
a novel
TASHA GOLD
SCARLETT UNDONE

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TASHA GOLD


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PRELUDE

MAY 29TH, 2018

These rural roads were treacherous at this hour, so dark it was like driving through a high-beam tunnel. Clouds blotted out the stars. The potholes sent my car bumping from side to side, each hard *thwump* reverberating up my spine.

I turned off the radio and focused on the drive, gripping the wheel at ten and two, like my fastidious uncle. I smiled as I pictured Arthur's always-stern expression, the way he arranged the cans evenly on his pantry shelves. That man would find a way to organize the dirt around his coffin by geological type. Surely he'd find a way to forgive me for all I'd done.

As I rounded the last bend toward the farmhouse, I relaxed slightly, relieved to be away from the city. Back in this mud-caked town I'd always thought I hated. Closer to Arthur.

Until I saw glowing lights in the distance. Possibly at the farm.

I squeezed the steering wheel in a stranglehold.

Those weren't just any bright lights. Red-and-blue flashes whorled in the dark like radioactive bats, and my racing heart jumped into my throat.

Police lights. At the farm.

Oh God, no.

ONE

TWO MONTHS PRIOR...

This was definitely a bad idea. One of my worst, and I went through a yellow eye shadow phase in college.

"You sure you're up for this?" Kenna asked me, her fringed bangs as severe as her narrowed eyes.

I wasn't sure anything was a good idea these days, unless it involved eating chocolate. "I RSVP'd before it happened. It would be rude not to come."

She muttered something like, "The things I do for you…" and rang the doorbell.

I clutched my baby shower gift and tried to steady my breaths.

The door swung open, and a man in a pressed shirt and slacks ushered us in. He took our gifts and motioned upstairs. Kenna guided me with a hand on my back, but the closer we got to Chelsea's nursery, the tighter my lungs felt.

Voices drifted out. My legs quit working.

"We should leave," Kenna said. "Go to lunch or something. Just the two of us."

Maybe she was right. This was too soon. Escaping the apartment was one thing. Attending a baby shower after having a miscarriage? I never should've talked myself into this.

The click of heels sounded behind us. I turned as Franny masked the shock on her face. “I’m so glad you came, Scarlett. It’s so great to see you. And I’m so, so sorry about the baby. You must be so devastated.”

She was clearly *so* uncomfortable, but devastation hit close to the mark. I just wished I understood why I was also frozen. Scared to analyze my feelings or talk to my husband about the jumbled angst swirling inside me. When he’d mentioned us eventually trying for a baby again, my visceral reaction had been *No!* The solid syllable had clung to my tongue with its audacity.

I hadn’t spoken it aloud, thank God.

To Franny, I said, “It’s been hard, but it’s good to get out.” And too late to leave without causing a scene.

We walked into the nursery. The women wore soft-hued dresses similar yet different enough you’d think they had coordinated their attire. My black wrap dress was the only one that fit me properly.

Slowly, every set of eyes fastened on me, pity emphasized in the lifted brows and tilted heads. A few women clutched their Tiffany pendant necklaces. Condolences were uttered, and when Chelsea stood to embrace me, her rounded belly pressed into my empty one.

My eyes burned, but I kept them wide. I would not cry. I came to celebrate a friend’s joy, not focus on what I’d lost, which felt like a lot more than a baby.

I pulled back and motioned to my best friend. “I hope you don’t mind me bringing Kenna. She didn’t want me coming alone.” She was also my buffer. At some point in the afternoon, they’d forget about me and glom on to her. The fawning happened like clockwork.

“No, no,” Chelsea said. “Of course not. We’ll get another chair.” But she frowned at the circle.

She actually needed two chairs. She hadn’t expected me to come.

With the chair situation rectified, Chelsea's sister led us through silly games. We passed around a diaper bag to guess which items were inside by feel, not sight. We played Guess Chelsea's Measurements by cutting string to match her belly's size. I participated the way a marionette followed its owner's cues: laugh, lift scissors, cut, nod, grin. The women did a stellar job pretending my presence was normal. Kenna, however, looked ready to tie her measurement string around her neck.

Her dislike of this crowd wasn't subtle. She'd told me often and loudly how shallow she thought they were, but Chelsea had included me when I'd moved here. All our husbands were friends.

The gifts were brought in next. Chelsea lifted a tiny pair of Prada booties and cooed. "Oh my God, Bridget! They are just so perfect." She rubbed her rounded belly. "Little Nutmeg will love them."

Kenna leaned toward my ear. "Why is she naming her daughter after a fucking spice?"

I elbowed her with a discreet, "*Shh.*"

There was always some kind of baby-naming trend, the current front-runner being spices—Cayenne, Cinnamon, Nutmeg. The names confused me as much as they annoyed Kenna, but the last thing I needed was to draw more attention my way.

The women remained focused on the gift opening, *ooh*ing and *aah*ing at the parade of registry gifts. Designer onesies. Sippy cups. Chelsea feigned surprise at a polka-dot sweater she'd already picked out.

I clasped my hands until my nails dug half-moons into my palms.

I'd almost purchased that sweater set for my baby, pink and tiny and adorable. Other memories thwarted me: the horror of the cramps, Dr. Patel's hushed words, my tears, Daniel's optimistic *We'll try again*, and my feelings of inadequacy and guilt as I'd stuffed my face with food instead of facing his hopefulness and my ambivalence.

Was that why I'd come to this shower? To shake my strange reaction and revive my maternal switch?

"Ten bucks says the next gift is that creepy owl mobile," Kenna whispered.

"Not if it's the silk crib sheets I regifted," I said, matching her low tone.

She mock-gasped. "The ones your mother-in-law bought? How perfectly tacky of you."

"It's better than buying off a registry." There were so few pleasant surprises in life.

"Sure, but it won't beat my gift."

Bridget glanced our way. I ducked my head, only to notice my clenched hands had relaxed. Kenna's familiar technique had worked—distraction by sarcastic volleys.

She'd defused me often enough to read my tells and know when I was stressed. She was, after all, the only person in my circle who knew my real last name and that she could never, ever discuss it with my husband or my friends, unless she wanted her bed filled with spiders. She knew why I never returned to my teenage hometown. She also knew I'd had a unibrow in college and an embarrassing love of eighties "hair metal" bands.

Chelsea pulled my gift from the dwindling pile and placed it on her lap. The rose wrapping paper matched the hairband securing her generous blond waves. Her nose was as petite as her dainty hands. If they made a pregnant Barbie, she would look like Chelsea.

She opened my card, and I braced myself for an emotional wave.

Her chin trembled. "Oh, Scarlett. Thank you so much." She dabbed at her eyes. "Stupid pregnancy hormones."

An excellent excuse, but most eyes fastened on me were glassy. Mine reacted in kind, but I didn't know if I was crying for the baby I'd lost or the future ones I wasn't sure I wanted. I focused on the handsewn dolls

slumped on Chelsea's lavender changing table, on the lemon accents in the calming green room. "I'm so excited for you," I told her.

She pressed her hand to her heart, then unwrapped my regifted sheet set.

The ladies nodded their approval.

"Last one!" Chelsea pulled Kenna's gift from her bag and blinked at the wrapping paper.

Cartoon Santas lined its length, all with their pants down, mooning the world. Kenna had used the same paper on her Christmas presents. I'd cracked up then. Now it was March, not December. I'd since lost my baby and myself, and this was a group of wives who chose craft nights over sex-toy parties.

When the subject matter registered, Chelsea blushed. The air conditioner hummed. I bit my cheek.

Kenna smiled wickedly. "You'll be wiping lots of ass in the coming months," she said. "Figured it was fitting."

Gradual laughter tittered through the group, including mine. It felt cathartic to laugh. To feel a natural emotion.

Blythe stared at the gift longingly. "You have got to tell me where you bought that paper. If I wrap this year's gift in it, Edward's mother might have a stroke. Then she won't be able to attend dinner and criticize my cooking." Blythe was on her third strawberry-infused mimosa—the wild child of the ladies.

Kenna's actual gift was just as entertaining. Chelsea lifted the silver flask and turned it over as though encountering alien technology.

"Fill it with vodka," Kenna told her. "If I don't sneak a nip when I'm at my niece's music recitals, I spend the hour plotting murder."

"You're hilarious," Blythe said, like Kenna was joking.

I'd heard her niece play. The screeching could incite violence.

Franny leaned toward Kenna from across the circle. "What color lipstick is that? The reds I've been trying all have a hint of orange to them."

The question came out of left field, as the beauty questions usually did, but Kenna blew her an air kiss. “MAC Ruby Woo. You could eat a bowl of ramen, and it wouldn’t smudge.”

All attention swept to Kenna, makeup artist extraordinaire, and the women didn’t hold back their rapid-fire questions.

“Which eye cream hides dark circles best?”

“Does lash primer really work?”

“How do I get that beachy, fresh-faced look?”

Kenna pursed her lips but played along, detailing which products she loved and which should be banished. Their interrogation continued as we moved to the main floor living room. The catering staff milled around, as unobtrusive as the cream and gray decor, offering cucumber water and tea sandwiches.

I loitered on the outskirts, always amazed how these women vied for Kenna’s attention.

If they passed her on the street, they’d likely avoid eye contact. Eighty percent of Kenna’s pale skin was covered in bold ink, and I’d lost count of her piercings. She was a five-foot-four punk rocker with a big personality and bigger talent. Chelsea’s circle of friends almost died when they’d learned the likes of Lagerfeld and McCartney begged Kenna to beautify their runway models with her makeup artistry. Kenna, however, only took those gigs to fund her passion—teaching kids how to apply foundation over disfiguring burns and scars.

The group flitted around her like pretty pastel butterflies accosting an ornery bee. She’d normally have shrugged them off by now, but she caught my eye and winked. She knew she was being my buffer.

Chelsea pushed through the group and joined me on the periphery. She gave me a brave smile. “Are you doing Easter with Daniel’s family this year?”

“Breaking that tradition would be sacrilegious.”

She rolled her doll-like eyes. “Tell me about it. If I suggest Dean’s mother cater instead of making her spiral ham, she looks at me like I said we should eat dirt.”

“In-laws are atrocious.”

“The worst,” she agreed and took a dainty sip of her virgin mimosa.

“Guess you’ll be that atrocious in-law one day,” I said, assessing my internal reaction to the concept. Did I want to be an in-law one day? A mother of the bride or groom? Surely I wanted that, right?

She glanced down and rubbed her belly. “I can’t wait,” she whispered, but pity gathered in the lines between her brows. “How are you holding up?”

“Good days and bad.” With a side of confused desperation.

“And Daniel?”

“He’s sad, but powering on. He’s at the gym a lot. It’s kind of become his thing.”

If my coping mechanisms were inaction and overeating, Daniel’s was working out. Extra softness padded my middle, but he’d gained a set of abs I hadn’t seen on him since college.

“Healing takes time,” Chelsea said with gravity. “You’ll try again when you’re ready.”

I didn’t tell her the idea of trying again made me panic. I also hadn’t mentioned I should be celebrating Passover, not Easter. Both were difficult conversations for different reasons, my family’s sordid history responsible for the latter kind-of-lie.

If this crowd knew who I was—who *my father* was—they’d never have invited me to this celebration.

Kenna sauntered over and linked our elbows. “Mind if I steal my girl away?”

“Be my guest,” Chelsea said. “I need to chat with the caterer about dessert. Wait until you see it. It’s to die for.” She punctuated her excitement

with a little clap and left to flag a server.

Kenna batted her lashes at me. “The only thing dying is *me* to get out of here. I think we’ve given these vultures enough to gossip about.”

“They aren’t vultures. You know how good Chelsea was to me when I moved here, always asking me to go for lunch or coffee.”

“Because she and this horde of hens don’t do anything except gather gossip.”

“They’re nice, Kenna. That’s more than I can say about a lot of people.”

“All I’m saying is, I know you.” She picked a fallen strand of hair off my dress and let it drop. “I’m glad you wanted to get out of the house, but these women are observers—people who walk around with mental scoreboards, deciding who’s worthy of their attention one minute and who’s on the outs. Do any of them even work?”

“Bridget and Franny volunteer.” The strength in my voice diminished, sucking the wind from my defensiveness.

It was hard to battle Kenna’s assumptions when I’d also wondered how these women could fritter away their days and bet it all on their husbands. I knew what it was to have everything—money, friends, family, *things*—then poof, nothing. I’d bungee jump naked before depending on a man financially.

“These women are nice enough,” Kenna said, dialing back her attitude, “but I assumed they were a way station for you. That you’d meet your people over time and see them less.”

I threaded our fingers together. “You’re my people.”

She sighed. “I know, honey. And you’re mine.”

All because we’d been assigned the same dorm room. On our fateful meeting, she’d taken one look at my unibrow and poorly bleached mustache and had said, “For the love of God, let me help you.”

I squeezed her hand. “You look amazing, by the way. The shorter hair is killer.”

“Really?” She scrunched her nose. “I’m not sure.”

“It’s totally fresh and fun. I love it.”

“Thanks, babe. And those shoes of yours”—she nodded at my slingback heels—“always look lethal on you.”

My black dress may have been the only one that fit properly, but accessories were a surefire way to feel more attractive. “Daniel thinks they’re hot, and I hoped wearing them would give us both a lift. It’s silly, but I need something to wake me up and get me out of my head. Find a way to get things back on track with Daniel.”

Kenna frowned but didn’t reply. Her uncharacteristic silence had me wanting to fill the void, but Bon Jovi’s “Livin’ on a Prayer” suddenly blasted through the elegant gathering. I glanced around, only to realize *my* phone was making the bewildering sound.

Mortification swamped me, along with suspicion.

Kenna had asked to borrow my cell on the drive here. I should have known she’d try to prank me.

Hilarious, I mouthed as I juggled to hit Talk. I plugged my free ear to block her cackling. “Hello?”

A muffled voice replied.

“Sorry.” I squinted, as though that would allow me to hear better. “Whoever this is, you’ll have to speak up.”

Beeping and rustling carried through the line. Then, “It’s me. Arthur.”

Unease prickled my neck. I spoke with Uncle Arthur once a month. To the minute. He was fastidious in his routines, verging on obsessive. It had made living with him during my teens interesting to say the least, but an out-of-sequence call couldn’t be good.

I hunched toward the wall. “What’s up?”

“I had a heart attack.”

I sucked in a shocked breath. His directness was always appreciated, if sometimes off-putting. “Are you okay?”

“Fine. I had minor surgery. They’re releasing me tomorrow.”

“What do you mean, surgery? Surgery isn’t fine.”

“It’s all routine. Nothing for you to worry about, but the nurse was on me to call family. So…”

So, I was all he had left.

My grandfather died of a heart attack in his sixties. My father died in his prison cell—although *murdered* is a more apt description. My grandmother’s lung cancer had thankfully been swift, and Arthur’s remaining relatives had banished us after Dad’s arrest.

All my never-married uncle had was me.

I bit my lip. “Who’s looking after the dogs?”

“Got staff for that. Anyway, I should go. I’ll call you next month.”

“Okay,” I whispered to the dead line.

Arthur’s abrupt demeanor should calm me. If he’d been sentimental or emotional, I’d have called the National Guard, hopped in my car, and driven three hours to the godforsaken stretch of dirt he still called home. A possibility that had my heart working double time.

I hadn’t returned to Fernlow since escaping to college and vowed to uphold that record. Everything about Arthur’s farm reminded me of visiting my father in prison. The air there smelled of noxious mud and my teenage wretchedness. Not that it mattered. He’d said his staff was tending the kennel, and heart-attack surgeries were routine these days.

Still, I stared at my silent phone. Maybe I should call back, demand to speak with a doctor.

Kenna pinched my side. “Everything all right?”

I swallowed past the burn in my throat. “No. Everyone here now knows I loved Bon Jovi.” A much easier horror to focus on than heart attacks and miscarriages.

“It’s cute how you use the past tense when I know their greatest hits are on your running playlist.”

I scowled at her. “We need to find you someone to date. Occupy your meddle-with-Scarlett time.”

“Oh, honey. Nothing would ever interfere with that precious time.”

The tightness in my throat worsened. I hugged my middle as Arthur’s call fully sank in. “My uncle had a heart attack,” I said.

Kenna’s hand flew to her mouth. “Is he okay?”

“He said he’s fine.”

“Are *you* okay?”

“I’m not sure.” Like my reaction to Daniel’s *We’ll try again*, my roiling emotions felt wrong. I was worried about Arthur’s health and recovery, but my erratic pulse worsened as I imagined him needing care and being forced to drive into the hell that was Fernlow, Pennsylvania.

TWO

I pushed into my apartment lobby, surprised to find Daniel by the elevators chatting with one of the residents. The newly separated Margot Fulton had her hand on Daniel's forearm, her shiny blond hair pulled into a sleek ponytail. She was in running gear. Daniel wore his post-gym track pants and gray T-shirt. The fitted cotton showed off his beefier arms and narrower waist.

The pillowing around my nonexistent abs felt like lead weights.

I didn't call his name or move to join them. I stood like a creeper and watched as Daniel replied to something she said. Her sympathetic expression matched the pity I'd endured at the baby shower. They were probably talking about the miscarriage. Or maybe he was complaining about my reclusiveness and the pile of takeout boxes in our recycling…or the strained silence that hung in our home like radioactive fog.

So engrossed in their quiet conversation, they didn't notice me. I couldn't drag my eyes away from her hand on his arm, the angle of his body, hovering over her with familiarity.

Queasiness stung my throat.

I'd spent the past few weeks barricaded in our apartment, while Daniel had gone to work and the gym and lived his life. Had he run into Margot often? Was this elevator rendezvous a regular occurrence? He *had* been

attending the gym excessively, even before the miscarriage. Wasn't that what husbands did when their attention strayed from their wives?

I shook my head at the notion. Not loyal Daniel, who'd brought me flowers weekly throughout the pregnancy.

My overactive imagination was my worst enemy. Case in point, the whole drive here I'd concocted elaborate scenarios that would force me to visit my uncle, none of which involved a heart attack—a swarm of locusts attacking his farm, an outbreak of boils blistering up his skin, thunderstorms of hail and fire, and then I realized I was reciting the ten plagues I'd learned when forced to attend Passover seders. The tenth and final horror was the death of your firstborn child.

I pressed my hands to my empty stomach.

Unaware of my presence or internal tornado, Daniel tipped his head back and laughed. A real laugh. The warm, belly kind filled with easy joy and affection. I had no clue the last time I'd heard him laugh like that.

A sharp *yip* resounded off the embossed ceiling. Mrs. Harlow's Maltipoo scampered in, always quick to terrorize. The duo sashayed from the entrance. Daniel's eyes darted to the dog, then skittered to me. He stepped back from Margot. Margot waved at me and beelined for the stairwell. The dog snarled at her retreating back—*good pooch*—as Mrs. Harlow and her powdery perfume filled the elevator.

Then it was just Daniel and me, standing a lobby apart.

His expression seemed to shutter a moment. Unless it didn't shutter. Unless my jumbled emotions had my mind playing make-believe again. He hiked his gym bag over his shoulder and smiled at me.

Daniel had improved with age, the lines by his hazel eyes adding sex appeal, the bit of gray in his soft brown hair handsome, but his smile felt calculated. Like the checkered marble floor between us was an elaborate chess game: if I smile at my wife, she might smile back, we might kiss the

way we once did, and our bodies might finally roll together instead of away when we turned out the lights.

Well, if he was trying, I needed to try too. Harder. Figure out where the fun, flirty Scarlett had absconded to. I sucked in my abdomen—and my cheeks—and worked my slingback heels across our chessboard.

"How was the gym?" Not my best flirty opener.

"Exhausting but good." He didn't comment on my sexy shoes, only studied my face. "How was the shower?"

"You know Chelsea, organized and detailed down to the pink mimosas."

"It must have been nice to see the girls."

"It was great," I said, adding a little oomph to my reply. Lead with positivity, and the mind will follow! "Really great. Nice to get out."

He rocked on his heels and hit the elevator button. My abdomen hurt from holding it in.

As we waited for the elevator, we stood close but not touching, and I bit my lip. Why weren't we touching? Why didn't we laugh together anymore?

Even the idea of reaching over and hooking my arm around Daniel's waist soured my saliva. This man, who was kind and hardworking and had swept me off my twenty-one-year-old feet, seemed more a stranger than a husband these days. And if I really racked my brain, this whole non-laughing development had darkened our door well before the miscarriage, before the pregnancy, even.

An unfamiliar man entered the lobby as the elevator arrived. I held the elevator door open for him, while Daniel and I waited in continued silence. The man joined us. The doors slid shut, trapping us in this tight space that still smelled of Mrs. Harlow's perfume. The flowery stench intensified the ache in my stomach, a cramp that churned with my uncle's news and my lingering unease from the baby shower.

If my mother and I communicated beyond shared birthday cards, or if a call from me wouldn't upset her fragile balance, I'd unload on her. But I

was zero for two on that account.

Daniel should be my support. My husband. My confidant.

I'd wait until the stranger left the elevator, then I'd finally purge the ten thousand worries crowding my mind. I'd open up and tell him how confused I was, unsure if I actually wanted to try for another child. Voice my fears that something had irrevocably changed between us.

The man left the elevator.

I dug my fingers into the soft leather of my purse. "Someone should tell Mrs. Harlow to go easy on the perfume," I said. Coward of the Year award. "The elevator will probably smell like her all day."

He grimaced. "It's like I ate a mouthful of baby powder."

Baby. *Baby, baby, baby, baby.*

The doors opened on our floor. I quit sucking in my gut and practically tripped in my hurry to our place.

Daniel strolled leisurely behind me. When I fumbled to find my key, he fitted his into the lock but paused and faced me. "You sure everything's okay? It couldn't have been easy today with…everything."

"Fine," I said quickly. "The shower was just tiring, and I have a ton of work to do. I might hunker down in my office awhile."

He hesitated, then shoved the door open.

I followed him into our apartment. The space was neater than usual, aside from the overflowing recycling bin—aka, Mount Takeout.

Along with gaining carpal tunnel from dialing Szechuan City, I'd been cleaning our apartment with the obsession of a bloodhound. I'd shined our floor-to-ceiling windows within an inch of their lives. The maple floors and gray area rug were clean enough to eat off. Nary a thumbprint could be found on our stainless-steel appliances. The space was modern and clean and all ours. It should give me a sense of pride. For some bizarre reason, I wanted to squirt soy sauce on the taupe walls.

Daniel grabbed a glass from the cupboard and filled it with water. “I’ll have some late nights this week.”

He had late nights most weeks, but I pictured Margot of the Shiny Blond Hair touching his arm, him leaning over her. Queasiness returned, along with a whisper of release I couldn’t pinpoint. “Is your project falling behind?”

“They changed some electrical requirements. Enough to have me backtracking.”

The explanation made sense. Being the lead electrical engineer on a massive library build came with obligations, but it didn’t explain why his busy schedule and the notion of having nights alone eased some of my tension.

“We should synchronize our watches,” he said after draining his water glass. “Get a couple hours of work done, then meet back here at eighteen-hundred hours.”

I saluted him. “Roger that, Captain.”

He didn’t wink or kiss my cheek the way he used to when we’d use military time to plan our day. The habit had been fun, a private joke we’d developed after watching *Stripes* and laughing as Bill Murray fumbled basic training until tears had streamed down our cheeks. We’d been twenty-three and in love then, eager to claim our coupledom with secret looks and a language only we could decode.

Today, Daniel plunked down his water glass and dropped his gym bag by the laundry room. He didn’t empty the sweaty clothes or offer to start the laundry. He just plunked and dropped and walked, and irritation tensed my shoulders.

Me. Irritated, after shutting him out and lying about my erratic thoughts.

I massaged my temples, unsure when things had gotten so out of my control. My words. My actions. My *feelings*. There was something wrong with me, and not in an *I spent five hours researching my weird rash on*

WebMD kind of way. Fundamentally, at my core, something was damaged, and I knew the exact day this particular infection had begun: August 6, 1995, at my tenth birthday party. A memory better left untouched.

I started the laundry, breathing through my mouth as I handled Daniel's gym clothes, then I changed into my recent uniform of sweatpants and baggy T-shirt. Daniel and I sequestered ourselves in our respective offices, him to use his science and math smarts as he studied blueprints. I stared at the latest book cover I'd been designing.

It was a suspense thriller. The publisher required three mock-ups to choose from, and I'd only completed one. I usually enjoyed the mix of problem-solving and creativity needed for my freelance work, and I loved the independence it provided. Designing book covers meant I could move at a moment's notice, work from anywhere. An option I'd never exercised, but I *could*. It meant no one, including Daniel, could derail my life like my father had. As long as this mental fog didn't affect my productivity.

I turned on my country playlist—low enough not to irritate Daniel—and listened to Dolly and Patsy as I tried a few sans serif title fonts. The FF Nexus Sans was clean and strong. Simple enough to let the imagery stand out and different from the first mock-up. The reds and grays evoked the publisher's creative vision, but they'd asked for a crow to fly through the title. Or above it. Or below. Basically, it needed a crow in flight, and every bird I drew looked like it belonged in Stephen King's *Pet Sematary*.

I closed my eyes and breathed. *Get your shit together, Scarlett.*

I'd seen animal drawings somewhere recently. The nursery, likely. Daniel's sister had brought over a slew of children's books, many with animal characters. Not exactly suspense-thrillerish, but flipping through the drawings could jolt my inspiration.

I padded past Daniel's closed office door, into our half-finished nursery. The small space smelled faintly of the sun-shower wall paint and new

furniture. We hadn't purchased a crib yet, but we'd added cream bookshelves and a hand-carved rocking chair.

Drained from the day, I did my best not to picture everything the room was missing or dissect the swirl of discomfort the space inspired. I chose a few books from the shelves and sat in the rocking chair. Cartoonish drawings filled most pages, but one eagle stood out. The bird's wings had a lovely faded quality—detailed closer to the body, sketchy and blurred toward the tips. A refined version could give my book cover a dramatic yet elusive vibe.

"I do this too."

I pressed my hand over my pounding heart, just noticing Daniel. "You scared me."

"Didn't mean to." He leaned on the doorjamb, arms crossed. He'd changed into jeans and a button-down. Always stylish. Always put together, even at home. He walked to the bookshelf and grabbed the purple stuffed bear Kenna had bought us. "Some nights, when you go to bed early, I find myself in here. I sit in that chair and rock."

"I didn't know." Because we'd barely talked since the miscarriage.

He stroked the bear's belly. "I've been trying to be strong for you, Scarlett. Positive. Give you space to grieve, but maybe it was the wrong thing to do. Maybe you need to know I'm hurting too. That you don't have to keep trying so hard."

"Trying?"

"To be stoic. There's no way that baby shower didn't affect you. It's okay to be sad."

This was the perfect opportunity to open up, be honest about my feelings for the first time in ages, but communicating meant admitting I'd come in here for creative inspiration, not to lament what we'd lost. "I have my moments, usually when I'm alone and you're at work."

“That’s the thing,” he said, still holding the bear. “We’re both going through this alone, when we don’t have to.”

His cheeks hollowed, a look he used to assume when we’d play backgammon or cribbage—determination to win.

He replaced the bear on its shelf and strutted toward me with more conviction than I’d seen on him in ages. He dropped to his knees and removed the books from my lap. I watched his purposeful movements, unnerved, unsure where this was going. When his strong hands circled my thighs and squeezed, his intent became clear.

As did my body’s instinct to recoil.

The last time we’d had sex had been eighteen weeks ago, on our anniversary. Daniel had met me for dinner after his post-work drinks. His breath had smelled like malt and honey, his movements loose and happy. He’d ordered us wine and told the waiter I was his bride. I’d laughed and blushed and couldn’t remember the last time we’d curled toward each other from across a table. Our usual routine involved eating side by side at our kitchen counter, job details discussed between the clatter of cutlery.

That night, though, his foot had caressed mine under the table, the Chianti and romantic mood slipping through my bloodstream in a dizzying rush. In that moment, we’d been twenty-three-year-olds high on young love and life’s possibilities, not thirty-year-olds walking a treadmill of ritualistic behaviors.

Arriving home to our familiar apartment had scuffed some of the luster from that shine. Our drunken sex had been a fumbling affair. Alcohol was never kind to Daniel’s performance, but it was our anniversary, and I hadn’t felt that close to him in ages.

He didn’t tell me the condom had broken until morning. He joked that we might have more to celebrate than four years of marriage soon, offhand, like we hadn’t discussed my desire to wait until he was working less. Until

he'd be home more to help raise a child while I pursued my career. Until I was sure I'd be a good mother.

We returned to side-by-side eating after that night, but I didn't just eat. I heaped second portions of pasta and steak onto my plate. I ate to calm the jitteriness inhabiting my stomach. I ate when we learned I *was* pregnant and for the fifteen weeks of Daniel's attentive doting. I ate while I shared our happy news with others and thought about what a great father Daniel would be. Nothing at all like mine. I ate while I convinced myself I wouldn't fall down a rabbit hole of despair like my mother. *I'll be a kick-ass mom*, I'd told myself. Worthy of those Number One Mom mugs I never would have purchased. I ate while I convinced myself this baby was good for me and our marriage.

I ate when I lost our child and broke down in a heap of guilt, the only explanation for my miscarriage having been my selfish ambivalence. My stressed negativity must have poisoned our child.

Yet my husband was on his knees now, trying to rekindle the extinguished flame between us. "I miss you," he whispered as he stroked my inner thighs with his thumbs. "I miss us."

He nosed and kissed my neck. I stayed frozen, stuck to the rocking chair that lilted with his persistent movements. I pictured threading my fingers through his hair and dragging his lips toward mine, our hands clutching each other as we reconnected finally, beautifully, all this trauma binding us together. *Yes.* This was what we needed. Not Margot suspicions and Szechuan noodles.

I pictured it all, and then I blurted, "I can't."

Just like that. No warning my mouth would betray me.

"The doctor gave us the okay," he murmured into my neck.

My tendons felt ready to snap, which must have been why I said the next thing. The absolute worst thing. "No—I really can't. I have to pack. I'm going to Pennsylvania."

He reared back. “What?”

I wanted to shove the words back into my mouth. Pennsylvania was the last place on earth I wanted to go. Arthur had asked me not to come. He’d told me he was fine. That knowledge didn’t stop the lies from spewing.

“My uncle had a heart attack. I need to go check on him.” And I needed someone to perform an emergency lobotomy on *me*.

“When did this happen?”

“He called while I was at the baby shower.”

“And you didn’t think that was worth sharing when I asked how the afternoon was?” His grip on my thighs tightened uncomfortably.

“He’s fine. Out of the woods for now, and I wanted to figure out my plan before talking to you.” Or, you know, spontaneously decide to torture myself.

He released my legs and pushed to his feet. The rocking chair lurched with the movement. “I’m sorry. I just wish you’d told me. How long will you be gone?”

I didn’t want to answer. I didn’t want to leave New York and go anywhere near Arthur’s farm. “One day. Two, tops.”

“I’m sure he’ll appreciate it,” Daniel said gently, once again my kind, understanding husband. “And I forgot to mention that my mother called. She wants to discuss Easter. Probably best if you call her before you leave.”

“Of course,” I said, but another kick of shame blindsided me.

Like Chelsea at the shower, Daniel assumed I celebrated Easter as a Christian, because people walked through life assuming others were like them. It had been so easy with Daniel, letting him make assumptions when we’d met, getting swept along with that tide. Our first winter, when he’d asked how I was spending Christmas, I’d told him I wasn’t close with my family and had no plans. The sort-of-lie had slipped out easily. Christmas had lost most of its religious significance. It had become a gift-giving holiday to prove love through dollars spent.

I hadn’t told him I was Jewish back then, that lighting a Chanukah menorah was more my speed than hanging stockings. I hadn’t confessed who my father was either, the two realities too intertwined to separate, and a fresh start for me had meant a reinvention.

I had let him assume what he wanted, and after five years of dating and four years of marriage, too much time had passed to tell him—or anyone besides Kenna—the truth.

Today, the omission felt as damaging as my dismissal of Daniel’s advances.

After discussing logistics, he returned to his office while I packed. I froze several times, barely breathing, willing myself to tell Daniel I’d overreacted and Arthur was fine. Instead, I zipped my suitcase shut, muscle memory the only thing keeping me moving.

I fell asleep before he joined me in bed. I sank into a too-familiar dream filled with sharks and jagged teeth and endless water choking me—the recurring nightmare I hadn’t experienced in years resurfacing to drag me under again.

THREE

The first time I had my recurring shark nightmare was the day my father got arrested. I had watched *Jaws* the night prior, thanks to Melissa Silver's older brother. I wasn't sure I'd swim in an ocean or lake or pond ever again, but I cornered my dad the next morning and boasted that I'd watched the movie without closing my eyes.

Instead of commenting on my astounding bravery, he stepped back and scanned me like I was a stranger. "I'm sorry, do I know you?"

I rolled my eyes and giggled. "It's me, Daddy. Your only kid."

"Nope. My daughter is a nine-year-old child. You're"—he gestured at my grinning face—"a two-digit girl. Practically an adult. What did you do with my Scarlett?"

"Don't be silly, Daddy. I don't look any different."

He picked me up and squeezed. "Happy birthday, bug." I hugged him back until he tried to bite my neck. "And *Jaws* is child's play," he said. "Talk to me when you've watched *Dracula*. Those classics are the real deal."

He plopped me on the floor and murmured good morning to Juliette. Juliette was part nanny, part cook, part tutor, part cleaner, part chauffeur. She was the one who applauded my art projects and grumbled at me to put my dirty dishes in the sink.

She pointed at a plate of melon and raisin bread. “Eat at least half that fruit with your toast, lovey. I’m off to pick up the balloons for tonight.”

I tap-danced in my socks. “We could cover the house in cobwebs instead and play *Dracula* at my party. It would be way cooler than Melissa’s pool luau, and Dad could dress in a cape with fangs and drool fake blood over everyone.”

He tipped his head back and chuckled. I mentally high-fived myself.

That sound was my ten-year-old crack. If Dad wasn’t traveling for work, I did imitations of my teachers until he cracked up. Mrs. Eisner was my favorite with her hunched shoulders and how she pronounced schedule like a snake: *shhhedule*. Dad would wipe his eyes and call me his little actress.

“Fruit!” Juliette hollered as she headed out.

Dad tickled the top of my curly hair. “If we play *Dracula* at a ten-year-old’s birthday party, it might upset a few parents. Let’s stick with the planned spa theme. Your mother’s excited about it.”

I glanced at the ceiling, wondering if today would be an Awake Mom Day. Those usually involved wine by noon and burning Juliette’s premade dinners, or she’d tell Juliette she’d pick me up from dance and I’d stare at the time until the dance instructor finally drove me home. But she’d promised to take me to get my hair cut today, so it would look like Alicia Silverstone’s from *Clueless*. She even agreed to let me dye it. Goodbye, frizzy brown curls. Hello, swishy blond strands. Melissa would be green with envy.

“You won’t be late, right?” I asked Dad as I poured his coffee the way Juliette had shown me—black with a packet of Splenda. I placed the mug to the right of his morning paper.

“I’ll be the first one getting my nails painted.” He winked at me and assumed his reading position at the counter.

“Because I haven’t seen Mom yet,” I pushed. “What if she stays in bed?”

His jaw did that weird bunching thing when we spoke about Mom. “She’s just tired. She’ll be down soon.”

I used to believe everything my father said, no matter how farfetched: if you swallow watermelon seeds, a watermelon would grow in your belly; the flattened animals on the side of the road were napping. He spoke with such authority—quick with answers, fast to defend—there was no time to second-guess him. But Mom was always tired, and she was rarely *down soon*.

When his jaw kept working, I did an impromptu pirouette, long curls flying as I practiced a few more dance moves. “My end-of-summer recital is next week, so you can’t be traveling then. And I need to buy lipstick for the show, which I can get if we go to the mall. And can I sleep over at Melissa’s next weekend?”

He held up one finger at a time, ticking off his replies. “The recital is on my calendar, ask Juliette to take you to the mall, and yes to the sleepover, as long as an adult’s home. Now, eat your fruit.”

I pretended to retch. Dad laughed.

I picked at my toast and melon, too excited to eat much. My dance recital, my birthday party, movies, the mall, dyeing my hair blond—those trivialities had been my whole world that day, earning my father’s heartfelt laugh a close second. My mother’s idiosyncrasies, and the guilt they often inspired, had been nothing but a background whisper.

The guilt aspect of our dysfunctional relationship had begun a couple of years prior, when my game of tiptoeing past her closed door as a secret spy had lost its fun. I’d begun pestering Dad for a sister or brother around then. Someone I could play with whenever I wanted. He’d always say that I was perfect. Why would they want another child when they had me?

Juliette had eventually taken pity on me and told me the truth. “Your mum had postpartum depression, lovey. A kind of sickness that never went away for her. It’s not healthy for her to have more kids. But you have me!”

I hadn’t understood the word “postpartum” until I’d looked it up at school. *A feeling of deep sadness and anxiety a woman feels after giving birth to a child.*

After giving birth to me.

I had stared at the definition as a lumbering culpability had taken root. *I* was the reason my mother was sad. I was the reason she and Dad fought and slept in separate rooms. I had hurt my mother without even knowing it.

So, I worked to make Dad laugh when he was home and learned to say the blessings over our Shabbat candles and the challah bread at our Friday night table. I filled Mom’s void to ensure I didn’t accidentally hurt my father too. I poured his coffee. I pretended to love baseball and scary movies. I ate his favorite scalloped potatoes that Juliette made, even though they smelled like dirty feet.

Ten-year-olds knew when they lived in a fragile house of cards. They knew when words spoken were used to cover those left unsaid. I lived on a precipice of trepidation, believing the illness I’d given my mother was the thing that would make it all come crashing down.

My fault. My doing.

I never suspected my father would be our collapse.

Mom got up in just enough time for my hair appointment, and I sagged in relief. People often told me I looked like her. We both had slight bumps in the center of our noses, similar manes of curly brown hair, thick eyebrows, and dark eyes. Judy Ackerman was the type of pretty that attracted attention when she wasn’t hiding under her sheets, but I didn’t want to be anything like my mother.

Hence, the switch to straight blond hair, which was *a-freaking-mazing*.

I kept swishing it over my shoulders and tried to catch my profile in every mirror we passed. I wasn't as popular as Melissa, but her mother wouldn't let her dye her hair, and she wasn't allowed to stay up past nine.

When we got home, the house was filled with unfamiliar people. Food people and spa people, everyone quick to wish me happy birthday and compliment Mom on our house. The house hadn't been anything special to me. No different from Melissa's or the other homes in our Scarsdale suburb —lots of bedrooms, a kitchen that could hold fifty people, huge yard, swimming pool, enough plants and flowers to keep the gardeners busy. I had my fingers crossed I'd be adding a birthday trampoline to our backyard.

I waited for my friends, still checking out my hair every chance I got. I even dressed like Alicia Silverstone, my yellow plaid skirt and jacket exactly what she'd worn in *Clueless*, except I had on white stockings instead of the thigh-highs that Dad wouldn't let me wear. Balloons were up. We had multicolored cupcakes for dessert and staff ready to give us manicures and do our makeup.

Everything was perfect.

The adults were sipping drinks by the outdoor bar, laughing with my father, chatting about work and the Yankees. My friends and I were wearing feather boas and dancing around the pool to "Girls Just Want to Have Fun." Then a helicopter flew overhead, circling our house.

The adults tilted up their heads to watch. I stopped mid-twirl, confused, so focused on the propellers I didn't notice the men with guns. Shouts erupted quickly, everyone pushing and shoving. I fell to my knees, my stockings ripping as I hit the grass. Hands gripped my arms. Loud voices shouted. Someone lifted me, ushering us into a large group, telling us to keep quiet.

A killer must be on the loose, I thought. Someone the cops needed to protect us from as they tore through my party.

The tower of cupcakes got knocked to the ground. Glasses fell and shattered. A table with spa makeup tumbled into the pool. I stared at the squashed cakes, tears building at everything that was ruined. My perfect party in tatters, unopened presents scattered on the lawn. Parents gathered their kids close, but no one had gathered me.

My frustrated tears turned into confused sniffles. Where was my dad?

"Jacob!" My mother broke through our group, arms flailing. The most awake I'd ever seen her. "Jacob, you motherfucker. What the *fuck* have you done?"

People gasped. Shame was a hot poker stabbing my throat. Why couldn't she be a normal mom who baked cookies and remembered to pick me up from dance? Why didn't she love me enough to be happy? She kept yelling. I flinched, mortified, and followed her wild stare.

That was when I saw Dad. Flat on his stomach. A policeman was on his back, cuffing his wrists.

"Daddy?" My whispered plea was drowned out by the helicopter and the murmuring friends backing away from me and my family. I squeezed my hands into tight little fists to stop the shaking.

Daddy? This time, I mouthed the word.

Some policemen were barking orders; others flooded into my house. A woman wrapped her arm around my hysterical mother, while my friends were herded farther away from me.

My shaking worsened.

When the cop dragged my father to his feet, I screamed, "*No!*"

This was a mistake.

This had to be a mistake.

They yanked on his arm; he staggered.

"That's my dad! Why do you have my dad?" I ran to him, arms outstretched, my pretty patent shoes slipping on the grass, but someone

grabbed me from behind before I reached him. My panic became razor-sharp. “That’s my dad. Don’t take my dad!”

Don’t leave me with my mom.

I kicked and screamed, a violent sob bursting when I couldn’t move. “Daddy, don’t go!”

The arm around my waist held me tighter as my screams became incoherent, snotty things. My father didn’t look at me. Not once. They led him through our house, and the second he was gone, my fight left me in a nauseating rush. I puked on the grass. On the colorful cupcakes we were supposed to eat after I opened my presents.

That night, I dreamed of sharks.

I was swimming in a vast ocean, unable to find the surface. The sharks smelled my fear. They circled and taunted me. They nudged me with their leathery snouts and took bites of my toes and fingers, chunks out of my arms and legs. But I didn’t die. I thrashed and swam. I swallowed lungful after lungful of briny water, never finding the surface and never dying.

The amazing thing about falling from grace was thinking each scrape and bang on the way down would be the last. But I kept falling.

The details of my father’s shocking Ponzi scheme came to me slowly over time. I inhaled every newspaper article I found and gleaned snippets from quiet conversations spoken when people thought I couldn’t hear.

I knew my father had worked with money and investments, trading stocks and that kind of thing. I didn’t know he’d been a fraudster, fleecing people out of their hard-earned money to the tune of fifty *billion* dollars. Family. Friends. Celebrities. Everyone we’d ever known and hundreds we didn’t, including the leader of a gang called the Vipers, who threatened my mother after the arrest, thinking she had hidden cash.

Apparently, we did have money, but we couldn't access the funds. Dad had secret bank accounts in other countries. Houses I didn't know existed. Women who lived there with him.

The press devoured my father, and all our assets were seized, along with our house. Juliette gave me a tearful goodbye. My grandmother swooped in from Oregon and put us up in a small apartment, where she tutted over her daughter, whose depression had hit an all-time low. It was August, and my private school was paid for through the upcoming year. I was told I had to walk through those heavy doors and go on with my life.

Terror burrowed into my breastbone like a claw-fingered badger.

The first day of class, I kept my head down. I prepared myself for dirty looks and hostile whispers. I wasn't prepared for Aaron Levinsky to spit on my face or for Melissa Silver—my best friend since kindergarten—to call me a fucking bitch. Their families had invested money with my dad. They'd lost tens of thousands, *hundreds* of thousands in some cases, because of him. Because they had become friends with me—and my father, by association.

I had ruined their lives like I'd ruined Mom's, and all the while I didn't understand how the father I'd known and loved could have betrayed me so epically.

School didn't get better. It got worse. The day someone scrawled *cunt* on my locker, the administration suggested I transfer somewhere else. They said it would be best for me. The truth was harsher: they didn't want the notorious Jacob Ackerman's daughter associated with Westmount Prep.

I thought attending classes with kids touched by my father's crimes would be the last scrape on my fall from grace. Public school in New York City was worse. *Way* freaking worse.

My grandmother moved us to a city apartment, hoping Ewan "Reaper" Breck—head of the Vipers gang—would quit sending threatening notes. The threats stopped, but the kids in school figured out who I was. Everyone

in the *world* knew who I was, thanks to the headlines sensationalizing Dad's exploits.

Jacob Ackerman Runs Largest Fraud in US History.

Ackerman's Secret Life.

Jacob Ackerman: The Face of Evil.

Magazines splashed his bad deeds in bold ink, the famous people duped by him adding fuel to the tabloid fires. What the articles didn't do was sling antisemitic slurs.

Those insults stung me at public school.

The students at Westmount Prep had worn uniforms. Like me, many of them attended synagogue for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The boys at my new middle school wore baseball hats backward and baggy pants. The girls wore cutoff jean shorts that practically showed their underwear. Some were Black, some were white, some were Hispanic. All of them hated me. They taught me the word "Jew" could be used as a curse.

Her dad is that *Jew*.

Fucking *Jew* stole all that cash.

It's always the *kikes* wanting something for nothing.

When I learned what kike meant, I refused to light the Chanukah candles.

My beautiful blond hair grew out, leaving a frizzy brown skunk ring. A visual marker of before and after, my transformation from golden to hopeless. Threats were written on crumpled papers and slipped into my backpack. People tripped me in the halls.

I stopped talking. The shark nightmares persisted. I skipped school and would hunch in McDonald's for hours, scratching drawings into notebooks, the lined pages filled with shark teeth and shark fins and tiny knives dripping with blood. Self-loathing was the only meal I ate, but that wasn't the last scratch on my long tumble down.

My mother's depression worsened. I went from skipping school stealthily to never leaving my room. My drawing time increased, so much turmoil engraved on the pages. The screaming people I drew made my mother cry and my grandmother recoil.

I was proud of the violent images.

Then my grandmother handed me a box someone had brought to the front door, with my name on the front. "From a friend," she said, leaving as quickly as she'd entered my room. Like my vicious drawings would come to life and attack her.

I didn't have friends any longer. I didn't know anyone well enough to be sent a gift. Unless one of my former Westmount friends missed me. Maybe Melissa felt ashamed of how she'd acted. Maybe she wanted to make amends and sent a gift to break the ice.

Hope stirring in my chest, I rushed to open the box and *screamed*.

A hissing snake shot its head out. I dropped the box and ran, shrieking, until I was out of the apartment, down the stairs, on the busy sidewalk, my knees slammed onto the pavement, sobs tearing at my chest.

Apparently, Ewan "Reaper" Breck hadn't forgotten about my family and the money he'd lost. Along with the live snake, the Vipers' gang insignia had been inside the box—a pit viper's head, blood dripping from the fangs. The gift had been sent as a warning to pay him what my father owed. But we couldn't pay.

After that trauma, *when* I could sleep, the sharks in my nightmares became snakes.

The next week, my grandmother came to me, no worry or kind words uttered since the snake incident. She eyed my dirty floor with disgust and said, "The cops arrested that Breck man. I'm taking your mother home with me. She needs special care. You'll be going to live with your uncle in Fernlow."

