the top of my head, so I tilt my face up to look at him.

"You're going to be my husband."

"And you're going to be my wife. Soon."

"Soon," I agree because we've already wasted too much time.

"I love you." Those three words are the salve I've always needed in my life.

"I love you too."

Amongst the faces of our family and friends, I see all the different versions of me. The woman I was. The woman I am. The woman I'm about to become. And all of them are finally in agreement on something…

We're going to stay.

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EPILOGUE

LOAD-BEARING

Cole
Three Months Later

Six hours.

That's how much longer I have to wait in this house that wasn't built to feel so empty.

Because it's not just a house. It's a home.

I understand the difference now.

Our home at Papa's fishing hole holds the quiet differently than the model house we used to live in. It's not an empty silence anymore…it's holding space for the life that will happen here.

I know because I drafted the plans for it in painstaking detail.

Junie spent last night at Katie's because Katie declared it a tradition we weren't going to mess with. And Katie's traditions, frequently invented on the spot, are enforced with the zeal of a small-town dictator in sequins.

That's how I end up on the deck of our home at 7 a.m. watching the fog sit low over the marsh, counting down the hours until Junie Mercer becomes Junie Whittaker.

My phone buzzes on the railing.

BFFs Maid of Honor Group Chat:

Katie: She's awake. She's fine. She may have tried to reorganize the seating chart at 2 a.m., but she's FINE.

Junie: I'm right here, Katherine.

Katie: See? Fine.

Junie: Whittaker, you'd better be sleeping.

Cole: Sound asleep.

Junie: Liar. I can see the porch light over the marsh from Katie's guest room.

I look up at the light burning brightly over my head and smile like an idiot.

Cole: You're not home. Of course it's on.

Junie: Five hours and fifty-six minutes.

Cole: I'll be waiting.

By nine, the Boston boys remind me why I love them and also why prisons were built.

Fen has appointed himself Director of Ambiance and keeps radioing Stanley via military-grade walkie-talkies about the golf cart procession route. Hudson is steaming his suit and mine because he doesn't trust anyone else to "get the details straight," and there's a legal pad on my kitchen counter with the heading *Objections, Anticipated* that I'm not asking about.

Nolan finds me in my office, fighting a losing battle with Papa's cufflinks.

Six months ago, I probably would've fought those little bastards until my fingers bled before admitting defeat. Today, I simply hold out my hands like a toddler.

"Help?"

My friend smirks. "Look at you. Using your words like a big boy."

"Don't make it weird."

"It's been weird since kindergarten when Fen decided that we would all be marrying each other so we'd be stuck together forever." He finishes the second cuff but doesn't let go. His hand comes down on my shoulder

instead, the weight of twenty-five years of friendship in it. “She’d have killed us both, you know. If we’d let you marry anyone else.”

“There was never going to be anyone else.”

His gaze softens as he nods. “That’s the truth, isn’t it? You would’ve rather died alone than try to replace her.”

“There is not, and never will be, a replacement for Junie, Nolan. My heart has always known that.”

“Yeah,” he says quietly. “So does hers.”

“For what it’s worth,” Fen murmurs next to me. We’re standing on our porch with the lanterns at our backs, waiting for Junie to walk down the aisle. “I’m really fucking glad you learned how to stay.”

“Well, maybe you’ll find that running was never the solution to your problems. Maybe this time, you’ll learn how to stay.”

Fenway Jones has always liked bookends, and he just dropped one on my wedding day.

“Me too.”

Of all the ways things could have—and did—go sideways when he and Hudson dropped Junie off at my front door, learning to stay made it all worth it.

Hudson hands me some tissues. I nod in thanks as I tuck them into my pocket after wiping my left eye.

The list of things we don’t talk about now could fit on a Post-it note, and it’s another thing I’m thankful for.

Sweet peas in mason jars line the railings, steps, and the new dock because Nana Mae spent two weeks muttering that she wasn’t taking any chances with this wedding.

The Haven arrived in a procession of golf carts strung with lights, and now they all sit in white folding chairs, staring at me with emotion swimming in their eyes.

Nana Mae is in the front row, wearing her good cardigan and a new pearl pin that Junie bought for her.