I stared at her, embodying that snake, shooting silent venom from my eyes. She had never been a touchy-feely grandparent, her hair blown into perfect waves, chin always ticked up. We only used to see her a couple of times a year. Now she was the aloof train conductor of my life.

And I was clearly unwanted.

From what I'd eavesdropped over the months, I'd learned the rest of our family had abandoned us. I had become vermin. A thing to be exiled. A dirty *kike*.

So, I rode an overheated bus with my one bag to live with a reclusive uncle I'd met exactly two times. At family funerals. I left behind all connection to the kitchen that held fifty people, the swimming pool, the dance recitals, and the knowledge that my father had been *my* person in *my* corner, no matter how long Mom had slept. I left behind an innocent ten-year-old girl who once believed her father's laughter was as magical as fairy dust.

The only dust in my future would be the reddish-brown dirt blowing around Fernlow, but it was winter when I arrived. I'd heard stories about Fernlow from my father. He'd joked about the one-horse town where he'd grown up, called it the armpit of Pennsylvania.

It would now be my home.

The drive was long. My neck ached from leaning on the bus window. Wafts of gasoline and pine air freshener stung my nose. The bland street was lined with monochromatic stores, proof of habitation petering out after a few blocks. Uncle Arthur was waiting for me by his pickup truck, his auburn hair sparse up top, a rip in his plaid shirt visible under his puffy coat.

His mouth was set in a firm line.

I assumed he'd hug me awkwardly and tell me how sorry he was or sneer at me for invading his life. When I shuffled off the bus, he just grabbed my bag and launched it into his truck bed.

“Buckle up,” he said, like it hadn’t been over a year since we’d last seen each other. Like my father—*his brother*—wasn’t facing umpteen years in prison. “Road’s bumpy to the farm.”

I slid into the passenger seat and watched as muddy snowbanks and wooden fences whizzed by. I prayed to a heartless God I no longer believed in that this wasteland was my rock bottom.

FOUR

Not much had changed about the drive to Arthur's farm since my youth. Stretches of monotonous farmland still yawned into the horizon, potholes jarring me as I navigated the dirt road to his property. Each jolt sent my heart into my throat, like I was ten years old again, being forced into a life I hadn't chosen.

Except I had chosen this drive, specifically, instead of having sex with my husband.

Spring had thawed winter's hold, this part of rural Pennsylvania bone-cold during those dreary months. Layers of mud sprawled where snow and slush had melted, the thick red clay squishing under my tires. I drove the final bend toward the farm with my foot barely on the gas, my hands clammier with every passing second. Not even Emmylou Harris's calming voice could soothe my nerves.

Then I was there.

I parked and turned off the car. I didn't get out. The towering black gum tree still stood sentry over the property, its spindly branches exposed in a tapestry of desolation.

I'd felt a kinship with that tree while living here. It had been imprisoned, like me. Stuck in a bleak place, no choice but to continue its mapping of the inevitable seasons: bursts of fiery orange in fall as though

begging to be set aflame, brittle skeleton arms giving winter the finger, those first green buds teasing at new growth, only to bloom fully and spit its purple berries onto the ground to squish under my sneakers. I would press my hands to its alligator bark as a kid. Feel the knotted scales dig into my palms. I'd whisper about everything I hated.

Knocks on my window made me jump, and I accidentally leaned on the car's horn.

Fantastic.

A cacophony of barking erupted—Arthur's home for wayward dogs as loud as ever—but when I peered through my window, all I saw was a man's denim-clad crotch. He stepped back far enough for me to get out. My tan boots squelched into the mud.

"Sorry to startle you, ma'am, but we ain't taking no more dogs. Kennel's full right up."

This Goliath was as solid as he was tall, his stained white T-shirt and overalls too sparse for the nippy weather. His massive arms were covered in tattoos, the bold slashes of ink on his dark skin a contrast to the softness in his kind voice.

I pulled my trench coat tighter around my waist. "I'm not dropping off dogs. I'm Arthur's niece."

"Oh wow. Well…" He ran a thick hand over his bald head and shifted on his feet. "Arthur didn't tell me you was expected."

"That's because I didn't warn him I was coming. He would have told me to stay home." Which sounded really, really good about now, but there was no reversing this trajectory. I thrust my hand forward. "I'm Scarlett."

He shook my hand, gentle as a lamb. "It's a pleasure, Scarlett. The name's Winston, and I owe my life to your uncle."

Which meant he was an ex-con, something I should have prepared for on my drive. Instead, I dissected how I'd recoiled at Daniel's advances, berating myself for pushing him away. What if he got fed up while I was

gone? What if he met up with Margot again and her hand moved from his forearm to his newly chiseled chest?

I'd stewed over my jealousy while driving, conveniently ignoring that Arthur had expanded his kennel business into his Pups in Prison program five years ago.

There was no avoiding it now. Not with a six-foot-something ex-con looming over me, telling me Arthur had changed his life. "Is he inside?" I asked.

"Miss Rosen dropped him this morning. Told me not to let him help with the dogs. Prison said the same. Won't let him work there for a week. They all forcing him to relax."

Not an easy task with a man as stubborn as Arthur. "How's he feeling?"

Winston's smile revealed a gold tooth. "Yelled at me to tidy the kennel, so I'd say mighty fine."

The dogs yipped their dismay, and I cut a glance toward the kennel. Arthur had built the long structure strategically, the open half of the dog runs facing the field, not the driveway. The dogs still heard the gravelly roll of approaching tires, sensed when people were near. Some dogs were strays. Some had been abandoned after an owner's death or a change in fortune. All had been rescued from being euthanized. Arthur might not be good with people, but he could calm a snarly dog with one measured look.

"Guess I'll head in and check on him," I said, but I didn't budge.

Winston bowed his head. "Pleasure meeting you. I ain't far if you need assistance." He turned and ambled toward the kennel.

I inhaled the sickly sweet scents of decayed leaves, refusing to think about the concrete hell Winston used to call home. I eyed my Camry's trunk. There was no point unloading a suitcase when I might leave tonight. Winston said Arthur was fine. I could just go in, make sure he was comfortable, fill his fridge with the food I'd brought from New York, then be on my way. Return home and kiss Daniel until I was happier and

skinnier and maybe ready to try for a child again. Be the wife I knew I could be.

Resolved, I marched to the farmhouse I had once called home, surprised by its decay. My twelve-year absence was evident in the wraparound porch's slanting posts, the paint flaking off the exterior in white ribbons. But the porch swing hadn't moved, and the stairs still groaned their judgmental welcome. I opened Arthur's never-locked front door and eased the screen door shut.

An odd sound had me pausing. Was that *eighties* music playing?

The noises of my teens had involved rain scratching at windows, dogs howling, and the somber tones of late-night news. Synthesized keyboards had been a hard no.

I removed my muddy Chelsea boots and placed them beside his PVC rain boots, perfectly aligned, the habit ticking through me like a metronome. If one heel had been out of whack when I'd lived here or a jar in the pantry misaligned, Arthur would raise hell. And here I was, doing it again, my past splicing with my present, or my present splicing with my past.

Get a grip, Scarlett.

I shook my head and focused on the music. I padded softly toward the living room, careful to stay quiet. Last thing I needed was to give Arthur another heart attack, but as I peered into the room, I had to bite my cheek to keep from laughing.

It wasn't every day you caught a sixty-four-year-old man doing knee raises while watching a jazzercise video. His high-waisted jeans were as fashionable as the leotards on his tube TV. A muffled snort escaped me.

Arthur swiveled my way. He didn't startle or smile or show any hint of happiness or surprise. His lips flattened. "What are you doing here?"

Ladies and gentlemen, my ever-sentimental uncle.

"It's great to see you too." My eyes kept flitting to the dated video.

He crossed his arms and scowled at me. “Doctor told me to exercise. So I’m exercising.”

“Isn’t it a bit soon for that?”

“The sooner I get better, the sooner I can get back to work. The dogs need me.”

“I thought you said you had staff to help.”

“I thought I told you I was fine.”

If I weren’t still wearing my jacket, the chill in the room would make me shiver. “I wanted to check on you to make sure.” And avoid my life for a minute. “I brought some food for lunch and later.”

He sucked on his teeth, age and annoyance dragging his mouth into a frown. Spend twelve years with someone, living together, and their changes were fluid, each added wrinkle defining the canvas you knew. After this chunk of time, the full force of Arthur’s age was a shock. His nose and ears looked bigger, looser skin hung under his neck, most remaining hair only circling the lower half of his head. He looked old.

I wondered how I looked to him. If he still saw the frizzy-haired girl with the unibrow, hiding herself under baggy T-shirts and an attitude that could shame a feral dog. Or had our monthly calls prepared him for my metamorphosis into a successful book cover designer with two distinct eyebrows? Did he see a loyal wife and friend to Upper East Side women, who celebrated babies with pink mimosas and registry gifts, my new life exactly how I’d planned it?

Except he didn’t know most details about my life, like Daniel barely knew about my past.

Convincing Daniel to elope had kept my two lives from colliding, my explanation to Daniel rooted in truth: my relationship with Arthur was strained, my mother’s and mine nonexistent. Daniel only knew Arthur as the man who called the first Monday of every month and trained dogs.

Arthur didn't know about the pregnancy or the miscarriage or the magnitude of Mount Takeout. It had been too hard to find the words.

There was no need to explain now, not when I'd be returning home today.

"Suit yourself," Arthur said. "You know where the kitchen is." He turned his back to me and resumed his leg raises.

Strangely, his gruffness calmed my jittery nerves. It was one thing in my life I could count on.

I returned to my car, prepared to unload the groceries and see this day through, but a fresh round of barking erupted. Pulled by the noise, I walked toward the kennel, dodging rocks and strewn branches as I rounded the side.

The kennel I remembered had housed fifteen dogs, rescues Arthur would train until they could be placed in homes. His real income had come from boarding services, obedience classes held in the property barn, and private sessions for ornery pups, but the rescues had been his pride and joy. Or, in Arthur's case, they hadn't made him glower.

Now he trucked some into Brackson prison, where selected inmates lived and worked with the dogs, training them to be loving and obedient companions. The dogs, in turn, taught hardened criminals that touch and affection invited devotion, that putting another first came with rewards. Learning to train dogs had taught me change was possible; all it took was discipline.

The building was longer than it used to be—the wood spanning its last quarter lighter in color—but the rest of the kennel looked and smelled the same. Dogs of all sizes lounged or moved restlessly in their fenced sections, tongues lolling, intermittent barks cutting through the chilly air. They could push through their doggy doors if they wanted, seek shelter and water, or rest on their cushy mats, but most had their attention lasered in on Winston.

The large man was leading a pit bull-cross through an agility course. The dog ran through tunnels, walked a teeter-totter, and wiggled his thick body through a series of flexible posts. Not as elegant as an athletic border collie, but he got points for enthusiasm. Winston didn't leave the pup's side, his encouragements unintelligible from my distance, but the bond between trainer and trainee was unmistakable as they whipped through the course together.

I wasn't sure who was enjoying the exercise more: former inmate or dog. But the awareness of Winston's background blindsided me again.

I believed in the prison program's fundamental value, but knowing Arthur ran it in the institution where my father had been murdered didn't inspire warm fuzzies. If I thought about Arthur's work, my mind would ricochet to my father's lies, my cover-designing would stall, I'd then clean my apartment within an inch of its life, and interactions with Daniel would become more stilted…which kind of sounded like our relationship as of late…and my cover-designing…and my obsessive cleaning. Like my current life was a prison boxing me in.

Totally preposterous.

My life had been cultivated by design. Through deliberate choices. Things had simply fallen off course. Slightly.

A forlorn pup caught my eye, so ugly it was cute—patchy gray hair, atrocious underbite. The thing probably weighed ten emaciated pounds. Based on her swollen teats, she had recently given birth, but there were no puppies here. She was alone, flat on her side, oblivious to Winston's training and the yattering mutts.

I knelt by her fence. She didn't move her body, only shifted her head enough to look at me. *I lost my babies*, her watery eyes seemed to lament. *They were taken from me.*

My heart gave a soft whump.

“So was mine,” I said, the wobble in my voice catching me off guard. My guilt and sadness resurfaced, feelings I still didn’t know how to unpack, but they mixed with something deeper and more entrenched. Another loss I’d done my best to forget.

My life was taken from me twenty years ago.

———

By the time I lugged the groceries and cooler bags inside, Kenna had texted.

Kenna: Come to lunch with me?

Instead of straining my thumbs to explain my whereabouts, I placed the last grocery bag on the shelf and called her.

“I was thinking Sammy’s,” she said when she picked up. “Get that grilled cheese that makes you moan.”

I traced a crack in the wood floor with my socked toe. Sammy’s sandwiches were akin to heaven. They used clothbound cheddars instead of the orange plastic some heathens passed off as cheese. “Might be tough since I’m at my uncle’s.” An area with as much artisanal cheese as a vegan commune.

She paused. “As in you’re actually at the farm you haven’t visited in a lifetime and swore you’d only do so if zombies took over the world?”

“Considering Arthur hasn’t moved, the answer to that very specific question is yes.”

I walked to the fridge and gawked at the premade meals already lining Arthur’s shelves.

Lasagna. Cabbage rolls. Stew.

The smorgasbord shouldn’t surprise me. When I’d first been shipped here, food would appear randomly. The women from Fernlow’s small Jewish community would ply us with Tupperwares of brisket and rugelach

and matzah ball soup. I had snubbed the gifts, choosing peanut butter and jelly over “Jewish” food.

I could have used the generosity the past few weeks, though, while I had dialed takeout and slurped noodles. Kenna had been in Paris working her makeup magic. No one in my life had offered to bring me home-cooked meals.

“I decided on the fly to make the trip,” I told Kenna, talking through the weird tightening in my chest. “Arthur yelled at me for coming, as expected, but I needed to make sure he was fine. See him for myself.” God, I was even lying to Kenna now.

“I gotta say, I’m impressed.” Squealing brakes overtook her voice for a second. She growled. “Sorry. People in this city think it’s okay to cut off pedestrians. Anyway, it must have been nuts driving out there again, but kudos to you for doing it and facing some of your past. Any chance you opened up to Daniel before you left? Told him how off-balance you’ve been?”

Her hopefulness was as painful as picturing Daniel’s hands on my thighs, the determination in his seductive movements.

“There was no time to bring it up. I had to pack and get organized.” Standing here, rearranging Arthur’s fridge, took as much finesse as lying to Kenna. I moved jars as I spoke, making sure to keep rows even. Focusing on Arthur’s persnickety rules was easier than dissecting my latest falsehoods. “I won’t be here long anyway. Arthur seems fine. I’ll probably drive home tonight.”

“Suck my dick!”

I sputtered out a laugh. “Excuse me?”

“Not you. Some asshole whistling at me from a construction site. Do these guys think women want to date a neanderthal?”

I moved Arthur’s mustard collection to one side. “I doubt those men are looking for dates.”

“You have a point. And I’m about to head into subway hell. Call me when you get home.”

We hung up, and I resumed unpacking my groceries. I lined cans of low-salt beans in the blue cupboards, Lean Cuisine in the freezer. I maneuvered around the battered wooden table, pretending I’d never hunched on those unforgiving Shaker chairs, furious with the world. It was so strange being here again, as though the manifesto I’d written—*Changing My Life*—had never been scrawled into my notebook, each point ticked off until no trace of Scarlett Ackerman, daughter of the notorious Jacob Ackerman, had existed. I had trained her out of my system, like a disobedient dog.

That Scarlett was still here, though, shadows of her lingering in this finicky home. I was here too—Scarlett Brooks, the new me. A woman who’d adored taking her husband’s last name and cooking his favorite moussaka, while planning our future and the babies we’d have.

This new me appreciated the charm in Arthur’s lacy window curtains, the funkiness of the vintage stove. All I’d seen as a kid had been narrow halls, dusty windowsills, and miles of isolation. Today, the musty smells weren’t as sharp, the neat rows of nonperishables less oppressive, and the big whopper of it all was the panic I’d expected to build hadn’t yanked me under yet. I felt unsettled and adrift, but I didn’t feel like squirting soy sauce on the walls.

My phone buzzed again. Daniel’s name shot me with the nervous adrenaline I’d expected the farm to trigger.

Daniel: How was the drive?

I leaned into the counter and returned to toeing the cracked floor as I replied.

Me: Easy. Unloading groceries now.

Bouncing balls hinted at his reply. My sock snagged on a splinter. Why was breathing suddenly so hard?

Daniel: How is your uncle?

His simple question smoothed off some of my edginess. Arthur was abrupt and growly, which meant all was well. I wasn't sure if his bluntness and orderly obsessions were a result of his early military days or his nature. Maybe a bit of both.

As a kid, if I didn't like the baked beans and hot dogs he'd made for dinner, I could make my own meal. If I didn't clean the dog pens daily, I wasn't allowed to watch TV. If I didn't say the blessing during Friday night dinners or join Fernlow's quorum of Jews to celebrate Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, I'd be on egg duty, gathering our breakfast at ungodly hours. At a time when I didn't know when the next zinger would send me for a loop, his staunch routines had been grounding.

Maybe that was what I felt here—tethered. Less pressured to make life decisions. Arthur didn't know what I'd been through. There would be no prying questions or pitying looks.

I stared at the dimly lit kitchen that could be used in a *Little House on the Prairie* remake, my shoulders more relaxed than they had been in months. A shocking contrast to my agitation on the drive here, my constant tension at home with Daniel. Completely unexpected, but maybe not so odd. This escape could be what I needed, space and time to center myself so I could finally figure out why I'd been so confused. Which must be why I sent the next text.

Me: Arthur's okay. But I'd like to be here for him. I'll stay for a week.

That decision was as spontaneous as my choice to thwart Daniel's advances and drive down here, but somehow less distressing.

Hopefully my calmness was a sign this was the right thing to do. I would use this time to find my balance. Maybe make another ten-year plan, like I had with my *Changing My Life* manifesto. Figure out if my jumbled

emotions were aftereffects of the miscarriage, or if the past I'd buried was finally scrabbling to the surface.

FIVE

I woke gasping for air, a snake dream stealing my breath this time. It took several seconds to realize I wasn't being attacked by vipers, fighting for my life. It took longer to remember I was no longer in my New York apartment.

The patchwork quilt was twisted around my legs. One of my pillows was sprawled on the floor. I pressed my hand to my sweaty breastbone as I scanned the room: wood walls, wood furniture, wood floor—the exact same room as in my teens. No posters of Bon Jovi had been allowed. The only accent was still a watercolor boat Arthur had purchased at a flea market in tones of muddy brown. So different from my childhood bedroom, and a world apart from the life and home I'd curated with Daniel.

This morning, my old room's neutral simplicity was strangely soothing.

I showered and didn't bother straightening my hair. I dressed in jeans and a cashmere sweater, the only other outfit I'd brought. I had planned for a one- or two-day visit and had brought two days' worth of clothes. The nearest mall was forty minutes away. Part of today's activities would include a drive there, followed by a few hours with my laptop. Taking a week to center my life was one thing. The daunting task didn't supersede my freelance work.

The floors sighed as I made my way downstairs. There was no sneaking up on people in this farmhouse, unless eighties jazzercise videos were

playing, but Arthur wasn't exercising this morning. I'd hoped to visit the chickens before he woke, gather eggs for breakfast, but he was already cracking them into a bowl.

"Shouldn't you be using egg whites?" I asked, my voice still groggy with sleep.

He kept his back to me. "There's nothing wrong with yolks."

So much for a healthier diet. "At least let me do that. Sit down and rest."

"I'll rest when I'm dead."

Okay, then.

I moved around his cold shoulder and poured myself coffee from the stovetop pot. No fancy espresso machine or convenient Keurig for Arthur. He was a bare-bones man, down to his routines and daily three-piece wardrobe—jeans, white T-shirt, red-checked flannel. You could bounce a quarter off his crisply made bed. He ate scrambled eggs with cheese every morning, broke for lunch at 12:15. He used his rifle for target shooting at 4:45 p.m. Two rounds of five, snapping off like clockwork. And he was a damn good shot. I'd once seen him hit a coyote from across the field, right between the eyes.

One sip of his coffee woke me with a slap. I normally drank my coffee black and sugar-free. This was more like drinking tar. A dash of milk and sugar later, I dug through the crammed fridge for the orange cheese that had graced the scrambled eggs of my youth. Instead, I struck gold.

"You have real cheese!" I thrust the wedge of Gruyère in the air. Not just any Gruyère. An aged Beaufort that would taste like heaven.

"New shop in town," he muttered.

Apparently. A new shop was as shocking as Arthur switching up his meal. The Fernlow I remembered had one grocery store that sold fish tackle next to the Wonder Bread. "What else has changed?"

His jaw bunched. "This and that."

I tried to breathe through my annoyance. Arthur wasn't the king of small talk, but this was worse than speaking with Daniel's cousins, who never glanced up from their phones.

I pulled a frypan from the cupboard and opened the butter dish—the same one from my youth, bright-blue ceramic with a chipped edge. "Did you sleep okay?"

"Fine."

"We could go for a short walk through the property later? Get some fresh air."

"I've got paperwork to do."

He shuffled to a drawer and pulled out an ancient cheese grater. We both grabbed for the Gruyère. I beat him to it.

He clutched the grater, obstinate. "Pass me the cheese."

"This is for me. You shouldn't eat cheese." His glare implied he didn't care, and I didn't have the energy to fight him. "Fine, but I can grate it."

"So can I."

What was he, five? "I'm here to help, Arthur. Let me help."

His glare could fell a black bear, but he didn't reply. I freed the grater from his unforgiving grip and went to work. His slippers scuffed on the floor. My pan scraped over the stove every time I shook it. The silence between us screamed louder.

Yesterday's interactions had involved a similar battle of wills, with me trying to make conversation while he'd grunted one- or two-word answers.

How long has Winston worked here? Two years.

When did you enlarge the kennel? Last spring.

Does the porch light still flicker? Yes.

Extracting details about his condition, and the doctor's instructions, had been akin to using the Jaws of Life on a sealed car, but I had persisted. Arthur's heart attack had been moderate. The doctor had placed two stents in his clogged arteries. Standard stuff that still hit hard—the indomitable

Arthur of my youth was not invincible. He was supposed to eat healthier and integrate more exercise into his life, after he'd rested sufficiently. Two weeks, he'd been told. No work with the dogs during that time. No driving for at least five days. Things I could assist him with, but when I'd told him to relax while I cleaned up from last night's dinner, he'd bitten back with a sharp, "I'm *fine*."

My vehemence had won out, and the "fine" man had marched into the living room, where he'd promptly nodded off during the nightly news.

I was no stranger to Arthur's bluntness, but our phone calls hadn't been this strained. He would ask me what book covers I was working on, and I'd ask about the dogs. Not the prison work, but he'd tell me which rescues were giving him trouble and which had been placed in homes. There were never tangents or sentimental conversation. Work. Weather. News. These had been the basis of our regular chats. The first Monday of every month. At ten a.m.

Now I was getting grunts.

We sat to eat, the clatter of cutlery too similar to my silent dinners with Daniel.

"I'm driving to the mall this morning. Is there anything you need?" I asked.

He swallowed his eggs. "No."

"I could look for more of those exercise videos. Where'd you find it anyway?"

"Joan Rosen dropped it off."

"She brought it with the food?"

Another grunt.

As delicious as the cheesy omelet tasted, swallowing became an effort. Arthur may have told me not to come, and the reasons behind my visit weren't purely selfless, but I was here. I wanted to do something for the man who'd put his life on hold to raise me.

I placed my fork down and stared at the deep creases lining Arthur's face. "Did I do something to upset you?"

His pale brown eyes flicked to me, then back to his plate. "No."

"Is it your health? Are you nervous you'll have another heart attack?"

"No."

Jesus. Talking to a brick wall was more fun, and I was so tired. Exhausted from my marital strain and cradling my emotions so tightly to my chest that my ribs felt ready to pop.

Returning here emphasized how tenuous my home life was, how many lies I'd told Daniel. I'd begun weaving threads of untruths nine years ago, stitched into the exact life I'd imagined, but like any fabric used over time, it now hung loosely. Ill-fitting. One wrong tug from coming undone. But this old farmhouse somehow still fit.

"Coming here was hard for me, Arthur. Living here was hard for me, but you never once flinched at that responsibility. You took me in when no one else would, even though I was awful to you. So your little tantrum won't run me off. If this is your form of retribution for being stuck raising me, fine. I can hack it. You're the only real family I have, and I'm all you've got. Maybe we need to start remembering that."

He pushed his plate away. "I remember everything, Scarlett. Don't go thinking the heart attack messed with my head."

It had certainly messed with mine. Arthur and I didn't do feelings. I hadn't confessed about the state of my marriage, but I was trembling slightly, wishing I'd poured my heart out more fully, so he could tell me my life would be okay. That I would be okay. "Then why can't you give me a break? Why don't you want me here?"

He folded his arms and leaned into his resolute chair. When he finally looked at me, I'd have sworn there were tears in his eyes. "Your whole life, you've been saddled with problems that weren't yours to shoulder. I don't want to be another burden."

I lingered at the kennel after breakfast. The sterile interior smelled ripe with scents of dirty dog and kibble. Leashes hung on the wall next to the water hose. A handful of training clickers were in a nearby bucket. I picked up a clicker and spun it in my hand, ran my thumb over the red plastic, letting it dip into the depressed metal. It replied with a sharp *click*.

The indoor dogs perked up, ears raised, their Pavlovian response not so different from mine after Arthur had fed me that scrap of affection, leaving me eager for another taste.

I focused on the clicker in my hand, something solid and true. Clicker training was fun. I wouldn't admit it as a kid, but the tool offered immediate gratification to the trainer and the trainee. I watched a program once, filmed at a zoo. They had trained elephants to take injections willingly, this style of operant conditioning focusing on the positive.

Arthur used similar techniques with his dogs. Give a command with a hand gesture, and if the dog didn't comply, the direction was fortified with a stronger voice and body language—a step forward, taller posture. The second the dog obeyed, a click was offered with a treat and praise. The exercise was repeated, clicks and rewards given more randomly, but the praise was maintained.

Until the praise was enough. Until the dogs worked for love.

It had been twelve years since I'd trained a dog. Something else I'd avoided after leaving the farm. Daniel had suggested getting a toy poodle for the apartment. A pet to keep me company while I worked from home. I had brushed him off, claiming I wasn't a pet person.

What's one more lie? I'd told myself.

I hadn't realized how much I'd missed canine company until returning to the farm.

Some dogs were in their outside runs, but Captain Underbite—the sad mother I'd met yesterday—was resting inside. Her brown eyes tracked me as I neared. She stood, tongue lolling, yesterday's lethargy absent. She didn't growl or shrink away or show any aggressive behaviors. I searched the room for treats and spotted a massive barrel labeled *Food*.

A handful of kibble later, I stood inside her enclosure, clicker at the ready. "Sit," I commanded as I raised my right forearm to ninety degrees.

She remained standing and nosed my hand. Greedy girl wanted the food for free, but the pit bull beside us was sitting pretty, stubby tail brushing the floor. "You're a good boy," I told him and pushed a piece of kibble through the fence.

My student took longer to acquiesce. She kept trying to nibble at my hand, but I didn't budge. With a confident voice I hadn't used in a lifetime, I stood taller and said, "Sit."

Her butt hit the ground.

"That's my girl!" I clicked and fed her, lavishing her with an embarrassing amount of affection. It was such a silly thing, getting a dog to sit, a simple task done by millions of people, millions of times. Its mundaneness didn't stifle my pride.

"Morning, Scarlett." Winston's heavy boots crossed the cement floor, each thud bringing the dogs to attention, including Captain Underbite.

He scooped up kibble from the barrel and traveled down the line, filling the metal bowls attached to the fences. The bowls could be pushed inside and pulled out, easy to fill and clean without entering enclosures. Winston spoke to each pup, whispering quiet words. Their bodies wiggled with delight.

"Man's best friend," I said.

"This one—" he pointed to the large Shepherd-cross devouring her food "—she's fine with me, but she ain't sociable. I still got to train the meanness outta her. Ain't that true, Sophie?"

Sophie smiled up at Winston, tail wagging.

"She doesn't seem mean."

"You best be careful around these dogs," he said sternly. "I saw you in there with Ginger. And she—"

"Captain Underbite," I interjected.

"Captain who?"

"Underbite. I renamed her." In my surliest days, Arthur would make me rename dogs he rescued. I would sit and stare at a new arrival until the perfect name came to me. I pretended I hated doing it.

Winston cocked his head and nodded. "It's a right fine name. And she may be a softy, but most ain't. Arthur and me—we the alphas. We give 'em food and water, and they show respect. You, they don't know. Never underestimate the animal in 'em."

The warning didn't hit me lightly. Once, as a kid, I'd snuck into a new dog's run, a fluffy white husky with sky-blue eyes. I'd named her Nomad. She was timid and had shied away from me. I'd been determined to win her over.

Arthur had been training two dogs that day, working to get them socialized so they could interact without growling. When Arthur saw me crouched by Nomad he raised hell, hollering at me to get out of there. A chorus of barks and howls erupted. Nomad snarled at me, her flip in behavior turning me to petrified stone, but it wasn't as scary as the canine snarls coming from Arthur's fenced area. By the time I finally reacted and scrambled out of Nomad's run, the high-pitched shrieking had ceased, but the scene had turned gruesome.

Dark red splotches bloomed on Arthur's leg and both dogs' fur. The smaller mutt was on its side, a massive gash in his neck, the other pinned down by Arthur.

The injured one had been euthanized that day, news Arthur had shared with a quiet fury. I'd been sure his anger had been directed at me—outrage

over my stupidity or over his lot, being saddled with a useless teenager who grumped through his home. After this morning's breakfast, I wasn't so sure. Maybe his temper had been born of fear for my safety in Nomad's cage or for my uncertain future. Fear for the love he thought I deserved but wasn't equipped to give.

"Who else works here?" I asked Winston, preferring to focus on the present.

"At the farm, two of us. But Diesel missed his last two shifts."

"Diesel?"

"Another ex-con. Good with fixing cars. Good with dogs. Ain't so good at following rules."

Diesel, Winston—both names I hadn't heard before this visit. Twelve calls a year, and I'd never once asked Arthur about his employees. I'd never gone out of my way to show him I cared. "So, it's just the two of you, and one of you is gone?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"But Arthur said he had staff to help out."

Winston puffed up his massive chest. "He got me."

There was no denying Winston's commitment to his job, but Arthur's lie mingled with all these revived memories, and his admission: *I don't want to be another burden.*

The sentiment made me sad…and angry. He'd worked so hard to unburden me, it had driven a wedge between us. Negative reinforcement, not positive. There had been no endearments or praise growing up. Just stern lessons taught. Some days, the only reminder that I hadn't been alone in that old house had been the groaning floorboards.

Had Arthur been lonely all that time too? Had he also wished someone would hug him, so he'd remember the comfort of being loved?

SIX

I left my shopping bags in the car and walked down Fernlow's main street. The pharmacy and hardware stores hadn't changed, while other storefronts were familiar but different—a boxy line of buildings like in an old Western movie. The rest of the county was all about produce.

Fernlow thrived as an agricultural community—apples, potatoes, and soybeans were tended on rolling farms—but the town prided itself on growing the sweetest corn in the state.

Community fairs were held at the local high school, where people served corn pie and corn fritters and corn Popsicles, the corn-inspired food rivaling *Forrest Gump*'s shrimp menu. Plaid and denim were the uniform of most men, unless they wore hockey jerseys or baseball pants during sports seasons. Women popped out babies young, often pushing strollers while smoking cigarettes. The American Legion hosted Friday night bingo and Saturday night drunken brawls. It wasn't a town New Yorkers visited for a quaint weekend getaway. It was a town where people got on with the task of living.

The new cheese shop wasn't hard to spot. Painted a soft yellow, it pronounced its intent with the simple sign: *Milk & Bean*.

I didn't get the bean part, but I pictured an unctuous piece of camembert hot from the oven, dripping with the homemade walnut jam I hadn't made

in forever.

My belly rumbled as I walked inside. Instead of getting a nose full of cheesy aromas, wafts of roasted coffee hit me. Ah, *the bean*.

A coffee bar was dead ahead, the cheese counter off to the left. It wasn't as impressive as some of New York's fancy cheese shops, but it wasn't too shabby, and a cute seating area filled one end. Each small table was unique, every chair painted a different color with fun nature prints. The perfect place to do some work.

I hightailed it back to my car and returned with my laptop. I wouldn't leave here until I'd finished at least one cover design and had enjoyed a fresh cup of joe that didn't taste like sludge.

One woman was in line, pushing a stroller. I eyed the other patrons, my head bowed slightly, worried someone would recognize me. *Aren't you that Ackerman girl?* The possibility ground through me as the coffee machine whirred, but my anxiety didn't increase. The startling truth was I'd rather endure that question than face miscarriage condolences.

"Scarlett? Is that you?"

The woman in front of me had turned, one hand gently rocking her stroller. I wouldn't have recognized Tavi on the streets of New York, but she was the only Indian girl I'd known in Fernlow. "It sure is. And you look amazing."

She beamed. "So do you."

I instantly regretted not straightening my hair or applying mascara. I sucked in my stomach, the delayed reaction doing little to hide the emotional weight I'd gained. At least all my facial hair had been eradicated, as had Tavi's—the taunt "Sasquatch" had haunted us both during our gawky teen years.

Tavi shook her head. "What's it been? Eleven years?"

"Twelve." But who was counting? "Does your family still own the gas station?"

“Tavi!” A barista waved at her. “Order’s up.”

“Be right there.” To me, she said, “My father still lives and breathes that place, but they moved in with me, near the Armstrong farm. Do you have time to sit and catch up?”

It would cut into my design work, but the rest of my schedule wasn’t exactly full. “That would be nice.”

She steered her stroller toward the barista while I ordered and waited.

Of all the people in Fernlow, Tavi was the only one I’d kind of liked. She hadn’t been a friend per se. She’d been a fellow shadow. Where I’d endured slurs about my father, girls would walk by Tavi and plug their noses and complain about the nasty smell. Those bullies probably dined at hip curry houses now, not a thought to the girl they’d taunted. But Tavi and I had endured. We’d kept our heads down and our words quiet, never banding together but sharing occasional nods of solidarity.

I joined her at a table. “Seriously,” I said. “You look beautiful. Motherhood agrees with you.” A pang hit me at the term *motherhood*. Was it sadness? Longing? Guilt?

She pointed to her perfectly arched eyebrows. “The wonders of threading agree with me. I wish my mother had taken pity on me in high school, but no such luck.” She glanced at her sleeping baby, a girl with Cupid’s bow lips and wisps of black hair. “My daughter will not suffer the way we did. She’ll be waxed and threaded as early as she wants. And in answer to your question, I still live here. I left for college and moved back after. Are you here to help your uncle? I was sorry to hear about his heart attack.”

“I’m helping with day-to-day stuff, but not with his prison program.” No chance in hell that was happening.

“I figured you might turn up to visit him.”

“Just for a week. Arthur tried to keep me away, but…” I let her fill in the blank. The notion of lying again about why I really showed up, even to

a woman I barely knew, didn't sit right. And I kept glancing at her baby, silently assessing my reaction. *Baby, baby, baby, baby.* "This shop is certainly a nice addition to town," I said.

"You have no idea, especially since I'm not working. Without it, I'd be stuck hanging out at Red's, eating pie every day."

Red's Diner did have excellent pie. Cherry with extra whipped cream had been a favorite. Arthur would bring a whole pie home on my birthday. That was it. No gifts. No parties. He wouldn't even say *Happy Birthday*. I'd resented the brush-off back then. Would sulk in my room and relive that awful tenth birthday, crying sloppy tears into my pillow, quiet as could be, the bed shaking with the effort. What I hadn't expected was to continue the tradition as an adult, minus the pie and the tears. I had refused to let Daniel celebrate my birthday, my excuse to him a partial truth: "My father died on the same day."

Thinking about it now, through these new rose-colored glasses, maybe Arthur had actually understood me. He'd known the date no longer marked my entry into the world.

Symbolically, my birth date marked the collapse of it.

My phone rang. I gave Tavi a sheepish look and rescued my cell from the depths of my purse. I frowned at Arthur's name. Last time he'd called out of sequence had been to inform me he'd had a heart attack.

I hunched away from Tavi. "Is everything okay?"

"No."

I pressed my hand to my stomach. "Are you at the hospital?"

"Why would I be at the hospital?"

Why couldn't he make conversations easy? "Because you said you weren't okay."

"I said no such thing. 'Everything' isn't *me*."

I followed his logic and rolled my eyes. The man was literal to a fault. "If you're okay, then what's up?"

“I need a favor.”

I straightened on my turquoise seat, legs tensed, ready to bolt out of here. Arthur needed me. He was finally asking for help. “Just say the word, and it’s done.”

“There’s a dog at the local shelter. You have to take him to Brackson.”

Those were the wrong words. The worst ones he could have said. “Sorry, the connection’s sketchy. I can’t hear you.” Not over the jackhammering of my heart.

“We’ve got one day, Scarlett.”

“Sorry, what?” If vodka were on the table, I’d take a shot. My only option was coffee. I gulped a mouthful; the too-hot liquid burned my tongue.

“He needs to be picked up by tomorrow,” Arthur said, irritation coloring his tone. “Or they put him down. I can’t drive, and the warden took me off the visitor list for a week. It’s got to be you.”

“Must be crappy reception. You keep cutting out.” Why would he ask this? The one thing he knew I couldn’t do. Unless he didn’t understand me as well as I’d thought. I could claim an injury. Return to New York to see my doctor for burned-tongue-itis.

Arthur cleared his throat. “Are you putting your fears over an innocent dog’s life?”

He wasn’t buying my act, and he had never pulled a guilt trip on me. Ultimatums, yes. Punishments, you bet. Never the Jewish guilt. “We’ll discuss this when I’m home,” I said quietly.

He harrumphed and hung up.

Tavi’s big brown eyes crinkled in the corners. “That was entertaining.”

“No, it definitely wasn’t.” I pressed my burned tongue to the roof of my mouth.

“Who was it?” When I didn’t answer, she leaned closer. “I’m not normally one to pry, but I haven’t worked in seven months, my husband’s

away on business, and my parents only talk to me about baby stuff. I'm a little starved for adult conversation. And did I mention most of my clothes are covered in baby puke and I'm lucky to sleep four hours at a time? Take pity on me."

I laughed through my quasi-panic attack. Compared to Chelsea's perfect nursery, perfect hair, and perfectly styled wardrobe, Tavi's honesty was refreshing. She would also understand why I was nearing meltdown mode. "That was my uncle. Our relationship has always been…strained, but coming back here is making me see things in a different light. I want to be here for him, but he just asked me for an impossible favor."

"He always scared me a little. I don't think I've ever seen him smile."

"Pretty sure he was born without those muscles."

"So…" She moved to the edge of her seat. "What did he ask?"

I dug my nails into my palms. "For me to take a dog into Brackson."

She cocked her head, probably unsure why Brackson was my panic button, then her bottom lip dropped open. "That's where your dad was."

It was such a simple comment. Acknowledgment of a fact. Kenna and Arthur knew the details of my life, but hearing my truth from a virtual stranger made me want to weep. *In relief.* "Arthur isn't supposed to drive, but I can't do it. I can't go back."

"I don't blame you, but why?"

"Why, what?"

Her baby fussed and squirmed. She picked her up and cradled her swaddled body to her chest. "Why can't you do it? What scares you most?"

Her adorable baby scared me. That child challenged the preconceived notions I'd assumed about myself. This fear was less tangible. Brackson was the invisible boogeyman of my youth, the stormy *scritch* of branches on a darkened window. It was everything and nothing. "I've worked so hard to forget about that time of my life. Going back is too much."

She rocked her baby and nodded. “I hated this town. Hated how my parents forbade my sister and me from playing near the gas pumps. They claimed they were being protective of their kids, but I knew the truth—if potential customers saw a brown kid, they wouldn’t stop. I got bullied in school for how I looked, how I smelled, how my mother wore traditional saris instead of jeans. I hated being different, but when I went away to college, I felt more alone.”

“Because you missed home?”

“Because I didn’t know who I was. I aced my degree and made friends with a mix of people, mostly white Americans, thinking that was what I wanted—to shed my Indian identity as much as I could—but I wound up feeling more out of place than I had here.”

I thought about my Upper East Side friends, the Christian holidays I celebrated, the Jewish delis I avoided. How hard I’d worked to blend in. Easier for me with my white skin, but the efforts had been harder lately, bits of Judaism creeping into my thoughts. “It’s frustrating when you’re not sure where you fit.”

She sipped her coffee and licked her lips. “It is, but everything changed for me when I embraced my culture. I had to love all parts of myself to truly be happy. Maybe you need to do the same.”

“That’s awesome for you, Tavi, and it’s nice to see you happy, but Brackson isn’t my culture. It’s a shitty place and the last thing I need to embrace.”

“I guess I mean figuratively. You are your father’s daughter. Embracing Brackson means embracing his role in your life.”

My eyelid twitched. “Not everyone needs to embrace the skeletons in their closet to be happy. I’ve moved on from all that.”

“Sure,” she said, softening her tone. “I get it, but maybe there’s a reason you’re here. Maybe you have unfinished business.”

I laughed at her persistence. “Do I need to pay for this shrink session?”

She winked at me. “I’m off the clock. Took a year to stay home with Prisha. You can set up an appointment after.”

I stared at this confident woman, who used to eat lunch by herself in the science lab, amazed by her transformation. “Are you actually a psychologist?”

She cringed slightly. “Sorry if I overstepped. It’s hard to turn off the training.”

I wasn’t sure where she’d stepped, but she’d sure as hell hit something. Arthur’s request was still distressing, but my father’s criminality wasn’t the only aspect of my history I’d buried.

All I could think about now was the approaching Passover holiday and the Seders I used to attend—sullen and bitter with Arthur, but before that, with my father…*happy*. I’d been the star of those family meals, a table full of extended family who loved us. I would read the Four Questions in Hebrew—the part of the service designated to the youngest child, a chance to teach and understand why we celebrated Passover: the exodus of Jews from Egypt, freedom from slavery. I hadn’t understood the Hebrew words, but I’d practiced phonetically, reveling in my father’s effusive praise. Now I avoided all things Jewish.

Tavi and I veered away from sensitive issues and gossiped about the kids from high school: where they lived now, who they’d married. Hearing our nemesis, Lisa Willard, who’d bragged about the rich guy she’d snag, now worked at a fast-food restaurant gave me a kick of pleasure. We chatted about our lives. Our jobs. Our partners. Tavi spoke of her husband with a twinkle in her eye and a blush on her cheeks.

Their obvious happiness made me feel lonely.

Before she left, we swapped numbers and agreed to meet again. Then it was just me in this colorful cheese/coffee shop, with jazz standards drifting through the airy space, Arthur’s favor once again filling me with dread.

I spied my old history teacher, Mrs. Franklyn. She didn't seem to recognize me.

My phone buzzed with a text from Daniel. I didn't read it.

I opened my laptop and stared at the cover I'd been designing, my eyes glazing over.

Cheese. I should buy some cheese. A clothbound cheddar if they had one. Something yummy to bring home for Arthur. A peace offering so we could discuss his request calmly, before I told him I couldn't rescue that dog.

I visualized our conversation on my drive home, an adult tête-à-tête where I'd open up about my feelings on Brackson and my father—issues we'd never discussed. He would tell me he understood. We might even hug.

I didn't expect Arthur to be standing on the porch, waiting for me, arms crossed, like he'd been there since our call. Two hours of glaring at the muddy drive.

A peace offering wouldn't cut it. These dogs were his life. I was a transient relative who'd disappointed him time and again.

"I bought cheese," I said shakily as I slammed my car door. My smile felt as slippery as the muddy path.

"You're picking up the dog," he said, firm. "Tomorrow. The shelter's expecting you."

So much for an adult tête-à-tête. "Well, they'll just have to *un*expect me. Why can't Winston do it?"

"Winston doesn't like returning to Brackson."

"Funny, because I feel the same." I stopped at the bottom of the stairs and jabbed my hand at my chest. "I don't like the idea of returning to Brackson."

"Not the same."

"I beg to differ."

Red splotches dotted his cheekbones. “Did you live in that hellhole for eight years? Did you suffer at the hands of power-hungry guards and sadistic inmates? Did you spend two months in their infirmary because someone shanked you in the gut and left you to die?”

My fight drained out of me. “No.” But my heart bled for big, strong Winston, a man with a gentle handshake and a deep respect for Arthur and his job. God, I was selfish.

Arthur seemed to agree. “Then I don’t think your reasons for avoiding Brackson are the same as Winston’s. You’ll pick the dog up at the shelter tomorrow.”

“How can you ask this of me?”

“I’m not asking. I’m telling.”

“But…I can’t.” I’d reverted to a whiny twelve-year-old child.

He tipped his head back and dragged a hand down his face. He muttered something I couldn’t hear, then leveled me with unwavering eyes. “You are stronger than you think, girl.”

He stomped into the house, the screen door slamming behind him. The beautiful cheese I’d purchased slipped from my hand and landed in the mud.

SEVEN

I was fifteen the last time I visited my father in jail. That fateful morning, I stood in front of the mirror, glaring at the acne on my chin and cheeks, the dark hairs overtaking my sideburns and upper lip. Where I used to have one thick eyebrow stretching its mocking wing across my brow, I now had an eyebrow and a half, my plucking effort a travesty.

This is the portrait of a motherless girl, I thought.

I trudged to the car and slammed the door shut. Arthur ignored the loud *crack*.

Brackson prison was in New York, but it teetered close to the Pennsylvania border, just forty-five minutes from Arthur's farm. Most days, it felt like forty-five hours.

We drove in silence, me with my arms crossed and chin pressed to my chest, Arthur with his hands at ten and two, always gripping the wheel like a novice driver. We jostled over every pothole. The muggy July air smelled of cow shit and mud. Always that gross mud, rank and fetid. The closer we got to Brackson, the lower I sank into my seat.

I pictured myself turning into a pancake and sliding through the air vents, being spat out onto the road. I could lie there like roadkill, let the vultures tear into my flesh and pick at my bones. I could be the road, lumpy and pockmarked, letting life roll over me. Anything but this hairy,

parentless girl. But I'd already played those unforgiving roles. I'd been roadkill in school. I'd been a beaten-up highway the past five years, driven over time and again. I was tired of everyone bulldozing my wants, telling me where I had to live, what I had to do.

I was pissed off.

I walked into the prison waiting room, seething. My mass of curls was a frizzy mess. My jeans stuck to my thighs, the weather too hot for the thick material, but my shorts weren't long enough for prison rules. Little kids were dressed in their Sunday best: pretty dresses, shiny shoes, khaki pants. I glared at them. Women fidgeted with their hands and fussed with their hair. Some men looked tough enough to hold their own behind bars. Arthur stayed close to my side.

He always stood nearby at this stage of visiting. After we'd filled out the paperwork, had gone through the metal detector and been patted down, he'd stand by me. He didn't put his hand on my shoulder or distract me with jokes like some of the other adults. He just stood there, stoic, unmoving. Until I got called in.

Then he cut me loose.

I always had to visit my dad solo. Not my choice. I didn't want to be anywhere near him or that place. No one cared what I wanted.

My dad was at one of the tables, tapping his thumb restlessly. I froze, as usual, the other visitors flowing around me. When Dad caught my eye and smiled, my stomach churned. A guard narrowed his eyes at me, and I moved. Anything to get this over with.

"Hey, bug," Dad said, trying to sound normal. Like we were in our Scarsdale kitchen having breakfast, not in a bleak, criminal-filled room.

I whispered, "Hi," the bitter word swallowed by the surrounding concrete.

"How's the summer going?"

I picked at the bloody cuticle I'd already chewed to shit. "Fine."

“Arthur tells me you’re helping with the dogs. Training some. Do you like it?”

“It’s fine.”

“Dogs loved him growing up. Any stray in a fifty-mile radius would sniff him out and beg for food. He’d give them his last meal if they needed it.”

I didn’t reply. There was no point. *He* was the one who wanted me there. He insisted on the visits. I would have been happy sitting in the kennel with my sketchbook, drawing people tearing off their skin and heads cracking in two. Secretly, I wanted to be an artist. Study drawing or painting or sculpture or glassblowing, anything to purge these violent images and nightmares from my mind. Create beauty from pain. I was happiest when my fingers were smudged with pencil lead, my back cramped from hunching over my sketches.

But here I was, staring at my father’s bright-orange jumpsuit until my vision blurred.

His thumb-tapping picked up speed. “Watch any scary movies lately?”

Of all the mundane questions I’d gotten the past few years, this was the first time he’d asked that. It shot me back to our last morning together, how I’d blabbered about *Jaws* and *Dracula*, as though impressing my father had been my greatest triumph, and all that while he’d been a *fucking liar*, spending stolen money on extravagant homes and gold-digging women.

He’d chosen greed over his family, and now I lived in butt-fuck Pennsylvania with an austere uncle who never wished me happy birthday.

The prison visitation rules were strict. We had thirty minutes. I was to speak in a low tone and remain calm. I had to stay in my assigned seat and keep fidgeting to a minimum. Aside from a quick hug hello and goodbye, which I avoided, I couldn’t touch my father. If I broke these rules, I would be escorted out. Future visitations would be affected.

I had never challenged these regulations, preferring invisibility over drawing attention, but as I sat on that metal chair, surrounded by drug dealers and gang members, my jeans suctioned to my sweaty legs, my blood boiled. I stared at the notorious Jacob Ackerman, a man I no longer knew—a man I had *never* known—and I breathed fire.

"I fucking hate you," I said, quiet at first. He winced. It felt like a victory. "I hate your face. I hate your voice. I hate being near you. I hate this fucking place and these fucking people." My voice rose, an operatic crescendo of venom. The guards rushed me. I didn't stop. "I hate you! I never want to come back here. I never want to see you again!"

The guards dragged me to my feet. My father sat there, slack-jawed, tears filling his eyes. I reveled in my triumph. I was no longer a derelict road for others to drive over. My future was mine to control.

Arthur didn't yell at me for my outburst, and I never visited Brackson prison again.

Jacob Ackerman died a year later, murdered while doing laundry.

Ewan "Reaper" Breck's grudge against my father hadn't abated. A Viper gang member had been in Brackson too. The man had stabbed my father fourteen times with a sharpened toothbrush. Newspapers—local and national—picked up the story, rehashing Jacob Ackerman's grim deeds in bold ink. A photo of the murderer was in the articles, along with pictures of his distinctive viper tattoo, its fangs dripping with blood. Same as the image sent to me with the live snake.

My panic dreams returned with a vengeance after that. Adults in town pointed and murmured. Kids at school resumed their religiously slurred taunts. When their snide insults veered from me to Tavi, as they often did, I exhaled in relief. I looked forward to the days they bullied her.

I attended the funeral with dry eyes, but my mind was alive with images of my father stabbed, bleeding, screaming for help. I felt more angry than sad, though. I didn't look away as his casket was lowered into the ground or

flinch when Arthur shoveled dirt onto the coffin, each heavy *thwack* of earth vibrating in my chest. No matter how hot my eyes burned, I refused to blink or shed a tear for that man. My mother didn't come. She was too fragile.

That left Arthur and me, but not quite.

Fernlow had a small Jewish community. Arthur had explained its history once, while I'd smashed the carrots on my plate. The population had been larger in the twenties, topping out at 150 people. They had formed a small Orthodox congregation back then, renting out the old telephone company on the main highway. A member of the laity would hold Friday services there—any pious man from the community chosen to lead. They established a cemetery. They followed Jewish law, but people left, as people often did. Kids and families migrated to cities, where opportunity bloomed. The telephone building was now a lumberyard. Religious beliefs converted with the times, becoming less stringent.

Fernlow's forty-odd remaining Jews now hosted gatherings in homes, where they celebrated High Holidays and organized community activities. They came together in times of struggle and filled fridges with food. It was these people who'd filtered through Arthur's farmhouse for the seven days he sat shiva. A time of mourning, to reflect and heal, he'd told me.

I had been reflecting, all right. Planning my exit strategy.

Visitors talked in low voices and told me how sorry they were. They recited the Mourner's Kaddish each night, a Hebrew hum that swarmed around me, never breaking my hostile shell.

My father was dead. My mother was nothing but a shadow.

I was officially on my own.

I would sit in the kennel at night, enveloped by the stagnant stench of sleeping dogs, and plot my future. "I'll get away from here," I'd whisper to the mutts no one wanted. "Create a new life of my own."

Every time an image of my father bleeding out on a concrete floor struck, I'd dig my fingernails into my palms. I wrote my *Changing My Life* manifesto there, with looping letters in purple pen. If I could train a pit bull to lick instead of bite, I could train myself to not be Jacob Ackerman's daughter.

I gave myself ten years to achieve this goal. The bullet points were randomly written.

Change my name.

Earn my own money.

Find a career where I'm in control.

Get a scholarship.

Leave Fernlow.

Never set eyes on Brackson prison again.

Marry the opposite of my father.

I didn't write that I should renounce my religion. That metamorphosis happened organically. I switched from sketching compulsively to studying and refused to participate in Jewish rituals. I ate Friday night dinner in the kennel and spent Yom Kippur stuffing my face with food instead of fasting. Arthur would stare at me, silent in his judgment, but he didn't challenge my decisions. He made me clean dog shit and collect eggs, and I accepted my penance.

I never wavered from my plan.

As soon as I turned eighteen, I filled out the paperwork to change my name. I opted for Scarlett Ronson, taking my mother's maiden name as mine. Her father had emigrated from Poland, his surname at the time being Aaronson—*son of Aaron*. He hadn't changed it upon arrival to America like some Jews, but after he'd struggled to find work and faced anti-Semitism, he'd lopped off the first two As, westernizing his identity to Ronson. I considered his shamed act my good fortune. As was the full scholarship I earned.

On my last day in Fernlow, I packed my bags for the University of Pennsylvania, my name-change request sent, a new beginning ahead of me. Arthur drove me to the bus stop. We stood awkwardly by his truck, the usual mud crusting my sneakers.

He passed me an envelope of money and blinked a lot. “This won’t be enough. You’ll need to get a job.”

“I know.”

“Be smart with your spending.”

“I will.”

He pursed his lips. “And don’t walk alone at night.”

“I won’t.” Unexpected tears stung my eyes. We looked anywhere but at each other.

“I’ll call every month,” he said. “To check in.”

I nodded.

“There’s a Jewish Hillel group on campus. You should reach out.”

There was no way that was going down, but I suddenly felt out of my depth, a small fish forced into a sea full of bigger fish. I didn’t understand why the one thing I’d wanted more than anything—to leave Fernlow and all the memories it held—was suddenly so terrifying.

No goodbye hugs were offered. Arthur drove away before the bus left, obviously relieved to see me gone. *I* was thrilled to be leaving, but the confidence I thought I’d gained seeped out of me as the bus bumped its way down the country road.

Campus was a hive of activity. I shouldered my small duffel bag and hiked the stairs to my dorm room, chin tucked as laughing students whizzed by. I opened my door with a shaky hand, surprised to see an aggressive punk rock poster hanging over one bed. The girl beneath it looked up at me with dark-lined eyes, flawless skin, and gauges in her ears. The antithesis to my poorly bleached mustache and unibrow—my horribly plucked brows once again united.

“Hi,” I said to my new roommate, intimidation thinning my voice. “I’m Scarlett.”

Her pointed gaze swept over my motherless face, and her perfectly shaped eyebrows shot up. “For the love of God, let me help you.”

Thus began my official transformation into Scarlett Ronson, mustache-free girl, best friend to Kenna Puglisi, a half-Irish, half-Italian woman with the personality of a pit bull.

Kenna was the exact person I needed to talk me down as I sat outside the animal shelter, fifteen years after vowing never to revisit Brackson prison. I’d been sulking since Arthur had stormed off the porch yesterday. We had barely spoken over dinner or breakfast.

Now I was in his van, where I’d been sitting for an unhealthy length of time.

Kenna answered her phone after three rings. “Are you home?”

“Sadly, no. I’m still in Nowhere, Pennsylvania, and it’s still as traumatizing as ever.” I kept contemplating pressing my foot on the gas and speeding Arthur’s dog van away from here.

A strange buzzing filled the line. “You’re being dramatic,” she said over the noise.

“This doesn’t qualify as dramatic. I have to take a dog into Brackson.”

“Seriously?”

I whimpered.

“Shit. Give me a sec.” To someone else, she said, “Mind if I talk while you work?”

The sun blasted through the windshield, coaxing sweat from my frizzy hairline. I tied my curls into a bun on top of my head and watched a woman

drag a border collie toward the shelter. The pup dug its paws into the gravel drive. The owner yanked; the collie fought harder.

I understood how the collie felt.

"Okay," Kenna said. "I'm ready to give you brilliant advice."

"Did I interrupt a job?"

"A tattoo."

"You're talking to me while getting a tattoo?" I glanced at my hip, where my butterfly tattoo resided. I'd gotten my first and only ink while Kenna had acquired her tenth. It had been a spontaneous decision, the college type made after a few drinks. The butterfly had been a symbol of my metamorphosis from Scarlett Ackerman to Scarlett Ronson. It had hurt like hell.

"I am," Kenna said. "That's how much I love you."

Buzzing rang from her end. I shuddered. "What are you getting this time? And where are you fitting it?"

"I'll send a picture after. Right now, I'd rather focus on your crisis than my pain. My advice for your Brackson dilemma is simple—you're an adult now. You don't have to follow your uncle's rules."

"This is different." Arthur was different. Or I was. Or the years had altered the angry glasses through which I used to view him. "I want to help him, but the idea of driving to Brackson gives me hives."

"So pull up your big-girl panties and go."

"But I'm frozen. I've been sitting in his van for thirty minutes."

"So…you want me to tell you *again* it's okay not to go?"

"Yes. No." I rubbed my eyes. "I'm a mess," I mumbled.

"Like I said, dramatic." She paused and exhaled. "I don't know if you're still in Fernlow to avoid your life here or to help your uncle, but going was a big deal. Visiting the prison is a *bigger* deal, but what's the worst that'll happen?"

"I'll have a panic attack and pass out on the concrete floor."

“And?”

I knocked my head into the headrest. “That’s not enough?”

“Do you want to help your uncle or not?”

Where Tavi had zeroed in on my deeper fears—what it would mean to face the past I’d buried—Kenna was all practicality: did I want to help my uncle or let him down? That was the crux of it, really. Returning to Brackson wasn’t a therapy session about embracing my childhood scars. This was a familial duty, and Arthur was the only real family I had.

“Fine,” I said on a sigh. “I’ll go.”

She snorted. “You sound like a whiny child.”

I totally did, *again*. This feebleness was becoming a troubling habit. “How has work been this week? You were worried about another makeup artist getting an upcoming photo shoot.”

“I got it, but I need to step up my networking game. Keep myself top of mind, spend a few less hours on my volunteer work.”

“Or you could promote the volunteer work. Show the fashion world beauty is more than status and prestige.”

A longer pause. “This industry is pretty cutthroat. If I tell them how I split my time, they might think I’m not committed enough to the fashion work—staying on top of the trends and all the travel involved.”

“Or they’ll be impressed. Teaching kids to cover their scars changes lives. I bet some of the bigwigs in those fashion houses would be keen to help too. Maybe fund your work. But you have to be comfortable sharing that side of yourself. Either way, I’m here if you need to vent. And you better send me a picture when the ink’s done.”

“I’ll send the ink,” she said, “as long as you send me pics of the hot prisoners.”

I scoffed. There was nothing hot about convicted criminals.

EIGHT

The only thing scarier than facing Brackson prison was facing Twinkie, the Jack Russell terrier from hell. The dog snarled as the attendant handed over his leash. “He’s a temperamental one,” the woman said.

Twinkie bared his teeth at me. I recoiled. “No kidding.”

“He’s been here a couple months. Only getting worse. We’re short-staffed and don’t have time to train him, and most fosters have young kids or cats. Twinkie doesn’t like kids or cats. Or dogs or people.” She blushed. “I’m Ellen, by the way. Your uncle is a godsend.”

He was certainly something, and Ellen didn’t seem to care he was Jacob Ackerman’s brother, or maybe she didn’t know.

I stared down at Twinkie. “Hopefully the prisoners will help him.”

“They’ll have their work cut out for them, that’s for sure.”

I led the cantankerous terrier to the van’s back door, ignoring the Pups in Prison logo splashed across the side. I bent down to pick Twinkie up. He growled.

“I’m not happy about this either,” I said.

He curled his lip.

“If you stay here, it’s the end of the road for you.”

Another growl.

This called for bribery. The sun was stronger today, searing my back as I pulled a meatball-filled baggie from my pocket. I dropped a portion of ground meat. Twinkie devoured it in one bite. While he was distracted, I snatched him up and locked him in the back of the van, my heart pounding wildly the whole time.

A little dog shouldn't scare me, but my palpitations continued as I drove, worsening when the prison loomed in front of me. I lowered my window, needing fresh air. The surrounding fields teemed with cicadas, their buzzing incessant, like creatures whispering their decree: *Thou shalt not pass.*

I stopped at the guard's booth. Twinkie seemed calmer, or maybe he was focused on my wheezy breaths as I waited for the guard to find me on his list.

The guard tapped my ID against his page. "You new to the dog program?"

New implied I'd be working with Arthur longer than this one favor. *Not in this lifetime.* "Just helping out for the day."

He returned my driver's license. "I was sorry to hear about Arthur's health scare. Give him my best."

I offered a strained smile.

I drove as Arthur had instructed, toward the rear of the massive concrete structure. A tower jutted from the center of the building. The Pups cellblock was a wing off the larger central prison, with barbed wire curled along the tops of the fences, the menacing spikes as welcoming as Twinkie's snarls. Another guard opened an electric gate and guided me to a parking spot.

I stepped out and tried to draw more air into my lungs. I focused on a fenced agility course, its setup much like Arthur's. Its length was attached to the prison wall, where a hose and tub filled one corner, a grooming table in another. The familiar items helped my breathing some.

Then the guard said, "This way to the metal detectors."

I ignored the ball hardening in my stomach and unloaded Twinkie. He bared his teeth. I used his leash to control his head and avoid his fangs.

“These men are scarier than me,” I told him. “They won’t tolerate your attitude.”

He barked.

The guard whistled. “Feisty little thing.”

“I hope your prisoners know what they’re doing.”

“He’ll be with Emery, and he’s the best. Never seen a dog he couldn’t train. I’m Martinez.” He led us through the first security door. “Any questions, I’m your man. If the prisoners make you uncomfortable, alert me. If they say anything inappropriate, report it right away. The freedom we give them for the program is earned. One false move, one angry tug on a leash, and they’re back in gen pop.”

Martinez wasn’t tall, but his thick frame was as solid as his voice. His calm didn’t silence my rising panic as he handed me a visitor’s badge. “You’re new and…younger than the other volunteers. The men might take notice. They have enough manners to keep remarks to themselves, but I suggest wearing a higher neckline next time.”

I twisted Twinkie’s leash around my fist. “There won’t be a next time.”

But I suddenly wished I’d worn one of Arthur’s thick flannel shirts, not the maroon V neck I’d purchased at the mall. The sleeves were long and the bottom hung over the waistband of my jeans, but my breasts had challenged my bras since Mount Takeout. The shirt did nothing to minimize the change.

Martinez led us through the metal detector. Twinkie’s collar and leash were made of plastic and fabric, a precaution Arthur must have instilled, but my belt set off the beeping. The loose change in my pocket did the same again. The third time was all clear, and a quick frisk later, I was in the guts of Brackson prison.

The clap of our steps echoed off the concrete floor. Bits of dried mud flaked from my boots. Martinez unlocked and opened a heavy door, but the gray walls seemed to inch closer. My knees weakened. For the life of me, I couldn't force my feet to move. And *God*, I loathed how weak I felt. My father wasn't here. I was Scarlett Brooks, wife of Daniel Brooks. I wasn't an Ackerman. I wasn't even a Ronson. I'd neutered my names and identities with the efficiency of a skilled veterinarian.

"Everything okay?" Martinez asked.

I wasn't sure when he had let the door swing shut or when he'd walked in front of me.

He passed his hand over his goatee. "Visiting can be intimidating, but I promise nothing'll happen to you or the dog. We only have room for twenty-six inmates in the program. Screening is rigorous. Not all programs have clean records, but no dogs or volunteers have ever been harmed here. These guys know how lucky they are to be chosen. They wouldn't do anything to jeopardize that."

"Yeah. Of course. Right." Still, I debated playing the role of nervous upper-class girl who'd never visited a prison. Escape before my clamminess turned into full-on sweats.

Except Arthur had never asked me for a favor. He'd never needed my help.

"Just nervous," I said. "Lead the way."

Martinez scrutinized me a second longer, then he turned and shoved the door open.

I held my breath and followed.

The first thing to hit me was the noise. Doggy whines and barks mixed with commands. Laughter rang out from a far corner. The teenage visitations I'd endured had been subdued, laugh-free affairs sequestered in an airless room. This large space had a few couches and a spacious seating area, and there were no orange jumpsuits. The inmates had on navy

sweatpants, emblazoned with the word *PRISONER* down one leg, written in bold yellow. They wore loose short-sleeved blue shirts, like you'd see in a hospital. Some were smiling.

The severe lines of my face probably resembled Arthur's.

A man in jeans and a T-shirt waved at us. He pushed up his glasses as he approached. "I'm Colin. Arthur said to expect you."

I squinted at Colin's visitor badge, my attention jumping to another man and woman in plain clothes. They were interacting with prisoners, talking and training dogs. Since this had been an emergency dog rescue, I'd assumed I'd be the only civilian. "Wish I could say the same, but I wasn't expecting you."

"I volunteer twice a week. We have others who fill in the gaps."

I squeezed Twinkie's leash until it bit into my palm. "And Arthur knew you'd be here?"

Colin looked around my uncle's age, with untamed gray hair, caterpillar eyebrows, and a bushy mustache. He gave me a lopsided grin. "Of course. I offered to pick up Twinkie, but he said you wanted to do it."

Come a-fucking-gain?

I replayed Arthur's call and irate demands. The Jewish guilt he'd unleashed. His blatant disregard for my anxiety. Arthur had lied, bluntly, to my face, using his heart attack and my need to help him against me.

Fury burned over my nerves in a white-hot flame. As did confusion. "Did he say anything else?"

"Just to give you the lay of the land once you got here. Help you get Twinkie settled." He crouched in front of the pup. "Happy to have you aboard, little one."

Twinkie snarled. I felt like doing the same.

Arthur's motivation behind this scheme was murky, and I had no interest in being his pawn.

“Come,” Colin said. “I told the men who you were before you got here. I’ll introduce you to Emery.”

Great. Not only had Arthur plotted to get me here, but they all knew I was his niece. They probably knew who my father was.

I was ready to drop the leash and make my escape, but Colin and the guard Martinez were on the move, and the prisoners had noticed me. A couple had tattooed skulls. One had tears inked on his face. A number were in the seating area, writing in notebooks, sleeping dogs relaxed at their feet. All of them stole glances my way.

Self-preservation kicked in, and I tried to hurry toward Colin, but Twinkie wasn’t having it. He stood his ground, lip curled, going nowhere fast. The tiny devil bared his teeth. I opened my mouth to scold him, but his body shook and he tucked his tail between his legs.

While in survival mode at high school, I used to picture the students as dogs. The popular girls were poodles with silly pom-pom tails. The jocks were Rottweilers or Dobermans. The goths and rockers were hairless Chinese cresteds. The game had distracted me from the dirty looks tossed my way, but there had been exceptions to my rules. I’d watched Riley Murphy, a poodle in looks, laughing harder at jokes, eager to prove her cool-girl status. I’d picture her with her tail tucked between her legs. Drew Deckard wouldn’t gang up with the other Dobermans when they found someone to ridicule. I’d imagine him with a bristle of fur along his broad back, unimpressed with his so-called friends.

If we wore our true emotions as clearly as dogs—flagrant, unapologetic—bullies would be called out for the cowards they were. No one could pretend to be someone they weren’t.

Just like Twinkie.

“Mind if I take his leash?”

I swiveled and swallowed hard. The inmate belonging to that deep voice was massive, the sheer size of him forcing me to step back. I searched for

Colin, but he and Martinez were talking privately.

The prisoner's arms hung loosely by his sides. "I'm Emery. Colin said I'll be training Twinkie."

He didn't move to take the leash. Twinkie continued his impression of a vicious scaredy cat. My attention darted between them.

Like some of the inmates, Emery wore a long-sleeved white shirt under his blue short sleeves. Ink peeked out from the cuffs, and a Celtic cross stretched up one side of his neck. His face looked like it had met with a few fists; his nose was crooked, and slashing scars split his chin and eyebrow. He should be the opposite of attractive, but his imposing presence and bottomless dark eyes had Kenna's "hot prisoner" comment fuzzing up my brain.

I shook my head. "Twinkie's nervous," I said. "And kind of terrifying."

The corner of his lips kicked up. "I can help with that." He jutted his chin toward him. "May I?"

Politeness from this brute of a man relaxed my shoulders. I lifted the leash, expecting him to take it. He got down on his knees instead.

He rested his upper body on his forearms and bowed his head. Twinkie sniffed the air. His tail stayed between his legs, but he tiptoed forward, no growl in sight. He investigated Emery's thick, dark hair.

Emery lifted his head and scratched between Twinkie's ears. "Nice to meet you too."

Without a word to me, he held out his palm. When I realized what he wanted, I dropped the leash into his hand. He scooped Twinkie into his arms.

"Thanks," he said in that gravelly voice. "Please give Arthur my best."

"Yeah, sure," I mumbled, unsure why full sentences had vacated my brain.

He carried Twinkie with his forearm under the dog's belly. Twinkie held his head high and barked at a mutt five times his size. My work was done

here, but Emery's was just beginning.

I tried to catch Martinez's attention, let him know I was ready to get the hell out of here. I had an uncle to confront. I had book covers to design. I needed to inhale a bucket full of fresh air, but Martinez walked the opposite way, and Colin waved me over.

Before I could ask to be escorted out, Colin said, "You've got to meet Brutus."

I would rather clean the kennel with a toothbrush than extend this visit, but Colin wasn't reading my fidgety posture as the cry for help it was.

He walked past the central seating area, and I followed close on his heels. Better that than fending for myself in a room full of criminals. A few men nodded at me. A Hispanic man with tattooed knuckles was rubbing a pit bull's belly and waved at me with the pup's paw, a goofy grin on his face. My answering smile snuck up on me, but I schooled my expression. This wasn't a place for smiling. This was the place where my father was murdered.

Colin gestured to an inmate and his brindled mutt. "Jesse's been training Brutus for six months. Why don't you show Scarlett what you can do, boy?" He spoke to the dog but winked at Jesse.

Jesse wasn't as tall as Emery, but he was as built. These men must spend plenty of hours lifting weights and exercising. Something I should consider. I could borrow Arthur's exercise video, if I ever spoke with him again, or get back into running. Find the old, happy Scarlett under the layer of weight I'd gained.

Jesse chewed his lip and focused on Brutus. "Sit," he commanded.

Brutus sat, tail wagging. Jesse praised the pup.

Jesse said, "Down."

Brutus complied, and more praise was given.

They ran through other mundane commands any well-behaved dog should know, but Jesse's eyes kept darting to me, a hint of nerves in his

jerky movements. Like he wanted to prove his training prowess. I wanted to get this over with and get out.

He raised his hand in the air next and said, “Stand.”

Brutus, shockingly, stood on his hind legs.

Jesse turned his palm toward the dog. “High five.”

Brutus smacked his paw against Jesse’s palm.

Jesse said, “Walk,” and flicked his wrist. Brutus took a few steps.

A few more tricks later, I laughed as Jesse ruffled Brutus’s fur, then I bit down on my molars. There should be no laughing in Brackson, which made me think of *A League of Their Own* and Tom Hanks yelling, “There’s no crying in baseball!”

Another maniacal laugh threatened.

Colin folded his arms and leaned toward me. “Brutus came to us severely malnourished. Skittish and hostile. Now he’s the star of the program.”

His good behavior was undeniable, as was the juxtaposition before me. Jesse’s head was shaved, his aggressive-looking tattoos tough to decipher on his dark skin. The hard edges of his face were also unforgiving, but the devotion in his eyes was undeniable, as was the adoration between trainer and trainee. Their connection had my lightheartedness resurfacing, which made no sense. They must be pumping something into the room, an airborne drug that kept prisoners happy and dulled their hate.

Flustered, I went to lean over to pet Brutus, but I remembered my low-cut top. I crouched instead, keeping my upper body straight. Jesse didn’t glance at my cleavage. He focused on the dog he’d trained the past six months.

“Brutus worked hard,” he said, pride in his squared shoulders. “Smartest dog I’ve ever trained.”

“He seems to know how lucky he is.” Love poured from the pup’s big, glossy eyes.

Jesse grabbed the fur at Brutus's neck and gave it a rough rub. "Naw. I'm the lucky one. This guy gives me a reason to wake up every day."

There it was again, that squishy feeling in my chest. I understood the power of dogs. The kennel had been my teenage hideout, the mutts my sounding board. No matter my reluctance about this visit, their effect here was even more powerful.

"How long will you train him?" I asked Jesse.

His Adam's apple dragged down his neck. "Gotta give him up next week. Family's coming to adopt him."

"That's got to be tough," I said, his rush of emotion palpable.

"I try not to get attached, but…" He planted a kiss on Brutus's head. "It's still worth it. I'd have been toast without this program. We all got real sad when we heard about your uncle's heart attack. There's no repaying that man for what he's done."

His eyes got watery, and mine burned. Was this why Arthur had forced me to come here? To have me inhale this strange cocktail of humanity and see the difference his program made?

I stood, overwhelmed by Jesse and Brutus and my unexpected emotions. For fifteen years, I'd nurtured my fears of Brackson. I'd assumed one step inside these hostile walls would revert me to my insecure teen self, terrified and angry, but I hadn't face-planted during this visit. I was standing a bit taller than when I'd first arrived.

Colin adjusted his glasses. "You should see Arthur in here. He treats these men like equals. Gets on their backs when the training slips but never quits on them. He's given them and the dogs a second chance."

"One-point-two million," I murmured.

Colin scrunched his bushy eyebrows. "Sorry?"

I pictured myself at the farmhouse kitchen table, sixteen and moody, bitching about cleaning the kennel. "One-point-two million," Arthur had said. "That's how many dogs get euthanized at kill shelters every year. They

didn’t do anything wrong. They didn’t ask to be abandoned or abused. All any dog wants is a home and food. Some kind words. Giving them a safe place to live is a privilege, not a chore.”

The rebuke had stung back then, but like all our past interactions, I was seeing them through a clearer filter now. Arthur hadn’t only been talking about his rescues. He’d been talking about me.

“Arthur used to give me lectures,” I told Colin, my voice thick. “Explain how many dogs were euthanized and how he could only save a few. That part was hard for him, I think. Saving a handful when so many needed help. What he’s doing here is important.”

“He’s changing lives, that’s for sure. The program bridges the gap between guards and inmates too. The racial divide in general population disappears in here. You should walk around and see for yourself. The men don’t want to overstep, but I know they all want to meet you.”

I glanced at the exit, pulled by the safe world I knew. Where the lies I’d told had insulated me from facing the ghosts of my past. Trouble was, I hadn’t been feeling particularly insulated these days.

Instead of leaving, I stayed. I congratulated Jesse on his work and tentatively approached another dog. I moved through the room that way, focusing on the dogs first, the prisoners second. I didn’t want to bear witness to the hardships they’d endured or consider the crimes they’d committed. It made me think about my father, handcuffed and dragged from the house. I did search each man for signs of a viper tattoo, though, unease pumping my heart each time. I wasn’t sure what I’d do if I discovered one of them was in the gang that had sent me a snake in a box and had murdered my father. Thankfully, none were visible. And the dogs were an excellent distraction.

Everyone was kind and proud of the work they were doing. One man showed me the mandatory journal he kept, detailing his activities. It listed

his dog's attributes, information the future owner would use. It also served as a diary.

The dogs teach me patience, he'd written. *They don't judge me. Others see this bad guy who did bad things. The dogs see the goodness I know is under all that. Through them, I know change is possible. I learned what it is to love and be loved. Through Arthur, I learned what it is to be a man.*

Tears filled my eyes again, that last line shredding what remained of my defenses. I was still mad at Arthur for forcing me into this position. I still planned to give him a hefty piece of my mind. These raw emotions, though? Redemption must be the drug pumping in the air. The tease of absolution.

I approached a skinny white dog next. One of her canine teeth was missing, and a patch of fur was shaved from her back. I ran my hands over her soft ears. "What's her name?" I asked.

When the prisoner didn't reply, I glanced up, still preferring to focus on the animals first. This man's attention was locked on my breasts, the slightest curl to his lip.

I leaned back sharply.

"Gracie," he said.

"What?" Heat pricked my neck.

He fanned his hand toward the dog. "This here beauty is named Gracie. She's as mischievous as she is pretty. Got me eatin' outta the palm of her hand."

This prisoner spoke politely, nothing about his body language aggressive. His focus had moved from my cleavage to my face. Still, his Southern twang crawled across my skin. My overactive imagination kicked in, painting the scenes of his potential crimes: him standing over a woman, his belt undone, her mouth twisted in horror; him stalking a child and coaxing her into his tinted van; him holding a bloody knife while sneering at his dying victim.

“Gracie is a sweetheart,” I said and moved to leave, but he touched my wrist.

I froze, worried about making a scene and agitating the dogs.

He removed his pale hand and placed it on his lap. He was sitting on the floor, lanky legs crossed. Everything about him was long and lean, including the greasy hair combed over his head, but his position on the floor was one of vulnerability, not power. Martinez had said they screened all participants in the program.

“I was hopin’ we’d get a chance to chat,” he said, still polite, easy-going. “Your uncle is a real hero in here.”

I fought the urge to bolt. “That’s nice to hear. I know how much the work means to him and the dogs.”

“It’s a real *symbiotic* relationship.” He stretched out the word *symbiotic*, emphasizing each syllable while stroking Gracie’s back. “We’re not so different from these animals. Give us love, and we love back. Give us hate, and we’ll bare our teeth and bite. Human nature is a finicky beast.”

“It sure is.” I tried to act natural, not judge this slinky man, but the lazy slump of his posture seemed practiced. A challenge, almost. Shivers slipped down my spine and I moved to leave, but a presence at my back stopped me cold.

Emery. He didn’t touch me, but he stood close and stared at the creepy prisoner with hard eyes. “How’s the training, Randal?”

“Just givin’ Gracie her well-earned rest. And gabbin’ with the lovely Scarlett.”

Randal tipped his head to me. My heart rate did a hundred-yard dash.

Emery’s massive shadow sliced over Randal. “Best get back to your work. If I recall, you’re scheduled for yard time, and Gracie’s due for a bath. Don’t want her thinking she’s boss.”

“Right you are, my friend.” Randal pushed to his feet, the slothful effort clearly for show. He winked at me. “Until next time.”

Gracie wagged her bushy tail and followed Randal to Martinez, who led them outside. My muscles were still coiled tight.

"Sorry if Randal made you uncomfortable." Emery's eyes moved over my face, concern etched in his furrowed brow. "He's been in Brackson awhile. His social skills are lacking, but he's not a bad guy."

I replayed the brief interaction. Randal hadn't said or done anything wrong. I had been the one busy judging him. "I'm fine. It's just been an odd day. I'm a little on edge."

"This place can do that to people."

And then some. "How's Twinkie doing?"

He glanced toward a cell. "I put him in his crate for a short stretch. He needs to get used to alone time. To settle himself." Emery's attention drifted back to me. "I appreciate you bringing him here. It must be nice for Arthur to have help."

This had been coercion, not help, but I didn't feel like getting into that mess with a prisoner. I wasn't sure why I was struggling to make eye contact with Emery. "Arthur will be happy when he's allowed back here. The warden's forcing him to stay away for at least a week."

"I didn't think anyone could force Arthur to do anything."

I laughed, the unexpected reaction catching me off guard. "I should get going. Thanks for stepping in with Randal."

I turned, but he said, "Scarlett," his tone scratchier than before.

I'd never heard my name spoken quite like that, rough and soft at once, both a question and a command. I glanced up at the shadows under Emery's obsidian eyes, the earnestness in his candid gaze. Nothing about him set alarms ringing in my head, but my cheeks felt warmer, my breath shallower.

"Thanks for trusting me," he said.

NINE

The second I stepped out of the van and onto Arthur's drive, a loud *pop* had me ducking. It must be 4:45 p.m. *Rifle shooting time!* At least some things never changed, my uncle's meddling notwithstanding. I tensed, bracing myself for the next blasts. I flinched each time.

"You get used to it," Winston called from the kennel.

"No. You really don't." I wiped the sweat from my forehead and squinted through the sun. "How are the dogs today?"

"Stubborn as ever. Got us a class of puppies in the barn tonight. You're more than welcome to join us."

Arthur marched from the field before I could reply. "Scarlett," he said in greeting, like he wasn't a traitor.

I gnashed my teeth together. "Arthur."

He didn't ask how the prison went. I didn't scold him for his deceit. It was tough when I also wanted to tell him how beautiful his program was and that Winston and Jesse and Emery, and so many others, were changed men because of him.

"You shouldn't be shooting," I said.

He adjusted the rifle on his shoulder. "I'm fine."

"You had a heart attack."

"Thanks for the reminder."

I tried to match his stony stance. “If you need me, I’ll be inside making dinner.”

But he was already walking with Winston, gesturing with his gun toward the barn. I stared up at the massive black gum tree and sighed. “How have you lived here this long?”

The barren branches groaned in the wind.

Dinner was a subdued affair. Neither of us mentioned Brackson, but my thoughts never strayed far from that place or those men, even that creep Randal. I kept replaying the moment I’d seen him as a criminal, not a human. The switch had been jarring—one second talking, the next judging. I hadn’t done that with the others, but curiosity nipped at me now.

“What did Winston do?” I asked. “To land in prison.”

Arthur didn’t glance up from the cabbage rolls I’d reheated. “No clue.”

“What do you mean, no clue?”

“I don’t know and don’t care.”

Every day, this man confused me more. “But he works for you.”

Exasperation sank into the wrinkles by his eyes. “I never ask the men what they did in their past lives. It’s none of my business. What concerns me is the men they are now and if they treat the dogs right. You can’t give a man a second chance if you’re always worrying about how he ruined his first.”

It was a profound statement, but I couldn’t stop thinking about… everything—what crimes the prisoners had committed, the sweetness of the dogs, Jesse’s misty eyes. Emery’s *Thank you for trusting me*. I wasn’t sure if he’d meant trusting him with Twinkie or for not recoiling from him like I had with Randal. Not that it mattered, with the depths of his sincerity.

I wondered how Twinkie was settling in for the night, if his snarls had dented Emery’s stoic facade. I wondered what it was like to live in that place, day in and day out, no choice in how you dressed or what you ate or

where you went or who you saw. Without the dogs, those men would have no company but their morose thoughts. Like my dad.

My fork clattered to my plate.

Arthur stared at me. “Something wrong?”

That would be a resounding *yes*. I had never sympathized with my father’s suffering, *his* pain during that awful time in my life. I’d only focused on how his actions had affected me.

I choked down the rice in my mouth. “Nothing. I’m fine.”

Arthur and me, the King and Queen of Fine.

He kept staring. I chugged water.

“Are you helping with the class tonight?” he asked.

I pushed my plate away. “I need to get some work done… You know, since I was busy today.”

My sarcasm slipped out accidentally and I waited for Arthur to retaliate, bite back with one of his hard-earned wisdoms. Instead, he did the most shocking thing imaginable: the indomitable Arthur Ackerman *smirked* at me. “Any chance you’ll help the volunteers again tomorrow?”

My uncle wasn’t a smirker. He was a growler. The move had me so addled, I couldn’t form words, but my mind jumped to Twinkie nestled in Emery’s huge arm, to Brutus taking baby steps.

All the years I’d designed covers, I’d never saved a dog’s life. I’d never given someone a reason to live.

Before deciding fine arts was a fast track to minimum wage, sketching had given me that same natural high. A rush of accomplishment would fill me as I’d stare at my finished work, unsure how my brain had told my hand to move quite that way, like someone else’s thoughts and talent had pumped through my veins. Now my art affected others, because of the words the book covers surrounded. My contribution was surface—and functional. The freelance work allowed me to support myself. I kept my money separate

from Daniel's, invested it with an adviser. Daniel thought it was cute I wanted to "play" with my income.

He could think what he wanted, as long as I controlled my future.

The joke was on me in the end. All the control I'd orchestrated was unspooling like discarded yarn.

"I'll go back," I said abruptly, unsure who had abducted the real Scarlett. "I need to check on Twinkie."

Arthur, thank God, didn't smirk. "If you can stay for a couple weeks, it would be a help. Some volunteers have vacations coming. Easter stuff."

"I'll speak with Daniel, but it shouldn't be a problem." Because my job was remote, and I was clearly losing my marbles, but the Daniel variable was less certain. I'd barely communicated with him since leaving New York. Extending my stay deserved a phone call, which meant a conversation. He'd ask what I'd been doing, and I'd have to tell him about Brackson.

Or I could lie. Again.

"And you'll come to Passover dinner," Arthur said.

His latest demand cut through my worries like a chainsaw. "I no longer celebrate Passover, Arthur."

"You do when you're in this house."

"Except I'm not fifteen anymore."

He glared at me from across the tiny table. "And I'm not forty-five with a strong heart."

He scraped his chair back and stormed from the room, leaving me to stew in my guilt. No wonder the prisoners revered Arthur. He was an evil mastermind.

Well, so was I.

The second I heard the front door shut, I opened a cupboard and messed up his perfectly lined jars of canned beans. I did the same to his oils and vinegars.

Take that, Mr. I'm Not Forty-Five.

After checking and sending emails, I hunkered down in the kitchen and focused on work, while occasionally smirking—I could be a smirker too—at the quiet chaos I'd created behind Arthur's cupboards. The odd bark reverberated from outside, but I was more productive than expected.

I finished the suspense thriller covers I'd been toying with, the third being my favorite. The flying crow was a silhouette, the hint of a gnarled tree barely discernible. It was subtle and poignant, with a sinister vibe. Arthur's black gum tree, and his evil-mastermindedness, had inspired me.

My next project was more whimsical. I'd worked hard to vary my portfolio over the years, appeal to different genres and attract as many contracts as possible. This job required a cupcake on the cover or a bake shop or something sweet and pretty with looping fonts. The kitchen's stark monotony wasn't exactly inspiring, and my phone's music app was acting glitchy. Every country song I played cut out, which sucked. I wasn't at home with Daniel. He couldn't complain that my music taste made his ears bleed.

Instead of working, I spent the better part of my time staring at the window's lacy curtains. They were the only feminine decor in the house. They had probably come with the property, unless Arthur had hung them or a lady friend had. Or a man friend.

I'd never seen him with a partner, male or female. I didn't think he was gay, but nothing would surprise me about Arthur. I'd be downright ecstatic, either way. His sexual identity didn't matter to me. His solitude mattered, even though he had an evil streak. He slept in this cranky house alone, no company but the complaining floors and whistling wind. I wanted to ask him if he was ever lonely or if the prospect of aging without kids for

support scared him. I may be helping now but I'd never move to this stagnant town, even with its funky cheese shop, and Arthur abhorred the bustle of New York.

My eyes unfocused as I imagined his life as mine, no offspring to care for me. No one to ask me if I was *fine*. The prospect unsettled me but that wasn't a reason to have kids, and I had Daniel and Kenna and Chelsea, and I might still have kids. This year, even. Or not. But maybe.

I massaged my temples, no closer to solving the Rubik's Cube in my head, and Daniel deserved a call. With his work schedule, he was probably still at the office. I grabbed my phone and slouched in my chair, but the wooden frame dug into my back. I walked to the living room and dialed.

Music and voices hit my ear before Daniel said, "Hello?"

"Hey. It's me. Are you out?"

"Oh, Scarlett, hey. Yeah. Drinks with some guys from work. Give me a sec while I find somewhere quiet."

I lay on Arthur's brown couch and waited, a few barks drifting from outside. The ceiling had cobwebs in one corner, a plump spider suspended in the middle. The couch had a weird mildew smell.

"Okay, so," Daniel said, slightly out of breath, "how are things?"

"Arthur's doing well, but he can't drive yet, so I'm helping out where I can." By following his demanding orders.

"I'm sure he appreciates it."

He'd better appreciate it, and this was the perfect time to mention Brackson and the Pups in Prison program. Hardened criminals getting mushy over dogs was a fascinating conversation starter. We could talk for *hours* about that, but I'd never mentioned the prison to Daniel or Arthur's work. Not a whisper about anything related to my father. If I brought up the subject now, Daniel would ask questions. I'd have to lie more.

I squished my feet into the couch pillows. "Where'd you go for drinks?"

"A new place on 6th Street. Wolf something—a cocktail lounge."

“With Vehaan and the team?”

“No.” He paused. “One of the new project managers. Thought it would be good to hang out outside of work.”

“Just one guy?”

“Yeah. Chris. Why?”

I replayed our conversation, suspicion narrowing my eyes. I imagined him with Margot of the Shiny Blond Hair, laughing over drinks. Carefree with me gone. “You said the *guys* from work. I assumed you meant a few.”

“I don’t know what I said, Scarlett. It was loud in there.” His irritation bled into silence. “When are you coming home?”

There was no hopefulness in the question, just a lingering annoyance at my prodding. My doubts lingered as well, but in an unexpected way. The same concerns that had prompted nausea and feelings of inadequacy in New York only produced hollowness now.

“I’m extending my stay here. By another couple weeks or so,” I said.

“That’s over Easter.”

“I know.”

“My family’s expecting you.”

Again with his family. Not him. “I think taking care of my uncle is more important than eating spiral ham while your cousins text on their phones.”

His grunt puffed through the line. “You don’t need to be rude about it.”

“A little understanding from you wouldn’t hurt either.”

I sucked in a breath. We didn’t use to fight. Silence had been our tension of choice, and I’d never dwelled on our strains. *Couples go through phases,* I’d told myself. *Marriage is hard. We still love each other.* Such easy lies to believe when busy with your life.

Less so since the miscarriage.

My desire to have children was still blurry, the true nucleus of my unhappiness hard to pinpoint, but I was gaining clarity on other things:

Arthur loved me in his odd, aggressive way, Daniel and I hadn't been happy for a long time, and living a life built on lies was exhausting.

"I'm not sure when I'll be back," I said, lightening my tone. "I'll keep in touch."

"Call my mother, at least. Explain why you can't come."

"Of course."

"And I replaced those chipped water glasses. Mom thought the ones with the light gray edges went well with our place, so I ordered those."

He'd always been a mama's boy, an attribute I once adored. These days, I wondered why he was still so desperate for his parents' praise. He boasted about his accomplishments to them, never sharing the setbacks. Before he leased a new car or bought a new suit, before we even booked a vacation, Daniel would ask his parents' advice. Without family of my own, the closeness had been nice. Now his approval-seeking behavior with them was more often irritating.

We ended the call with social pleasantries. Neither of us said *I love you* or *I miss you*. I kept the dead phone pressed to my ear and listened to nothing.

I sighed and scrolled through my other messages. Chelsea had texted a couple of times since her shower, asking how I was doing. It was sweet of her to check in. I sent a quick reply, telling her I'd call when I was home. We'd do lunch.

I texted Kenna next, the only person I could tell about my insane day.

Me: I survived prison. You were right. I was being dramatic. It was actually pretty amazing in a totally weird way.

My best friend replied promptly.

Kenna: My advice is always brilliant.

I smiled at my phone. Why hadn't I smiled when talking to Daniel? Why couldn't we have had a nice conversation?

Me: Tattoo pic?

She sent a photo of her panty-clad crotch…and the fresh ink on her upper thigh. I could only imagine how intimate she and the artist had gotten for that piece. I enlarged the tattooed section: a multicolored phoenix rising from a blast of fire, stunning in its execution, and its meaning wasn't tough to guess.

Me: Is that for your mother?

Kenna: Yeah. Do you think she'll hate it?

Sorcha Puglisi had survived a terrible car crash that left part of her face and body badly burned. The way Kenna described her mother's healing time in the hospital painted Sorcha as a superhero able to smile through pain and uplift her family. Someone able to rise above and overcome, like the phoenix. Sorcha's accident was also the reason Kenna became fascinated with makeup. She had been determined to help her mother minimize her scars.

Me: The ink is stunning. She'll love it.

Kenna: Or she'll give me the silent treatment like in college.

When Kenna came out as bisexual, her mother's initial reaction had been rough. We'd eaten a lot of ice cream during that challenging phase, but they made it through and were as close as ever now.

Me: I bet she asks to get a matching tattoo.

Kenna: Not in this lifetime. You coming back soon?

A simple question that was anything but.

Me: I decided to stay here longer. Help at the prison more.

Kenna: Good for you. But don't fall for a prisoner. You would be such a cliché.

My thumbs froze, a flash of Emery's scarred face and imposing body filling my mind. The slow thump of my heart picked up speed as heat flamed my cheeks.

Whoa there, hormones.

Rough-and-tumble men weren't my kryptonite. Especially those in prison garb. I liked *GQ* guys with styled hair and tailored clothes. Clean-cut men like Daniel. My body's knee-jerk reaction must be a post-miscarriage effect. The doctor said my hormones would be out of whack.

You're a cliché, I texted back, then rolled my eyes at my lame reply. I sounded defensive, like her ludicrous joke held a kernel of possibility.

TEN

The next week was punctuated by a silent battle waged between Arthur and me. Every morning, I'd check the cupboards to find the cans and bottles I'd misaligned back in their tidy rows. I would mess them up again. They would be fixed that night. Wash, rinse, repeat. The battle of wills was beyond childish, but it amused me in its strange way. Arthur probably wanted to use my face for rifle practice.