Bea stands behind me, Hudson, and Fen, wearing a brand-new cardigan that Junie gifted her in butter yellow. She notices me smiling at it and

shrugs. “Lavender is for difficult days. She said I needed a verb-free color.”

That’s my Junie.

“Is verb-free the technical term?” Hudson teases.

“Don’t think I don’t see you, Hudson Tenney. My porch is waiting for you too.”

Hudson gulps and averts his gaze.

“Shh,” Bea says. “Here she comes.”

Here she comes, and the world fades to black and white around her.

Junie’s on her brother’s arm, walking up the driveway strung with lanterns, and I forget every structural principle I’ve ever learned because nothing about me is load-bearing anymore.

She draws my attention like a personal sunbeam.

Radiant.

Dazzling.

Mine.

Her dress is simple. Her smile is not.

Junie will always be complicated, witty, sassy beyond comprehension. But she’s also complicated in the sweet, quiet way that happens when you finally let love in.

She’s perfection in a Junie-sized package.

My gaze drifts down to the flowers she’s carrying. They’re tied with a moss-green ribbon the same exact shade as my favorite dress. It’s intentional, and she’s smug as hell about it.

She walks straight toward me without an ounce of hesitation. This is the version of her that will flash through my memories for a lifetime.

Nolan puts her hand in mine. “Junebug,” he whispers, and kisses her cheek before releasing her to me. His gaze finds mine over her head, full of love and happiness and all the joy we’ve been running from for too long.

Bea clears her throat, and he takes his position next to Katie because Junie decided that he would also be her bridesman—whatever the hell that is. I didn’t fight her on it, and neither did he.

“I’ve been informed I have one job today,” Bea says. “And it’s to keep this short so these two can kiss, then throw the biggest party The Haven’s ever seen.” She waits out the laughter, but that really was our only request. “Junie and Cole came to my porch haunted by ghosts they couldn’t control. Ghosts that kept them apart and broke their hearts. Sometimes we need to break before we can become whole, and sometimes our pieces only fit when

our soul finds its other half. That's what Junie and Cole did when they committed to fixing what was broken. Junie learned to release her past so she could have a future, and Cole learned to harness what he could control and let go of things not meant for him."

She smiles at us, and Junie squeezes my hand.

Hudson nudges me in the back. "The tissues weren't just for you," he whispers.

I reach into my pocket and hand Junie a clean tissue.

"Today," Bea continues, "I'm going to offer them a new verb, the best one I know, and they get to share it. Today's verb is *keep*. By coming together today, you're promising to keep each other's hearts safe. To keep your love alive. To keep choosing each other every day…especially when it's hard."

Junie's fingers tighten around mine.

"Juniper. You first, dear."

Katie steps forward to hand Junie a piece of paper she pulls from her cleavage.

Junie unfolds it, again and again, and the crowd loses it when she flashes a brightly colored spreadsheet their way.

I recognize it instantly.

"Before I agreed to move in with this man, I built a new matrix," Junie says. "It's sixteen pages, and he still can't read the math of it." She glances at me, wicked and watery at once. "So in the interest of transparency, I ran the numbers again last night. Probability of me running: Zero. Probability of you carrying things alone and getting caught by me immediately: High."

I chuckle, and so does everyone else.

"Probability that I will love you, exactly as you are, grump and vellum and all, until I'm dust: Certain." Her voice cracks on the landing. "Cole Whittaker, you're the only risk I never needed to assess. I just needed to be brave enough to take it. I vow to stay. I vow to try. I vow to love you openly, honestly, and with my whole wobbly heart until my very last breath because I've loved you for so long it's become a part of my fabric. You're in my DNA, my heart, my forever."

Hudson hands me new tissues. It's not worth telling him that the marsh is just aggressive in its allergens because there isn't a dry eye in all of The Haven right now.

Junie just put her heart on blast and did so with zero walls or hesitation.

God, I love this woman.

“Cole,” Bea prompts.

“I had a speech,” I say as Hudson tries to hand it to me, but I wave him off. I’m not even shocked that he managed to find a copy of my words. “But I’ve learned something about my speeches and you, so here’s the structural composition of you and me—you’re it, Junie. You’ve been it for me since before I had the words and after I lost them. I vow to hand you the heavy things. I vow to tell you the truth even when I want to build something to hide it behind. I vow to always leave the light on so while you learn who you are at every stage of life, you’ll always know where home is. I vow to love you and be your partner, from spite to love and everything in between for the rest of my life.”