I had begun running in the morning to clear my mind. Or run-walking, as my out-of-shape lungs dictated. The fresh air would slice through my chest, each pound of my sneakers jarring the thoughts jockeying for my attention. Arthur. My father. His jail time. Daniel. The miscarriage. Margot of the Shiny Blond Hair. The prisoners who loved their dogs. Emery's quiet fortitude.

My nightmares persisted. Sometimes shorter, sometimes longer. Sometimes with snakes and sometimes with sharks. Always with me, waking in a violent sweat. None of my uncertainty was untangling itself, but the prison visits had been less distressing. Each drive to Brackson still gave my nerves a workout, but doggy smiles were magical things. They coaxed baby talk from hardened men and lulled my anxiety into submission. The dogs helped keep my focus on the present, not the past.

Today, as I parked Arthur's van and waved at Martinez, no queasiness turned my stomach into an achy mess. The slam of the metal door behind us didn't make me jump.

Martinez and I walked to the Pups in Prison cellblock, chatting like colleagues at work.

"My wife and I watched that *Ozark* show last night," Martinez said. "People have been talking about it, but we'd never given it a shot."

"And?"

"We binged five episodes."

I'd refused to watch *Orange is the New Black* or *Prison Break*, but I could do mobsters and crazed hillbillies, and Daniel and I had plowed through *Ozark* as well. "Anything with Jason Bateman is quality."

"Right? That man is universally appealing. He's at the top of my wife's Celebrity Hall Pass list, and I'd love to have a beer with the guy."

"You have a hall pass list?"

Martinez didn't break his stride. "What else do you talk about after twenty years of marriage?"

His rhetorical question had me stumped. Daniel and I were struggling to have conversations after four. "Who's at the top of your list?"

Martinez didn't answer.

I stopped walking. "Who?"

A blush flamed his olive skin. Head down, he unlocked the cellblock door. "Doesn't matter."

Oh, this had to be good. "It sure does."

He grumbled something under his breath and yanked open the door.

I slipped through after him. "Sorry, didn't catch that."

Martinez glared at me, a subtler version of Arthur's evil grimace. He scratched his goatee and mumbled through his fingers, "Bette Midler."

I cracked up, a bark of a sound that reverberated through the room.

Every prisoner looked at us. Actually, no. They gaped at *me*.

I now dressed in conservative jeans and high-necked T-shirts, but the focused attention was still unsettling. And unhelpful. Instead of silencing my hysteria, uncontrollable giggles shook my body as I gasped for breath and bit my cheek, searching for my Zen. The last thing these men needed was a reminder that laugh attacks and embarrassing crushes existed beyond these walls, not that they knew why I was snorting between uncontained cackles.

Martinez glared harder. “She was amazing in *For the Boys*.”

That set me off again, my abs aching with the effort until I wiped giddy tears from my eyes. By the time I recovered, I looked around nervously. The guys were grinning at me and shaking their heads. Martinez wouldn’t meet my eyes. But Emery did. He was by the back exit, Twinkie at his feet, waiting to go outside, an inscrutable look on his rough-and-tumble face.

My cheeks heated as another awkward laugh slipped out.

Every visit the past week, when the prison would coax dark memories from the recesses of my mind, I’d seek out Emery. Something about being around him calmed me. We would chat about dogs and training and Twinkie’s progress, but I’d occasionally catch myself staring at his handsome profile, and shyness would grip my throat. He’d be polite and pretend not to notice, while my eyes would dart around skittishly. If Kenna’s niece were here, she’d call me a total mouth breather. A state of being I couldn’t fully shake around Emery.

Annoyed with myself, I visited Jesse first. He was in his cell, on the floor with his dog. In general population, the prisoners slept two to a cell. These men shared their cramped space only with their dogs. Brutus’s crate was on the lower bunk, the rest of the claustrophobic room sparse and unforgiving. I had avoided the cells on my earlier visits, preferring to interact with inmates in the main room or the outdoor yard. Seeing the barred doors, even open, hit home where I was and made me wonder how my father had coped living in such a depressing place.

Today, I shut those uncomfortable thoughts from my mind. Jesse would be giving Brutus up for adoption tomorrow. There was no missing the sad slump of his shoulders.

I stood at his cell's entrance and folded my arms. "How are you holding up?"

He picked at a loose thread on Brutus's leash. "This part never gets easier, but I know being in here isn't a good life for him. He deserves to be with a real family. Have a yard of his own."

If we weren't surrounded by cameras and guards and barbed wire, I'd give Jesse a hug. "How many dogs have you trained?"

"Five. But none as smart as Brutus." He ran his fingers through his dog's fur. "You're a real genius. Aren't you, pup?"

Brutus nosed Jesse's thigh. My heart cracked a little.

We talked a bit longer about coping with the change and how long he'd have to wait for another dog. The whole while, I kept picturing my father on the small bunk, curled toward the wall, stripped of his designer suits and extravagant home. Robbed of his dignity.

"I need to chat with the other guys," I said abruptly.

I should check on Twinkie in the yard. He could be causing trouble. He could be snarling at one of the bigger dogs. Yep. Definitely. He should be checked on.

"Will you be here tomorrow?" Jesse asked. He cleared his throat to cover the break in his voice.

"You can count on it." I knelt and gave Brutus the hug I couldn't give his trainer, then hurried outside.

The sky was heavy, the laden clouds as somber as Jesse's prison cell. The yard had its usual five inmates using the space. The men were allowed outside on a rotating schedule to work on leash walking and other tasks. When dogs responded to clicker training, volunteers helped inmates lead

their pups through the agility course. Grooming and bath times were particular highlights, if you didn't mind getting sloshed with dirty water.

For some, canine accomplishments were as simple as one dog not growling at another. Aggressive dogs couldn't be adopted into homes. Aggressive people didn't do so well in the real world either. Something these men could understand.

Emery was standing near the water hose, clicker in one hand, Twinkie's leash in the other. A baggie of treats was hooked to a belt around his waist.

The sight of him released some of the tightness cramping my chest, but creepy Randal and Gracie were there too. I'd given Randal a wide berth since our first encounter. If I'd found myself in his path, I'd nod and change direction. He hadn't seemed to care, but he stared at me now and gave me a cocky salute.

Emery glanced over, and something flickered over his face. He turned his back to me and spoke to Randal. Whatever he said had the man leading Gracie to the agility course, away from me. That left Emery and Twinkie alone.

I walked over and crouched a foot from the pup.

Twinkie snarled; Emery sighed.

I held out my upturned palm. "When are you gonna learn I'm not the bad guy?"

Curiosity replaced Twinkie's aggression. The second he quit baring his teeth, Emery pressed his clicker and gave him a treat. When Twinkie stepped closer to me, Emery did the same again. Without discussing our joint training, Emery and I fed off each other's instincts and tested Twinkie's limits. The pup didn't like to be approached by others. Sudden movements in particular set off his hostility. I mixed up my approach from slow to fast. He growled most of the time, but every so often, he'd stand quietly, and Emery would click and treat him. Emery's gravelly praise was unbearably sweet.

“Thanks,” he said afterward. “That definitely helped.”

We were crouched, Twinkie between us, both our hands on the pup’s wiry fur to keep him calm. I was less so. Any minute, I’d start acting like a weirdo around Emery.

A shaft of sunshine cut through the leaden clouds. Emery tipped his face up to the light. “Someone should write a country song about that,” he said.

I wasn’t sure what type of song he imagined, but the sky—dark and menacing, slashed with brightness—could certainly inspire lyrics. “You like country music?”

“Didn’t use to, but we do training sessions to get the dogs used to noise—run vacuums, play loud music. The guards always choose country, and it’s grown on me. There’s less frills, less aggression than stuff I used to listen to. I like how honest it is.”

I’d never thought about country music quite like that, but maybe that was part of what drew me to it too. “I fell in love with it the past few years—the classics by legends like Dolly Parton and Emmylou Harris. They always sound so strong and self-assured, singing from the heart.” My attention drifted to the scar on Emery’s chin, the strong cords of his neck. I quickly focused on the dog between us. “I guess that means Twinkie is learning to love country too.”

“He hated the noise session. Growled and barked like a devil that day.”

“This little guy will definitely test your patience.”

Emery and I were still crouched, both of us petting Twinkie. His fingers moved absent-mindedly. “If there’s one thing prison has taught me, it’s patience.”

The prison visits of my past had taught me fear and self-loathing. When walking into that visiting room, I would berate myself for being stupid enough to believe my father had loved me as much as I’d loved him. Now I felt a sense of pride for contributing to society while I sympathized with Jesse and helped rehabilitate dogs like Twinkie.

“It’s all different this time,” I said to myself. *I* was different, even though I still panicked occasionally, but I hadn’t meant to blurt that admission. “Sorry.” I glanced at Emery briefly. “Ignore that. This place still gets to me.”

He frowned and looked at his feet. Had I offended him?

I wasn’t sure what he’d done to land in here. My imagination sometimes got the better of me, conjuring scenarios—holding up a convenience store to pay for his mother’s cancer treatments, taking the fall for a younger brother who couldn’t keep his nose out of trouble. A far cry from the bloody scenes Randal inspired, which made me roll my eyes at myself. I’d never asked for the truth. I was trying to heed Arthur’s advice and give the prisoners the clean slate they craved. My past was a different story. It was slowly being exhumed, all those skeletons poking out and nudging me.

“My father died here,” I said out of nowhere. A truth bomb I hadn’t expected to drop.

“In this county?” Emery asked quietly.

I avoided his penetrating gaze, but I felt his attention on my scalp. Twinkie stayed calm while I stroked his ears. “In Brackson. He was an inmate.”

“Arthur’s brother or your mother’s?”

“Arthur’s,” I said, surprised he didn’t know. I wasn’t sure if that reveal made me relieved or frustrated. I didn’t want to tell more lies. “He was murdered by another inmate.”

“I’m sorry. That must have been a terrible shock.”

The platitude was genuine, but his kind words didn’t penetrate the strange fogginess clouding my thoughts. “I refused to visit him for the last year of his life.”

I trembled slightly, a lump of guilt making it hard to swallow. I’d never felt badly about this before. I’d been rude to Arthur back then and generally

bitchy, proud to give my father a big *fuck you*, even after his death. I'd never been consumed with guilt.

"That's a tough choice to live with," Emery said.

My back bristled. His voice was compassionate, but the comment implied it had been the *wrong* choice. I finally met his eyes. The intensity aimed at me made me falter. "It was a rough time for me. I did what I needed to survive."

He considered me a moment. "There's no shame in that, but when up against a wall we make emotional decisions, not rational ones. Those are harder to face after the fact."

I tensed, ready to defend myself, but he wasn't off the mark. I'd been a ball of pent-up angst in my teens, angry and hurt. Lashing out at my father had been as emotional as decisions got. "I just don't get why it's still so hard. I mean, it's been *years*. Why can't I just let it go?"

He glanced at the agility course, at where Randal was working with Gracie. His face hardened. "I'll make sure the guys in here treat you respectfully. I can promise you that. But I can't help with this." He tapped his temple. "There's no running from those demons. I've tried. The only way to deal with those hard truths is to face them."

He was right, and the advice meant more from someone in his position. Whatever his demons, they were likely more terrifying than mine. I just didn't know how to face these new feelings ensnared with those of my past. I had avoided therapy and rehashing my sad story, preferring to move on. Be someone else. Live a happy life.

"Was your father a good man?" Emery asked.

The surprising question took me aback, and my quick mental answer was *no*. There was no redemption in betrayal. But that was the easy reply. *No* erased the times my father had read me a story and would fall asleep on my bed. *No* expunged the standing ovations he'd give at my dance recitals, while my mother had slept at home. He had been my whole world.

“I don’t know,” I said, the most honest answer I’d ever given about Jacob Ackerman. I didn’t know if he’d been a good man or bad or stupid or just plain weak.

“Maybe you should start there. Figure out where he fit into your life—if he was a good man to *you*.”

“Honestly, I’ve spent so long trying not to think about him, I’m not sure how to tackle that.”

He cocked his head. “You’re strong, Scarlett. I see that in you.”

Arthur’s harsh *You’re stronger than you think* echoed Emery’s words, as did Tavi’s advice to embrace my family history. I’d ignored her suggestion. I didn’t want to be someone’s clinical study. From Emery, the prodding came from a more honest place. He understood the shame of living with a grim history. He knew the sting of judgment. Maybe that was why his broody eyes affected me so much, sucking me in all over again.

Both our hands were on Twinkie, moving slightly. His pinkie brushed mine, and I froze.

No. Not froze. This was too hot to function.

My blood rushed, most of it congregating in that one digit. That was it. Just one finger. And I was immobile.

Clapping and hollering came from the agility area, a rumble of thunder underlining the noise. Emery’s nostrils flared. Twinkie started to shake, and I yanked my hand off the pup.

“Scared,” I said, the first word to pop into my mind. “He must be scared.”

Emery stared at me a moment, then picked up Twinkie and cuddled him into his arm. “People think it’s the noise.”

“What?” All I could feel was my throbbing pinkie finger.

He scratched Twinkie under his chin. “A dog’s fear of thunder. People think it’s the noise, but I read an article about it during my library time—

research from Tufts University. They say dogs can feel the electric energy. It sends tiny shock waves through their fur."

Is that what I'd felt? Electric energy between Emery and me through one useless appendage?

"Cool," I said. The lamest reply imaginable. *Total mouth breather.*

Emery had offered insight into my life in a profound way, and I had reverted to weirdo status. I hugged my waist as random drops fell from the sky. I could do better than *cool*.

"Thanks for talking." I licked my dry lips and focused on his neck tattoo. The Celtic cross. He must be Irish. "That was actually the first time I've spoken about my father in forever. I needed it, I think. Or *need* it, you know, in the present tense."

He opened and closed his mouth. A muscle in his jaw bunched, then his attention cemented to the dog in his arms.

Emery always stood tall and assured, his reserved strength quick to command confidence. The prisoners deferred to him with questions. Creepy Randal seemed to follow Emery's lead. I sought him out when I was uneasy. This unsure Emery, rocking on his feet, had me addled.

When he made eye contact again, his nostrils flared like when our pinkies had touched. "Thank you for laughing earlier, with Martinez. That was the most free I've felt in years."

His eyes darted to my lips, then he walked past me at a clipped pace, never glancing back. I didn't move. More rain fell. Randal and the remaining prisoners went inside, and that electric energy in the air migrated to my chest.

I had shared more personal details with Emery than I ever had with Daniel. *My husband.* The man I was supposed to trust. But the urge to confide in Daniel had never pulled at me like this. Everything with him had been about change and forward momentum. With Emery, opening up had been…natural. Not easy, but instinctive.

The interaction left me feeling off-balance and *scared*. That word again.

I also felt cheated. How had I let myself live all these years never feeling safe enough with Daniel to confide in him?

ELEVEN

I walked down the stairs from my room to find Arthur frowning at me from below. He wasn't wearing plaid. He wasn't even wearing jeans. He waited for me by the front door, dressed in gray slacks and a blue button-up shirt. "Took you long enough," he said.

"It's tough straightening my hair when the power keeps going out."

"Then leave it curly. It looks nicer with less fuss."

I faltered on the steps. That was a backhanded compliment to be sure, but a compliment, nonetheless. I focused on the latter, because I felt pretty tonight. The A-line dress I'd purchased on my shopping spree disguised my soft middle, the low neckline and sleeveless cut flattering on my neck and arms. I didn't usually wear turquoise, but the heart-shaped pattern, detailed with tiny roses, had been hard to resist. If I had to attend a Passover dinner, I'd at least look good.

I lost focus for a beat, imagining wearing this for a prison visit with a specific someone as we talked about country music and laugh attacks. Just the thought had me flushing something fierce. *Get a grip, Scarlett.* I was one move shy of becoming Kenna's dreaded cliché.

"I'll meet you in the truck," Arthur said, annoyed with my dawdling. "Don't take forever. And don't forget a coat."

I gave the back of his head my best stink eye, then misaligned the boots by the door.

Even though Arthur was past his no-driving-for-five-days instruction, I relegated him to the passenger seat. Aside from his occasional questions about how Jesse was getting along without a dog (sad but dealing) and Twinkie's progress (slow as a herd of turtles), we didn't talk. If I were in a car with Daniel, I'd be racking my brain to make conversation. I'd bounce my heel and tap my fingers as I watched the numbers flip on the digital clock. Even though tonight's destination made me uncomfortable, being with Arthur was uncomplicated.

I didn't have to pretend with him. If he asked about Daniel, I'd probably unload my troubles until he regretted prying. He'd grunt and share a gruff wisdom, and we'd go about our lives. Arthur didn't pry, though. I drove. He stared out the window at the corn stalks.

It was nice.

The Malakoff household, however, was rowdy. Their farmhouse was pristine compared to Arthur's. Their white paint gleamed in the early evening sun, not a chip or blemish on the large wraparound porch. Two kids were playing catch on the front lawn, while a handful of others ran in chaotic circles. The fun atmosphere made me forget why we were here.

As did the Indian woman on the porch.

"Is that Tavi?" I asked Arthur as I followed him toward the house.

"Last I checked."

Always so darn helpful. "Last *I* checked, she wasn't Jewish."

He stopped and I nearly rammed into his back. The gray hairs on his head flapped in the breeze. "You always were a clever one," he said.

And he was an impenetrable fortress. I sometimes wondered if the army was responsible for Arthur's austerity. I knew he'd served for two or three years, before going on Reserves for his remaining contract, but he didn't

bring up that time or have army pictures in the house. If I had to guess, I'd bet they'd used him to wear down prisoners with his snarky sarcasm.

Breathing through my irritation, I brushed past him and walked up the porch steps.

When Tavi saw me, she gave me a warm hug. "I was hoping you'd be here. I keep meaning to text you to meet for coffee, then…" She waved a distracted hand. "Life happens."

"No worries." I squinted at her, still trying to figure out why she was at a Passover dinner. "It's just nice to see you here."

"But it's weird, right?"

My scrunched face must have given me away. "Kind of?"

She smoothed her long hair over one shoulder. "I met Anna—tonight's host—in town a few years ago. I'm always interested in other cultures and religions, especially since Fernlow is on the pasty side of Caucasian. She was shopping for Passover, and I asked her so many questions, she eventually invited me to the dinner. It's tradition now."

Whatever it was, I was happy to have her here. "You'll probably know the service better than me."

"You don't have a community in New York? A group of friends to celebrate the holidays with?"

"Religion never meant anything to me." Unless you counted being bullied and targeted as a kid. "My husband is Christian. We celebrate Easter and Christmas with his family. It was easier for me, for a lot of reasons. I haven't been to a Seder since I was sixteen. But I don't miss it," I added quickly, not mentioning that everyone other than Kenna actually thought I was Christian.

Being the Jewish daughter of Jacob Ackerman—the largest fraudster in US history—should come with allowances. I should be applauded for ditching my heritage and overcoming adversity. So what if I let people assume I was Christian? *Have you done your Christmas shopping yet?*

Where are you celebrating Easter? No one thought twice about asking those questions, and stopping to explain I was a nonpracticing Jew who had assimilated into my husband's traditions to avoid mine was dicey. Telling my husband of four years I'd kept that fact a secret from him was a whole other ball of tangled twine.

Yet here I was, having an internal meltdown, when Tavi hadn't even scrutinized my reply.

"Did your family come?" I asked her, my topic-change skills well-honed.

"They're in the house somewhere. My husband loves watching sports with Anna's husband, and their daughter adores Prisha. When someone offers to take your kid, you hand her over and run. But enough about me, did you do it?"

"Do what?"

She lowered her voice. "The prison. Did you go?"

My cheeks heated, but I had no clue why. "Every day since I last saw you."

"No way."

"Yep. Seven actual days."

Tavi beamed at me, and a punch of pride threatened to knock me over.

See? I wanted to shout. I was strong, like Arthur and Emery had said. I didn't need to own my religion in order to rise above my past. "It's been surprisingly gratifying. The men work so hard with the dogs—but also to prove themselves. And the dogs are adorable when not snarling."

"They snarl?"

"The smaller they are, the more vicious."

She shuddered. "And what about you?"

"I only snarl when I haven't eaten lunch."

She cuffed me lightly on the arm. "Smartass. How has being there made you feel?"

It was a simple question, but nothing from a psychologist felt simple, and I wasn't sure how to answer.

In the real world those men would intimidate me. Society condemned them, shut them behind bars, forever branding them felons. But they weren't giving up. They were fighting that stigma, bettering themselves, writing in journals about their *feelings*, and honest to God it was inspiring. Interacting with them in their confines made me value the open roads I drove, the foods I chose to eat, the morning runs I hated less each day, all that fresh air free for me to breathe.

Unfortunately, it also brought with it a heap of guilt over my father, untended wounds I hadn't realized existed. Then there was Emery, the most unexpected part of this experience. I couldn't decide how he made me feel.

"I think this is where I'm supposed to be," I said. The least complicated answer and the truth. "For right now," I added. Two weeks, maybe three. Four, max. Then it was back home to face reality.

Tavi waved to someone over my shoulder, then focused back on me. "I'm sure it can't be easy, but I'm impressed. After that call in the café, I figured you'd for sure turn Arthur down. And who knows? Maybe tonight's dinner will awaken your Jewish curiosity."

Doubtful, but the guests went out of their way to make me feel welcome.

Slowly, men and women introduced themselves. On the porch at first, then in the house, where the savory scents of roasting brisket and simmering matzah ball soup made my mouth water. The smells conjured memories of our Scarsdale kitchen, with me complaining to Juliette that I was hungry and would die if I didn't eat. She would call me *lovey* and scold me in her English accent—*don't spoil your dinner, lovey*—then my father would sneak a matzah ball from the pot and tell me it was our secret. Jacob Ackerman had been adept at secrets.

The interior of Anna's farmhouse was as polished as the outside: pretty floral curtains, bright rugs on the dark-stained floors, cream couches cushy enough to sleep on. Anna fussed over me, telling me how beautiful my dress was, and thanked me for taking care of Arthur. There was no caring for a man who went rifle shooting a week post-heart-attack, but I appreciated the sentiment.

Joan Rosen, who had filled Arthur's fridge with food, asked about my work and how I liked living in the city, nothing but kindness in her eyes as she adjusted her not-so-fashionable square glasses. Every person who arrived did the same, shaking my hand, making excited conversation. Some I remembered vaguely from my sullen teen days, but they made no comment about that time, only chatted as though we were long-lost relatives. The easy warmth should have wrapped me in comfort; it made my skin feel too tight.

The more people who arrived for the evening, the more uncomfortable I got, the harder it was to keep track of names.

Until I met Esther Kopple.

I maneuvered into the kitchen, keen to help with *something* and escape the onslaught of attention. At Daniel's Easter and Christmas family dinners, I'd hunker in the kitchen to help cook or plate food and clean up afterward. I liked feeling useful, but my need to stay busy had been rooted in less altruistic motives—letting people believe I was Christian was easier than enjoying the festive holidays. Today's kitchen getaway was the same but different.

I was Jewish, but I didn't belong here either.

An elderly diminutive woman sat in a kitchen chair, her posture painfully slumped. She gestured toward the mouthwatering brisket being sliced. "Thinner, Anna. You are cutting it too thick." Her accent was thicker than the meat, rolling over her Rs and blending a soft F with each "th." *Finnerrrr, Anna.*

Anna rolled her eyes. “The meat’s not too thick. It’s the same thickness I always cut.”

Esther harrumphed. “It is not. If I could do it—”

“It would be perfect,” Anna finished. She smiled tenderly at the elderly woman and nodded at me. “I don’t think you’ve met Scarlett yet, Arthur’s niece. She’s visiting from New York.”

Esther’s cloudy eyes brightened. “Come, sit. Tell me about my city.”

Anna lowered her voice and gave me a meaningful look. “Esther moved here with her daughter two years ago. She’s still bitter about it.”

“I am old, not deaf,” Esther said, the word *deaf* sounding like *daf.* “Do not talk about me like I am not here.”

“See?” Anna said to Esther. “I told you getting a hearing aid had its benefits.”

I laughed at the amusing interaction and sat opposite Esther. “So, how long did you live in New York?”

She pulled a Kleenex from her cleavage, wiped her nose, then stashed it back in her bosom. “Not long enough.”

“Esther,” Anna scolded, like she was a child. “You like it here just fine.”

“I love my grandkids and family. The rest?” She shrugged, then winked at me. “Seventy years in that beautiful city.”

I leaned in conspiratorially. “I’m a city girl too. The nightlife and shows are undeniable, and the people-watching is out of this world.” As much as I’d begun to enjoy my morning runs on the farm, my cupboard wars with Arthur, the nights I’d linger in the kennel to commiserate with Captain Underbite, I missed the bustle of the city.

Esther clucked her tongue in agreement. “New York is vibrant. The people. The lights. The food.”

“Right? You can get anything you want, whenever you want.” Hence, the horror of Mount Takeout, which I kind of missed too. I’d give my right eyeball for an order of Bengal Tiger’s butter chicken.

Esther reached over and patted my arm. “This girl, she knows. No one here makes kishke. The good stuff with the schmaltz. And challah? God forbid.”

I hadn’t set foot inside a Jewish deli since my father’s arrest, hadn’t eaten a towering corned beef sandwich or a latke dripping with applesauce and sour cream. We used to take trips to the city, my dad and I. We would eat at Dannenberg’s Deli. He would tell me I must have a wooden leg. That was why I could eat so much. I would laugh and eat more.

Listening to Esther’s cravings, while inhaling the steam bubbling from the chicken soup, stirred taste buds and memories I hadn’t indulged in ages. “Now I’m really hungry.”

“If we were in New York, there would be no hungry.”

Wasn’t that the truth, but I looked through the large kitchen windows, at the farmland beyond. A simple view that felt surprisingly relaxing. Chatting with Esther was nice too. Enjoyable enough to forget why I was here. “At least Fernlow’s peaceful,” I said.

“*Ach.* There is no need for peace when you are alive. This time is for living.” Esther shook her fist in the air, a frail punctuation at her age. Her sleeve slipped to her elbow, and a flash of blue caught my eye—a blurry line on her wrinkled forearm. When I realized what that mark was, my body went rigid. A sharp sting pinched my throat.

I had never met a Holocaust survivor. I’d learned about the horror in school and from TV shows. This wasn’t a distant story narrated by a soothing voice, though. This was devastatingly real.

Someone called, “It’s Seder time!”

One kid chased another through the kitchen.

Scraping chairs and bustling carried from the living room.

All I could see was Esther’s arm.

“*Scarlett*,” Anna said, the inflection in her tone indicating she’d called my name more than once.

“Sorry. Yeah?”

“Mind helping me plate the last of this brisket?”

“Of course. No problem.”

An older man in a sweater-vest, whose name I couldn’t remember, helped Esther to the dinner table. Her tattooed arm was once again covered by her light-green blouse. Like this, she was just a sweet, old lady who loved New York and kishke and complaining about brisket slices. She hadn’t lived through hell.

“*Scarlett*?” That same tone again. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Fine. What can I help with?”

Anna hesitated, then placed her carving knife down. “Esther was the first survivor I met too. I probably looked as upset as you when I realized. And shocked. Not many of them left in the world, let alone in rural Pennsylvania. But her granddaughter’s husband is in lumber, and they moved here, then Esther’s daughter followed. They weren’t about to leave a ninety-two-year-old woman to fend for herself in New York. She complains plenty, but I think she likes it here.”

Flashes of emaciated people assaulted me, piles of shoes and dead bodies. “I just can’t imagine. How does a person survive that?”

“From what I’ve heard,” she said quietly, glancing at the doorway, “Esther didn’t talk about her experience for thirty-odd years after the war. Then a New York group was looking to interview survivors and asked if she’d share her story. I’m not sure why she agreed, but it must have been therapeutic. She speaks with school groups now, talks about that time to anyone who’ll listen.”

I glanced at Esther’s empty seat, my throat still tight. “I want to cry just thinking about it. Hearing about her experiences would be too much.”

“It’s deeply upsetting, but that’s the point. If we choose to forget, so will the younger generations. You should speak with her more later. You might be surprised how it affects you. For now, we have brisket to plate.” Anna

wiped her hands on her apron and got to work. “If you put the meat in the Pyrex, I’ll get this mess cleaned up. We’ll leave it in the oven while we have the service.”

We went about our business as though this were any kitchen on any given day, but the Four Questions made famous by the Passover Seder swam through my mind. All of them revolved around one central theme: *Why is this night different from other nights?* I didn’t remember the answers or the phonetic Hebrew words I used to speak.

Only that one question.

As the weight of Esther’s tattoo settled on my heart, one particular answer plagued me. Tonight was different because on this night, I realized pretending to be Christian was just that—pretend. Observant Jew or not, a believer or not, if I had lived through the war, my arm would be tattooed as well.

TWELVE

Anna's husband led the bulk of the Passover service, but it was a community affair. The twenty-nine participants read parts from the Haggadah—the Jewish book that guided us through the rituals. At first, I felt like a fraud and mouthed words instead of saying them aloud, then I glanced at Esther and shame swamped me. Who was I to hide from my religion when this woman proudly acknowledged hers? Tavi and her husband participated. Arthur spoke with a quiet fealty I'd never heard from him or cared to notice, and gradually, my voice emerged.

We recited the story of the Jews' exodus from Egypt. We dipped parsley in salt water to remember the tears our ancestors had shed. We ate maror—pieces of fresh horseradish—to recall their bitter lives of servitude. We ate flat matzah to honor the Jews who had fled Egypt and didn't have time to bake leavened bread.

We said prayers together. We observed the rituals as a group.

There was so much *We*.

As a kid, when I'd refused to participate in Friday night dinners, Arthur would explain the We-ness of Judaism to me. "These are your people," he'd say in that forceful way of his. "If you're ever in trouble or lost or scared, they will take you in. They will celebrate the good times with you and keep you afloat in the bad. Other Jewish denominations focus on the Torah and

following biblical law. For me, and I hope for you one day, being Jewish is about community."

It was *We*.

Tentative warmth filled me as *We* said Hebrew words together. I didn't understand them. It didn't matter. The sounds of our voices, humming together like a collective beehive, drowned out my marriage woes and this newfound guilt over my father. Our joint prayers didn't make me feel connected to a God I didn't believe in, but it connected me to this table, this room, these people.

We laughed when the youngest boy fumbled through his Four Questions. *We* winced when we ate horseradish that made our eyes water. *We* smiled when Anna's husband made a show of hiding the afikomen—a piece of matzah the kids would later hunt for in hopes of earning a prize. *We* celebrated Passover as friends—some Jewish, some not—to remember our history and move forward as a welcoming community.

These were the people who had filled Arthur's fridge with food. They had sat shiva with us after my father had died. They hadn't judged the man Jacob Ackerman had been. They had supported those left behind because that was what *We* did.

My eyes got misty, but my newfound warmth slowly chilled. I had denied any connection to this feeling for most of my life. A deeper sense of belonging. The world had stolen Judaism from me—the journalists, the bullies, the stereotypes that still made me feel inadequate, different, *judged*. I was mad at my father for putting that storm in motion. Yet these people welcomed me and my faith, or lack thereof, with open arms.

Soup was served first, each bite of the plump matzah ball setting off a moan in the back of my throat. Gefilte fish followed, which I never understood and didn't really trust—fish shouldn't be shaped as a ball—but I ate it anyway, then perfectly sliced brisket and potato kugel and glistening

roasted carrots, and a flourless chocolate cake that could bring a country to its knees.

Tavi's husband sat beside her. Naresh had kind eyes, a dark beard, and a sweep of hair you'd see on a seventies anchorman. He looked at her holding their baby, devotion in his eyes, and pressed his lips to Tavi's temple. Just kissed her for no apparent reason.

The last time Daniel had tried to kiss me, I had only seen determination on his face, and I had recoiled.

When the kids ran to find the hidden afikomen, I tried to help with the cleanup, but Anna tutted at me. "Enjoy your night. We're happy you came."

Surprisingly, so was I.

Arthur chatted with the people at his end of the table. Those by me asked about my job and marveled when they knew a book I'd designed. Tavi left soon after, with a promise to be in touch for coffee. If she prodded later and asked if the Seder had awakened my Jewish curiosity, my admission would come easily. I had no urge to join a synagogue, and my belief in God or higher powers hadn't been roused, but I was curious about this community of *We*.

As the remaining guests moved to the living room, Esther caught my eye. "Come," she said. "Take me outside."

I was tired and ready to head home, let this newfound Jewish identity steep, but I wasn't about to argue with an elderly woman.

Although warmish for the end of March, it was still chilly. We wrapped our coats tightly as we walked onto the porch. Without the yattering of dogs, I felt more than heard the silence. The quiet had a weight to it, heavy and expectant. Stars popped in the sky.

I led Esther to the large bench and sat beside her. "You don't get nights like this in New York," I said. No blanket of stars to count, but the city was a galaxy of its own, lights and life flashing with a vibrancy I loved.

"Arthur tells me you don't like being Jewish," she replied.

Seriously? Was there no end to his meddling?

"He shouldn't have said that," I murmured. To a Holocaust survivor, no less. This was like being called out for cheating in front of a professor, but worse. *So* much worse.

"When you love family," Esther said, "you try to help them."

I was ready to shove Arthur's form of love where the sun didn't shine, but I thought back on my week at Brackson, how fulfilling it had been, how much stronger I felt.

I slouched into the bench. "It's complicated for me."

"Everything worth anything is complicated."

I understood the platitude, but it didn't apply here. "Do you know who my father was? What he did?"

"I know. His actions are not yours."

"But that's the thing—no one thought like that when I was growing up. Everyone judged us. We lost family and all our friends. New people who found out judged me right away." I didn't mention the Jewish slurs insinuated in those taunts or that some kid in school had taken a dump in my backpack. Esther was no stranger to Jewish stereotyping. My suffering hadn't compared to hers.

She patted my thigh and kept her hand there. "Let me tell you a story."

Trepidation replaced my angry confusion. If this was The Story, I wasn't sure I could handle it right now—or ever. Some horrors were easier to bear through textbooks and strangers' accounts on TV.

"When I was seventeen," she said, "my family and I were deported to Auschwitz. We had been hiding in a man's basement, but someone saw my twin sister, Ruth, sneak in and called the authorities." Every muscle in my body tensed as she went on. "We traveled to Auschwitz in a cattle car, crammed together with other Jews. I thought I would die there, smashed together so tight we had to hold our hands above our heads, and it was pitch

black. I could barely breathe. When I did, all I could smell was feces and urine, grown men and women losing their bowels and their dignity.

"When we arrived, it was a relief for a minute. There was fresh air, but the chaos took over. People were shoving one another and crying. Mothers screamed for their children as they were ripped from their arms. Some were smashed on the head with guns. Guards yelled and dogs barked, and the rancid smell of burning filled my nose. Ruth and I held hands, never letting go, but our parents got shoved away. They disappeared in the crowd. That was it. Just gone. Ruth cried and wailed, but I did not. I was frozen stiff with terror. I did not want to be bashed on the head or attacked by a dog. We did not know it would be the last time we would see them."

A fierce burn filled my throat, too hot to force a swallow.

Esther gripped my thigh harder. "A guard came to my sister and me and asked if we were twins. I nodded, not knowing if this was a good thing or a bad thing to admit. Ruth demanded to see our parents, and he shoved her so hard she fell. We did not ask again. The guard ushered us away from the chaos, toward another building." A slow swallow. "I had never heard of Joseph Mengele, the Angel of Death. I did not know he experimented on Jews and studied twins—to increase the reproductive rate of the German race, they say. I did not know then, and we followed."

"You don't have to talk about this," I whispered, stomach roiling with dread.

She ignored me. "Some days, we would stand in a room with other subjects for hours, naked, while they measured us. Some days, we were moved to labs where our blood was taken and we were given injections. We cooperated because we were scared to be separated. The others told us stories. We understood what was happening outside those walls. The gas chambers. The smells of death and decay. If we cooperated, we stayed inside and together. Then it got worse.

“Mengele amputated an arm off a set of twins for no reason. Our injections increased. Ruth fell once and had a seizure, and my limbs got so swollen it was hard to move. We were both covered in red welts. One day, Ruth’s fever spiked, and a guard took her away. She was incoherent, but I was not. I was terrified, and I finally screamed. I screamed for her. I screamed for the other twins with us. I screamed for my mother and father and for the Jews shoveled into mass graves until I was sedated.”

Esther spoke in an even voice, little hint to the screaming lab rat she’d been.

I was screaming internally. Angel of Death. Joseph Mengele. The Mengele Twins. The names jogged my memory, something on the History Channel that Daniel had once watched. I had sat there next to him, thinking, *If I had been born in a different time and place, this could have been my life*. Daniel had texted on his phone during the show, and I remembered wanting to turn the channel or leave the room, but I’d been entranced, and the worst parts of the documentary had been about Mengele.

He was the type of villain you’d see in Marvel movies and fantasy films, a monster who’d whistled while selecting which Jews would be sent to the gas chambers.

Yet Esther was here, alive, reliving that horror with reserved dignity. She’d obviously told her story umpteen times—therapy for her, education for her listeners. I could barely restrain my tears. And I kept thinking about her tattoo, a forever reminder of the hell she’d endured.

Most prisoners were heavily inked too. Full sleeves. Necks. Heads. Teardrops on faces indicating murders committed or gang members lost. Words and numbers shakily inked declared gang allegiances. Did these images that once gave them status serve as bitter memories now too? Did they fantasize about carving them off?

I would never forget the viper tattoo of the gang member who’d killed my father. That man had no doubt worn his ink with pride. Then there was

Kenna, who used ink to express herself, for the sheer beauty of it. And I had a stupid butterfly on my hip. A childish vow to reinvent my life.

I'd never thought much about it all, not with how mainstream tattooing had become. Esther's blue-black number proved all ink had a burden, sometimes featherlight, sometimes carrying the weight of the world. In her case, not by choice.

She hadn't eased up on my thigh, her liver-spotted hand clutching me tightly. To anyone else, she probably looked too weak to sit upright. But, no. Not this powerful woman.

She was being my cornerstone.

"I never saw my sister again," she went on, her accent slightly thicker. "I expected she died, but no one ever told me. I got sick afterward and was put in the infirmary. The camp was liberated not long after, and I was free. Every member of my family was dead, but I was free."

Her last words drifted into the night sky, quiet descending between us.

"I'm so sorry, Esther," I said, my voice cracking. Such useless, empty words.

Esther made a clucking sound and gathered my hand in hers. "I talk about Auschwitz because we must *never* forget. But I also tell my story because so many young people have forgotten their heritage. I was put in a concentration camp because I am Jewish. I survived that ordeal because *I am Jewish*. We are a strong people. We were persecuted in Egypt, chased from our homes during the Spanish Inquisition, killed with poisonous gas in Germany, and we are still here. You may not cling to your religion or God, but you are Jewish, Scarlett. This is our history. These roots make us strong. If you grab hold of them, they will make you strong too."

Her words whipped around me like a violent wind, stirring up a hailstorm of emotions.

Strong was the opposite of what I'd felt these past months. The past twenty years, really. Since my fateful tenth birthday.

I had told myself lies since then. I'd believed the life I now lived, with my job and friends and husband, proved I was a survivor. Only recently was I realizing changing my name and lying about so much had been weakness, not strength. Ignoring my father's roles in my life, the good and the bad of them, had been cowardly, not brave. I wasn't lifting my chin, telling the world I was Jacob Ackerman's daughter, daring it to challenge me. I'd been cowering in a stylish New York apartment.

I put my hand on top of Esther's, searching for the heart of my struggles. "I had a miscarriage," I said quietly. Not *I was bullied* or *My mother is too unwell to love me* or *My father told me nothing but lies*. I squeezed my eyes shut, unsure why that particular truth had slipped out.

She placed her other hand over mine. A hand sandwich of support. "Loss tests us. Let it test you."

"But what if I failed the test? I was ridiculously stressed while pregnant, worried and upset for so many reasons, and I keep thinking I killed the baby. That my anxiety weakened my body. And under all that guilt is this relief I shouldn't feel. Women aren't supposed to be relieved when they lose a child." Toxic guilt and relief on a loop, each emotion feeding the other in those early weeks after the miscarriage, lingering still. "It's like I don't know who I am anymore. Like I'm coming undone at the seams."

She made a rough sound at the back of her throat. "The seams are the best place to come undone. It is where you do the hard work of stitching yourself back together. If you are relieved, be relieved. This is not for anyone to judge. But your stress did not cause this, and it is still a loss. If you do not grieve, you will not move on and start stitching."

She held my hands, unwavering, offering me the roots I'd yanked so violently from the earth. How could she not judge me for abandoning my faith? How could a woman in her nineties, who had been imprisoned and experimented upon, be the stronger of us?

I survived that ordeal because I am Jewish.

We sat there for a while, hands intertwined, the hoot of an owl echoing in the darkness. When I felt Esther shiver I helped her inside, but my chill remained. The dinner table was cleaned. People were chatting in the living room. I needed to leave and clear my head.

I found Anna and thanked her for the lovely meal and perfectly sliced brisket. Others offered kind words and hugs. One woman even invited me to her son's upcoming bar mitzvah. I surprised myself by accepting.

Arthur kept quiet on the drive home, and I didn't berate him for meddling with my life again. Like Esther had said, people interfered when they cared, and I'd take what I could get from Arthur.

At home, he walked up the creaky porch steps, but I felt restless. "I think I'll go for a short walk."

He turned and stared at me a moment. "Stay away from the chicken coop. Coyotes slink around there some nights."

He went inside, leaving the screen door to bang shut behind him. A few dogs barked. I closed my eyes and inhaled the sickly sweet muddiness in the air. Esther's story was a labored pressure on my heart, alongside the reality of my unraveling life.

I had planned to stay in Fernlow with a purpose. To find my balance. Figure out if my jumbled emotions were aftereffects of the miscarriage or something larger. Make another ten-year plan. Except that felt like part of my problem: the Plan.

Aside from Kenna, nothing in my life had been happenstance. Not my job or husband or Upper East Side friends. My pregnancy had been, though. A big wallop of inadvertent chance. A condom breaking. My belly growing. Daniel bringing flowers while I promised myself I'd be a good, *good* mother who wouldn't abandon her child. Losing that child. Tears of grief. Tears of *relief*. So much emotional eating and confusion.

I walked to the black gum tree and pressed my palms against its towering trunk. The alligator bark cut into my skin, rough and alive. The

barest hint of spring buds was visible through the soft porch light. It was too early for spring buds, but there they were, peeking their green heads into the world. Birthing new life.

A sob moved through my chest for the baby I'd lost. The child who had fed off my angst for her short life. She hadn't deserved to die like that, surrounded by ambivalence and fear. I hadn't deserved a mentally ill mother and narcissistic criminal for a father. I cried for us both and for Esther, and the six million Jews killed because of ignorance and hate, and the larger truth that had sent me on this journey in the first place—I didn't want kids. Not now. Maybe never.

I wasn't sure I wanted Daniel to be my husband.

Holy wow. I leaned heavier into the tree, clutching it for support. Daniel was a good man, kind and hardworking. He used to be funny and passionate when we'd spoken in our lovers' code with military time and had had sex on the living room floor. I had pursued him. I had fit myself into his life with his friends, his family, his religion. I had been high on that success. Yet I didn't know what it was to *just live*. To let life sweep me along for a wild ride.

I pressed my palms into the tree's alligator bark and felt its spirit. I absorbed its truth. "It's time for me to stop running," I whispered. Time to quit planning and living out of fear.

Time to live for the simple joy of it.

THIRTEEN

I waited for Arthur by his van, alternating between checking my watch and pacing. He wasn't exactly late, but I'd already been up for three hours, too excited—and scared of nightmares—to sleep.

Winston came over and handed me a baggie of treats. "For the new recruit."

I smiled up at him. "I can't wait to see Jesse's face."

Arthur and I would save two lives today—one pup and one inmate who'd been down in the dumps. Brutus was irreplaceable, but having another animal to love would do Jesse wonders.

Winston crossed his meaty arms. "Hope the rescue is a good dog."

"I don't think it matters. Jesse will work his magic with whatever mutt we save." And they'd both have the company and understanding they needed.

I rocked on my heels and eyed Arthur's deteriorating home—something else that could use a bit of love. Its walls had withstood countless storms and one very grouchy occupant, but it had seen better days. "Has Arthur ever talked about fixing up his house?"

Winston followed my stare. "Here and there, but the dogs take priority. You know how Arthur gets."

He got fixated and stubborn as a string of mules. “If I want to repaint it, do I have to do something to the outside first?”

Winston rubbed his chin. “Well, you gotta sand off that peeling paint, for starters. Scrub down the bits of mildew. Caulk any cracks. Ain’t easy work. You looking to bring that old girl back to life?”

I hadn’t thought about it until this moment. Now it seemed more important than solving the world’s energy crisis. “I think I might.”

“That’s awful nice to hear. Nice for Arthur to have company in that big ol’ house, ’specially since there’s been no sign of Diesel.”

“Diesel?”

“The other ex-con Arthur hired. He ain’t called or nothing. I been asking Arthur to hire another worker, but he won’t give up on Diesel yet. With you here, he can wait longer.”

Winston talked as though I were moving here for the foreseeable future, a prospect that would have been laughable, but I had communed with the black gum tree and spoken my truth to its alligator bark. I was no longer running or lying. “I won’t be staying here forever, but I’ve been going through some things at home, troubles with my husband. It might be good for me to stay a bit longer. If I do, I’m happy to help out.”

Winston bowed his head. “Sorry to hear you’re struggling.”

I fidgeted with my wedding ring while studying the house. “I’m sorry too, but I have a feeling there’s a light at the end of this tunnel.”

Esther had certainly helped light the way. I’d taken a break from volunteering since our talk at the Seder. A week to putter around the farm while cooking fresh, low-sodium food for Arthur, going for runs, and helping Winston walk and train the dogs. Captain Underbite was gaining weight while I was losing it, but the real pounds I was shedding were from my shoulders.

Every breath I took these days was ripe with possibility, so many options at my fingertips. I could ditch my life and travel to India or

Thailand or take my laptop and design book covers on a beach in Bali. I could move to Scotland and explore those savage lands. I knew I wouldn't do any of those crazy things, but I liked thinking I *could*.

The truth was more daunting.

I'd have to call Daniel soon and return to New York, explain all my lies, rebuild my life on a foundation of truth, with or without him. Above all else, there would be no plans. No squeezing myself into a predetermined mold. Maybe then, I'd kick my snake nightmares.

For now, I'd make the exterior of Arthur's house shine. I would do such a beautiful job, even he'd thank me.

The man in question finally pushed through the front door and scratched his ass. "Quit standing there staring. We've got work to do."

Or he wouldn't thank me, but I was pumped to bring his home and myself back to life.

Unlike my last trip to the dog shelter, I was impatient to meet the next scrapper heading to Brackson. *I* was excited to head to Brackson. To see the guys in general. And Jesse. Not because I hadn't seen a certain someone in a week.

I let Arthur drive for his first time since his surgery. He gripped the wheel at ten and two. "Deborah told me she invited you to her son's bar mitzvah."

I wasn't sure how I felt about agreeing to that function. The last bar mitzvah I'd attended had been for my ex-best friend's older brother. My mother had worn her sunglasses indoors and had given her wineglass a workout, but my father had been in town for the party. He had danced with me and had helped build me the most insane ice cream sundae covered in sprinkles and gummy bears. He had told me my bat mitzvah would put Jonathan's party to shame.

After his arrest, my planned bat mitzvah had been canceled.

Instead of replying to Arthur's comment, I said, "What was Dad like as a kid?"

Arthur cut me a look, then slid his attention back to the road. "Smart. Always smarter than me. And a good ballplayer."

"Baseball?"

"Outfielder. He had a great throwing arm."

I chewed my lip as I digested that snippet of information. It wasn't earth-shattering intelligence, but I hadn't known he'd played ball. Watched it, sure, but he'd never boasted about playing. "Did he have friends in high school? Did people like him?"

"Sure, he had friends. The popular kids flocked to him."

"Did he get into trouble? Vandalize the school? Cheat on tests?"

The car jerked to the left, then evened off. "What's with the third degree?"

Best to answer his question with a question, keep the focus off me and on him. "What's wrong with asking questions?"

"Why are you avoiding mine?"

Goddamn Arthur, always beating me at my own games. I quit chewing my lip and moved to my cuticle, a habit I thought I'd kicked. "My time at the prison has made me see things differently," I said slowly. "Like maybe Dad wasn't all bad or maybe he was or maybe I didn't know him at all. I just have questions. I want to know what he was really like—if he showed signs of being deceitful or underhanded as a kid, or if he was a good older brother to you and good son to your parents, or if he was mean. What kind of person was he?"

This sudden need to know more about my father felt as all-consuming as my urge to paint Arthur's home. Necessary, yet inexplicable.

Arthur drove five or six miles before replying. A whole five or six minutes of painful silence before he spoke. "Adults always liked Jacob—our folks, teachers. He knew the right things to say and do to get what he

wanted. At home, we'd fight about who had to wash the dishes or dry them, who had to cut the lawn or take out the garbage. He was always trying to get out of his chores and would goad me into bets I'd lose. But he was good to me too. I wasn't popular like him. I didn't have many friends, and some of the kids weren't nice about it. Jacob stood up for me."

That sounded like my father. All of it, down to the boy who'd schemed to get the upper hand. Not such a far cry from the charismatic man who'd swindled friends and strangers out of billions. "And after high school?"

"I wouldn't know. I joined the army, and he went to college. Jacob hated Fernlow and refused to come home for holidays. We didn't have much in common and didn't keep in touch."

Also not shocking, considering I'd only met Arthur a couple of times before the arrest. It still explained nothing. "Everyone else dropped us like hot potatoes, but you took me in and you visited your brother, even though it doesn't sound like you really liked him. You kept visiting, even after I stopped. If you didn't have enough in common to stay in touch when he was an upstanding citizen, why visit him monthly when he was a convicted criminal?"

"Because he was my brother." Arthur's quick vehemence was loud in the enclosed space, making me feel small. This was more than a reason. This was who Arthur was.

He believed in community and the We-ness of Judaism. He believed in offering support to those who had been abandoned: dogs, inmates, a brother who'd ruined countless lives, and one niece who had hated the world.

Arthur cleared his throat. "If you don't believe in change, Scarlett, what's the point of it all? This crazy planet we live on is full of so much violence. Parents teach hate to their kids. Poverty and sickness in underdeveloped countries perpetuate that hostility. It's so easy to feel helpless and blame others for their choices and what they've done, guilty or not. The harder part of life is offering forgiveness, hoping for something

better. For me, that starts with open-mindedness. I give others the chance to change."

His optimism was a heady drug, one I wanted to inhale. I didn't know if Arthur had developed the Pups in Prison program to honor his late brother, a silent prayer that he could have been one of those men, learning humility through compassion, love through trust. Or maybe he'd felt he had failed his brother and this was his way of making amends.

Either way, my respect for him doubled. "Do you think Dad regretted what he did?"

Arthur pulled into the shelter's driveway and parked. He took his time removing his key and unclicking his seat belt. When he finally looked at me, a sad smile softened the hard lines of his face. "He was so ashamed to have let you down."

He left the van and headed for the shelter as a memory of my father fought for life, one I used to bury in the depths of my mind—my last visit to Brackson, with me screaming and kicking up a fuss, while my father watched, impotent, tears pooling in his eyes.

I was suddenly ashamed to have let *him* down.

Where Twinkie had been all bark and bite, our new recruit, Goliath, was a gentle giant who'd been abused. The short-haired mutt looked part golden Lab and part Shepherd. He wore a cone of shame to keep him from gnawing on the incision up his back leg; the bones had been broken and reset. Sores covered his tan body, his ribs stretching his emaciated sides. I'd never seen a dog cower so violently.

The shelter attendant carried him to the van and got the big guy settled. I gave Goliath my hand to sniff. "Jesse will give you so much love," I told him. "He'll fix you up and have you doing tricks in no time."

I offered him a treat, but he trembled and turned his head.

Arthur was back to glaring. “Folks who hurt animals should get a one-way ticket to Siberia.”

I couldn’t agree more. “Do you often take in dogs like this? Ones who need extra care?”

“From time to time. If the shelter’s overcrowded, they can’t give the dog the attention it needs, and the prisoners have nothing but time to give. Jesse will nurse Goliath back to health while slowly training him.”

We got settled in the van and drove to the prison, thoughts of my father and Daniel and a thousand other things spinning through my mind. I twisted my wedding ring, the cold band feeling too heavy and tight. The closer we got to Brackson, the faster I spun it. Sweat gathered at the back of my T-shirt, like it was my first day again, those same nerves rushing back. I was thrilled to be delivering a dog to Jesse. Brackson didn’t scare me anymore. This trip should be exciting.

Unless it wasn’t Brackson that had me in a tizzy. Unless a certain someone with dark eyes and a vicious little dog was responsible for the painful tightness of my wedding band.

FOURTEEN

Emery was definitely the source of my jumpiness. My hypothesis was confirmed the second we walked into the cellblock, and I couldn't look anywhere but at the floor. This was mouth breather behavior. Only one person reduced me to my insecure fifteen-year-old self, as though I still had a unibrow and appalling facial hair, no hope of forming a sentence around a boy.

Martinez carried Goliath, while Arthur and I trailed behind him. My attention was still on my feet, until clapping snapped me out of my stupor. It was the type of applause you'd hear at a theater, bursting, genuine. I looked up and bit my lip. The men and guards and volunteers were all on their feet, smiling wide, showering Arthur with a welcome worthy of a king.

The King of Fine. The King of Wayward Dogs. The King of Hope.

I pressed my hand to my heart.

Arthur flattened his lips and wiped his eyes, more emotional than I'd ever seen him. Then he swatted the air with his hand. "Enough of that. Get back to work. You have dogs to train."

His voice was stern, but the underlying affection was impossible to miss.

With my attention up, I scanned the room. I found the source of my nerves quickly. Where the other men were attuned to Arthur, hoping to snag his attention and talk with him, Emery's focus was on me. His eyes flared when they locked on mine, one corner of his lips lifting. That subtle smile sent my heart beating into my throat, and my eyes reverted to the floor. I tripped over nothing as I followed Arthur and Martinez.

Jesse stood by his cell, shifting from foot to foot. When he saw Goliath, he smiled, but that joy quickly dipped into a frown. "What happened to him?"

Arthur crossed his arms and sucked on his teeth. "Abusive owners. His back leg was shattered when he was found."

Jesse's jaw tightened.

Martinez lowered Goliath to the floor, and the big dog shook. Jesse passed a hand over his mouth, then got on the floor, nothing but gentle compassion on his face. "You're a good boy, aren't you?"

Goliath balanced on his three sturdy legs, tail tucked low, eyes terrifyingly wide.

Jesse opened his arms and legs in a welcoming gesture and placed a few treats between them. "I won't hurt you, boy. Won't ever do nothing mean. We're gonna be good friends, you and me."

"Go on," Arthur said to the dog. "This is your home now."

There was no way Goliath understood the encouragement, but animals were intuitive creatures. Trained medical dogs could sense drops in blood sugar for diabetics. They could detect biochemical changes in epileptics and warn them of impending seizures. Studies even showed they could sense the early onset of cancer.

Whatever Goliath sensed in Jesse, it gave the pup courage. Goliath ignored the treats, but he hobbled over and curled between Jesse's legs, lying awkwardly with his cone bumping the floor. Jesse pressed his hands to the dog's ribs and closed his eyes.

“This one won’t be easy,” Arthur said. “You’ll have to clean his wounds. Change his bandages and keep him calm. No getting excited and running with other dogs.”

Jesse nodded, his hands never leaving Goliath. “Tell me what I gotta do, and it’s done.”

Martinez brought a chair over for Arthur, and the two men discussed the details of Goliath’s care. That left me time to visit with the other prisoners. *All* of them, as was my duty.

Not just the one who shouldn’t make my heart race.

I worked the room, surprised how much I’d missed these men and dogs. It had only been a week, but I’d attended a Passover Seder since then that had moved me. I’d met a Holocaust survivor who could teach these muscular inmates a thing or two about real strength. I’d cried for the baby I’d lost and had forgiven myself for not wanting another. I had decided to confess my lies to Daniel and let the chips fall where they may. This newfound freedom bled into my interactions, the men seeming to feed off my positive mood.

I helped one man train his rescue how to shake a paw. Another asked advice on teaching his rambunctious dog to quit jumping on people. The men did group sessions some days, all working on walking or discussing ways to offer positive reinforcement. Other times, it was one-on-one work tailored to their dogs’ specific needs. Always, it was rewarding.

An hour into my visit, I found myself a few feet from Emery, and my positivity nose-dived into awkwardness. He sat at one of the tables, scribbling in his journal, Twinkie asleep at his feet. With other prisoners, I’d approach and read their entries, help them with their writing.

Reading Emery’s thoughts felt too personal.

Instead, I readjusted my loosely piled hair and scratched my neck. I popped my knee and fiddled with my wedding ring. Arthur was busy talking to the prisoners, spending time with each one. Martinez, however,

was on his own. Talking to him would be safer than talking to Emery. I could tease him about Bette Midler, walk over and hum the theme from *Beaches*.

I grinned, about to make my move, but Emery looked up at me and said, "Hey."

I really should leave. Teasing Martinez was the smarter option here. I replied with a quiet, "Hey."

He closed his book and leaned back in his chair.

I moved closer, spinning my wedding ring in restless circles. "How's Twinkie?"

Emery spread his legs wide, like a typical man relaxing in his space. "Three steps forward, two back, but I'd say that's a win."

The pup made a high-pitched squeak, fearful almost. I shuffled back, worried I'd stepped on his paw, but he was fast asleep, body twitching in a dream state. "I've always wondered what they dream about."

"Probably that they're running in a field of bones. Or devouring a juicy steak." He licked his lips, a small sigh escaping.

I had no clue what food they served in prison, but I doubted juicy steaks were regular menu items. I also liked this game. "Or he grows into a ten-foot monster dog and is finally big enough to unleash his wrath."

"Or he's the King of Doglandia and walks his pet person on a leash."

I barked out a laugh. "I'd take that dream over mine."

I immediately bit on my cheek, wanting to staple my mouth shut. One second, I was joking with Emery. The next, I was spilling secrets. What was it about him that made me blurt personal details?

He quirked an eyebrow at me, inviting me to continue.

I absolutely should not. I should tease Martinez as planned, not let this minuscule crush develop into something bigger.

Choosing idiocy over caution, I eased into the seat opposite Emery. "I had a nightmare when I was young, all because of *Jaws*." Plus, the tiny

issue of my father's arrest.

He cringed. "That movie scarred a generation of kids."

I wished my nightmares had been as simple as that—a wild imagination, irrational fears. I wished they'd just stop. "Mine was recurring, always with a bunch of sharks circling me, but I was underwater. They'd bite and toy with me, and I'd struggle to get to the surface, halfway choking."

"Did you ever get there?"

"Where?"

"By the end of the dream, did you get to the surface?"

Clamminess clung to my neck, this morning's sweaty jolt feeling fresh once more, although that had involved a boa constrictor snapping at my ankles. "I'd wake up in the middle of it, never getting anywhere."

He leaned his elbows on the table. "Do you still have them?"

So much for using the past tense. "Yes, but snakes lately, not sharks, thanks to a scary incident when I was young."

"You ran into one on a hike?"

"Not exactly," I said, a chill slipping down my spine. My terror in that moment was still tangible. "A guy angry with my father sent me a box as a gift. It had a snake inside it."

"Jesus." His dark eyes took on a more probing edge. His cheeks hollowed. "What kind of snake?"

I shrugged at the odd question. "I have no idea."

He rubbed his brow, frowning deeper. "For the nightmares—you should try writing them down when you wake up. As much as you can remember. It sometimes helps me."

I used to draw my nightmares while sitting in McDonald's and skipping classes. I would lose myself in the steady scratch of my pencil and growing images on the page. Writing them had never occurred to me. "It couldn't hurt to try, I guess."

Emery swallowed, the move making his Celtic cross tattoo undulate. “What were you…” He trailed off and glanced down. His jaw bunched.

“What was I…what?”

Another swallow, then he looked up. “What were you up to the past week?”

It was such a mundane question, basic pleasantries you’d ask a friend or coworker. I wasn’t sure if that was what we were, and the question emphasized our power imbalance. I was on the outside. I knew where Emery was and what he was doing when I was away from here. He had no clue about my life or when I’d show up. I wasn’t sure if he thought about me the days I didn’t come.

“Aside from doing some work,” I said, “I helped in the kennel and forced Arthur to eat well. It’s also Passover, and I went to a Seder. My first one since I was sixteen.”

I tensed as I waited for his reply. I’d never admitted to being Jewish as an adult, or even as a kid. Most of my friends had been Jewish, and the question had never been posed. It hadn’t been asked now, but I wanted to feel the words on my tongue, taste the sweetness of honesty.

Amazingly, the world didn’t stop spinning. My head didn’t explode.

Interest sparked in Emery’s dark eyes. “You eat matzah at that, right? Go through a service?”

“We follow along in a book—a Haggadah. Our service was kept pretty short. Some are more intense and continue after dinner.”

He shifted on his chair and searched my face. “Tell me about the food.”

“The food?”

“Everything. The dinner. What did you eat?”

His teeth grazed his lower lip, and I couldn’t look away from his mouth. His lips were full and wide, enticingly so, and my body reacted. I itched to trace the small scar through his eyebrow, the larger one cleaving his chin. It

was chemical, this kind of attraction. One of those opposites-attract situations. There was no other explanation.

"The food," I said as I fought for composure. Friends talked about food. Emery was clearly fixated on the topic. "We started with matzah ball soup."

"A chicken soup?"

I nodded. "With carrots and parsnips and dill, and the matzah balls were simple but rich." So, so good.

"Comfort food." His deep voice filled with longing.

"Exactly."

"What else?"

"Gefilte fish, but you don't want to know about that." I wrinkled my nose. "Fish shouldn't be shaped as a ball."

Emery, however, did want to know. He wanted to know every last ingredient, down to the pepper sprinkled on the plate. We went back and forth like that, with him leaning closer and asking a million questions, living—no, *eating*—vicariously through me. I wasn't sure when I'd moved my hands from my lap to the table, matching his posture.

"It goes on for a while, right?" he asked. "You eat special stuff for a week or so?"

"Normally, yeah. Eight days. Tomorrow is the last day, but I don't observe the holiday. I haven't for years. Arthur does, just not in a regimented way. He eats matzah instead of bread and avoids pasta and grains. Some Jews are stricter with their diets."

Chairs beside us scraped the floor as inmates moved. Commands and the sharp *clack* of a clicker resounded. Emery's focus didn't waver from me. "What do you do for work?"

"Work?" The sharp change in conversation took a second to register.

"Your job. You said you've worked the past week."

When talking with Daniel, he'd repeat a question over the span of a meal. *Did you pick up the dry cleaning?* Then ten minutes later, *Did you*

pick up the dry cleaning? He no longer engaged me in interesting conversation or remembered offhand remarks. Then again, I wouldn't have told him I'd attended a Passover Seder. "I design book covers."

Emery's head jerked back as his eyes widened. "Seriously?"

His boyish grin had me grinning too. "I studied design and computer stuff in college and wanted a job I could do remotely. Something flexible that could move if necessary. My life kind of fell apart after my father's arrest. I never wanted to be in that financial position again."

Instead of Emery turning somber and offering me pity, his grin didn't budge. Neither did mine, even after blurting yet another confession. The more I spoke about my past, the easier it became. Or maybe it was this man and this place, no judgment left between these concrete walls.

"That's a supercool job, Scarlett. Not one you hear often."

It was kind of cool, but a strange lethargy struck. Wistfulness for my sketch pad and pencils and the freedom of a blank page. I had no clue if I'd draw the creepy images of my youth or if the act of bringing my imaginings to life would pump me full of pride and wonder. I hadn't sketched for myself since before college.

Emery was watching me calmly. Waiting. He had nowhere to be. I wanted to reply in kind, ask about his life and former job, but Arthur said prying into a prisoner's past was unkind. Prodding didn't foster their growth and desire for a second chance. I spun my wedding ring and scrunched my toes in my boots, trying to find a middle ground. Emery glanced at my hands and his smile slipped. He rubbed the back of his neck.

I ran through a slew of questions and kept returning to one. Not a pleasant question, but it didn't focus on the past. "When do you get paroled?"

He picked up his pen and tapped it on his journal. "Two days."

"Two days?" Jesus. That wasn't the answer I'd expected, and why did I keep repeating him? *Tell me about the food. The food? What do you do for*

work? Work? Like I didn't believe this imposing, tattooed, former criminal wanted to have a conversation with boring, ordinary me.

Emery shifted on his seat. "They told me to write down what I want to say to the board, you know, to make sure the hearing goes smoothly." He tapped his pen faster. "I've just gotta hope it goes well."

"What'll happen to Twinkie?"

He winced slightly. "Another inmate will take my bunk. He'll train him."

"And what about you? What will you do for work?"

He shrugged his wide shoulders. "Construction, likely. Not easy getting hired with a record."

I didn't ask what job he'd held before being incarcerated or how long he'd been in here or what he'd done or why. I couldn't focus on much besides images of Emery outside these walls, in the sunshine, head tipped back to breathe the fresh air; Emery at a busy restaurant, eating a steak, groaning from the pure joy of it, which made me think of other groans and things a married woman should not entertain.

Heat bloomed in long-dormant areas. Words vacated my brain.

"Construction is cool," I said finally, my scattered thoughts stabilizing. Sort of. "Well, not *cool*, cool. Just, you know, physical, which will keep you busy. And tired. My husband is an electrical engineer and works crazy hours. But he also goes to the gym a lot. My husband—Daniel? I don't think I've mentioned him. But you won't need to do that if you're outside working construction. But it'll get hot. My husband burns in the sun. You should make sure to wear sunscreen."

Emery blinked at me. I wished the floor would swallow me whole.

My mortification from that ridiculous monologue continued through my drive home. It worsened as Arthur and I ate a quiet dinner. I had said the word *husband* three times in three seconds, the only barrier I could think of to rescue my mind from fantasyland. I hadn't encouraged Emery's writing or wished him luck with his parole hearing. I had panicked.

All I could think about now, as I sat in the kennel stroking Captain Underbite's wiry fur, was Emery doing construction. He was a smart man. That much I sensed in his open curiosity—sharing interesting facts about dogs and their fear of thunder, questions about Passover, his intuitive advice and ability to command respect. The last part gave me pause. Emery had been my safety net in Brackson. Not the guards or volunteers. Without him there, I would feel more vulnerable, especially around Randal.

The notion ignited the nervousness my first day had inspired, but I'd just have to get over that. I wasn't going to quit on the men because one guy made me uncomfortable. I also didn't want to quit on Emery, no matter my inappropriate thoughts.

Arthur walked into the kennel, a husky-cross scampering behind him. He got her settled in her dog run and walked over to me. "You can sleep there if you want. I'll feed you kibble in the morning."

I was inside Captain Underbite's dog run, her fenced door between Arthur and me. It was a familiar scene from my youth, except his joke felt sweet, not patronizing. "I'm on a kibble-free diet, but thanks. Is Snow picking up the agility course?"

He glanced at the fluffy dog he'd brought in. "Not bad for a first day. Still can't get her to play nice with the other dogs." He covered a yawn with his hand.

He'd been doing that a lot since his surgery, falling asleep on the couch, yawning excessively. Everything I'd read said heart-attack patients would be fatigued for a while. The awareness didn't lessen my concern. "You should go to bed."

“It’s too early for bed.” His jaw bulged, a telltale sign of him swallowing another yawn.

Always so stubborn.

“You’ve been working with the dogs more than you should,” I said. “You were supposed to ease in gradually.”

“Working keeps my mind occupied. There’s nothing worse than an idle mind. Except a nagging niece. That’s definitely worse.” He gave me a steady look and turned to leave.

I didn’t like how much he was working. Winston put in hours with each of the dogs, cleaning, grooming, walking, training, teaching private lessons and classes, but with this Diesel guy disappeared, there was only so much he could do.

“Actually,” I called, halting Arthur by the exit. “Can I ask you something?”

“I thought I was tired and should go to bed early.”

I rolled my eyes. “Have you always been this challenging?”

“Is that what you wanted to ask me?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “You are certainly one of a kind. And no, that wasn’t the question.” I gave Captain Underbite a final pet and grimaced at the angry rash on her nose. If it didn’t go away soon, we’d have to take her to the vet.

I slipped out of her enclosure and met Arthur by the door. I picked up a clicker from the basket and spun it in my hand. “I was wondering about your staffing situation.”

Arthur glared out the door, toward the road beyond. “Did Winston put you up to this?”

“He’s concerned, but this is all me. Why won’t you replace this Diesel guy? He’s obviously not coming back.”

He ran his tongue over his teeth. “I only have enough work for two full-time positions. If I hire someone else and Diesel comes back, I won’t be

able to take him on."

"Isn't that his problem? He's the one who left without a word."

"You don't understand what it's like for these men, Scarlett. How hard it is reintegrating into life on the outside. If I offer one of them a job, it's because I see their potential. Diesel has potential. He was living in the barn loft before he disappeared, keeping it tidy. He was working hard and pulling his weight. If he comes back here and I've got nothing for him, it might set him further back."

If more people had a millionth of Arthur's compassion, this world would be a far less depressing place, but kindness wouldn't help him on the farm.

I spun the clicker through my fingers as I chose my words. "Can we set a deadline, at least? Give him another week, and if he's not here, you'll hire someone else?"

A certain someone I should leave alone.

Working more closely with Emery could result in me spewing more nonsense about my husband and suntan lotion, but the idea of him doing physical labor that didn't exercise his brain wasn't right. If adjusting to the outside was as rough as Arthur said, menial work wouldn't help. Boredom could exacerbate issues. Emery could falter and wind up back in jail.

"Fine," Arthur said, gruff.

"Really?" I accidentally pressed the clicker in my hand. A few dogs whined. Arthur narrowed his eyes. "Sorry," I said to him and the dogs. "I was expecting more of a fight. And I know someone who might want a job, if Diesel doesn't show."

Arthur unleashed one of his rare smirks. "Does his name start with an E?"

My jaw dropped. Arthur telling a joke was shocking in itself, but his telepathy was the larger concern. If I'd kept a diary and had waxed on about

my inappropriate crush, his stupid smirk would make sense, but I hadn't written or breathed a word about Emery. Not even to Kenna.

I was about to grill him on his sources, but my phone rang. Since I hadn't changed my ringtone, "Livin' on a Prayer" blasted through the kennel.

The dogs howled.

Arthur whipped his head around as though a bat were careening through the air. Served him right for reading my mind.

I ran outside to answer. "Hello?"

"Hey," Daniel said, his voice cutting through the chaos. "How are things?"

Strange and unsettling, but for different reasons than when I'd left. Interfering in Emery's life could backfire on him. And me. Mostly on me. I also shouldn't be thinking about him when on the phone with my husband. "Arthur's doing much better. Working with the dogs again and driving. Still being a grouch." And a mind reader.

"Doubt he's worse than my grandmother. You should have seen her at Easter, standing over my mother, criticizing every move she made."

The visual reminded me of Esther and the brisket carving. "It's one of the good things about getting old—you're allowed to thrust your unwanted opinions on everyone."

He laughed, the mood between us lighter than it had been for a while. I could almost forget the silent island our apartment had become, the endless lies I'd told him.

"Does this mean you'll be coming home soon?" he asked.

I nibbled the inside of my cheek and gazed over the property. Arthur's farmhouse looked better bathed in the soft porch lights, the peeling paint less noticeable, the rotting wood hard to see. Like this conversation. A moment of comfort with a man I'd lived with for six years didn't cover all the cracks in our foundation. I could stall and explain I needed to repaint the

house, cook extra food for Arthur before leaving, but I'd avoided this conversation for far too long.

Since the day we met.

"Tomorrow," I whispered, too soft for him to hear. Then louder, I said, "I'll come home tomorrow. We need to talk."

FIFTEEN

The first day I met Daniel hadn't been a chance encounter. I knew he'd be on the College Green, studying by a tree in his Thursday afternoon spot. During the spring and fall, he'd sit with his long legs stretched out, crossed at the ankle, a copy of his calculus or chemistry textbook balanced on his lap. Sometimes friends would call his name and wave. Others would crouch by his legs and chat briefly. I knew this because I had a grassy spot of my own, close to his. And I was entranced.

I blamed my fondness on my first sighting of him. I happened to be in line behind him that day, both of us waiting to order coffee. The girl with him had been going on about a celebrity couple, as though their split had been a personal attack. I didn't know Daniel's name or anything about him, but he'd said, "The press loves to print lies, anything to sell papers. People should have the decency to let them deal with their struggles in private."

It wasn't groundbreaking insight, but his vehemence resonated with me. I had been a victim of sensationalism. No one had demanded the press leave my family or me in peace.

I saw him next by accident again, studying on the lawn. He had light brown hair and broad shoulders and an easy laugh that charmed me more than the warbling chickadees. He wasn't gregarious when his friends stopped to chat. He listened as much as he talked.

I moved closer to his spot, pretending to study my books when I was really studying him. Kenna had helped with my beauty makeover, but my confidence was a different story, as were my instincts. Trusting my father had done a real number on me. If I hadn't sensed my dad's web of lies, how could I trust a man enough to date him?

According to my *Changing My Life* manifesto, I needed to marry the opposite of Jacob Ackerman, a goal that usually began with a date. Or basic conversation. Not an easy task when talking with guys tied my tongue in knots, and any of them could be hiding dark secrets.

Instead of talking to Daniel, I watched him. I sat near enough to catch his odd conversation with friends. I learned he was on the rowing team and practiced every morning. He studied electrical engineering and seemed to take his courses seriously. He attended some parties and missed others and liked old movies. He was Christian.

All of these discoveries were checks on my Not Like My Dad checklist:

A rower had to be dedicated and loyal to his team.

Someone who took school seriously would take work seriously and not cheat.

People who enjoyed quiet time weren't the types to have secret lives.

Old movies celebrated good morals and chivalry, attributes criminals lacked.

He wasn't Jewish.

The girls who knew him dressed in preppy skirts and blouses. Some wore pearls. My wardrobe consisted of ripped jeans and baggy T-shirts. Although I studied Daniel relentlessly, he never gave me a second look.

After one of those love-sick Thursdays, I returned to my dorm and flopped on my bed.

Kenna pulled out her earbuds. "Did you talk to him?"

My answering groan was pathetic. "What do you think?"

She came over to my side of the room—a whole three steps—and stared down at me. “If you don’t say hi to him, he’ll never know you exist.”

So easy for her to say. Kenna was in the photography club, the punk rock club, and the underground tattoo club she started. She flaunted her piercings and individuality. She hadn’t spent her life trying to be a shadow.

“I have the social skills of a subterranean mole,” I said.

“You are not a mole, Scarlett. I wouldn’t be friends with a mole.”

“The only reason I look non-mole-like is because you fixed my face.”

She tickled my knee. “I love your face.”

I grabbed my pillow and pressed it over said face.

She shoved my body to the side and lay down next to me. “What’s mystery man’s name again?”

“Daniel,” I said through the pillow. It smelled of my coconut shampoo and shame.

“Right. So, if you never say hi to Daniel or smile in his general direction, he’ll never know how awesome you are, and you’ll live with regrets.” When I remained mute, she sighed. “Do you actually like this guy, or is he one of those ‘I want him because I can’t have him’ crushes?”

Her question had me pressing the pillow harder to my face.

When Kenna talked about a guy or girl she liked, she’d gush about how being with them tied her insides into delicious knots or how she wanted to maul their face. My belly didn’t dip and dive around Daniel; it lurched with nervous doubt. I didn’t want to maul his face; I wanted to put his name through a police check. But he was attractive and seemed to fit my ever-important checklist. If I never approached him, I’d always wonder if he could have been The Guy.

Kenna lifted the corner of my pillow and blew her stinky breath in my face.

I gagged, shoving her and the pillow off. “You seriously need to stop eating Doritos. They aren’t a food group.”

“You seriously need to get out of your head. If you ask me, this guy sounds boring but nice. You deserve to meet a nice guy.”

“I can’t tell if that was a compliment.”

She made her evil-villain face—big eyes, snarled lip. “I’ll never tell.”

I elbowed her. She elbowed me back. We laughed.

When my breathing evened out, I lifted onto my elbow and faced her. “How do I know he’s nice? Like, really know.”

She stayed on her back, staring at the white ceiling. “You mean, how do you know he’s not like your dad?”

I never told Kenna about my manifesto and checklist, but I had confessed the rest of my past. The day my name-change request had come through, she’d walked into our dorm room to find me in a crying, snotty heap. She’d offered to defend my honor and throat punch someone, assuming I’d been hurt. Someone had hurt me, all right. But that man had already been killed.

Between my sniffles that day, I’d told Kenna about my mother’s depression and my father’s arrest. The bullying at school. The family and friends who’d dropped us. The terrifying snake in a box. Arthur. Fernlow. My father’s murder. How much I hated him. Kenna had admitted my last name had sounded familiar when we’d met. She’d remembered news stories about an Ackerman but hadn’t given it much thought. No one else at the University of Pennsylvania had been sneaking suspicious looks my way either. The massive campus had provided the anonymity I’d craved.

But on that dreary November day, I had officially become Scarlett Ronson, and my relationship with Kenna had deepened.

In the face of my honesty, she’d confessed that she struggled with her identity too, but in different ways. She thought she liked boys *and* girls and felt so confused, tears filling her eyes at the brave admission. She’d been terrified to tell her parents, but she’d told *me*, and I’d been honored. I’d listened to her stress and worries over the coming months. Distracted her

with movie nights and bags of Doritos. Hugged her fiercely after she'd told her parents. Her mother hadn't taken the news well, telling Kenna this was just a phase. And when her mother visited months later, tearful, apologizing with promises of unconditional love, I bought cake and champagne and told Kenna how envious I was of their relationship.

Nearly two years later, Kenna and I were still roommates and best friends. I smiled more often. I enjoyed school and spoke with Arthur on the first Monday of every month, and I planned. I kept my manifesto close to my chest and worked hard to make it a reality. I still had three points to complete, every big decision I made revolving around that list.

Earn my own money.

Find a career where I'm in control.

Marry the opposite of my father.

I earned money as a waitress but not enough to live comfortably. I was majoring in digital media design, instead of my preferred fine arts. I needed to use my artistic skills for something more practical. A computer-based job that could be done remotely, move as needed in a pinch. I still hadn't figured out my exact career path, and marriage wasn't a blip on my radar—my trust meter in the boy department ran at a consistent low. So low, I'd never even kissed a guy.

Kenna was on her back now, giving me her *don't lie to me* stare. She knew me better than I knew myself.

"Yes," I finally admitted. "I don't trust my judgment. I'm worried all guys are lying assholes like my dad."

"That's very glass-half-empty of you," she said.

"There's plenty of data to back me up. The divorce rate is atrocious."

"Now you're being sexist. Women sabotage relationships as much as men."

Kenna loved proving a point as much as she loved her Sex Pistols CD collection. She was also kind of right. "It's hard to be glass-half-full when

I've seen how wrong relationships can go. How do I make sure Daniel's nothing like my dad?"

She shrugged. "You can't."

I gawked at her. "What kind of answer is that?"

"An honest one." She rolled to her side too, both of us facing each other, heads resting on our hands. "You can't walk through life in a bubble. I mean, you could, but I'd call you Bubble Girl, and people would talk about you behind your back."

I flicked her shoulder. "Please remind me why we're friends."

"Because we put up with each other's bullshit. But back to my genius advice—you can't live your life waiting for a bomb to drop. You finally have *true* freedom. No one is pulling the strings of your life. You can date different people. Use that time to figure yourself out too—what you like and what you don't, who you are and who you want to be. Then, when the right person shows up, you'll trust your judgment. You'll *know* he's a good guy and live happily every after. But fooling around a bunch beforehand is fun." She waggled her perfect eyebrows.

My now-separated eyebrows furrowed. I should have understood the larger meaning behind Kenna's advice. That true happiness only existed when we were happy with ourselves. But my twenty-one-year-old mind only absorbed the easy portion of Kenna's cautionary tale: trust was the main ingredient to falling in love with the right man. I didn't need to date a string of losers. I didn't need to get all psychoanalytical and delve into the reasons behind my Daniel infatuation. If I found an honorable guy, love and happiness would follow.

"I'll talk to Daniel soon," I said. "But enough about me and my pathetic-ness. You have that psychology test coming up. I'll help you study."

"You hate psychology."

“But I love you and you need to pass that test, or you’ll end up doing another year of school and might have to live with a new roommate.”

“Sacrilege!” she cried and went to grab her heavy book.

Still too nervous to approach Daniel, I waited for a sign to show me he was as honest and kind as he seemed. When that didn’t happen, I wished for enough confidence to approach him and say hi. Predictably, that got me nowhere fast. Then, on a cloudy April day, I witnessed Daniel stopping to give a homeless man money. A random person he didn’t even know!

Only decent humans noticed the less fortunate. Only a nice guy would choose charity over buying a beer. I took his good deed as my long-awaited sign, proof he was the kind man I’d imagined. I no longer needed to assess Daniel’s inherent nature.

I needed to get him on a date.

I was pretty sure he was single. I’d observed him enough to surmise as much. I also knew he didn’t hang out with girls in baggy T-shirts and ripped jeans. Kenna had helped make my face prettier, but my wardrobe was a different story. Instead of squirreling away my next paycheck and watching my savings grow, I shopped. This wasn’t frivolous spending, I told myself. This was manifesto business.

The next morning, I did a fashion show in my dorm room, flaunting my periwinkle sweater-vest. I wore it over a button-up shirt, like Selma Blair in *Legally Blonde*. My fake pearls hung below the lapels of the open collar, my navy skirt fitted but not too short. The outfit was perfect, but a painful memory surfaced.

The last time I dressed like a movie character had been at my tenth birthday, as Alicia Silverstone in *Clueless*. That event hadn’t exactly gone as planned.

Kenna frowned at me. “Why are you dressed like a PTA mom? Halloween isn’t for six months.”

I ignored the disdain in her voice and adjusted the hairband holding my straightened hair. “I’m taking your advice. Today’s the day I’m finally going to talk to Daniel.”

Kenna’s judgmental gaze dipped down my calculated wardrobe. “But you’re not you.”

I laughed off her comment, too anxious to concentrate on anything besides today’s plan. Daniel was smart. He studied a lot. Appealing to his intelligence seemed like the clear move, but men were also simple creatures. In the animal kingdom, different species didn’t commingle. A bright yellow goldfinch wouldn’t get his flirt on with a gray catbird.

If I wanted to date Daniel, I had to dress the part.

I barely focused in my linear algebra class. I didn’t love math the way I loved art, but it was mandatory for my degree, and I appreciated how straightforward it was. There were no multiple-choice questions or essays graded based on opinion. You were right or you were wrong. Most of the time I was right because I studied my butt off. Pretending to love math could be a way to broach conversation with Daniel.

The day was brisk. I wore a new jean jacket over my sweater-vest combo, the nippy wind sharp on my face. I clutched my algebra book with shaky hands, beyond nervous. This was the day. I was finally going to say words to the guy I’d admired for a year and a half. Assuming I didn’t puke first.

I walked toward Daniel’s usual Thursday study spot and reviewed my plan. I was going to drop my algebra book as I passed him. He would help me pick it up. I would notice his textbooks and say something witty like, “Calculus books must be really sad. I couldn’t imagine living with so many problems.” He would laugh, and I’d tell him I’d noticed him studying calculus in that very spot (not a lie) and that algebra was my favorite

subject (total lie). He would smile and ask me on a date. I'd bat my mascara-lined lashes and demurely accept.

I hadn't planned to fall on my face.

Still shaking like a nervous first grader starting school, I kept my attention focused on my goal. Students rushed past me. One girl accidentally knocked my shoulder and apologized. I waved her off absent-mindedly, only one thing on my mind. *Daniel, Daniel, Daniel.* When I rounded a building, I searched for his light brown hair, my algebra textbook digging into my ribs, waves of panic rising.

What if he wasn't studying today? What if I had to collect my courage all over again and endure another morning of nauseating nerves?

But he was in his usual grassy spot.

A rush of breath left me at the sight. This was happening. I kept my eyes on his head, refusing to glance away. I couldn't chance him getting up and disappearing. I could lose him in the stream of students and blow this opportunity. I marched forward with single-minded determination. If people around me were talking, I didn't hear them. If an alien spaceship was suddenly hovering over campus, I didn't notice.

That wayward branch lying in the grass near Daniel? I didn't notice that either.

A foot from him, I stepped on the traitorous branch and my foot rolled forward while I tried to find my balance. My backpack slid to the side. My arms flailed. A horrifying squawk burst from my mouth as my face met the grass. No, not the grass. The algebra textbook I'd been clutching slammed into my cheek.

Freaking wonderful.

I stayed immobile, eyes squeezed shut, cheek and shoulder smarting, hoping I would disappear. Daniel might not have seen me. I hadn't made it to his side yet.

Then a guy said, "Hey. That was a rough fall. Are you okay?"

I peeled one eye open and squinted at a pair of slightly worn boots. I knew those brown boots and that voice. Frustration and anger swamped me. I should have known my plan would fall apart. I was an Ackerman, after all. All carefully crafted schemes eventually bit us in the ass.

I lifted onto my elbow and winced at the pain in my shoulder. “Sorry,” I mumbled.

Daniel crouched in front of me. “Why are you apologizing?”

Because I never should have expected a nice, handsome guy to go for someone like me. Dressing like his preppy crowd didn’t suddenly make me cool and attractive. I should dig myself a subterranean hovel like the mole I was.

Too embarrassed to even answer, I dropped my gaze.

He pressed two fingers under my chin and tilted my face. “You cut your cheek.”

Yeah. I felt the sting and the warmth of his fingers on my skin. None of it was as sharp as my humiliation. “Sorry,” I said again. “I should go.”

Daniel didn’t take that as his excuse to escape. He gripped my upper arms and helped me move to a seated position. “Looks like your necklace broke.”

I touched my neck, still avoiding his eyes. The space was bare. Round white beads littered the grass. They had been fake, like me. Easy to break. “Guess so,” I said.

“Let me grab this…” Daniel maneuvered my backpack off my shoulders, gently lifting to avoid tugging on my sore shoulder. “I have some water. To clean that cut on your face, if you want.”

Two years of college hadn’t erased my inherent distrust. If someone spoke to me with the slightest brusqueness, I’d assumed they hated me. If a student on campus looked at me too long, I would dip my head and walk the other way. I hated that about myself. How I expected contempt. I wanted to be one of those glass-half-full people who walked through life

believing everything happened for a reason and negative events led to greater successes. But that wasn't who I'd become.

As Daniel spoke, I listened for disdain under his nice offer. I tried to hear a whisper of distaste. When my keenly attuned ear registered nothing but kindness, I finally looked up.

My voice muted for a different reason.

I'd never seen Daniel this close before, every detail there for me to absorb. His skin was tanned from rowing and running, more golden than I expected, the birthmark near his left ear a lovely surprise. Unexpected grays and greens swirled with the brown striations of his irises. He had dark smudges below his eyes, though, hinting at a lack of sleep. The broody marks upped his attractiveness.

When I didn't reply to his offer of help, he frowned. "Sorry if that was forward. You don't even know me."

"*I'm* sorry. I interrupted your study time."

He glanced at his strewn textbook, just a foot away. "I guess we're both sorry."

"We're so polite, we're practically Canadians."

He laughed and adjusted his grip on my bag. "Next thing you know, we'll both start speaking French and saying *aboot*."

I laughed too, a bubble of happiness rising with our awkward banter. "Probably."

We both studied the grass. Any pain from my fall was drowned by the hard pound of my pulse. "Water," I said and pointed to my cheek. "I'll take you up on that offer to clean my face. Wouldn't want to attract any wild animals with my blood."

He nodded gravely. "A valid concern. We're liable to get cornered by a pack of wolves."

That was how I wound up sitting on the grass, my legs tucked under me, Daniel opposite me as he dabbed my cheek with a damp shirt. He pressed

the wet cotton gingerly to my cut. “Sorry if it smells. I wore this T-shirt rowing this morning.”

“It’s okay,” I murmured, scared to say or do the wrong thing and ruin this moment. My plan may have been a flop, but this was way better than pretending to love algebra. “How long have you rowed?”

“Since freshman year.”

“Do you love it?”

His dabbing paused, and his eyes lost focus. “It was kind of expected of me, that I join. My dad is a Penn alum. He rowed here. I signed up because of him but don’t love it like he did. I mean, I love the physical aspect. Working out gets me out of my head, but the early mornings suck.”

“You couldn’t pay me to exercise at the crack of dawn.” Those extra hours of sleep replaced the ones I lost to my recurring nightmares. I didn’t mention that fact or that I already knew he rowed. None of that mattered while I faced him, both of us leaning toward each other in quiet conversation.

“Are you a night owl?” he asked.

“Not a partier, if that’s what you mean. I like staying up to watch old movies.”

He straightened, his fascinating hazel eyes roaming my face. “I love old movies. What have you watched?”

I’d rehearsed this part. I’d overheard him mentioning his interest in black-and-white films months ago and knew it was a feigned commonality we could share, one that could lead to more talking and maybe an actual date. I had then spent several evenings watching movies, pencil in hand, ready to scribble notes, tidbits I’d later memorize for this very moment. What I hadn’t expected was to be entranced by the old films.

“*Casablanca*, of course,” I enthused. “It’s a classic. I love how Victor fought for what he believed in. That he was willing to suffer and put his wife before himself.”

“I totally agree,” he said, his voice picking up in volume. “Don’t you wish people were more like that? That they valued doing the right thing over the easy thing.”

He had no clue how hard his comment hit, or how his impassioned belief increased his appeal. “It’s all romanticized, though. Nothing was perfect back then, but I like pretending it was. That life could be as meaningful as that.”

He stared at me a moment, then poured more water onto his now bloodstained T-shirt. He wrung out the excess moisture and pressed the cloth to my face. His Adam’s apple dipped down his neck. His chest seemed to rise faster. “We should get together sometime. Watch an old movie. If you want,” he added quickly, like he was the one who was nervous. Like he was the one eager to meet up again.

I swallowed my dreamy sigh. “That sounds nice.”

It was better than nice. One movie night turned into two. I joined Daniel for study sessions in his grassy spot, no longer admiring him from afar. More of my money got spent on clothes Kenna hated, but she never directly accused me of being shallow. Her judgment was subtler.

“You know that girl with the combat boots I liked?” she said. There was always a different girl or guy. “She told me I look better with my hair black. I told her to fuck off.”

Kenna’s hair-dyeing phase lasted a year, each month dedicated to a different color. She was also dedicated to her passive-aggressive jabs about me changing to please a man.

I didn’t let her comments dampen my joy, though. This was my time. It had finally come.

And Daniel was better than I’d imagined. The two of us talked late into the evenings, debating our future careers, where we’d like to travel, if we’d ever want to ride a rocket to Mars, which Summer Olympic events we looked forward to watching.

Me: Volleyball. Him: Anything but rowing.

We had popcorn fights and argued about who would win *The Amazing Race*. We kissed and touched with trembling hands while falling for each other. True falling. Not the infatuation I'd nursed for so long.

When he asked if I was going home for the summer, I explained my father had died and my mother and I had a strained relationship. When summer became fall, he invited me to his house for Thanksgiving. His Wyndmoor, Pennsylvania, house wasn't as large as my Scarsdale estate, but it exuded the same upper-class authority. At dinner, he boasted about his marks to his mother and told his father how much he loved rowing. The rowing lie made me smile—he'd confided the truth to *me*. In his room, he showed me his hockey trophies, the debate club ribbons and goofy photos tacked on his bulletin board, along with pictures from his family ski trips, every memento evidence of a vibrant life.

The type of life I was desperate to reclaim.

I vowed that day to embrace Daniel's world as mine, even more so than before. I started listening to the same pop and rap music as his friends. I watched the same TV shows, smoked weed when it was offered, even though it made me hungry and paranoid. I did everything I could to fit in.

When fall became winter, and Daniel asked how I was celebrating Christmas, I didn't mention I was Jewish or explain I used to love lighting the menorah candles, the heat of the flames licking at my palms. I shrugged and told him I didn't have plans. The lie was so simple at the time. Harmless. All my efforts to meet Daniel and fit into his life had been easy as pie.

Being with him was the path I'd been destined to follow.

Only now, nine years later, did I realize my marriage hadn't been destiny. I hadn't been righting the wrongs my father's die had cast. I'd behaved as despicably as Jacob Ackerman, manipulating others for my personal gain.

SIXTEEN

If hell was real, it would consist of sitting in an endless crush of traffic with no bathroom access. My hips ached from immobility. My nerves were shot. I should have stopped to pee an hour ago, but I wanted to reach New York in good time. I hadn't expected ninety percent of the city to be driving at noon on a Wednesday.

I finally parked and didn't even try to reach my apartment. I rushed into Fiery Feta and waved at Angel on my way to the bathroom. This tiny Greek restaurant was a regular contributor to Mount Takeout, which meant I could use their facilities, no questions asked. Bladder relieved, I chatted briefly with Angel, then went outside and stretched. I should take my bag upstairs and relax before Daniel got home. Prepare myself for our confrontation, but I was antsy.

Opting for a city stroll, I left my bag in the car and walked with the pedestrian flow, happy to be on my feet, moving at a steady clip.

Honks blared. Brakes screeched. Music thumped from passing cars. Everyone was in a rush, blasting their symphonies of self-importance. After living on a farm, where stillness outweighed man-made sound, the noise seemed louder than I remembered. Unpleasant, almost.

I walked faster and swung my arms. I smiled at strangers for no reason. I tried to exude the positivity dogging me, but no one smiled back. People

brushed past me, aggressive in their single-minded pursuits. The longer I walked, the more alone I felt. There was something worse about feeling lonely in a crowd. So unconnected you could lie down and everyone would traipse over you, oblivious.

I suddenly missed the farm. Which made no sense. I had no company there but a menagerie of mutts, a soft-spoken ex-con, and a cantankerous uncle who shot his rifle every day at 4:45 p.m. New York was my home. I was a city girl at heart.