Junie makes a sound that’s half sob, half victory.

Hudson hands me the rings, and as Bea says words I don’t hear, I slip the final band around Junie’s ring finger like it was always meant to be there—and we both know that it was.

Junie takes my hand, and before she puts my ring on, she tilts it toward the light. I lean in to read the engraving.

Love is load-bearing.

I swallow thickly as she slides it past my knuckle.

Love is load-bearing. It wraps around my finger, then around my heart in a way I wasn’t prepared for.

Those four little words mean more than I can say, and she knows it.

Love is the structure of us—it always has been.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” Bea says, and loving chaos erupts around us.

“They did it,” Stanley shouts into his megaphone just as I lean in to kiss Junie.

It’s not a sweet kiss. It’s a forever kiss—it’s a lifetime of hopes and dreams and a promise of the future. It’s love between lips and hearts and us.

We have our first dance right where I asked her to try, and the night glows golden all around us.

“Mrs. Whittaker,” I say, just to hear it.

“Mr. Whittaker.” She grins like she’s gotten away with something.

“The first time I danced with you, I knew you’d either be my salvation or my ruin.”

“Yeah?” She rests her head against my chest. “And which did I end up being?”

“Both, sweetheart. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“My teenage self is pinching my arm right now,” she says. “When I think about every dream I ever had for myself, they always ended here, with you. Thank you for being my dream maker, Cole.”

“Oh, sweetheart. You have that all backward. You’re the only dream worth having. Thank you for trying.” I tilt her head up and press my lips to hers. “Now.” I kiss the corner of her lips. “About tonight.” I kiss the other corner of her mouth. “How…slow should we go?”

Her gaze darkens with desire.

The Haven residents and our family are scattered around the property, but Hudson will shut this place down the second we head inside.

“Carry me over the threshold, Mr. Whittaker, and don’t you dare even think about…slow tonight.”

Game. Set. Match.

I lift Junie into my arms and practically run down the dock to cheers and whistles, and Hudson immediately starts corralling people out of the way.

We threw the party we wanted—now it’s time to start our future.

“I love you, Juniper Whittaker,” I growl as I slam the front door shut, then lock it behind us.

“I love you too, Mr. Whittaker, but if you ruin this dress, I will destroy you.”

I smirk as I take the stairs two at a time. She bounces against my chest.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, Junie. You own me, body, heart, and soul. From now until forever.”

“Forever’s a long time, Whittaker.”

“Forever is not nearly long enough, Viper. Not nearly long enough.”

———

If you loved Cole’s quiet fixer-hero energy, then you’ll love *Where We Fall* —Kissing the boss is never a good idea. Especially when your boss is suddenly guardian to two tiny nieces he has NO idea what to do with! Get it here →

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Mr. Maxwell: Without you, none of this would be possible.

The Maxwell Kids: Thank you for supporting me, even when it means you have to wait longer for dinner.

Reader Kyle: My local architect. Thank you for answering endless questions about Cole's career…even the ones you never thought you'd receive.

Jenny L: My wine night friend who turned a late-night winery visit into a "I bet you can't put this in a book" night. The next day I woke up to a text with a video of *The Singing, Ringing Tree* in Lancashire, England, a challenge to make an inanimate object sad, and I said, "hold my wine." That's how Cole's Whisper of Souls Memorial was born.

TWSS: Thank you for always believing in me, supporting me, and encouraging me. I couldn't ask for a more supportive team.

My friends: All of you. Thank you for being my safe place to land when insecurity gets the better of me.

To you—my amazing readers: I wouldn't be here without you and your continued support. When I started this career, I had no idea it would include a community I'd been searching for my entire life. Thank you for being you and for allowing me to be me.

HEA Author Services: Jess and Emily—you make me a better author with each pass, and I appreciate everything you do.

Kari March: Thank you for always bringing my vision to life in cover form.

Team Avery: Without you, I wouldn't even know where to begin each day. Thank you for all the ways you support me.

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