I stopped on a corner and inhaled the familiar tang of gasoline, the savory scents of hot dogs, the mix of perfumes adding lush tones to the air. All signs of the bustling city I used to adore. So why wasn't I thrilled to be home?

My brutal drive must be to blame, along with my impending confrontation. Daniel wouldn't be home for five or six hours. Waiting in our empty apartment didn't appeal. Kenna was working, but Chelsea wasn't. She could be free for lunch.

A quick call and more walking later, I was in a small French café, the city noise barricaded outside…and I exhaled. The waitstaff wore crisp white shirts and pressed tan pants. Wisps of lavender adorned the tables. Chelsea arrived shortly after me, as perfectly coiffed as the immaculate room, her pale-pink dress something a royal would wear.

She waved when she spotted me. "I'm so glad you called. You saved me from yoga class."

"I thought yoga was fun."

"Not when you're ready to pop."

I stood and hugged her. Her full belly pressed into mine like it had at her baby shower, but tears didn't threaten this time. Shame and confusion didn't crest me. I simply hugged my friend, happy for her fortune. "You look amazing. Remind me when you're due."

Two waitstaff helped us with our chairs. Once seated, Chelsea placed her delicate hands over her baby bump. “Two weeks. I can’t believe how fast the time has gone.”

“Time is strange like that.”

For me, time had slowed. I’d only left the city a few weeks ago. Less than a month of Arthur’s passive-aggressive wisdoms, visits to Brackson, and morning runs, but I felt like I’d been away for ages.

“So…” Chelsea tilted her head, pity softening her big blue eyes. “How are you?”

“Good. Really good.” As unexpected as the last weeks had been, my answer was even more surprising. “I’ve been visiting my uncle in Pennsylvania. Since the shower, actually. He had a health scare, but he’s doing much better, and the escape was exactly what I needed.”

She rubbed her stomach absent-mindedly. “Well, I’m sorry about your uncle, but happy you’re feeling better. We’ve all been so worried about you. And you look great. Have you been exercising?”

“Running in the mornings and eating better.”

“The change looks good on you.” She smiled sweetly. “I bet you can’t wait to see Daniel.”

More like I was mildly panicked. I didn’t know how this talk with him would go. At the very least, he’d need space to digest my revelations. At the worst, he’d kick me out and call a divorce lawyer. If Daniel told me *he’d* been lying our entire marriage, I’d be out the door faster than a New York minute.

Our waiter arrived, saving me from confessing I might not have a husband by nightfall, and we ordered on the fly—omelets for the both of us.

When the waiter left, Chelsea eyed the room as though someone in the half-filled space might tape our conversation. She leaned toward me. “I bought Dean a Porsche.”

I laughed at her secret-spy whisper. “Didn’t he get a new car last year?”

Her rosy cheeks got rosier. “This is a convertible. A summer car we’ll keep at the lake house. It’s just, he’s done so much for me during the pregnancy, and I wanted to thank him. Show him he won’t lose his freedom after Nutmeg is born, that we’ll still take romantic drives. Oh, and did you hear about Blythe? Her hairdresser was off sick, and the woman dyeing her hair messed up the color. Blythe asked to have it dyed darker, and it wound up green. She couldn’t fix it before Easter, so you can imagine how that went.”

Her topic change gave me mental whiplash. “She must have been furious.”

“Not as mad as the stylist who got fired. And that isn’t even the worst of it.”

She flitted her hands as she gossiped about the professional family photos Blythe couldn’t cancel, Chelsea’s mannerisms loosening as her story built. I feigned interest by nodding in appropriate spots, but I had trouble focusing. Dean’s new car and Blythe’s hair disaster weren’t high on my list of concerns. I cared more about Jesse and the abused dog he was training. I worried about Arthur and if he was overworking himself. I fretted over Emery’s parole and how meaningless construction work could derail his progress.

Chelsea prattled on about the changes she’d made to her nursery, her sister’s upcoming trip to France, a popular restaurant closing and a new one opening.

Aside from her first question, she didn’t ask me about myself. I tried to remember if our other lunches and coffee dates had been as one-sided as this, with her talking and me nodding. If the frivolous chitchat had bored me back then. I couldn’t recall, but Kenna’s comment about my New York friends being more of a waystation for me, not my “people,” snuck up on me. Yes, I liked Chelsea, but I didn’t want to tell her the truth about Daniel

or explain about Brackson. I couldn't imagine talking to her about Emery or confessing about my father and my past.

When Chelsea's stories dwindled, our omelets finished, she dabbed her napkin to her lips. "Are you back for good, or does your uncle still need help?"

"I'm not sure. Depends how things go."

Daniel things. Arthur things. This weird missing-of-the-farm thing.

"Well, I'm happy you called. This has been nice."

I nodded. "I'm glad we got to see each other before the baby's born. Things will be different after."

Things already felt different.

The silence of my apartment was another shock to the system, this one equally as uncomfortable. Instead of craving quiet, I craved noise. Anything to shake the weirdness of returning home.

The place was tidy, Mount Takeout no longer reproducing around the recycling bin. The granite countertops also gleamed, which was odd. Daniel took care of his appearance and worked to project a successful image, but I was the organizer of us. I scrubbed floors and toilets, preferring to clean than hiring someone to do it. He was the one who dropped his dirty laundry beside the basket and left dishes in the sink. Either he had barely lived in the space since I'd left, or his mother had come over to tidy. I wasn't sure which option bothered me more.

I opened a cupboard to grab a glass for water but paused. The new glasses he'd purchased—with his mother's approval, of course—weren't in perfect rows, with exact spaces on all sides. They were in a jumbled mess. Before I knew what I was doing, I evened the glasses into precise lines, like soldiers readying to march. Then I messed them up again.

Frazzled, I checked the clock. Daniel would be home in two hours, endless minutes that were ticking by too slowly. I flopped on the couch, phone in hand, and tapped the case with my thumb. When the silence became unbearable, I called Arthur.

"What?" came his succinct answer.

I smiled genuinely for the first time since leaving Fernlow. "Is this how you always answer the phone?"

"Yes."

I wouldn't have known. Arthur had always been the one to call me. "What if it had been someone else?"

"No one else has this number."

I frowned. Arthur communicated with the prison and dog shelters, with the men and women who organized Jewish events. Their contacts were pasted on his kitchen wall, but that better not be the only place he kept them. "At least tell me you have other numbers saved in your phone—so you can speed-dial in an emergency."

"Of course not. I have a landline for that."

Was this man trying to give me a stroke? "What if something happens when you're in the field or training the dogs?"

"Winston found me after my heart attack. He took care of things."

The visual winded me: big, strong Winston leaning over Arthur, maybe pressing carefully on his chest, afraid to break the old man's ribs, while breathing life into his mouth. I didn't even know if CPR had been needed or when or where the heart attack had happened. I'd never asked.

"And if Winston hadn't been there?" I demanded now. "What, then?"

"There's this thing called 9-1-1."

I snorted at his cheekiness, but what kind of emergency plan was that? His home was in the country. An ambulance could take too long to reach him, and I lived three hours away, in the heart of a gridlocked city. I wanted

to shake him for being so stubborn about…everything. Jeopardizing his life because he couldn't be bothered adding numbers to his phone.

That would be my new mission when I returned. I would steal Arthur's cell, get emergency numbers, and stealthily add them to his call list. I'd repaint the house, too, and check on Captain Underbite's nose rash. We also needed to hire someone if Diesel didn't surface.

I glanced around my silent apartment and tried to list the things I needed to do here.

Nothing came to mind.

"I just called to check in," I said. "Don't work too hard while I'm gone."

"Are you planning to come back?" he asked, rare vulnerability under his gruff tone.

Arthur didn't do vulnerable. Arthur was a man carved from rock, but I still hadn't told him about my marriage issues. Not that he'd asked much about my life the past weeks. No prying questions about how Daniel was or if he was okay with me spending the time away. He had mentioned Emery, though, last night, when asking if my suggested employee's name started with an *E*, that ludicrous smirk on his face.

"I told you I was coming back," I said to the confusing man. "For a bit, at least."

Silence carried through the line. Then, "Guess I'll see you when I see you."

He hung up. I resumed fiddling with my phone.

Instead of waiting nervously on the couch, I visited the partly finished nursery, rocked in the rocking chair, and allowed myself to feel sad and reconciled. I packed another bag of clothes, this one more thoughtful: non-revealing jeans and tops for prison visits, a couple of worn T-shirts and sweatpants for painting Arthur's house, casual shoes and boots that were okay to get muddy.

The purposeful activity calmed me, until I heard the front door open.

Forcing my hands to unclench, I stepped into our living area. Daniel wore navy slacks and a blue striped button-down. His wavy brown hair wasn't as tamed as first thing in the morning, the bit of gel he'd applied losing some of its hold.

If only gel could hold me together now.

When he noticed me by the kitchen counter, his eyes lit up, as though surprised. "You're home."

My answering smile was shakier than I'd have liked. "I told you I'd be here."

He didn't question the waver in my voice. I didn't ask why he thought I might not keep my word.

He dropped his briefcase and wrapped me in a hug. "I missed you. Don't remember the last time we were apart this long."

Because it had never happened. Neither of us had jobs that demanded travel, and I had molded my interests alongside Daniel's—tennis, watching old movies, attending football games I disliked, listening to his music until I veered into my love of country—all to ensure we shared hobbies and spent our free time together. No spare minutes for him to lie and cheat and have a secret life. The awareness made me feel ashamed and irritated with myself. I had worked so hard to be the right woman for him, I'd sabotaged us and no longer knew who I was.

Still, I softened into his embrace. Daniel had always been a good hugger, holding just tight enough, letting me nuzzle his neck just long enough. The new hardness of his body didn't fit the way it used to, but he smelled good.

He kissed the top of my head and pulled back. "How's Arthur?"

"As stubborn as always, but strong as an ox. It would take more than a heart attack to slow him down."

"Bet he was happy to have you there."

I thought about Arthur's devious smirks, our silent cupboard wars. "I think so, but it's hard to tell with him."

"I'm sure he was, but I'm happier to have you home." Daniel brushed his thumb along my jaw. "It was lonely without you."

A wallop of guilt flared. I hadn't been lonely the past weeks. Distraught and confused at times, but not lonely. I hadn't lied to anyone in Fernlow. People there knew my history—who my father was and that I was Jewish. It was the first time in twelve years I hadn't had to censor myself.

"Looks like you weren't completely alone while I was gone," I said, grounding myself in this space. This life. "Unless you magically took an interest in cleaning."

The corners of his eyes crinkled. "You know there's no point fighting my mother. She brought over food and did the laundry, even though I told her not to. I swear, she thinks I'm still nineteen."

And he loved it. "You are such a mama's boy."

He shrugged a shoulder and studied me a second longer. "You look great, Scarlett. Let me get changed. Then I'll pour us some wine, and we can order food."

The idea of food turned my stomach, but I nodded. Then I was waiting again, fidgeting as sourness flooded my mouth. My skin felt itchy, my breathing irregular.

By the time Daniel returned, I was standing in the exact place he'd left me, pulse rattling, hands re-clenched at my sides. He didn't comment on my strange behavior. He walked to the counter, pulled out wineglasses from the disordered cupboard, and removed the cork from an opened bottle. He poured the first glass, then the second, unaware I was about to topple his world.

"We missed you at Easter," he said as he turned with the wineglasses. "My mother sent me home with enough ham to feed a small country."

I tried to swallow, but my mouth was too dry. I considered making small talk first, easing into this conversation, but I remembered the feel of Esther's hand in mine, how much stronger I'd felt after visiting Brackson. *The seams are the best place to come undone. It is where you do the hard work of stitching yourself back together.*

I took a deep, shuddering breath and said, "I'm Jewish."

SEVENTEEN

Daniel squinted at me but didn't break his stride. "What are you talking about?"

"I never told you, but I'm Jewish."

He laughed this time, the sound harsh to my ears. "If you think that'll get you out of next year's Easter dinner, think again." He handed me my wine and sipped from his glass. "Did you get much work done at the farm?"

I didn't answer his question or play off my honesty as the joke he thought it was. I walked to our couch and put my wineglass on the coffee table before it hit the floor.

Daniel sat beside me, still in good spirits.

I stared at the gray couch cushion between us and tried again. "This isn't a joke, Daniel. There are things about myself I never told you. Things that were easier to hide than admit."

"What are you talking about?" The tight edge to his voice forced my eyes up.

"I'm so sorry," I said.

"Sorry about what, Scarlett?" His wine sloshed with his hand's jerky movement. "I'm feeling a little in the dark here."

I held my breath until my chest hurt, and then I let the air rush out. "My maiden name isn't Ronson. It's Ackerman."

His eyes flitted about, like he was trying to spot a biting insect he couldn't see. "I don't understand. Why would you lie about your name?"

Because I was a coward. Because I didn't have roots to make me strong. "Because my father was Jacob Ackerman."

A deep crease sliced across his brow. Then his eyes narrowed. "As in *the* Jacob Ackerman?" I nodded, but he shook his head. "This makes no sense. You said your father was dead. You *said* you were Christian."

"I didn't say—" I bit off my defensiveness. There was no denying what I'd done. The only one in the wrong here was me. "My father did die in jail, and I let you believe I was Christian. I wasn't strong enough to own who I was."

I started at the beginning, relaying my tenth birthday, my mother's depression, the schools, the bullying, the snake threat, being shipped to live with my reclusive uncle, and hating myself. Daniel's face darkened as I spoke, his wineglass teetering in an unforgiving grip. My voice was surprisingly flat. Like I was reciting someone else's biography.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he said, anger and confusion coloring his tone. "You could have told me."

God, he made it sound so simple. Just blurt my past and he still would have dated me, pursued me, married me. Not in this lifetime. My issues may have driven me to concoct my web of lies, but Daniel valued his parents' opinion more than his own, worked for their approval. He wouldn't have risked tainting the family name. But this wasn't about him and his need to please.

Nobody was perfect. Least of all me.

"I was scared," I said. "Terrified I'd never live without that shadow hanging over me. I was scared to trust people."

"But this is us, Scarlett. You and me. You must have trusted *me*, right?"

"Not even you, Daniel. Not at first." I didn't need to tell him I'd watched him for ages and planned our first meeting. Those shameful facts

wouldn't serve this conversation about my father and my religion, but there was no point offering partial truths. That wasn't how confessions worked. "I noticed you a year and a half before we met, once in a coffee line then often studying on the campus lawn, but I was painfully shy during that time and was terrified to trust men. So, I did research from the sidelines, found out as much as possible about you. Tried to make sure you were the nice guy you seemed to be."

He stared at me, his hard eyes heightening the tension between us. "So, you were…what? Spying on me?"

"Sort of," I whispered. "Essentially, *yes*," I said louder.

"When, exactly? When I was rowing, hanging out with friends, walking around campus?"

"Some of those times, yeah."

"And when you fell on the grass while I was studying—I always assumed that was an accident. A perfect accident that led us together. Was that planned too?"

"No… I mean, yes." I swallowed convulsively. "Kind of."

"Well, which is it, Scarlett? No or yes? And while we're at it, what else has been lies? Or maybe a better question is, what has been the truth?" He gestured angrily and spilled wine on the couch. He muttered, "Shit," and planted his glass on the coffee table.

He stood and speared his hand through his hair, looking disheveled, wild-eyed. A man on the cusp of violence.

Winston's warning about the dogs, to never underestimate the animal in them, had me shrinking away. Humans were animals too. Men like Emery and Jesse had unleashed their inner beasts at some point, committed crimes, and paid the price. If attacked, a passive person could strike, claw, bite. If backed into a corner, there was no predicting what we'd do.

I studied Daniel warily, unsure what *he* would do.

He bunched his hands into fists and crossed his arms. A defensive pose or an effort to tame his inner beast? “Explain,” he said, curt. “About our first meeting. I want to know.”

So, I told him. Every detail, down to shopping for fake pearls and preppy clothes and the traitorous branch I’d tripped over. He stayed eerily still, watching me with a slight glaze to his eyes, like he was in his head, thinking about something else, someone else, anything else.

When I finished, he didn’t speak. Neither of us had shed tears. My emotions felt as distant as the girl who’d faked her way into this relationship. I should be crying, pleading for him to forgive me.

I remained mute.

“I don’t know what to think,” he said eventually. “It’s like I don’t even know who you are.” Hurt eclipsed his glazed expression, growing as he searched my face. “You didn’t want the baby, did you? You didn’t want our child?”

The heart of those words hit me on target, opening the wound that had begun healing. He knew the truth of my erratic behavior the past months. He’d known, and he’d chosen to ignore it.

“I thought I wanted kids. When we got married and talked about it, I was sure I wanted that with you, but as time went on, the idea scared me more and more. Not because of you. I just didn’t realize how much my past still affected me, things I haven’t fully worked through yet. So, no, I don’t think I want kids of my own, but I did fall in love with you, Daniel. I may have done stupid things to get there, but those feelings were real.”

“You mean the idea of me.”

Another harsh blow, this one just as crippling. “I was happy,” I said, the only surety I could grasp. “I was happy with you and our life, but things changed. Probably because of me, but you changed too. I think you saw this baby as a way for us to get back to where we were. For me, it only emphasized how much we’ve grown apart.”

“Grown apart from what? We never had anything real!”

The air shuddered with his outburst, but I didn’t look away. I deserved his anger. I deserved this horrible twisting in my gut. There was nothing else to add, no turning back time.

“We can see a therapist,” I said. “If you want. Or give each other some space. Whatever you think is best.”

“Oh, that’s rich. *Now* I get a choice in how this unfolds? Now that I know my wife trapped me into a fake marriage and doesn’t want kids, now I get a choice?”

“It wasn’t fake,” I said, my voice small. I blinked, willing my emotions to finally spill over. My eyes remained dry.

He huffed out a humorless laugh.

When the silence stretched, I said, “Are you happy, Daniel? Have you truly been happy the past few years? Because I’m not sure I have been. Not for some time. I know it’s not fair for me to say that now, after all this, but it’s the truth.” The admission made me feel stronger yet sad, another piece of our marriage tossed onto the pyre I’d built.

He scanned our spotless apartment, the floor-to-ceiling windows I’d been sure had proven we’d made it. Success in a bustling city that often crushed dreams.

“I can’t answer that,” he said. “I can’t be in the same room with you right now. I need…” He dropped his head forward and rubbed the puckered skin between his brows. “I think we should take a break. A separation or whatever. I need space away from you so I can think.”

I’d expected this outcome, had packed for it. I had admitted to the old gum tree that I didn’t want children and wasn’t sure Daniel was the man for me. This blow didn’t hurt less.

“I’ll go to Kenna’s tonight and back to the farm tomorrow. Take whatever time you need. I’ll wait for you to reach out.”

We didn’t discuss how long this separation would be or what the rules entailed, but a separation was just that—a split from certainty. If we chose to come back together afterward, we’d be starting from scratch. *The seams.* Re-stitching ourselves into a new life. Or we wouldn’t, and this would be an anticlimactic end to the marriage I thought would make me the happiest version of myself.

EIGHTEEN

Kenna took one look at me standing on her doorstep, my face and limbs droopy, and opened her arms. “What happened, honey?”

My tears finally came, a gasping sob that had me tumbling into her embrace. She petted my back and let me cry on her shoulder. I’d never loved her so much.

When my breakdown ebbed, she grabbed my shoulders and held me at a distance. “I assume this has to do with Daniel.”

I nodded, then cringed at the wet splotch on her vintage Powerpuff Girls top. “I ruined your favorite T-shirt.”

“It’ll wash off as easily as the tears on your face. I’ll pour us liquor while you get settled. The spare room is all yours.”

Thirty minutes later, after rehashing tonight’s confrontation, we sat on her oversized couch, knees tucked under us, refilled glasses of scotch in hand. Kenna didn’t do wine. She did everything loud and proud, like the vibrancy of her turquoise couch, the pinks and yellows in the artwork and accent cushions, the piles of magazines and colorful knickknacks on every surface.

She didn’t do subtle in conversation either. “Daniel is a good guy, but he isn’t for you.”

My next sip of scotch burned as much as her bluntness. “Tell me what you really think.”

“Okay, Daniel was a project to you. A test to see if you could magically transform yourself and wipe clean all that crap from your past. Marrying Daniel was never about love.”

“Jesus, Kenna, I was being rhetorical. You weren’t actually supposed to tell me what you think.”

She flashed her pearly whites. “But it felt so good. I’ve been waiting to tell you that for nine years.”

“But I *did* love Daniel. We used to laugh all the time. I may have changed things about myself to fit into his world, but you can’t fake happiness.” Where had this defensiveness been when I’d been arguing with Daniel? This burst of passion? I hadn’t even tried to fight for him.

“Being happy with a nice guy can feel like love, but being in love with the *right person* is a different language. With the right man or woman, it doesn’t matter what you’re wearing or what they’re wearing or if their family has the right pedigree. With the right man, you would’ve told him you were Jewish and who your father was from the start. You wouldn’t have been able to hold back. He would have made you feel safe enough to spill that whole mess.”

An image of Emery bloomed: his huge frame and massive shoulders, those bottomless eyes. Telling him about my religion and father and recurring nightmares had been effortless. What he’d been wearing—*a freaking prison uniform*—hadn’t mattered. I had no clue who his family was or what criminal activity had landed him behind bars. Emery was the first man in a long time who had made me feel safe.

“Why are you blushing?”

I looked up sharply, caught off guard by the heat in my cheeks. “I’m not blushing.”

“You are so blushing, and considering what went down tonight, I’m guessing Daniel isn’t the one flustering you.”

Sometimes I wished I could hide things from Kenna. “It’s nothing. Just someone I met at Brackson.”

Kenna moved in slow motion, blinking her ridiculously long lashes, placing her scotch glass on the coffee table, and crawling into my space. “Say that again.”

“Nothing. It was nothing.”

“Holy shit.”

“What?”

Her eyes widened. “Holy shit.”

Forget blushing. My face felt hot enough to ignite. “Fine. His name is Emery, and there’s something about him that just…gets to me. He’s easy to talk to and is great with the dogs, and for some reason I get all loopy around him. I’m sure it’s nothing—effects of all this confusion with Daniel. I mean, he’s a convicted criminal for God’s sake.”

“Is he hot?” Kenna was on her knees, hovering over me, glee on her face. “Do you have a picture?”

I shoved her away. “There’s no picture.”

“But is he hot? Is he like one of those broody, tattooed prisoners who make good girls go bad?”

Her pleasure at my discomfort was irritating, but there was no denying how my body reacted to thoughts of Emery, even now, all these miles away from him. Which was ridiculous. I couldn’t picture him at a fancy French café, sitting next to Chelsea, his tattooed neck beside her dainty pearls. The idea of him in my life beyond our training work was laughable. “He isn’t my type, *obviously*. But he’s easy on the eyes.”

She whooped and fell onto her back, too giddy for my liking. “This could be the best day ever.”

“The day Daniel and I separated?”

“The day you realized Daniel wasn’t the right man for you and the day you got all gushy over some sexy convict. It’s like my real friend is back.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She lifted onto her elbows and blew her black bangs out of her eyes. “I love you like a sister, but from that first day you did that fashion show wearing those tacky pearls and that sweater-vest, you’ve cared more about playing a role than being the real you. You need to let loose for once in your life. Have a wild affair with the guy from the wrong side of the tracks. What did he do anyway? To get pinched.”

“Since when do you speak like a mob boss?”

“Since now. Was it bad? Did he, like—” she dropped her voice to a whisper “—kill someone?”

Thinking about Emery made the alcohol burn hotter through my veins. “I have no clue. I’ve been dying to ask, but Arthur chooses not to know. He even hires these men without asking. He says they deserve their fresh start without people judging them, and I guess I relate to that. It’s why I changed my name and everything.”

Unless I was being naïve. If Arthur hired him, I couldn’t ignore Emery’s past. I would be the reason for his employment. I’d have to ask why he’d been sent to prison, make sure having him around was safe. An unpleasant prospect, and Kenna and I had gotten off topic.

“I didn’t cry when talking to Daniel,” I told her. “I didn’t even get sad. It all just felt so…inevitable. How could I be in a relationship for this long and not ache for him?”

She settled back onto the couch, legs tucked under her. “I think a part of you always knew he was a stand-in, a guy to help you heal while you got older and stronger. Which is what you are now—older and stronger. It’s time to quit planning and start living.”

This was the exact awareness that had hit me after talking with Esther: my need to find out who I was, no agenda or manifesto. Daniel and I had

been drifting for years. Nothing about this separation was sudden. Over the coming weeks, he might flirt more openly with Margot of the Shiny Blond Hair. He might walk to her apartment, his hair slicked back, his new body stretching his T-shirt, and ask to borrow a cup of sugar. He might commiserate with her over our separation until she touched him, soothed him, offered herself to him.

It could happen, and no jealousy spiked. No want for the man who had warmed my bed for nine years.

My phone rang from the kitchen counter, and my stomach churned. If it was Daniel, I wouldn't have anything else to say. Not yet, so soon after the rawness of my confessions. I walked over warily, but Arthur's name flashed up at me.

"What's wrong?" I asked as soon as I hit Talk.

"Do you always answer the phone like that?"

I laughed at his retort, my affection for this man still surprising me. "Only when you call. What's up?"

"I took your advice."

"To work less and exercise more?"

"Diesel broke parole. He isn't coming back, so I hired Emery. He starts tomorrow. Thought you'd want to know."

Butterflies collided with the scotch in my belly, throwing me off-balance. "I'm sure he appreciates the work," I said, struggling to maintain my composure.

"I'm sure he does," Arthur replied, a hint of humor to his tone. He was probably smirking.

Arthur didn't bother with further small talk or ask about my city visit. He simply said to call when I was returning and hung up.

I didn't know if I should keep standing or sit down or go for a run or tidy Kenna's apartment. I wasn't sure what to do with my hands or restless body. Emery was a soon-to-be *ex*-convict. He was the opposite of who

should unbalance me, and I had no clue why he'd been in prison. A fact that was no longer avoidable.

Kenna poured herself another finger of scotch.

The last thing I needed was more alcohol. "That was Arthur," I said.

She swirled her glass. "I gathered."

"He hired Emery. To work on the farm. He starts tomorrow."

She froze mid-swirl. "I thought he was in prison."

"He gets out tomorrow."

"Then I'll come to Fernlow with you."

"What?"

She shrugged and downed her drink in one gulp. "I have a few free days, and there's no way I'm letting you near that guy without meeting him first."

"I thought you said I should let loose and have fun with the guy from the wrong side of the tracks." Not that I would go there with Emery. Daniel and I were separated, not divorced, and I had never been reckless like Kenna.

"That was theoretical. I said it before I knew he was getting out."

"But I have a bar mitzvah to attend."

"Then I'll be your date to that and to any other shindig you think will keep me away. I need to verify Emery's hotness for myself and assess that he isn't a creep. Plus, I'd love to see the farm and meet that nutty uncle of yours."

Thanks to my elopement, I'd avoided introducing Arthur to my friends and husband. *I* hadn't seen Arthur in the twelve years between leaving for college and his heart attack. But I actually liked the idea of him meeting Kenna, all five-foot-four tattooed inches of her. She wouldn't take Arthur's lip, and he wouldn't put up with hers.

I just wasn't sure Kenna should meet Emery. Or that Arthur should have hired him in the end. He might move in to the barn loft where Diesel had

slept. If so, he'd be close to where we lived. What if he *had* actually murdered someone? What if he had hurt innocent people?

What if I blurted more awkward monologues about suntan lotion and skin care?

NINETEEN

Driving to the farm was nothing like driving to New York. The farther I got from the city, the more my shoulders relaxed. The closer I got to the farm, the faster I drove. By the time I turned into Arthur's drive, an overwhelming sense of rightness filled me.

The feeling of being home.

Arthur's truck was gone. Kenna pulled in behind me and joined me by my car. She frowned at her combat boots. "You weren't kidding about the mud. Or the isolation. Do you even get Wi-Fi here?"

"It's intermittent." But my phone dinged with a text. I dug it from my purse, pleased to see Tavi's name. Her message, however, confused me.

Tavi: What should I bring tonight?

I sensed Arthur's meddling at work.

Me: I'll tell you if you tell me what's going on tonight.

Tavi: I saw Arthur in town. He invited my family to dinner. To meet the new recruit.

That would be Emery. I guess we were throwing him a release party. And I had cooking to do.

Me: Bring dessert.

"Are you sexting with your boyfriend already?"

I loosened my grip on the phone, refusing to let Kenna get under my skin. “No, but I’m apparently cooking for his release party. And he’s not my boyfriend.”

He would be my coworker, though. A free man, allowed to eat whatever he wanted, do whatever he wanted, date whomever he wanted. I had no clue how long he’d been in jail, how many years he’d gone without a woman’s touch. He’d probably go to a bar later tonight, pick someone up. Bring her back to the farm.

My mouth soured, but I had a larger concern at hand. Tonight, I would ask Emery about his history and find out why he’d been in jail.

After I cooked for him.

“Can you make your lasagna?” I asked Kenna. “I bet Emery would love it. I’ll throw together a Caesar salad and grill some steaks—Emery mentioned missing steak. And baked potatoes with all the fixings. I’ll defrost chicken soup too. And maybe buy some pizza? We’ll do a buffet.” Emery had been so intent in prison, asking about food, salivating over every word and conjured image.

Kenna leaned on my trunk and smirked at me. “You have it so bad.”

Why was everyone smirking these days? “I have nothing so bad, unless you count a worsening case of annoyed-with-my-friend-itis.”

She waggled her eyebrows. “Dinner’s gonna be some kind of fun. Take me on a tour first. Then we’ll shop and cook, and I’ll continue driving you nuts.”

There was no avoiding Kenna’s teasing or this impending night.

The tour was a short reprieve. We chatted with Winston in the kennel and watched him run a mutt through the agility course. I checked on Captain Underbite, pleased her nose rash was clearing up. Winston said she was ready to be more active, which meant she could come on my morning runs. When I told her the good news, she slathered me with kisses. I was a firm believer dogs spoke human.

A trip to town and thorough shop later, Kenna and I were in the kitchen, lasagna being layered, takeout pizza on the counter, chicken soup defrosting, potatoes baking, while we chopped and prepped the rest. I had no clue what was taking Arthur so long. Winston had said he'd gone to pick up Emery six hours ago.

When the screen door slammed, I jumped and dropped my knife. I recognized Arthur's stomping steps. No others followed. Maybe Emery had already found a woman, someone to give him a proper *release party* that didn't involve inhaling mountains of food. Why the hell had I cooked so much?

Arthur surveyed the insanity. "Are we feeding an army?"

Honestly. What was wrong with me? "I might have gotten a tad carried away."

Kenna wiped her hands on her apron. "You must be Arthur. It's so great to finally meet you." She waltzed over and wrapped Arthur in a hug. He didn't hug her back. She hugged him harder. "I would say Scarlett got her looks from you, but the eyebrow situation when I met her wasn't pretty. You're much better-looking."

The woman had zero filter. "This is Kenna, Arthur. My roommate from college and former friend. She's leaving shortly. Like, right now."

She released my rigid uncle and winked at him. "I'm staying for a few days, actually. You'll have to excuse Scarlett's poor memory. She's a little loopy in the head at the moment, for *reasons*. She's stress-cooking."

Arthur eyed the messy counter again and nodded once, sharply. "He'll like this."

I assumed the *he* in question was Emery, and heat flushed my face. I didn't remember the last time I wanted a meal to go so well. I wanted to feed Emery. Good food. Real food. Welcome-home food. Even if this wasn't his real home. Or mine. I just wanted his first free night to be nice.

“Tavi will be here around six,” Arthur said. “Winston’s staying for dinner too. Emery will sleep in the barn loft. He’ll need fresh sheets. You can take them out to him, Scarlett.”

More heat flared up my neck, mild panic following. I suddenly wasn’t ready to see Emery here, in my space, outside those prison walls. “Can’t you do it?”

“You told me to relax,” Arthur said, amused.

I had told him that, but what I really wanted was to throttle the smugness off his face. “Fine. It’s no big deal. I’ll just walk over and give Emery some sheets.” For the bed he’ll be sleeping in. On this property. With other women.

I ground my teeth. Kenna was right: this stress-cooking was making me loopy.

She chuckled as I left, her traitorous words to Arthur following me into the hallway. “Nice one, sir. Consider me impressed.”

Sheets tucked under one arm, I drew out my walk to the barn. I assessed the farmhouse’s exterior, studied the peeling surfaces I would be repainting. I lingered by the black gum tree and pressed my free palm to its rough bark.

“I’m doing it,” I whispered. “I told Daniel everything. There are no more secrets. No more lies. I’m scared about where I go from here, but it’s a good scared.”

Being around Emery was a good scared too. It meant my hormones were alive. If Daniel and I decided this was it, there would be another man, someone who would bring my libido and heart back to life. Not Emery, but someone suitable. My nervousness with him was about the tough questions ahead. This was the perfect opportunity to ask why he’d been convicted. Make sure nothing in Emery’s past would follow him here and hurt my family.

I paused in the barn and inhaled the smells of leather and earth. The main level was a simple space used for dog training—leashes hung off

hooks next to a bucket filled with clickers. A bathroom had been added, and a ladder led up to the upper loft. I knew there was a bed and night table up there. A small mirror above the dresser. A kitchenette.

There would also be a massive man living on his own for his first time in years.

I gathered my wits and began to climb. The rungs creaked under my boots, the oxygen seeming to thin the higher I ascended. I kept my eyes on the ladder, then on the floor as I reached the landing. When I finally glanced up, I squeezed the sheets to my chest.

Emery was on the bed, his elbows on his knees, a forlorn look on his broody face. Several plastic bags were by his feet.

"What's wrong?" I asked. He was free. He should be ecstatic.

He shook his head and passed a hand over his mouth. "Your uncle took me shopping. Bought me a bunch of stuff."

He gestured to the still-packed bags. It was then I noticed a cage in the corner, Twinkie resting inside. Emery had said Twinkie would stay in Brackson and be transferred to a new prisoner. But Twinkie was here. Arthur must have made this happen. He wanted Emery to have company and love, and clothes that weren't prison-issue. "Isn't going shopping a good thing?"

Instead of thankfulness, regret pulsed from his hunched shoulders and bowed head. "I don't deserve this. This place. This job. Any of it." He looked me square in the face, moisture shimmering in his eyes. "I did things, Scarlett. Bad things. Things I'm so ashamed of. I just don't… I wish I'd never…"

His pained voice trailed off, and my heart ached for this imposing man grappling with his newfound freedom and the choices he'd made. I couldn't relate to what he was going through, but Arthur's belief in letting the past lie had never hit as hard as it did now. Emery's shame and disgust with

himself were palpable. A man this distraught over his bad deeds wouldn't sabotage his second chance or hurt those who'd supported him.

Rehashing his crime would only feed my curiosity, not help him heal.

I placed the sheets on the bed and sat beside him. The old mattress dipped, forcing us closer together. "I don't know what you did to land in jail. I don't know how long you were in there or what you've done to rehabilitate yourself, and I've decided not to ask. But I do know you made me feel safe when I visited Brackson. The guards respected you, and other prisoners looked up to you. I know you saved a number of dogs while there and wouldn't have hurt them for anything. And Arthur believes in you. He wouldn't have hired you otherwise. So, I guess your job now, aside from working here, is to figure out how to believe in yourself. The farm is good for that. It's been good for me. There's nowhere to run from your demons here."

He dragged a knuckle by the corner of his eye and nodded.

We sat in silence for a while.

TWENTY

Tavi's family and Kenna were excellent buffers for our odd dinner gathering. We moved the small kitchen table into the living room and added a spare bridge table, all of us crowded around the makeshift space. Winston ate quietly, offering shy smiles and thanks while shoveling more food onto his plate. Emery ate with single-minded resolve.

There was nothing fancy about lasagna noodles layered with store-bought sauce or cold takeout pizza or steaks purchased from the local grocery store. Emery ate like he was at a five-star restaurant. He moaned when each forkful hit his mouth. He closed his eyes to chew and swallow. He licked his lips as he considered what to attack next, his plate filling twice over.

I could barely eat with him near.

"If you don't slow down, you'll regret it later," Arthur said.

"There's no way I'm not finishing all this food." Emery's sadness from earlier was gone, replaced by excited determination. "It's too good."

Arthur jabbed his fork toward me. "You can thank Scarlett for your imminent heart attack. And mine. When she found out you were coming for dinner, she decided to cook for a platoon."

Leave it to Arthur to embarrass me. "I told you to stick to the soup and salad. The rest wasn't for you."

Kenna laughed. “That’s like giving a kid a handful of candy and expecting him not to eat it.”

“See? She knows how it is.” Arthur didn’t smile at Kenna, but his slight nod was an Arthur stamp of approval.

I wasn’t sure I liked how well they were getting along. Two of them against one of me weren’t good odds.

Winston looked up, eyes wide, as he scooped a forkful of loaded baked potato. “Is there gonna be candy too?”

“No candy,” Tavi said. “But I did make a cake. Chocolate with vanilla icing since I didn’t know what Emery liked.”

She ate while her husband took his turn bouncing their baby, but the mention of cake had Kenna chattering about her mother’s baking skills. Mrs. Puglisi made a mean molten-chocolate cake and lemon tart and every type of pie you could imagine. She said baking was the path to the heart.

Emery sat opposite me, ignoring the conversation, his fork the stillest I’d seen it since we’d sat down. “You made all this for me?” he asked quietly.

There was no denying the messy kitchen or overflowing table—or the dip in my belly at his soft words. “I went a little overboard. I just know how much you’ve missed food. I wanted your first night to be special.”

He stared at me, fork not moving, eyes doing that intense thing where the rest of the world fell away. All but Emery’s dark eyes. “Thank you,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” I murmured.

Kenna’s cutlery clattered loudly to her plate. “So, Emery. How does it feel to be out?”

He glanced at me, then at Arthur. “I feel grateful.”

He refocused on his food, but she didn’t. “Did you grow up in Pennsylvania? Do you have family around here?”

He moved a piece of soggy lettuce around with his fork. “I was raised in Philly, but my sister lives in LA now. My father’s still here, but we don’t speak. And my mother moved to Michigan, but we’re not close either.”

The mood sobered, and I glared at Kenna, hoping she could read my mind. *He just got out. Don’t push him. He’s not ready.*

Kenna avoided my steely gaze, but Tavi didn’t. She swallowed a bite of lasagna and smiled at me. “Arthur said you were back in New York for the night. Visiting your husband, I assume. Will he be coming here? I’d love to meet him.”

As thankful as I was for Tavi’s intuitive topic change, this one was just as awkward, and everyone waited on my reply.

I gathered my hands on my lap, spun my wedding ring in circles. “Daniel and I have been having problems for a while. I went back to discuss some things with him, and we…” I looked at Arthur, who was focused on me. “We decided to separate for now.”

Arthur pressed his lips together. Annoyed I hadn’t told him about my troubles? Or in sympathy? I could never tell with him. My attention flicked to Emery, but he looked down abruptly. Silence hung over the room.

Note to self: at future jail-release parties, write down a list of acceptable dinner questions.

The men resumed eating, while the rest of us scrambled for conversation—predicted summer weather, this year’s corn festival, how great it was having a store like Milk & Bean in town. All topics that didn’t involve my marriage or Emery’s release. When I told Tavi I’d be repainting Arthur’s house, my uncle frowned at me but didn’t comment. I’d take that as permission.

Once everyone’s forks had slowed to a stop, Arthur pushed his chair back. “I need to discuss a few things with Winston and Emery. If you ladies clean up before dessert, we’ll clean up after.”

I'd normally grumble about getting the short end of that cleanup stick, but I couldn't push them out fast enough. A breather was in order, girl time away from that awkward meal.

Tavi's husband carried their daughter in his arms. "Do you want me cleaning up or taking her for some fresh air?" he asked Tavi.

"Which do you think?"

Naresh kissed her cheek. "Fresh air, it is."

He took their daughter on an evening stroll, leaving us women elbow-deep in dirty dishes.

"You got a winner with Naresh," I told Tavi. "He's so sweet with Prisha and seems to love spending time with her."

She smiled as she scraped food into the compost. "It's twofold. He works all day and misses her, so he steals whatever time he can. He also knows the days can be long for me, that I'd rather be in here for adult time than out there keeping her settled."

"Like I said, he's a winner."

She placed her hand on my shoulder. "Sorry about your husband."

Kenna loaded the small dishwasher noisily. "I'm not. He wasn't right for Scarlett."

Tavi laughed. "You're lucky to have a friend like her. There's no price on honesty."

"Lucky, meaning, I should be happy she said my one eyebrow looked like an angry caterpillar when we met?"

Tavi's next laugh was louder. She understood the horror of unruly eyebrows. "Beyond lucky. I'd have killed for that kind of friendship during high school."

She and I both. Those years had been punctuated by solo lunches in the art room, kids purposely knocking into me as they'd walked by. "I wish we'd been friends back then. Closer, at least. It would have made things easier."

She stacked the scraped plates by the sink. “Probably, but it might have sent us on different paths. I like my path just fine.”

I’d expect nothing less from a trained psychologist, but I wasn’t sure I liked my path. I’d spent the last nine years in a relationship of design. Most of my friends were friends of convenience. I had lied as much as my father, though with less detriment.

I wasn’t particularly happy. Or was I?

I loved *this*—doing dishes with Kenna and Tavi, two women who knew most of the crap I’d endured. I was building a relationship with my uncle for the first time in my life. I loved Captain Underbite and volunteering with the prisoners. I liked being part of Emery’s successes in his new life. If I really thought about it, I was happy. Even with the separation.

We chatted about the upcoming bar mitzvah and what Kenna and I should wear. We joked about how much food those men could pack away without worrying about weight gain. I would certainly be running longer tomorrow.

“So,” Kenna said, dragging out the syllable. “When are we allowed to talk about the hunk of manly perfection that is sweet on you?”

I nearly dropped the dish I was drying. “Never. The answer to that is *never*.”

Tavi extricated the dish from my hand. “Is Emery why you’ve been volunteering at Brackson so much? He really is cute—and sweet.”

Did they not realize I was still married? Did they not see the tattoos peeking out of his crew neck and at the wrists of his long sleeves? Not that Kenna would care about tattoos, but Tavi must know this guy was the antithesis of my type. “Volunteering makes me feel good. I like contributing to society and helping Arthur. I love the dogs, and seeing these rough men get all mushy around the pups is special. I haven’t been going because of Emery, and I plan to keep going now that he’s out.”

But my niggling anxiety resurfaced. Emery had been my safety net there. Not the guards or volunteers. If I'd ever felt uncomfortable, he was the person I would seek out. Which meant I'd have to deal with any issues on my own, lean on Martinez more, but I would tough it out. I would spend a few days on the farm, help get Emery settled, then I'd go back.

"You were holding out on me," Kenna said, no longer washing dishes. She and Tavi stood by the counter, both of them crowding me. "He is more than easy on the eyes. And the way he looks at you? They write poems about looks like that."

Warmth unfurled in my belly. "Like what?"

"Like you're a goddess and he's never had a woman. Which, let's be real for a sec—he has definitely *not* had a woman in a long time, so I get the heat pouring off the man, but there was more than lust in his eyes. I think he likes you."

"*I think he likes you.* Really, Kenna? We're not in grade school. He's a grown man with a rough time ahead of him. I'm sure you were reading into things."

Kenna turned to Tavi. "Am I wrong? Is he not moony over her?"

Tavi faced me, resigned. "Sorry, but there was definite mooniness. He likes you."

First, Arthur banding together with Kenna, now Kenna and Tavi. Everyone was so quick to gang up on me. "Have you forgotten that I'm still married? I have a wedding ring and a husband."

"You're separated," Kenna said. "Not married. You're just as free as Emery."

Daniel and I hadn't discussed the length of our separation or its details. "Free" might mean we could date other people and have flings, or it could mean we should remain chaste while we sorted through our feelings. "Emery and I are friends. I want to help him transition from prison, give him the best chance possible. But that's all this is—a friend helping a

friend. Plus, I have no idea how old Emery is. I'm pretty sure he's younger than me."

"The lady doth protest too much," Kenna said. "And don't diss cougar town. Younger guys are fun."

I rolled my eyes at her. "Like I said, we're just friends."

Still, my mind returned to his small barn loft, that soft mattress, the intimate air around Emery and me as we'd sat in silence. What would it feel like to be kissed by a man as large and imposing as him? To feel the weight of him on top of me? Too distrustful of men, I'd only ever slept with Daniel, and I didn't remember the last time I'd had sex. Real sex. Not the drunken fumbling and broken-condom sex before my pregnancy. The type of passion that made you feel connected to another person on a deeper level, pulling at each other, needing more, needing everything. I wasn't sure I'd ever had sex like that.

"Just friends," Kenna said, laughing as she studied my face. "Sure. We'll go with that."

TWENTY-ONE

Sam Cohen's bar mitzvah was a small affair. We were in the Cohens' basement. Chairs had been rented for the guests, a bimah erected where the bar mitzvah boy would stand and read the Torah. A rabbi was rented as well. I didn't know rabbis could be rented, but rural communities didn't have much choice.

Kenna, Arthur, and I sat with gathered family and friends during the service. Sam read his Torah portion, his voice wobbly at times, some Hebrew words stumbled over until the rabbi whispered in his ear. I didn't understand the words sung, the lessons or stories shared by this thirteen-year-old boy, but the sounds flitted through the low-ceilinged room, teasing me with a sense of belonging. This was the language of my people, the tradition ingrained in our history—a child reaching adulthood, a gentle push to open his arms and embrace his role in our culture.

I hadn't been offered this tender nudge. I had been shoved into a lonely world filled with hate, but I was sitting here now, paying witness to Sam's journey, whether I chose to accept my heritage or not.

Today, I chose acceptance.

The rabbi spoke of Sam's new role as a Jewish adult, hopes for his involvement in the community and that he would one day teach the same traditions to his children. All moving talk, but the last comment made me

frown. The rabbi hadn't asked *if* Sam wanted kids one day. He presumed he'd enter fatherhood, as did most people. *When are you having kids? Just wait until you have your own.* Off-the-cuff comments rooted in assumption. We were created to procreate and give life. Perpetuate our species…and our faith, in the eyes of the rabbi. The expectation felt like another barrier between Judaism and me.

Sam spoke next, telling of his tzedakah: the charitable act performed for this bar mitzvah, a deeper involvement in community and volunteering. More prayers were read afterward. I followed along in the book on my lap —the siddur filled with Hebrew and English translations. They rolled the Torah back up, covered it with a decorative fabric, then paraded it around the forty-odd people in the room.

I didn't sing the unfamiliar Hebrew song or touch the sacred scroll, as was the custom. Esther did, though. The frail Holocaust survivor held her siddur toward the Torah, pressed its corner to the ancient scroll, then brought the book to her lips for a kiss.

Love for religion. Love for who she was.

Love for the people who had helped her survive.

"I might start crashing Jewish parties," Kenna said as the luncheon began. She heaped smoked salmon and cream cheese onto her plate. "This is food nirvana."

"You'll have to wear long sleeves and pants if you want to blend in." Not the combat boots, short plaid skirt, and tight red halter top she was currently flaunting.

She bumped her hip into mine. "You have a tattoo. I just have more."

"My butterfly hardly counts."

She popped a slice of cucumber into her mouth and chewed while smiling. "Isn't it nuts that the guy you're falling for is covered in ink? I must have rubbed off on you."

"I'm not falling for him," I whisper-yelled. "I'm married."

“Semantics,” she said. “Also, thanks for pushing me to talk about my volunteer work with my bosses. You were right—a couple fashion houses were intrigued, not worried I was less committed. They even mentioned funding, like you thought they might.”

“Really?” My shoulders hitched with my excited tone. “I’m so happy for you.”

“So am I…but it’s also daunting. There’s been talk about setting up a foundation, raising money. Stuff I know nothing about.”

“I’ll help with anything you need. Just say the word.”

“You can count on it.” But her attention cut to one of the food tables. “Tea sandwiches! You didn’t tell me they had tea sandwiches here.”

She left to devour more food, while I smiled, happy for my friend’s success.

I found a free couch cushion and ate the blintz and other salads on my plate. I remembered this about Jewish events, all the food, the leftovers eaten for a week. Tuna and egg salad, blintzes stuffed with cottage cheese and slathered with jam. The menu reminded me of my father and our New York deli excursions, memories that made me more sad than angry these days. I’d also found myself imagining his last moments lately. His shock at being stabbed. The pain. The fear. What he might have thought about as he’d lain on a cold floor, breathing his last breaths. If he’d thought about me.

Arthur stood nearby, chatting with a few men. Other women were gathered in groups, eating heartily, gossiping together. At some point today, they had all stopped to thank me for coming, even though it wasn’t their son’s big day. They had thanked me for supporting the community.

A young man helped Esther to a chair beside me and got her settled with a plate of food on her lap. “Being old is not so bad,” she said. “Nice men are always helping me.”

The young man blushed and asked if she needed anything else. She said a winning lottery ticket.

“Does this food stand up to the New York delis you miss?” I asked her.

She made a noncommittal sound. “It is good, but it is not the same.” Esther took a bite of an egg-salad-smeared bagel and chewed. The effort took longer than my next three bites. She wiped some crumbs from her lips. “It is nice to have you here, Scarlett. Arthur is happy.”

I choked on a piece of blintz and covered my mouth with my napkin. “Arthur is never happy.”

“He is when you are home. He might not say it, but he is more content.”

I wasn’t sure when she saw Arthur outside of these events, but I followed her gaze to my uncle. Kenna had him cornered, talking about God knew what. He stood stiffly, hands stuffed in his pockets, nodding and speaking occasionally. When both their heads turned, their eyes seeking me out, I cursed silently. Nothing good could come of those two colluding.

“He’s happy enough, I guess,” I said.

“And you? Are you happy in Fernlow?”

I loved the weight of her accent, how it curled around the letters as she spoke, but it was a loaded question. This week had certainly felt different. I’d spent most afternoons at Milk & Bean, working on my book covers. I had also started drawing again, these sketches less morose than the scratchings of my youth. I’d drawn trees growing from a rabbit’s head, mushrooms sprouting from a whale’s spout. Strange imaginings, all revolving around growth and transformation. I’d also written. I’d detailed my recent snake nightmare down to the nitty-gritty, gory details. The task had been unpleasant but seemed to help; the nightmare hadn’t plagued me last night.

It could be the fresh air, the morning runs with Captain Underbite, her tail wagging, the earth supporting every pound of my feet, but I thought Emery’s advice had helped the most. His thoughtful insight.

He had even run with me this morning, a question in his eyes when he'd met me by the kennel. "Is it okay if I come?"

My heart had started racing before my run had even begun, but I'd said, "Sure."

We hadn't talked on the run. Captain Underbite and Twinkie had frolicked in the grass. Emery had slowed his longer stride to match mine, our breaths in sync. That serene quiet had provided happiness so pure I'd been afraid to speak and break the spell.

It had been the most at peace I'd felt in a long time.

"I'm happy," I told Esther. "This place feels more like home than it ever has." I just wasn't sure what would happen when Daniel and I spoke again.

Esther considered me, the vastness of her life swirling in her cornflower-blue eyes. "Home is not a place. Home is a feeling. It is a belonging. It is something no one can ever take from you."

Maybe that was why I'd been floundering all these years. My father had been my home, and he'd been taken from me.

Kenna and I drove Esther home early from the bar mitzvah. She lived in a detached in-law suite on her daughter's property, small and tasteful with everything accessible on the main floor. We got her settled then returned to the farm, checked on the dogs, then made dinner for us and Arthur. Emery had declined to join us. He said he was used to solitude and liked it. I thought he was more like Arthur and didn't want to be a burden.

"I might actually miss this place," Kenna said, her voice drifting into the night. We were on the front porch, drinks in hand—wine for me, bourbon for her. Arthur had yawned so much I'd told him to go to sleep. "It's creepy when the floors creak," she went on, "like the place is talking to you, but I get why you dig it here."

“I really do like it, which still surprises me. I’m planning to start repainting this week, fix up a bit of the old house. I’m still waiting for Arthur to fight me on it. If you were staying longer, you could run interference.” It would be quieter with her leaving tomorrow. I’d have to visit her soon. Brave the city noise.

She pushed her feet off the porch, giving the swing momentum. “Any chance you’ll stay here? For good, I mean.”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” My answer should shock me, but the past month had been nothing but surprises. I enjoyed talking with Esther and feeling part of that community. Volunteering at the prison gave me purpose, even though I hadn’t been back yet. My time here felt unfinished, while lunches with women like Chelsea no longer fulfilled me.

“A lot depends on Daniel,” I said, unwilling to relegate him to the past yet. I wouldn’t contact him, though. After all the lies I’d told, it was only fair to leave the ball in his court. “And don’t go telling me I better not get back together with him. Our relationship was far from perfect, but being apart has forced me to remember the good times we had too.”

Watching old movies, legs intertwined on the couch. Eating dinner on our apartment floor—before we’d purchased furniture—making love on that floor, laughing while we banged our elbows and knees on that floor. We had been happy once, but I didn’t miss him now. I wasn’t worried he was flirting with someone else. Neither of those reactions were good signs.

“I don’t know,” I said again.

“For what it’s worth, I do like Emery. He’s got that whole strong, silent vibe going on. He seems nice.”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “He’s nice.”

My attention strayed to his barn window, to the light I searched for each night. As far as I knew, he hadn’t left the property. Only once with Arthur to buy supplies and food. Never at night. There had never been any voices

drifting from his loft. If he had left to date or drink or have sex, I'd seen no sign of it.

"Am I crazy for being attracted to him?" Finally admitting the obvious was tough, but I'd only been kidding myself. "Because it's more than his looks. We ran together this morning, and I loved it. I love talking with him and training dogs with him, or not talking at all, just being around him. Every morning, I'm so nervous to see him I can barely drink my coffee. My stomach ties itself in knots when he's around. But I also don't know him that well. Is this absolutely insane?"

Kenna's smile was faint in the soft light. "Kind of, but who cares? Life is short. Live it like no one's watching."

"What about Daniel?"

"Live it like he's not watching either."

So easy for her to say.

We talked about her work with the kids at the hospital, how excited she was to have proper funding and help more people, even though the road ahead was daunting. She told me about her next Italy trip and the runway makeup she'd be doing, the glamour and extravagance of that life so foreign to the creak of an old swing swaying on a rural porch.

We said goodnight, and I washed up and went to bed, eager to wake up and run with Emery again, if he asked. I hoped he'd asked. I wasn't ready to ask him.

When I got to my room, there was a small box on my pillow with a note below. Puzzled, I picked them up and recognized Arthur's scrawl on the page.

This belonged to your grandmother. I saved it, hoping you would wear it one day.

It didn't say *Love Arthur* or *Dear Scarlett*. Those endearments weren't in Arthur's wheelhouse, but there was sentiment here. Love in the gesture.

Touched, I removed the weathered white lid, then the soft bit of white fluff. Inside was a gold chain and Star of David. I lifted the chain, the star catching the ride and twirling in a dance.

A declaration. A decree for the world to see.

I am Jewish, it said. *I am Sarah Ackerman's granddaughter and Jacob Ackerman's only child. I am more than the mistakes my family made.*

TWENTY-TWO

Running with a guy Emery's size should be challenging, but he never pushed himself to his limits with me. He always kept time, our dogs dashing every which way, covering twice the distance as us, his strong thighs going at a gentle pace.

This morning, I lagged more than usual. "I caught Arthur doing jazzercise again," I said between pants. "He does it when I'm gone, but I came back from the café early yesterday."

Emery chuckled. "I'd love to see that."

"It's worth its weight in gold. He blushes, gets totally embarrassed."

The visual was a pleasant distraction from my pumping lungs. The morning was warm, wildflowers flaunting their colors, grasshoppers dodging our feet. A family of ducks paddled through the property's pond. If it weren't for my knee twinging with each footfall, this would be the start to a beautiful day.

"There was this time in Brackson," Emery said smoothly, as though we hadn't been jogging for fifteen minutes, "a year or so ago. Arthur must have eaten a salad or something, and he showed up with green stuff stuck in his teeth. Everyone who spoke to him noticed. It was impossible not to, but no one said a thing. We were all kinda scared of the man."

Arthur intimidating a room of convicted criminals sounded about right. “I bet it was hilarious.”

“Yeah, but he marched in the next day and planted his hands on his hips, just glaring at the room. You know how he does that evil-stare thing?”

“That glare could cut diamonds.”

Emery’s grin was as easy as his stride. “That’s the one. So, he’s glaring and we’re all fidgety as fuck, unsure what went down, then he cracks a smile and says, ‘If I ever have food in my teeth again, you fucking assholes better tell me.’ And man, the whole room broke up. Arthur never swears, and he certainly doesn’t smile. For whatever reason, it set us all off. We laughed about that for a week. The guys would lose it if they saw him doing jazzercise.”

It was a sweet story, and so perfectly Arthur, but talking about Brackson was a reminder of who Emery was—an ex-con with an unsavory past.

There were stretches when I’d forget about his history, a day or two of us chatting and training dogs together, or while I’d sketch and work on my book covers. He’d been living at the farm for a month now, days bleeding into each other, most mornings spent running with me in this easy rhythm. Then I’d visit the prison, or Emery or Arthur or Winston would say something to remind me of Emery’s mysterious history.

I’d stuck to my promise, though. I hadn’t asked Emery why he’d been arrested, but the longer I knew him, the closer we got, the harder it was to pretend I didn’t care.

My foot hit a dip in the field, the impact a reminder I’d tweaked my knee. I should have known better than to play fetch with Captain Underbite on our muddy driveway, but she’d been so cute standing there with that huge branch in her mouth.

I slowed my pace, breathing hard, and eased into a walk. “My knee isn’t happy with me.”

Emery stopped and turned. He waited for me to reach him. “From yesterday’s fall?”

“It’s not bad, but I’m slowing you down. You should finish on your own.”

He frowned at my knee. “Can I have a look?”

“It’s nothing. Just a strain. Seriously—finish your run. No point letting me ruin it.”

He nibbled his lower lip and rubbed at his neck. “Is it okay if I walk with you?” His question was tentative, a shy smile following. “Twinkie likes hanging with the Captain. It’s more fun for him than running around on his own.”

He was talking about our dogs, who were darting around like lunatics, chasing something in the grass, but he wasn’t looking at them. He was looking at me, intimacy in his hesitant voice.

This felt like a game, a vaguely disguised code. *Twinkie likes spending time with the Captain. I like spending time with you.*

“The Captain likes running with Twinkie too,” I found myself saying, while a strange effervescence bubbled up inside me. I’d felt this way around him before, light-headed and fizzy. Flirting with Emery was risky business, his past a huge wild card, but the air was too fresh, the spring flowers too joyful. “I think the Captain finds it peaceful.”

He closed his eyes briefly, as though absorbing my coded words. “I’m glad she likes it. Twinkie is the happiest he’s ever been.”

Not so coded after all.

We walked at a gentle pace, talking in waves, the backs of our hands brushing occasionally. This type of closeness was new. He sometimes joined Arthur and me for dinner and would sit across the table. I helped him train dogs but always with Winston around. Or Emery would do chores while I’d sit and sketch on the grass. Or he’d sit at the picnic table, writing

in his journal, absorbed in his pages and thoughts, intensity often clouding his face.

Some days, I'd catch stolen glimpses of him standing still, his eyes closed, just breathing. But walking or sitting close enough to touch didn't happen.

I was still married. Emery never made advances on me. I wasn't sure if I wanted him to, but out here, like this, I had the urge to unfurl my fingers and link them with his, to feel his skin against my own. To be wild and show him how much our time together meant to me, but thoughts of Brackson returned, bringing with them all that I didn't know about this man. I had promised him I wouldn't ask. Respecting his privacy was the polite thing to do.

My curiosity was no longer in my control.

I stopped.

Emery took three steps before turning around. "Does your knee still hurt?"

Asking this question would hurt more than the annoying throb in my joint, but avoiding it no longer made sense. "Why were you in prison?"

His cheeks hollowed, like the life had been sucked from his face. His next swallow took an eternity. "Aggravated assault."

The answer wasn't a shock, but his expression shifted, a twisting below his bones that made my throat burn. The conviction meant Emery had been angry enough to hurt someone, but he also must have known love, even as a little boy. He couldn't be as kind as he was today without goodness under his skin. Trauma created scars, but happiness did too. Different ones, softer memories that shimmered like sunlight on a dark lake.

Still, his turmoil gave life to the Emery who existed before the farm, before he'd told me to quit running from my demons and face my recurring nightmares. I needed assurance. "Do you consider yourself a violent person? Will you ever hurt anyone again?"

The dogs dropped to their bellies, resting in the grass. Emery locked eyes with me and took a step closer. “Violence is part of my past, but I will never hurt another living soul again. I would never, *ever* hurt you, Scarlett.”

I’d honed my instincts since my father’s betrayal, trusting my judgment most of the time. I’d witnessed Emery’s remorse his first night in the barn, his huge shoulders hunched in defeat. I knew he lived with a heavy burden, and his conviction now was undeniable. I wasn’t ready to learn the details of his crime, have that visual stamped on my mind, but a growing part of me desperately wanted to trust him.

“I need to get to the prison for my shift,” I said, ready to let the topic lie for now. “Want to walk me back?”

He dragged his forearm along his forehead and gazed into the distance. “Think I’ll finish my run after all. See you later today.”

He didn’t wait for my reply. He turned and ran, picking up speed as he went, like someone was chasing him.

TWENTY-THREE

Near the end of my prison shift I sought out Jesse and squatted by him and Goliath. I rubbed the big dog's belly. "I can't believe how good he looks."

Jesse scratched Goliath's ears and kissed his nose. "Arthur took him to the vet yesterday. They said the leg's doing better than expected. He still uses it more than he should, but it's getting stronger every day."

"At least he's done wearing the cone of shame."

"That thing was the worst." Goliath pushed his still-emaciated body up and licked his master's face. Jesse laughed. "Gotta get this ham outside for a bath. See you next week?"

"I'll be here."

I watched them leave, Goliath favoring his good legs and sticking close to Jesse. The pup was still timid around other people, but his trust in Jesse was absolute.

Martinez waved to me, a signal today's visit was ending. This had been my seventh prison visit this past month. Arthur came here five days a week. I helped on the two days he missed. It was good for the men to have our visits spread out. It was good for me to have a schedule.

"Nothin' sweeter than a man with his dog." Randal's twangy voice unnerved me as usual, especially this close.

I hadn’t noticed him approach. If I had, I’d have turned and walked the other way.

“Hi, Randal.” I gave him a tight smile. “I hear Gracie’s getting adopted soon.”

He glanced toward his cell, where she was probably sleeping in her crate. “It’ll be a rough day, that’s for sure. But a good day for my Gracie.”

Nothing in his words was cause for concern. It was Randal’s demeanor that unnerved me—the exaggerated tilt of his head, how his eyes dipped down my body as he spoke. Part of me felt badly for disliking him, casting judgment with no evidence. Part of me preferred to trust my gut.

I tried to make eye contact with Martinez again, let him know I was ready to go. He was busy talking to an inmate.

“Looks like my time’s up here,” I said as I backed away from Randal.

He stepped forward. “Just a quick question, if you don’t mind.”

As usual, his politeness didn’t strike me as genuine, but maybe I was being unfair. I’d gone out of my way to avoid Randal the past weeks, but Emery had said he’d been in here a long time. His social skills were lacking. I stopped and crossed my arms. “As long as it’s quick.”

“I was wondering how Emery was faring out there in that big ol’ world. Have you and Arthur heard from him?”

I didn’t talk about Emery with the prisoners. He no longer belonged in this place, with these men. I certainly wasn’t about to admit we’d walked together this morning, our hands brushing after speaking in flirtatious code.

“I assume he’s doing fine,” I said. A statement I couldn’t corroborate since I hadn’t seen him since he’d bolted on that fierce run.

Randal didn’t move to give me space. I searched for Martinez again. Thankfully, he was facing me this time and I waved. Randal didn’t budge, leaving me no choice but to brush past him. He hummed as I passed, the sweet melody sounding like a taunt.

“All good?” Martinez asked when I reached him.

“All good.” But my pulse didn’t settle until the heavy clank of the cellblock door slammed behind us.

I shouldn’t let that man get to me. He was in jail. There were security measures. Nothing bad would happen to me in there. Avoiding him all this time must be partly to blame. I was building his bad-guy image in my head, letting it grow like a boogeyman below a bed.

By the time I got to the car, I vowed to make an effort with Randal next visit. Show him he didn’t intimidate me and quit behaving like a scared kid.

I checked my phone before turning the ignition and saw a text from Daniel. It was a simple message, just five words, but my pulse was back to speeding.

Daniel: Call me when you can.

I hadn’t contacted him since our separation, as I’d promised myself and him, but I’d expected him to reach out before today. Get mad. Ask questions.

There had only been silence. Until now.

I picked at my lilac-stained nails, dirty from the house painting. Winston had helped strip off the old layer and patch the rotting siding. The priming and painting, however, I’d done alone. The process was slow, but I liked the leisurely pace of my roller, the soft scrape of the sponge over wood, the chirp of flitting birds above me. It was in those moments life became clearest: I was happy in Fernlow. Happier than I’d been in a long time. I wasn’t sure I’d live here forever, but right now I couldn’t picture myself living anywhere else.

Or reuniting with Daniel.

Whatever we had was gone, most of the loss my fault. I only hoped he wasn’t calling to make amends.

Preferring not to delay the inevitable, I dialed his cell.

He picked up after two rings. “Scarlett, hey. I’m glad you called.”

“I’m glad you reached out. I wanted to give you whatever time you needed.”

He made a soft sound. A grunt of irritation? “The thing is,” Daniel said hesitantly, “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, and you weren’t wrong.”

“About what?”

“About me being unhappy. I haven’t been happy in our marriage for some time. Complacent, but not happy. I thought having a baby would somehow fix us, but it wouldn’t have. I know that now. And deep down, I knew you didn’t want to get pregnant, that you felt trapped in a decision you didn’t choose, but I’m really mad at you too, Scarlett. Angry that you lied to me this whole time. It was a selfish, shitty thing to do. But I’m also mad at myself for not being whoever you needed me to be. It’s all a bit of a mindfuck.”

I stared at the prison gates, the barbed wire looping over the fences. I had built a fence like that around myself for most of my life. “I can’t apologize enough for lying to you, Daniel. And I don’t expect or deserve your forgiveness. I did love you, though. I *fell* in love with you over time. That wasn’t a lie, but holding on to those old feelings isn’t enough anymore.”

“No,” he said, sad. “It isn’t. I think whatever we had is over.”

Neither of us spoke for a moment. I traced the steering wheel’s rounded curve. “Where are you?”

“At home. I took the day off.”

“For this conversation?”

“Yeah.”

He knew how hard this would be for both of us. He knew this would be the end.

The finality of it was in the resignation of his voice, the lethargic lilt of mine. But there was still one thing I needed to know. “When we talked last, you said I could have told you about my past and it wouldn’t have mattered.

Do you believe that? In the beginning, would you have dated Jacob Ackerman's daughter?"

His pause lasted so long I almost checked the connection. "No," he said quietly. "I wouldn't have."

I slumped into the seat, relieved and gutted by his admission. We were only here because I'd lied. We had married because I'd lied. We were heading for divorce because I'd lied. I had put this in motion, a relationship that should never have been. It felt like I was on the wrong side of the barbed-wire fence, free when I should be anything but.

"I guess this is the end," I said.

"I guess so."

"I'll come back to the city soon, get more of my stuff, figure out storage for the rest. We'll have to hire lawyers, work out the details, but I won't fight you on anything." Not that there was much to fight over. We had no excessive holdings or kids caught in this crossfire.

He cleared his throat. "Text me when you'll be around. I'll make sure to stay out of the place."

"You don't have to do that."

"I think it's best."

More silence lingered, static filled with regrets, then we said our goodbyes.

Four years of marriage over. Nine years of a relationship. So much of my life. I cried softly for what I'd done and what we'd lost. Then I dried my eyes and drove home.

The first thing I did at the farm was go to my room and put on the Star of David Arthur had given me. I hadn't worn it since he'd left it on my pillow. I wasn't sure why I'd waited this long. Maybe I was waiting for a sign that my new beginning could start. The re-stitching of my undone seams. Wearing the necklace didn't mean I'd seek out a synagogue or follow Friday evening prayers. Putting it on just seemed right today.

I placed my wedding ring in the box and closed the lid. The star was cold against my breastbone, my ring finger bare and weightless. One future traded for another.

A rifle blasted. I startled, as usual, then I smiled.

Those irritating shots used to remind me another agonizing day had dragged by. Now I liked picturing Arthur, gun on his shoulder, marking time.

I didn't text Kenna or Tavi about my conversation with Daniel. They would know soon enough. I rushed down the creaky stairs and hurried outside, only stopping once I reached the old gum tree. I pressed my hands into its bark—my place, my religion, along with this star fastened to my neck.

"You were right to stay here," I said. "I understand it now. I know how healing this place is."

The tree's leaves had unfurled, open hands ready to accept whatever gifts life offered. Its berries would grow, drop to the ground. Squish under my feet. Its fingers would reach for the sky in a burning rush of orange. Cycles that had pained me in my youth. In hindsight, they had been repeated lullabies. The ominous kind that crooned comfort with a dark edge, rhythmic words behind a soft hymn. *There is no happiness without pain.*

I was finally ready to accept both.

"How was Brackson?" Emery walked from the kennel, Twinkie racing around his feet.

I shaded my eyes to see him. God, he was handsome, his eyes clearer than when he'd left on that troubling run. "Goliath is stronger every day, and Gracie's getting adopted, which is great for her."

There was no need to mention Randal and how uncomfortable he still made me or the ring no longer on my finger, but Emery's jaw tightened. "Is Randal being nice to you? Respectful?"

Leave it to Emery to read through my facade. “He’s fine. And it looks like Twinkie has energy to burn. Did you miss your afternoon walk?”

He studied me a moment, then watched his dog bound over the muddy drive. Twinkie stopped to pee on my tree. “It doesn’t matter how much I walk him. He’s always full of beans.”

The little devil ran to my feet, planted his butt on the ground, and waited for an ear scratch.

“He’s also a beggar,” Emery said. “I’ve spoiled him.”

“Well, he’s yours to spoil.” Like Captain Underbite was mine.

The Captain slept in the kennel, but I’d spoken to Arthur and asked if I could keep her. All he’d said was, “Then you’ll pay for her kibble.”

I crouched and rubbed Twinkie’s ears. He leaned into my touch, demanding more. Definitely spoiled. “Is it feeding time?” I asked.

“Yeah, but Winston’s doing it. Thought I’d see if you needed a hand painting. I could help finish that first coat.”

Painting on my own had been cathartic, proof my life was gaining color, but today seemed like a good day to have a hand. “If you grab the paints, I’ll grab the Captain.”

He nodded, but his attention strayed lower. To the chain dangling from my neck. “That’s pretty. It’s pretty on you.”

The compliment sent a flutter through me, and I touched the Star of David. Something to do around him other than blush. His eyes darted to my hand—to the bare finger visible for the world to see. He looked down sharply. As did I. We hadn’t done this in a while, focusing anywhere but on each other, the undeniable tension between us too heightened for anything else.

“I’ll get the paints,” he said, already walking toward the barn.

I spent that time gathering my wits.

We reconvened on the porch, a drop cloth down, our dogs lazing in the late-afternoon sun, no mention of my missing ring or his aggravated-assault conviction. I had changed into my paint-stained blue T-shirt and baggy gray sweatpants. Emery was a big guy who sweated a lot, but he still wore jeans and a long-sleeved Henley.

"Aren't you hot in that?" I asked.

His face darkened, like it had after this morning's run, his movements suddenly stiff. It wasn't uncommon for Emery to turn introspective and broody. It was usually Winston who'd rouse him—an affectionate slap on Emery's back, a squeeze of his arm. The two men had developed a strong bond, both being ex-cons, both intimidating in size but sweet in temperament, clinging to their second chances. But Winston wasn't here to ground his friend.

"I hate winter," I said randomly, hoping to distract Emery. "Everything muddy turns muddier."

He rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. "I could do without winter too." He pushed his roller through the lilac paint, more relaxed, and worked on a taller section of the house. "I'm happy to soak up the sun when it's out, don't mind being hot. As long as I'm outside, I'm good."

"There's plenty of outside in Fernlow." More air and farm than road and steel.

"It's one of the things I love most about being here."

"You don't find it boring?"

He shrugged a shoulder. "Nope."

"But you haven't left the farm much, gone into town. Hit a bar or anything."

He did disappear on Thursday afternoons, though. Every Thursday, when Arthur was back from Brackson, Emery would borrow the truck and leave for a few hours. He'd return with groceries, but not enough to account

for the length of time he'd been gone. I once asked Arthur what he did. My uncle had replied with a sharp, "It's not your business."

He was right. It wasn't. I never asked again, and aside from those Thursdays, Emery stayed on the farm, even at night. His light would stay on until nine or ten, then all was dark.

"I have no reason to leave," he said.

"You don't miss having a nightlife? Friends?" It could be me who wanted him to have those things, attributes that would make him less former-inmate-ish, but living on the farm could be lonely.

His eyes slid to me, then back to his work. "Everything I want is here."

My stomach did a slow spin. "Everything?"

A knowing smile curved his lips. "Everything."

Did he mean *me*? Was this tango we'd been doing around each other actually going to go somewhere?

My finger was bare. My manifesto was in the trash. Going on a date with a tattooed ex-con was the last thing I'd imagined for my future, but my conversation with Daniel changed things. Hearing Emery say he'd never hurt another living soul changed things.

I felt changed, too—bold and ready to tackle life.

I was pretty sure Emery wouldn't ask me out. He wouldn't risk putting me in an uncomfortable position. That left me in the driver's seat, to continue like this or take a daring step forward. To stay safe or live my life like no one was watching.

Heart in my throat, I fisted my paint roller and faced Emery. He was stretching to reach a higher section, his muscles shifting below his clothes as he worked. My mouth dried.

He stopped and frowned at me. "What's wrong?"

"Will you go out with me? Like, on a date. The two of us, for dinner or something. Or drinks. Or not at all. I mean, we work together and live in

spitting distance, which could be awkward. Maybe this was a bad idea. Forget I mentioned it."

I bit my cheek and wished for invisibility. This was worse than the suntan-lotion monologue. I shouldn't be allowed to talk to people.

"Scarlett." Emery's soft voice forced my attention to him. "I'd love to take you out to dinner."

He blushed. My face felt flammable.

Kenna was going to lose her mind.

TWENTY-FOUR

My room looked like the center of a Category 5 hurricane. Bras were flung willy-nilly on the bed. Dresses and shoes littered the floor. I had finally decided on an outfit—a bold red dress with three-quarter length sleeves and a slim skirt, the ends of both frilly and feminine. The neckline dipped into a deep V, framing my Star of David, and my favorite black slingback heels did good things for my legs.

As hard as I'd worked to choose something to wear, these weren't the desperate efforts of a twenty-one-year-old trying to be someone she wasn't. This was me nervous for a first date, hoping to make a good impression.

"Your date's here," Arthur called. As if that wasn't embarrassing enough, he added, "The guy whose name starts with an E."

His mission in life must be to torment me the way my teenage grumpathon had tormented him.

I checked my makeup one last time, fluffed my curly hair, which hung long and loose down my back. I couldn't remember the last time I hadn't straightened my hair for a night out. The change made me feel good.

Emery was by the front door chatting with Arthur, a bouquet of wildflowers in his hand. When he heard me on the stairs, he looked up and stopped mid-sentence. "Wow, Scarlett. You look…" He shook his head and rubbed his sternum. "Beautiful."

He didn’t look half bad either. His thick hair was slightly messy, his dark jeans and light-blue collared shirt emphasizing his well-honed physique. If I’d noticed him from across a room, I wouldn’t be able to look anywhere else.

“You look handsome,” I said, quieter than intended. A blush stained his strong cheekbones, probably matching mine. I gestured to his flowers as I made my way down. “Are those for me?”

He glanced at them and blinked. “Oh, yeah. Yes. I should’ve bought some proper ones in town, but—”

“No. These are great. Perfect.”

“Yeah?”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

Arthur chuckled from behind me. “If you kids stopped blushing and actually got out of here, I could watch TV in peace. But don’t have too good a time. No drinking and driving.”

What were we? Sixteen, going on our first date?

Emery gave Arthur a somber nod. “I’ll take good care of her, sir.”

Yep. Definitely sixteen, but Arthur’s concern touched me. Even earlier, when I’d told him about the date, he’d said he was glad for us, but he’d promptly gone outside and had spoken to Emery. I had no clue what was said, but I’d spied on them as Emery had nodded and Arthur had stood stiff and imposing, like a father intimidating his daughter’s date.

I guess Arthur was that to me. The only father I had. Through all our hardships, he was still here.

I kissed Arthur’s cheek, a move that probably shocked him as much as me. I needed to do more of that. Show him how much I cared. Maybe then he’d learn how to hug and smile and say he loved me.

I took the flowers from Emery and pressed them to Arthur’s chest. “Mind putting these in water for me?”

His reply: “You better not wake me when you get home.”

Emery held the front door for me and followed close behind. My heels did fine on the front porch and steps, but the second I hit the squishy ground, I teetered.

"I got you." Emery's arm came around my waist, tucking me into his side. "This ground can be treacherous."

So could his smell—amber and firewood and something spicy I couldn't pinpoint. "I should have known better than to wear these heels."

"But they look great on you."

"You keep up those compliments, and you'll get a second date."

He hummed by my ear. "Telling you you're beautiful is no hardship."

Letting him charm me was no hardship either. I still found myself second-guessing our date, questioning if something could actually work between us, but I was getting ahead of myself. I'd asked him out. There was no harm testing the waters. "Should we take my car?"

He paused, brushed his hand lightly against my waist. "I asked Arthur if we could take his truck. The pickup, not the dog van. I wanted to drive us, if that's okay. Take you out properly."

"It's still a proper date if I drive."

He bowed his head, one corner of his lips kicked up into a shy smile. "I know. Wanting to drive you is probably old-fashioned. I'd just like to take care of you tonight. Do this right."

Yeah, *wow*. Definitely no harm letting him charm me.

Emery drove as diligently as Arthur, his hands fisting the wheel at ten and two. The farther we got from the farm, the more I unwound. We talked about a new dog Arthur had rescued and how Twinkie was liable to get pecked to death by the roosters. We laughed about Arthur's stern ways and listened to country music while warm air breezed through our open windows. We didn't touch or hold hands, but I felt my body's presence more acutely—the pressure of my legs on the ripped seat, how my thighs

rubbed together when we hit a bump, the weight of my forearms resting on my abdomen.

Emery surprised me by taking us to a steak house in a neighboring town. He opened my door for me at the restaurant, spread his large hand against the small of my back as we walked inside. I was healthier than I'd been in a while, thinner and stronger, but I wasn't a petite woman.

Next to Emery, I felt small and feminine.

"I hope this is okay," he whispered in my ear. His hand on my back shook slightly.

I looked up at him, his eyes even darker in the dim light. "Are you nervous?"

"Is it that obvious?"

I couldn't imagine he was as jittery as me, a woman on her first date in nine years *with an ex-con*. He was the second man I'd ever gone to dinner with. "Does it help to know I changed into five outfits before deciding what to wear?"

The creases by his eyes crinkled. He brushed a loose curl behind my ear. "Yeah. It helps."

A hostess led us to our table, the decor winning me over in seconds. If this restaurant were in New York, people would either slam it with insults like *dated* and *stuffy*, or hipsters would call it retro-chic and pack it nightly. Stained-glass chandeliers hung over the tables. Maroon carpet padded the floors. There was a salad bar in the corner with what looked like shredded carrots, cabbage, lettuce, and a choice of French or Thousand Island dressings. I kind of loved it.

Emery put his napkin on his lap, looking too big for his chair. "I heard they have good steaks here," he said.

I smiled in reply. We studied the menu and sipped our water. I crossed my legs and adjusted my napkin. Talking about Arthur and dogs and music on the drive had been easy, but this was different, intimate. The small table

and low lighting invited more personal conversation, something I usually avoided with Emery. We'd never talked about Daniel or my marriage woes. Aside from this morning, I hadn't asked about his past for fear of hitting a sensitive topic. But this was a date. Dates were only successful if you learned more about the person across from you.

I took another sip of water, let the cold liquid slide the length of my throat. "How long were you in prison?" I asked.

Emery winced and crunched on the ice cube in his mouth. Remorse stung me. *Way to ease into the tough stuff, Scarlett.*

Our waitress appeared, saving us both from dealing with my poor social skills. She shared the specials—bacon-wrapped filet mignon with peppercorn sauce and sesame-crusted salmon—while Emery frowned at his menu.

I should have worked up to that question, talked about Kenna or Winston or the way Arthur lined his glasses in perfect rows. Emery and I hadn't discussed Arthur's and my cupboard wars yet. Or that I'd quit trying to win.

"Should we get a bottle of wine?" I asked Emery. An olive branch.

"I'm driving. I'll probably just get a beer."

I was about to tease him, joke about Arthur's warning not to drink and drive. We were in the country. Most people had a couple before driving, but this wasn't about Arthur or lax rural laws. Emery was on parole. Any infraction would have serious consequences.

"Yeah, sure. Of course. I'll just get a glass too."

We ordered our drinks, and the second the waitress left, I said, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked about prison. It wasn't fair."

He picked at a rip in the black tablecloth. "Don't apologize. You can ask whatever you want. I was in for four years, the last two spent in the Pups program with Arthur. I'm not sure where I'd be if it weren't for him."

"A lot of the guys say that."

“They’d all be right. Arthur is…” Emery focused on the ceiling for a breath. “He’s a straight shooter. He doesn’t take our bullshit, and he doesn’t judge. He lets our actions speak for themselves, shows us we have value and can make a difference. That program saves as many men as it does dogs.”

“Is your sister older or younger than you?” I asked, even though the topic was a one-eighty. I wanted to know more about this man and didn’t want to harp on prison too much.

“Alexis is younger but a hell of a lot smarter. I wouldn’t let her visit me in jail and haven’t contacted her since getting out, but I miss her.”

“So, you were close?”

“When we were young, yeah—before things got rough at home and I fell in with the wrong crowd. I’m not sure she’ll want to hear from me, but I’ll reach out to her in time. When I’m ready.”

“How will you know when you’re ready?”

His posture had a slight bow to it, the mistakes of his past holding him down. “I’m hoping I’ll just know. What about you? Any siblings?”

I shook my head, the movement slowing as I recalled the dread of tiptoeing past my mother’s room. “My mother suffers from severe depression. She slid downhill after having me, then got worse after my father’s arrest. She’s stable and on medication now, but we have zero relationship beyond acknowledging holidays and birthdays. I think I remind her too much of her past. But I used to beg for a sister, before everything fell apart. Then I just wished I’d never been born.”

Emery considered me. He didn’t fidget with his hands. He sometimes dropped his gaze, but when he had something to say, he looked right at a person, into the heart of them. “Are you still having your nightmares?”

“Actually, thanks to you, I think I’m cured.”

Hopefulness brightened his face. “You’ve been writing them down?”

“As much as I can remember. I’ve also been drawing. Not my dreams, but I gave up on my art when I went to college. I only wanted to take practical courses, land a good job, get married, and start a brand-new life.” Oblivious to the damage that determination would cause. “I think drawing is therapeutic now, and writing about the dreams makes them less scary.”

“I’m glad I could help.”

Sitting opposite him, in this dated restaurant, Sinatra drifting through the speakers, helped me on some level. I was at ease with Emery, not trying to be someone I wasn’t. “Can I confess something?”

“Anything.”

“I used to have only one eyebrow.”

His eyes flicked between my separated brows. “Like one over one eye and nothing over the other?”

I laughed. “Nope. One solid unibrow across both. I also had a mustache. Wispy but there.”

His wide grin turned his sharp jaw boyish. “I had bad acne as a kid. I put a Band-Aid on the worst part. Hoped the other kids would think it was a cut.”

“I hate to tell you this, but they didn’t.”

“Thanks for bursting that bubble.” His body changed as we spoke, relaxing on his seat. His wide shoulders lowered. “What were you like as a kid?”

My first thoughts snapped to the angry and depressed days of my youth, but that was after. There was also a before. “I was obsessed with dancing and loved doing impressions. Anything to make my father laugh. I also ate mud.”

Emery leaned his elbows on the table. “Seriously?”

“I’d pretend to bake a chocolate cake and would eat mud. It pissed my mother off, which is probably why I did it.”

“Sounds to me like you were a strange kid.”

“You have no idea.”

We continued like that, sharing the oddest things about ourselves, while I gleaned small truths from Emery.

He’d been sentenced to six years but had gotten out for good behavior after four.

He’d been an angry kid who’d caused a lot of trouble.

His father had left when he was young.

Emery was dyslexic and had struggled in school.

Sprinkling tough topics with lighter ones made absorbing his history easier, but I still didn’t ask what specific violence he’d committed. I felt ready to hear his story, process the details, but I knew it would be hard for him.

We talked about embarrassing Halloween costumes instead.

Him: a too-tight Superman onesie. Me: a pencil.

We ate our steaks and shared apple pie for dessert. We admitted the first CDs we’d ever purchased. Him: Blink-182. Me: Britney Spears.

He *was* younger than me, but only by a couple of years—twenty-eight to my thirty. I ordered a second glass of wine, each sip loosening my neck, softening my vision. Emery’s shirt hid the tattoos often peeking out of his long sleeves, but the Celtic cross on his neck was unmistakable.

“I have a tattoo,” I said.

He scanned my body. “Where?”

“A butterfly on my hip. I’ve been curious about yours.”

Emery’s lips thinned. He didn’t reply but his knuckles whitened as he fisted his hands. He suddenly seemed distant, whisked away by one of his broody moods.

Exactly what I’d been trying to avoid.

“We’ll discuss my ink another time,” he said. “It’s getting late. I need to use the bathroom. Then we’ll go.”

He was up and walking away before I could reply or redirect our conversation or apologize for my insensitivity. I should have known better than to bring up his ink. Most of the Brackson inmates I'd met had tattoos. Most of the designs read as violent, tied to a time in their lives they were trying to forget.

Emery always wore long sleeves. Covered his skin. Even on the farm.

I should have known it was a sensitive subject.

He paid before he returned, not giving us a moment to recover while he helped me from my chair and we walked to the truck. We talked intermittently on the drive home, everything once easy now strained. The shift made me angry. At him. At myself.

Asking Emery out hadn't been easy for me. Dating after a failed marriage wasn't my idea of fun. Other women might get excited by the newness and adventure. Officially splitting from Daniel offered freedom, but for me, it wasn't a sign-me-up-for-a-million-dating-apps type of freedom. This was my time to rediscover myself. Own my religion, volunteer at Brackson, love my uncle for all his faults, and maybe find a piece of my father to accept.

Emery was a wild card. Those eyes. His quiet introspection. His shady past. The connection I hadn't expected but couldn't avoid. Dating him came with risks to my fragile heart.

Yet he was the one sitting rigid, hands clenching the wheel, dousing our nice night with his chilled reserve.

We drove the last ten minutes in silence.

We entered Arthur's property in silence.

We parked in excruciating silence.

And I was done.

I clicked off my seat belt with a hard flip of my wrist. I shouldered the door open and tried to stomp toward the farmhouse. I didn't need Emery. I

didn’t need a man. My teetering heels, however, undermined my resolute march.

“Please, Scarlett.” Emery’s voice finally broke free, rough and pleading. “Please wait. Let me explain.”

Goddamn these lethal shoes. I’d be better off barefoot. “You had the last thirty minutes to explain.”

“I know. You caught me off guard. I should have expected the question. Things were just going so well. It was so easy to pretend.”

Frustrated, I slid off my heels and gathered them by their slingback straps. They dangled in my right hand. Mud squished between my toes as I faced him. “Pretend what?”

“That I’m normal. That this was a perfect date with a perfect woman and my shitty past never happened.”

Hearing him call me perfect turned part of my anger to mush, but not all of it. “Well, here’s a news flash for you—I’m not perfect. Far from it, actually. And I asked *you* out, if you forgot. It’s not like I don’t know your last zip code. I put myself out there and risked being turned down. I risked falling for a guy whose past scares me, because I feel something with you, which is the real zinger here. It would be a hell of a lot easier to fall for a guy with a steady job who hasn’t spent his last four years in prison-issue clothes. So, yeah, I get that this is tough for you, but I don’t think you’ve stopped to consider how tough this is for me.”

The earth was cold on my feet. The air turned hot in my overactive lungs. Emery’s expression wasn’t clear in the dimness, but I saw the rapid rise and fall of his chest. The intensity of his stance.

“Will you come to the barn with me?” he asked, his voice plaintive.

An hour ago, I’d have said yes. I would have kissed him and let the evening take its course. Everything seemed too complicated now. “Why?”

“I need to show you the tattoos. I think it’s best if you see.”

I should cut my losses, not get in deeper with Emery and his demons. I had enough baggage of my own, but he looked so lonely in the dark, a big strong tree without roots.

"Okay," I said.

He didn't wait or help me as I navigated the driveway barefoot, sticks and stones cutting into my soles. He walked purposefully, never glancing behind.

The barn was cool and dim, too dark to see much. Then he flicked on the lights.

"I did bad things when I was younger," he said, facing me from a short distance. "I was angry and made horrible choices. I won't explain it to you, because explaining always sounds like excuses. I don't have any of those left. I own my actions. I did them. Now I have to live with the marks on my body and the consequences of my actions. But believe me, if I didn't have these tattoos, I would have asked you out, Scarlett. I'd have asked you out the second you removed that ring from your finger. But it's not my right to ask. I should never have said yes."

Shadows flitted across his face, darkness trapped below his skin like the ink under his flesh. He fisted the bottom of his light-blue shirt, lifted it in one smooth motion, then tossed his shirt on the floor.

I gasped—a pitched, sharp sound.

Emery stood with his chin tipped up, his hands fisted by his sides. Not in defiance. This was shame, and all I could do was shake. I couldn't decipher all the black ink on his torso, but there was a viper snake visible, bold and angry, blood dripping from its fangs.

Right over his heart.

"You're a Viper." My voice trembled. I pressed my hand to my mouth.

"*Was*, Scarlett. I *was*. Not anymore. But this—" he aimed a disgusted glare at his body "—these marks will always be a part of me."

They were symbols of anger and hate. Declarations that he aligned with men who killed without remorse.

After the first threat my family received, I'd read about the Vipers. Devoured all available information after that snake had been gifted to me. The gang members were of mixed races, joined by neighborhood, not background, but their leader at the time, Ewan Breck, was a white man with burn marks down one side of his face. They sold drugs, dealt in illegal weapons, killed anyone who got in their way. Their dealings were responsible for untold deaths. And when Ewan lost a ton of cash through Jacob Ackerman, I was threatened with a terrifying snake, and my defenseless father was stabbed with a sharpened toothbrush.

Emery was one of those vicious men. *My* Emery.

I stared at his viper ink, the image blurring through my tears. "You knew I'd recognize that symbol. You *knew* who my father was."

His huge shoulders curved forward. "Not at first. I didn't pry into your past. When you said your father died in Brackson, I didn't look into it. But when we talked about your nightmares, you mentioned the snake that was delivered to you." His Adam's apple bumped down his throat. "Sending snakes was something the Vipers did—a warning of worse things to come. I wasn't part of the gang then or when your father was killed, but I realized the link."

"And you didn't say anything."

"No."

"Why?"

He shook his head, aggressively rubbing at the back of his neck. "I have no excuse. I looked forward to your visits so fucking much, was scared to lose that small connection to something good. And I have nothing to do with the Vipers anymore. I cut ties with the gang a couple years back, have been slowly trying to make amends." He exhaled a trembling breath. "I'm a

different man now, Scarlett. But I understand if you can't see past who I was."

I pressed my hand over the Star of David hanging around my neck, attempting to calm my racing heart. Emery had been respected at Brackson, by the inmates and the guards. Arthur had hired him without a second thought. Emery had been unbearably gentle and kind with me.

These details supported his claim: *I'm a different man now.*

But all I could see was the viper on his chest and the images flooding my mind: a snake darting at me from a box, my nightmares, imagined images of my father stabbed over and over, his skin flayed to ribbons as his blood spilled onto the floor.

Emery's aggravated assault had been a gang-related crime. I didn't have to ask to know. He had attacked someone over a territory dispute or money owed or some other hateful reason.

Had he bashed in a man's face? Kicked him in the ribs? Stabbed him in the gut? He could have hurt a woman. A child. And he was here, living next to me. To Arthur.

"Did you deal drugs? Send poison out onto the streets?"

He didn't flinch. "I did."

"You could have sent me that snake," I said. A challenge. "You might not have been in the gang then, but later, if asked—would you have done it?"

This answer took longer, like he had to pry the words from his mouth. "I would have."

I hugged my middle, my dress suddenly too light and flimsy. "Would you have stabbed my father? If you'd been in jail then and had been tasked, would you have killed him?"

His eyes filled, shining with so much emotion *my* eyes burned. "Yes," he whispered. "*Yes*," he repeated, louder this time, like he was angry at himself.

I was putting him on trial again, charging him for his crimes. I wasn't sure my fury was fair, but I couldn't stop it. I pictured Emery putting that snake in the box, tying it up, knocking on our apartment door, telling my grandmother he was dropping off a gift for me. No remorse. Pride in the dangerous threat. He would have done it. He would have *killed* my father.

"You need to go," I said, panic rising, disgusted with myself for trusting him. *Falling* for him. Because I had. As much as I'd fought it, there was no denying this deep ache. Another man in my life lying to me. "Tonight," I added, furious with him for putting me in this position. Making me care about him. Making me hate him. "I want you to go now. I need you to leave and never come back."

A tear pushed from his eye. He let it fall. "Okay."

He didn't fight my demand or defend himself, but his devastation tugged on my heart. The Emery I had asked on a date was standing before me, anguished, desperate, begging silently for my forgiveness.

I turned, unable to look at the pain on his face or the ink on his body, but he said, "Scarlett."

I stopped and kept my back to him.

"I'm so sorry," he murmured.

I ran out of there before my first sob broke free.

TWENTY-FIVE

I woke with a start, clawing at my throat and fighting for air, only calming when I heard a dog whine. I wasn't being strangled by a boa constrictor. Smaller snakes weren't circling me, nipping at my shins. The sharp pain in my shoulder and hip reminded me I was in Captain Underbite's dog run, curled around a warm ball of fur I was hugging too tightly.

Another dream. Worse this time.

The Captain rolled onto her back, splayed and vulnerable, trusting me to lavish her with love. I had opened myself up to Emery like this, unsuspecting. Now I felt foolish and naïve. I sank my hand into the Captain's wiry fur, the soft thud of her heart beating against my palm.

"What did you do?" Arthur's sharp accusation made me jump. I hadn't heard him enter or approach.

I shifted to sitting, my joints crying their dismay as I moved. I had no clue how the dogs slept on cement floors, sprawled and happy. Even wrapped in a thick wool blanket, I was cold and sore, the pain in my neck traveling to my temple. My heart hurt the worst.

"Did you know?" I asked him. "Did you know what Emery was?"

"I told you I don't ask them what they did."

"But did you see his ink? In the prison—did you see what it represents?"

He stood taller, staring down at me from a greater height. From experience and age. “No, but Martinez mentioned it once—that Emery had been a Viper. I knew, and I still gave him a chance. And you know what happened? A miracle. I see miracles in that place every day. I see men open their eyes for the first time and truly see. I see them realize their mistakes. I see that realization break them. I see it *tear them apart*. Then I watch them rebuild. Yet you’ve chosen condemnation over redemption, hate over forgiveness.”

“*I’ve* chosen hate? Emery hung out with the man who murdered my father!”

“How can you be so blind?” His outburst rang through the kennel, silencing the dogs and withering my righteousness. He gestured wildly, at nothing and everything. “Hate is growing in this world, not shrinking. Guns are available to anyone with a grudge. Changing those laws is an uphill battle, but people? That’s the battle I choose. I was shipped to Cambodia in the army. I saw violent things. I did inhuman, horrible things. I hated because I was told to hate. It gave me purpose in a world that had decimated Jews. It gave me an outlet for my rage. Until a young Cambodian soldier had my life in his hands and chose to walk away.

“He could have killed me or taken me prisoner. But he said, ‘I want better.’ That was it. Three words in broken English that changed my life the way I try to change the men I meet. All it takes sometimes is three small words.”

The disappointment in his eyes cut through me, shame flooding where insolence had been. I had assumed Arthur’s army days had been mundane. Time spent training or peacekeeping. He had enlisted after the Vietnam War. Nothing in his life hinted at a man burdened by trauma, unless I hadn’t been paying attention. Extreme organization was a coping mechanism, control where none existed. He lived alone, surrounded by community, but without love. He’d kept me at arm’s length our whole relationship, until I’d

forced his hand. Like he was still punishing himself for crimes committed in the heat of war.

"I didn't know," I said, small, quiet. Arthur had done *inhuman* acts, he'd claimed, yet I still wanted to rise and hug him, hold him until he finally softened in my arms and hugged me back. I wanted to tell him it was okay.

"Is he coming back?" Arthur asked.

I shook my head, suddenly sick. "I told him not to."

His face reddened, a quiet fury building from his neck to the tips of his ears. He looked like he was about to say something, but he turned on his heel and stalked toward the exit.

I lay back down and closed my eyes.

Whatever optimism I'd gained since splitting up with Daniel washed away with the week's rain. The farmhouse remained half painted. Chelsea texted me in a tizzy, saying she saw Daniel at the gym and he wasn't wearing his wedding ring and why hadn't I told her we were having trouble? I sent a short reply, explaining it was hard for me to talk about Daniel without getting into issues from my past. I sent it with a vague "we'll talk soon" at the end. A platitude.

Our friendship was waning. Our messages would become sparse until they ceased. I wouldn't miss elements of Chelsea in my life, but the awareness made me feel untethered.

Grayness permeated the house as the week pressed on, heightening the newfound tension between Arthur and me. His quiet gravity had been the mortar of my life for years, but this blatant irritation of his struck harder. Meals were quiet affairs punctuated by scraping cutlery and creaking chairs. Ashen clouds weighed the air on my morning runs.

I missed the heavy footfalls beside mine, Twinkie's excited yips as he nipped at Captain Underbite's heels. I missed waking with the knowledge of Emery on the property, training the dogs and smiling with Winston, those two men so easy to be around.

I was still mad at Emery, devastated by what he'd been and his lie by omission, but his remorse in the barn had been genuine, and I was no stranger to lies. I had let a man believe I was something I wasn't, costing us years together, only to end in a failed marriage. My transgressions weren't as damaging as Emery's violent past, but it all muddied my thoughts. Arthur's ringing accusations hovered over it all.

"You seem quiet today." Martinez met me at the van as usual, his attentiveness more acute than I'd like.

"It's been a rough week." I had skipped my last volunteer session, choosing to wallow with Captain Underbite instead of facing the place where I'd met Emery.

Martinez held the outside door open. "Anything you'd like to talk about?"

I'd like to discuss how right and wrong were different sides of the same coin. Why it was easier to forgive some people than others, some wrongs over others. It would take a year to debate the questions crowding my brain. "I'm good, thanks."

We continued through our usual routine—walking through the metal detector, a quick frisk for good measure. The guards knew me, but procedure was procedure.

The routine took the edge off my mood, and I nudged Martinez with my elbow. "Do you picture Bette Midler when you pat me down?"

He muttered under his breath, ignoring me.

"I could wear a red wig next time. Play a scene from *For the Boys* before you confiscate my phone."

Martinez shook his head as he stood, his smile indulgent. “Remind me never to confide in you again.”

“But my life is so much fuller for knowing your weird crush.” We walked down the hall together. The closer we got to the cellblock, the more I wanted to talk. Hear my voice. Anything but the raging debates in my head. “What’s new with the dogs? Is Goliath getting better with people?”

“Still skittish. Haven’t seen one this bad since the program started. He cowers if Jesse isn’t near. I mean, considering his health when he came in, it’s understandable, but it won’t help get him adopted. Gracie’s gone, though—Randal’s dog. She’s been placed with a nice family. Arthur dropped off a new mutt for him. Pit bull-cross named Otis with loads of energy.”

Randal’s name triggered my usual distaste, but distaste was good. My discomfort was something to focus on besides my personal drama. I’d promised myself I wouldn’t continue building Randal’s bad-guy image in my mind. He deserved as much attention as the other men.

“I’ll start with them,” I told Martinez.

The cellblock hadn’t changed since my last visit. Nothing ever changed here besides the odd dog. Prison was about schedule and consistency, but the room felt different today. I saw shadows of Emery waiting to catch my eye, him sitting in a chair, intent on his journal, or laughing with the other prisoners. I remembered how safe he’d made me feel here, this man whom I had degraded with a few harsh words. He wasn’t here to protect me now, but he hadn’t been here the past month either. I should be used to it.

Randal was easy to spot. His stocky dog was dark brown and white, with a brown patch over one eye. The pair was by the back wall, headed outside. I strode directly there. I usually chatted with Jesse first and last. I liked beginning and ending my visits with him on positive notes. Facing Randal was about standing strong on my own.

I pushed outside and made a beeline for Randal. He was walking Otis on a leash. Trying to, at least.

“Looks like the new recruit is giving you attitude.” I kind of shouted the words, trying a little too hard for upbeat.

Randall stood his ground while Otis pulled, but he didn’t tug back. The prison rules were specific about dog treatment. No yanking leashes. No kicking or shoving or hurting the rescues in any way. One wrong move and you were out of the program.

Randal didn’t turn to me or acknowledge my presence. He waited for the dog to give a bit of slack, then he clicked and offered a treat. “This big ol’ boy is stronger than he knows. Gotta be patient with him. Patience always pays off in the end.”

He faced me, that same affability on his face—kind but calculated—until his eyes dipped to my chest. Was he seriously ogling my breasts? My bras were fitting better these days, my current purple T-shirt and jeans not too snug, but there was no denying his sightline. The prospect made my skin crawl, and his careful cordiality slipped.

He sneered. There, then gone.

My blood ran cold.

“Patience,” he said again, an edge to his voice. “That’s how issues are resolved, Ms. *Ackerman*. That’s the difference between the strong and the weak.” He licked his lips, the slow slide of his tongue as predatory as a snake.

He didn’t seem to be talking about the dogs. His emphasis had been on *me*—my last name, my father’s name. I didn’t know why he’d care who I was, but his tone and word choice had me stepping back.

“Was that a threat?” I shouldn’t be whispering. I should be standing taller, shouting. Or was I misreading his mannerisms?

Randal’s expression morphed, all traces of challenge gone. “I must apologize, Miss Scarlett. I didn’t mean to offend. I just meant prisoners

have more time and patience to train than you outside folk. And please give Emery my best. I hear he's been stayin' with y'all. Risky hirin' an ex-con. I sure hope he doesn't bring y'all any trouble." Another flash of something in his eyes, then he was leading Otis away while I struggled to catch my breath.

I hadn't misread Randal's intentions. He had been acknowledging Emery's past and my last name. No other interpretation made sense, not with the spite in his eyes.

I'd never asked Emery why he'd vouched for Randal. If I had to guess, I'd say they'd known each other before jail. I'd bet Randal had been a Viper too. He was much older than Emery. Maybe he'd been involved in the Vipers when my father had lost Ewan Breck's money. Maybe he still felt he had a score to settle. Maybe the Vipers didn't like that Emery had left the gang.

Risky hirin' an ex-con. I sure hope he doesn't bring y'all any trouble.

Whatever the motivation behind that ominous comment, at least Randal was in jail. He couldn't reach Emery or me, but I wasn't about to turn a blind eye to the verbal threat, no matter how subtle. I hadn't reported my bullying in high school or tried to affect change. I had suffered the ridicule and cowered. No longer.

I hurried inside and found Martinez. "If I have an issue with a prisoner, who should I speak with?"

He straightened to his full height, his hand falling to the baton on his hip. "Which prisoner?"

I opened my mouth, then closed it. Arthur's censure returned, his urging to offer these men their second chances. The more I thought about his beliefs, the more they made sense. The best way to improve this world was through people and actions. But those people had to want their fresh start.

"Randal," I said.

Martinez's eyes swept over me. "Did he do something?"

“Not exactly. It was more what he said and how he said it. I felt threatened.”

“Come,” he said, flanking me protectively. “We’ll talk to the warden.”

Thirty minutes later, I was in my car, shakier than when I’d arrived. The warden had confirmed my suspicions. Randal was a “former” Viper member, and I’d just accused him of threatening to send trouble Emery’s and my way. Subtle threats wouldn’t raise eyebrows in general population, but in the Pups in Prison program, it meant expulsion. There was no tolerance. Positions had to be continually earned.

I’d just cost Randal his cushy prison sentence.

I drove to the grocery store, still shaken and upset. I was glad I’d spoken up. Reporting the comments had been the right thing to do. I only hoped my actions didn’t drive a larger wedge between Arthur and me.

I parked and walked into the grocery store with a plan. I would cook Arthur’s favorite brisket before telling him. Fill the house with the smells of roasting onions and carrots and braising meat. I would cook for forgiveness, even though it wasn’t him who I’d wronged. I gathered the ingredients, filling my shopping basket with apology food.

If the Randal situation angered Arthur further, I wasn’t sure what I’d do. Move out? Find my own place in Fernlow or return to New York?

My cart’s back left wheel whined and stalled. I glanced up, hoping the grating sound wasn’t annoying others.

And there was Emery.

He was working at a checkout counter, bagging groceries, his huge body stuffed into a collared shirt and apron. I stood, unable to approach or back away.

In here, in that generic uniform, he was just a guy making a paycheck any way he could, the ink scratched into his skin invisible. He chatted with a woman and her son, said something to make the boy laugh. He crouched to high-five the boy, and my stomach curdled.

He was such a kind man, only working here because I'd tossed him from the farm. He was indoors all day, which he hated. Doing menial work that left his mind idle. I didn't know where he was living or who was looking after Twinkie during the day or if he had someone like Winston who'd know when Emery needed a gentle cuff on the back or a squeeze of the arm.

All I knew was he'd been honest with me, had offered a heartfelt apology, and I'd turned him away. And *still*, that simmering hurt and anger toward him lingered.

I abandoned my food and hightailed it back to the parking lot before Emery noticed me. I texted Daniel from the car.

Me: Can I come get more of my stuff?

I'd have to tell Arthur I wasn't coming home tonight, but I needed space from him, from Emery, from Randall and Brackson. Going home to Arthur meant confessing about Randal and facing more condemnation. Another night with my uncle's silent reproach would suffocate me, and Emery was bagging groceries when I had the power to give him the job he wanted, if only I could separate the man I'd grown to care about from the man who'd inked a snake on his chest to prove he'd always be a Viper.

TWENTY-SIX

New York was as loud and congested at night as during the day, but the darkness contained the discord. The streetlights and signs were beacons. Pedestrians and cars fought for dominance. I moved with the flow, tonight's anonymity a reprieve. There were no prisoners who would recognize me, no uncle to tell me I was ruining lives.

My apartment felt even more foreign this visit. Daniel had said I could stay the night in *our* place and offered to sleep elsewhere. I had no clue which bed he'd be crawling into, not that it mattered. I may have chosen the abstract landscape painting on the wall, the pink throw blanket on the couch, but nothing about this space felt like mine anymore.

I dropped my purse on the kitchen counter, happy to have some peace, but Daniel appeared, hurrying from the bedroom.

He skidded to a stop, something clutched in his hand. He held up his phone. "Sorry. Didn't realize I forgot this."

"No worries. It's your place right now." Formerly, *our* place.

We watched each other, animals caught in the headlights. He flipped his phone a few times. "How's Pennsylvania?"

"It's good. Arthur's doing good." But it wasn't and he wasn't, and I wasn't supposed to be lying anymore. "Actually, things are kind of rough right now. I've upset Arthur, and I made a decision that hurt someone we

both care about. I didn't need anything from the apartment. I just needed an escape."

Daniel rocked on his heels. "Why does this feel like the most honest you've been with me in a long time?"

Wasn't that the depressing truth. "It's my new leaf—speak my mind and live with the consequences."

His attention fell to my chest, interest and a hint of rawness on his face: my Jewish identity there for the world to see. "I guess better late than never."

"What about you?" I asked, preferring to shift the spotlight elsewhere. "How have things been?"

He licked his lips before replying. "Surprisingly good. The library build is coming together. Spending lots of time at the gym. And…" He dipped his chin and focused on the floor. "I've met someone."

A pang hit me. Not acute, but there. He was moving on already. I shouldn't be surprised. My date with Emery had been about me meeting someone too. Everything was progressing as it should, neither of us licking our wounds long, proof our relationship had ended well before we'd pulled the plug. Daniel dating wasn't surprising, but it was the end of a chapter, which made me sad. The final punctuation on our joint life.

"Is it Margot?" I asked.

He frowned. "How'd you know that?"

"I saw you together that day, by the elevators. After Chelsea's shower. I could tell there was…something."

"Nothing happened while you and I were together," he said quickly. "I would never cheat."

His vehemence was sweet and appreciated. I *had* doubted him, but my suspicions hadn't been his fault. I had doubted him because I had doubted myself. "I know, but thanks for saying it. I kind of met someone too. But he isn't who I thought he was."

Daniel's laugh held a trace of bitterness. "I know something about that."

Way to hit a woman when she was down, but I deserved the jibe. "I guess you do."

"Did he lie to you?"

I wasn't sure if this was a test, another dig Daniel could use to sting me, but I thought about his question, harder than I had since my altercation with Emery. The answer came clearly this time, all the periphery fading to the background.

No. Emery hadn't lied to me.

When Daniel had asked me about Christmas or Easter, I would manipulate and steer the conversation elsewhere. I thought I was letting people follow their natural train of thought, but that hadn't been the case. I had willingly lied.

Emery had never been vague. When I'd asked him questions, he always answered truthfully. If I'd actually questioned him before our date, asked why he'd been in prison or what his tattoos represented, he would have told me. He'd have bared his soul, knowing I'd cut him out of my life. But I hadn't asked. I had preferred pretending he was an altruistic prisoner, who had been arrested while saving babies or paying for his mother's imagined cancer treatments.

"He didn't lie," I told Daniel. "I'm just not sure I can live with our differences."

We chatted briefly after that, stilted but nice. We still had to deal with lawyers, organize our belongings, sell the apartment if he didn't want to buy me out.

We said goodbye and wished each other well.

I felt lonely when he left, adrift in a space that used to be my safe haven. I wasn't overly welcome at the farm right now either. I was a puzzle without a border, pieces fitted together with no end, but at least my picture was taking shape. I was Scarlett Ackerman, daughter of Jacob Ackerman,

soon-to-be ex-wife of a kind man, niece of a war veteran who'd dedicated his life to helping those society had condemned, mother to Captain Underbite, the world's ugliest mutt. I was a book cover designer and volunteer worker and sometimes an artist who liked the feel of a pencil smudging her fingers.

I went to sleep early, sprawled across the large bed I used to call mine. I slept like the dead, no terrifying nightmares. I woke up late but more alert than I'd felt all week.

I knew exactly where I needed to go.

I gathered a few more belongings, lingered in the apartment for one last breath, then drove to Dannenberg's Deli.

The small restaurant was the exact same as when my father and I would eat here, plates overflowing with towering pastrami sandwiches, gray-haired waitresses rushing through the space. Their blue-and-white uniforms were as dated as ever. The place smelled of briny pickles and bubbling broths, the savory mix pungent and homey.

The waitress sat me promptly, and I ordered five meals.

She looked at me like I'd lost my marbles.

"My dad can't be with me today," I said, my eyes filling as I spoke. "But he used to bring me here. I wasn't sure what he would have wanted to eat. I figured I'd order his favorites."

She pursed her lips and patted my shoulder, then left to put in my order.

I blew out a rough breath and pictured my dad across from me, laughing and telling me I was his favorite daughter.

"But I'm your only daughter," I'd say.

"And still my favorite," he'd reply.

Those endearments hadn't been lies. My father had done horrible things and ruined countless lives, including mine, but he had loved me. I understood that now.

I understood that the men in Brackson were more than their crimes. Most of them grieved over their mistakes and loved their dogs with a devotion akin to religion. They worked to better themselves more actively than people who were free to read or study or do whatever they wanted. According to Arthur, my father had lived with remorse too. Guilt had humbled him, regrets for my getting caught in his undertow.

I wouldn't know. I'd never given him the chance to tell me.

As my food was served, I allowed myself to live that grief. I remembered the good times with him while the matzah ball dissolved on my tongue. I grinned as I crunched a dill pickle and licked mustard from my fingers, happy and sad at once. I hadn't cried at my father's funeral. I had never sat shiva as a Jewish daughter should.

I sat now, intermittent tears tracking my cheeks. I tried to hear his laugh and see the joy in his eyes when I'd do my teacher impressions. I wrinkled my nose at the kishke as I would have back then. I still didn't like the sausage-like dish smothered in gravy, but I knew someone who would. I would pack up these leftovers and deliver them to Esther. Share my day of remembrance with her.

I took a detour on the way home and drove to my old Scarsdale neighborhood. The street was quiet, the opulence of the homes more dramatic than I remembered. Wealth stacked brick by brick, immaculate lawns and gardens.

My old house looked the same but different. I wondered if the family living there loved one another. If the mother spent her hours under her covers while her husband swindled friends and family. I wondered if they had a Juliette who cooked food and organized schedules and made sure the kids ate their vegetables. I wondered if my perfect cupcakes had become colored splotches embedded in the grass like splattered paint.

I wondered if they were happy.

I sat so long my leg fell asleep. There was nothing left for me here. Just a scab I was tired of picking. I stretched briefly, then drove away with a car full of food and a heart full of memories—good and bad. I was finally honoring them both.

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The light outside faded. Farmland gave way to cornfields, then more farms and more corn. Rural Fernlow at its finest. I turned into Esther's driveway, excited to bring her a piece of New York. Maybe I'd invite her with me next time, let her show me around *her* city.

A couple of cars were parked in the driveway, lights ablaze in both the big house and her smaller in-law suite. I knocked on her door first, rubbing my hands against the chill. I'd left Fernlow so abruptly, I hadn't brought my coat. I was wearing the same T-shirt and jeans from my prison visit, the reminder bringing with it Randal's thinly veiled threat.

Patience. That's how issues are resolved, Ms. Ackerman.

Risky hirin' an ex-con.

I sure hope he doesn't bring y'all any trouble.

I'd have to tell Arthur what Randal had said, ask if Randal could get to us outside those cement walls. The possibility sent a shiver down my spine, thoughts that had no place near Esther, a woman who'd lived through hell. I should have changed before coming here. I didn't want pieces of that experience anywhere near her. But footsteps sounded from inside the house, too heavy and quick to be hers.

The door opened. My heart stopped.

Emery, again.

My eyes darted from his face to his chest where that tattoo was covered and back to his face. "Why are you here?"

“Emery?” Esther called, her accent rolling over the R in his name. “Who is it?”

I glanced at my car, at the wood boards under my feet, confused, trying to remember if Emery had ever mentioned knowing Esther. “Why are you here?” I asked again.

“It’s Scarlett,” Emery called to Esther, avoiding my question and my eyes. “She’s come for a visit.”

“Invite her in, then. Keep that cold air outside.”

He nodded, even though she couldn’t see him. Even though he hadn’t answered my question. He shifted on his feet, then fiddled with the cuffs of his long-sleeved shirt. Emery wasn’t a fidgeter. He was a forthright man who looked into people’s hearts when talking, straight and true, yet here he was—awkward and fidgety.

“It’s probably best if I leave you two alone,” he said. “She’ll be happy to see you. Tell her I’ll visit next week.”

He slipped past me before I could recover and ask again how he knew Esther.

Frazzled, I hurried into Esther’s living room, unsure what to expect. Emery to have harmed her? Snakes to be loose in her home?

Esther was as healthy as ever, seated on the couch, a bridge table in front of her. The surface was covered in Rummikub tiles, two boards set up with a chair opposite, as though she’d been playing a game.

“Where is he?” she asked.

She was obviously referring to Emery. The big question was *why*. “He left.”

She made an impatient sound at the back of her throat. “I was beating him, and I never beat him. I am guessing you scared him off again.”

“I did *what* again?”

“Emery.” She waved her hand impatiently. “I know about the date and what happened after. You were hard on the young man.”

I must have entered another dimension. It was the only explanation for her censure. “I don’t understand, Esther. How long have you known Emery?”

“Two years.”

My mind whirled with that information, too fast to follow the trail. “But he just got out of jail.”

“Ach. Yes. But I visited the jail with Arthur. I talked to the men about Auschwitz. I met with Emery several times. He had many questions. He wanted to understand the depth of hate, so he could climb out of the hole he was in. He was in a deep hole, that man.”

Of course Arthur had taken her there. Of course he’d exposed the men to her history, evidence of humankind’s worst atrocities and the power to overcome. Arthur’s motivation made sense. The rest of these dots didn’t connect. “So you know Emery, and you know he was in a violent gang?”

“I know what he is *now*, Scarlett—a kind man who wants to make amends.”

Like Arthur, she focused on the strides Emery had made, not the decisions of his past, but she didn’t yell at me like Arthur had or shut me out with ruthless silence.

She waited, solemn, urging me to see Emery clearly.

“He must have been coming here every Thursday,” I said, more to myself than to her. “He would leave the farm every Thursday, and I didn’t know where he went.” I stared at this frail yet strong woman as the pieces fitted together. “He came here, didn’t he?”

She began piling her rummy tiles in neat little stacks. “He takes me shopping. He beats me at Rummikub. We talk about life. He is a kind soul who was led down a dark path, but he has found his way back.”

Emery’s reason for being here began to make sense, but Esther’s allowance of it didn’t. “You must know which gang he was part of, what

they did to my family. How can you play games with a man who could've been the one to kill Arthur's brother?"

She didn't rise to my baiting or react to my raised voice. She simply patted the couch beside her and waited for me to sit.

"In Judaism," she said, "there is no easy forgiveness. Forgiveness must be earned. If it is not, there is no true repentance. But only the offended can offer mercy. It is not for me or you or Arthur to say if Emery is absolved. The courts have punished him, but even that is not enough. A person cannot truly be free of their crime until they have admitted their wrong to the person harmed. They must accept responsibility for their actions and vow never to follow that path again. Only then is the offender absolved of any debt owed for the wrongs he has done."

I sat entranced, gathering these gems of wisdom and holding them close. Knowledge I could have used before my father had died, when I'd had the chance to offer him compassion. But I wouldn't have been strong enough to hold these precious wisdoms back then, and we weren't talking about my father.

"Did Emery do that?" I asked. "Did he beg forgiveness from the person he hurt?"

"He has worked harder to make his wrongs right than any man I have met, but it is his story to share with you, not mine. Now, tell me—why did you come to visit, besides interrupting a perfectly good game of Rummikub?"

For some reason, I laughed. An uncomfortable release of the anger and frustration I'd been harboring against Emery. I thought I was the one who had been wronged, naïvely duped and deceived. One conversation with this wise woman, and all that nonsense cleared away.

Emery was just a man. Horrible tattoos or not, criminal past or not, he was a fallible person. He had wronged, and he'd spent the last years trying to rebuild himself. It wasn't for me to derail his progress. It wasn't even for

me to forgive him. My only choice was to accept him or not. And I had chosen *not*. My shortsightedness had altered the positive course of his life.

I wanted to run out of the house, find Emery. Apologize. Rehire him and invite him back to the farm. Maybe start over together, or not. I didn't know. But I would give him the chance to tell his story this time. The full one, no-holds-barred. Listen the way a friend should have listened from the start.

I didn't run to him, though. I let this newfound understanding settle and nudged Esther's arm. "I came because I have gifts. I brought you food from New York."

Her watery eyes widened. "You are a good girl, Scarlett. I knew you were special."

I laughed fully this time, feeling lighter than I had in a long time.

I hauled in the food, then heated the kishke for a late-night snack. I stuffed Esther's fridge and freezer with the excess, while she puttered around me, telling me which drawers to open, what temperature to use on her temperamental stove. She ate kishke, and I smiled at her simple joy—food for the soul. I thought about how pleased Arthur would be when Emery came back to work with us, but nothing in life was that simple.

Emery might not want to return, and Arthur still didn't know about Randal's expulsion from the Pups program. He might be even more furious with me. Even if he wasn't and Emery was willing to work with us, we'd have to consider Randal's coded threats.

It might not be safe for Emery to return at all.

TWENTY-SEVEN

It was late by the time I drove home. The rural roads were treacherous at this hour, so dark it was like driving through a high-beam tunnel. Clouds blotted out the stars. The potholes sent my car bumping from side to side, each hard *thwump* reverberating up my spine.

I turned off the radio and focused on the drive, gripping the wheel at ten and two, like Arthur and Emery. I smiled as I pictured Arthur's always-stern expression, the way he arranged the cans evenly on his pantry shelves. That man would find a way to organize the dirt around his coffin by geological type. Surely he'd find a way to forgive me for all I'd done.

As I rounded the last bend I relaxed slightly, until I saw glowing lights in the distance. Possibly at the farm. I squeezed the steering wheel in a stranglehold.

Those weren't just any bright lights. Red-and-blue flashes whorled in the dark like radioactive bats, and my racing heart jumped into my throat.

Police lights. At the farm.

Oh God.

Arthur.

I pictured him on the ground, clutching his chest. Struggling to breathe. No one had called my cell, but I hadn't checked it in ages. The power could

be drained. He might have tried to reach me…unless this heart attack had been too severe.

I pressed my foot harder on the gas, gripped the steering wheel so tightly my hands cramped. Maybe the police had responded to a false alarm. He could have accidentally dialed 9-1-1. Their arrival could be as simple as that.

I eased my pressure off the gas, suddenly terrified of what I'd find. Yesterday morning, I'd left to volunteer in a rush. I hadn't wished Arthur a good day or scolded him to eat well and not work too hard. We'd barely spoken the past week, just strangers letting the groaning stairs announce our presence. I hadn't apologized or asked him to talk about the Emery situation. All the progress we'd made had vanished in the face of my selfishness.

A cop stopped me at the entrance to our drive and signaled for me to lower my window. I did as she requested, functioning by rote.

She leaned down and spoke through the window. "Sorry, ma'am, but this is a crime scene. You can't drive in here."

My thoughts turned sluggish, drifting in slow motion. *Crime scene?* What the hell did she mean by *crime scene*? "I don't understand. I live here."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. There's been an attack."

Oh God, no. *No, no, no, no.*

I shoved my car into park and pushed the door open so hard the officer stumbled back. I ran past her, toward the flashing lights, my ribs too tight to contain my rising horror.

"Arthur?" His name came out in a shaky whisper, like I was ten years old again, calling for my father, trying to figure out why uniformed men had invaded my life. "Arthur?" Louder this time, desperate. "Arthur! Where are you? Arthur!"

Several officers motioned toward me, one of them giving chase from behind. I ran faster, panic a fire at my back. Where was Arthur? Why couldn't I see Arthur?

Then I saw him, rifle on his shoulder, an officer at his side. The two men were talking calmly. I wasn't calm.

"Arthur!" I ran flat out, mud and debris slipping under my boots.

"Scarlett." He turned. I couldn't see his face clearly, but he moved too. He walked, then ran, catching me in his arms as I flung myself at him. "I'm okay," he said into my hair, his arms a vise around my back. "I'm okay. We're okay."

I clung to him, a violent sob shaking my body as I cried and hugged him tighter.

"It's okay," he said again. "It's okay." The same words over and over.

He couldn't say them enough. I was falling apart. Arthur was fine. I felt his hammering heart against my own, his arms around me, keeping me from crumpling to the ground, but I couldn't keep my shit together. "It's okay," he said again and again.

When I finally caught my breath, I loosened my arms enough to pull back and see his face. "What happened? Is Winston okay?"

He swallowed hard, hesitated. Arthur never hesitated.

I was back to hyperventilating. "Did something happen to Winston?"

"Winston is fine." He adjusted his grip on me, one arm still holding my back, his free hand coming to rest on my face. "We were vandalized. Some damage and graffiti to the kennel and property. I slept through it. Winston wasn't here when it happened."

"So, no one was hurt?"

Again with the hesitation, but something inside him broke. A raw sadness I'd never seen. "The dogs, honey. They got the dogs. By the time I woke up and realized what was happening, I was too late. I shot a hole in the back of their van window, but the damage had been done."

“No.” I was moving again. Running. My dog. Someone had hurt my dog.

“Scarlett! You don’t want to see it. Please, honey. Stay here with me.”

I couldn’t stop. I knew what I’d find in the kennel, but I needed to be with her. Hold her.

I hadn’t expected all the blood.

Blood was smeared on the floors, the fences, the walls. The dog runs had been torn apart, and all the dogs were *dead*. Captain Underbite was nothing but a lifeless shape on the floor—my dog, my girl, gutted and discarded.

The cops tried to stop me. I lunged forward, aggressive and feral. Dove to her side and gathered her on my lap, pressed my hand to the gaping wound in her side. I tried to push the blood back inside her. Make her okay. Make us okay. *Make everything okay.*

I tried and tried, but nothing was okay.

TWENTY-EIGHT

I wasn't sure how I got inside the house. I didn't remember walking up the stairs or showering or crawling into bed. I'd been hungover like this in college—previous nights murky, snippets of the evenings floating in and out—but this wasn't a hangover. My eyes stung from crying. Every inhale hurt my lungs. When I glanced at my hands, they still looked red, like the blood hadn't washed off. There was no washing off last night's horrors.

I forced myself to sit up. The room swam around me. I needed to get up and talk to Arthur, the police—tell someone about Randal's threats, his expulsion from the Pups program. The fact that last night was my fault. I couldn't summon the energy to blink.

Someone knocked on my door.

I looked at it but didn't move. The door opened slowly, and there was Emery.

I couldn't shake this man; I no longer wanted to.

"I needed to see you were okay," he said, devastation plain on his face. "Arthur said I could come up, but if you want me to go, I'll go."

He was so tentative, his voice so gentle, but his dark eyes held a hint of fury. His hand was on the doorjamb. His fingers looked strange—swollen and cut-up—but relief rushed through me. He was *here*. He'd come back for me, regardless of my cruelty.

I didn't know how to explain I was ready to listen to his story without judgment. That Esther had *made me see*. I didn't know how to tell him he was exactly who I needed right now. The sight of him was waking me up and calming me down at once, too many emotions battling for attention. I couldn't find the words to explain it all, so I opened my arms to him.

It took him a second to understand. Then he was in front of me, lifting me into his arms and cradling me against his huge body. I exhaled so long and rough, I sagged into him. I slipped my hands around his back, pressed my face into his chest.

"They killed my dog," I said against his breastbone. "All the dogs."

"I know, baby. I'm so sorry." He splayed one large hand across my spine, used his other to cup the back of my head. He kissed my hair, my temple.

I wasn't sure what soothed me more, his warmth circling me or that term of endearment. *Baby.* Tenderness I didn't deserve. Still, I clung to him. We held each other until I found the courage to release him and face what I'd done. "This is my fault."

More ferocity flashed in his eyes. "Don't you dare say that. Why would you say that?"

"Randal uttered vague threats my last visit. I told the warden, and they put him back in general population. If I hadn't said anything, he wouldn't have acted. He did this somehow. I *know* he did, and it's because of me." I swayed, one ragged breath from passing out. "I have to talk to the police. They need to know."

Emery gripped my shoulders and dipped his head to meet my eyes. "None of this was your fault, Scarlett. The police know about Randal. They talked to the prison first thing this morning. You did the right thing telling the warden. The *brave* thing. The only person at fault here is me. I'm the reason this started, and it started years ago."

“You knew Randal before, didn’t you?” Randal’s subtle threat had implied as much.

A vein in Emery’s forehead bulged. “I did. I thought he’d changed, but I was wrong. I’ve been wrong about a lot of things in my life.”

This was the story Esther wouldn’t tell me, the dark hole that had consumed Emery for so many years. I hadn’t given him the chance to explain in the barn. I owed him that time now.

I took his hand and urged him to sit on the bed’s edge with me. I feathered my fingers over the cuts on his knuckles. “How’d you hurt your hand?”

He stretched his swollen fingers. “After I saw the dogs, I punched a wall.”

“Better that than a person, I guess.”

He shrugged a shoulder and folded my hand in his.

“Tell me who you were,” I whispered. “Tell me what brought you to the Vipers and how you became who you are *now*.” So far from a violent man who’d kill innocent dogs.

“None of this is an excuse,” he said, not shying away from the ugliness of his past. “I’ll tell you if you want to hear it, but it’s just me telling you facts. I’m responsible for every decision I made. Any hurt I caused is my cross to bear.”

I threaded our fingers more firmly together and squeezed. “I want to know.”

He nodded and took a deep breath. “My father left when I was young,” he said. “I was eight and my sister was five. He just up and left, didn’t even say goodbye. Didn’t pay a dime in support, and my mother hardly came up for air. She worked two jobs, sometimes three. Was irritable all the time. Snapped at us for the smallest things and was barely around. Left me to cook dinner and take care of my sister, which I resented.”

“Any kid would’ve been resentful. That’s way too young to be the man of the house.”

“I was no man back then,” he huffed. “I was frustrated and angry. My father didn’t just leave and disappear. He moved in with a woman not far from us. Turned out they already had one kid and another on the way. And he wouldn’t talk to me or my sister. He was a shitty father before that, but the bastard ignored us, pretended we never existed. I’d see him in the neighborhood, and he’d treat me like I was invisible.”

Selfishness seemed to be a disease among too many parents. “I’m so sorry, Emery.”

“It was what it was,” he said, unlinking our fingers. “Then there was school, which was an issue for me. I was dyslexic, like I told you at dinner. I didn’t know what dyslexia was, but the other kids were mean. Called me stupid when I struggled to read. I was small growing up, didn’t hit my growth spurt until later. And when I did, I lashed out. Punched any kid who looked at me funny, which was when the Vipers took notice of me.”

“Because you were bigger and strong?”

“Because I was a volcano of rage. They look for that in kids—bad homes, angry, nowhere to channel their frustrations. I told them to fuck off at first. I was sixteen and had my sister to take care of. She had more friends than me. One nice kid, Dario Leoni, was over a lot to escape his abusive father. He’d help out so he could stay and hang out with her. I wasn’t easy to be around, so I was happy she had company. Then, a year later, I got in a brutal fight at school and was expelled.”

Emery stretched out his bruised hand, then dragged it down his face. “Merrick—the guy who’d been after me to join the Vipers—hounded me after that. Told me I didn’t need school to earn cash. Brought me to their hangouts, gave me food, booze, weed. Pounded my back and treated me like family. And honestly, that’s all it took. I didn’t care that they were

criminals. I didn't think about what they'd make me do. For the first time in my life, I felt like I belonged somewhere, and I folded like a deck of cards."

"We all crave acceptance, Emery. Especially as kids." Belonging was the most powerful drug an impressionable teen could take. I had inhaled my fill growing up, telling lies into adulthood to maintain my high. Nothing was more seductive than acceptance. "If you don't get support and love at home or school, you'll seek it elsewhere. It's only natural."

He shook his head vehemently. "I was such an easy mark."

"Maybe, but how many of those men are looking at their past choices now, trying to make themselves better?"

He sucked on his teeth. "Sometimes it feels like too little, too late."

We sat in silence a moment, close but not touching. Still, I could feel Emery's tension, hear the harsher pulls of his breaths.

Last night's events had devastated us both, but this stress felt bigger. Large enough to consume him. He needed to tell the rest of his story, and I needed to hear it. Not the details of how the gang had hazed him or a list of all his bad deeds. Making him relive that hell wouldn't help either of us, but I needed to know about his arrest, learn why he'd finally chosen hope over anger. See if we could figure out how to move past all this ugliness.

"Why were you charged with aggravated assault?" I asked softly. I'd avoided the direct question until now. There was no hiding from it any longer.

He stared hard at a spot in front of him. "A group of us broke a man's spine. He'll be in a wheelchair for the rest of his life because of us."

I sucked in a sharp breath, trying not to picture the gruesome scene. Emery had crippled a man. The shock and anger I'd felt when looking at his ink returned, but I bit my tongue. I hadn't asked so I could judge him again. I'd seen too much good in Emery to fail him now.

He worked his jaw, a look of disgust on his face. "I'd done a lot of bad shit by then. I was twenty-four and a menace, but things weren't sitting as

well with me—the constant violence, seeing my supposed brothers hurt or dead. Never knowing if the next stray bullet would hit me.

"My sister was walking a straight path and ragged on me to get out. Told me I couldn't see the full repercussions of my actions, how many lives and families I was ruining. I brushed her off, but some of her rationality had begun to sink in. Then a group of us was sent to handle a dealer who'd been selling on our turf. We were told to give him a warning. Beat him enough to send a message.

"So, we did our thing," he said, harder, angrier. "Got drunk and high, blared music in the car, getting riled up for the attack. We found the kid without much effort—he went by 'Ram,' and we were on him in seconds. Shoved him from the back, punched and kicked him, not giving a shit how much he screamed. And when he got real bloody, like really bad, he twisted around, and I saw the guy's face for the first time." Emery rubbed at his wrist obsessively. "It was Dario Leoni."

I blinked, trying to place the name. When realization hit, my stomach dropped. "Your sister's friend who'd been abused by his father?"

He nodded. "I fucking froze. Stood there, sick and confused—one of those weird out-of-body experiences—but I never told the others to stop. I stood there, scared for Dario and disgusted with myself, unsure how I'd wound up there. This kid had taken refuge in my house, trying to escape his abusive home, and we'd beaten him within an inch of his life."

We were both quiet, the gravity of his actions filling the room. I kept picturing the scene, Emery wild at first, violent and aggressive, then lost.

His actions made me angry at him; they also made me sad *for* him.

"My lawyer got my sentence knocked down," he said, his voice rough with emotion. "I didn't have a record, and she said I was a low rung on the Viper's ladder, not as involved in the beating. I obviously went to jail, but for less time than I deserved, and I was still angry with the world. Or more to the point, angry with myself, but I had no clue what to do with that rage

and guilt. Randal was already inside. He'd been a Viper for years and took me under his wing, kept me safe until I found my way. Then things in my head started to change."

The rhythm to his confession started to change, too, gaining momentum. Emery dragged his hands down his thighs. "I attended regulated counseling. Group sessions with a mix of men, and there was this one guy—a Mexican from a rival gang. I stayed quiet during the meetings, but he was vocal. He talked about his shitty family life, a sister he felt responsible for, how he struggled at school. Basically, his life sounded a lot like my life, and it hit me just how fucked up the gang system was. Pitting people against each other. Preying on kids like me, like Dario, like this guy."

Hate breeding more hate in a vicious cycle. "Were you still considered an active member then?"

"In theory, yeah. But I was pulling further away. Then Randal told me about the Pups in Prison program, said it was an easy way to do our time, so we worked toward it. I filled out forms and spoke up in group sessions, saying I was a changed man, even though I wasn't fully there yet. And when spots opened up, our lies paid off. We got in. And I met Arthur."

"The prisoner and the dog whisperer," I murmured.

"That man is a saint, Scarlett."

"He's definitely something," I said with fondness.

Emery picked at a paint stain on his jeans. "I was still riddled with confusion and guilt then. Sullen and quiet. He sat with me one day, asked to read my journal. I hadn't written anything profound, but he took one look at my awkward lettering and asked if I had trouble reading. I, of course, told him to fuck off and wasn't nice about it."

"I'm guessing he put you in your place."

For the first time since walking in here, the ghost of a smile curved Emery's lips. "He told me we trained dogs by offering them love and guidance to integrate them back into society. Then he asked me if I

considered myself less deserving than a dog, or if I'd quit being so stubborn and ask for the same level of help."

I shook my head at my uncle's candor. "That man doesn't mince words."

"Blunt as a hammer, but it worked. I grudgingly asked for help, admitted that reading had always been tough. Arthur was the first person to explain dyslexia to me, got me hooked up with some help. Became the father figure I didn't know I needed and pulled me the last distance away from the Vipers. Or maybe that was the dogs."

"Their trust and companionship?"

He nodded. "Unconditional love is a powerful drug. Made me feel human again, but feeling human also brought with it more shame." He scrubbed his hand over his mouth. "I was sick over what I'd done to Dario and others I didn't even know. I barely ate, couldn't sleep. The dogs still loved me. They licked me and curled up in my arms, but I was sinking into a dark place. Then Esther…" He shook his head. "She visited, talked about her experiences with all this *strength*, and she gave me hope."

"Esther is pretty good at the hope stuff," I said, my voice sounding as raw as his. I was a firsthand recipient of her wisdoms.

He kept picking at his paint stain, not meeting my eyes. "That woman is more of a force than men three times her size. I saw her tattoo, listened to her story. Couldn't believe a person could survive what she'd been through and not despise the world. And when she talked about forgiveness…I could finally breathe. I could *see* more clearly, slowly accept there was no erasing my actions or fixing Dario's back, but I could tell him I was sorry. I could beg him for forgiveness.

"So…" He took a moment to swallow. "I talked with Esther and Arthur at length. Arthur helped me draft my first letters, and I sent Dario thirty-three letters in total. He'd left his gang by then, and I begged him to visit the prison so I could apologize in person. I wrote to him like he was my

diary, explaining why I'd joined the Vipers, how wrong it was. How wrong *my* actions had been."

I turned toward Emery, one knee tucked up on the bed, and pressed my hand to his thigh. "Did he come? Did he forgive you?"

"I didn't deserve it, but yeah, he did. I cried like a baby and told him how sorry I was. I offered him money and help when I got out. Anything he wanted. All he said was 'Tell your story. Reach out to other kids who are like you and me and show them there's another path.'" Emery dragged his knuckle by the corner of his eye. "So that's what I've been doing with Esther, aside from shopping with her and playing games. She offered to help get me started with outreach programs, organizations that'll help me work with at-risk youth before they make irrevocable decisions."

He slumped on an exhale, and I put more pressure on his thigh, hoping he felt my support. To blindly follow a toxic path, causing untold damage to others, then to face the wreckage in your wake took immense bravery. Emery was doing exactly that—accepting his blame. Living *in* that agony. Maybe to a damaging point, but I no longer wanted to kick him out and run away. I wanted to be part of his recovery. Be his unconditional support.

"What you're doing is important work, Emery. It can't be easy, but you'll make a difference in people's lives."

There was no fervor on his face. Only resignation. "All I can do is try, but it's also why this place was attacked. The Vipers don't want me speaking against them, messing with their recruiting system and helping others get out. Randal and I talked in prison about my goals. I was sure he'd changed like me and wanted a clean slate when he got out, but he was still playing the system like we'd originally planned, trying to make his last years easy in the Pups program."

"You couldn't have known."

"I chose blind optimism, Scarlett. I *wanted* to trust him. The Vipers came here because of what I told Randal. Not because your complaint put

him back in general population." He faced me fully, the first time since his story began, and his face crumpled. "They killed the dogs because of my plans to interfere with their way of life. It was a warning. They want to scare me into silence, and they know who your father was, which makes me a traitor for being here and makes you a target. I brought this ugliness into your life."

"Ugliness?" I shook my head. "You helped bring me *back* to life. You helped me face my past and gave me strength to change my future. You brought me *hope*, Emery."

I wasn't sure how I'd missed his role in my empowerment, questioned his integrity for even a second. We all had good and evil in us on some level. The hard part was allowing the darkness to exist in the shadows, so it didn't block out the light. Arthur knew this and saw Emery's light. Esther saw it. All I'd seen since my father's arrest was how everything had affected *me*. But Emery's insights and quiet understanding had opened my eyes to the parts of myself I'd chosen to bury.

I stood and moved in front of him. His head and shoulders were curved forward, a familiar pose for Emery—too much weight for him to bear. He was such a powerful man, but here, with me standing over him and him bent in grief, he was just a boy ashamed of himself.

I pressed my hands to his cheeks, made him meet my eyes. "I see you," I said.

Three small words. Not *I forgive you*. Those words weren't mine to say. As Esther said, forgiveness had to come from Dario and from within himself. My words might not be what he needed, but I hoped they helped.

Moisture filled his eyes. "I can't have you in my life. I'll only hurt you."

"It's not your choice to make. I kicked you out when I shouldn't have. I was too angry to see the truth. You're not responsible for what happened to my father and me. You did terrible things, but all I see now is a man strong enough to admit his mistakes and try to make amends." I released his face

and pressed my palm over his heart, over the viper branded on his chest. “I don’t know what it means for us or where we go from here, but I see you, Emery. I see you, and I’m not scared.”

“Emery?” Arthur’s footfalls stomped up the stairs, louder than usual. He poked his head into my room. “The cops want a word with you, Emery. They’re waiting outside.”

I was standing between Emery’s thighs, the hard plane of his chest beneath my hand. I didn’t step away like a teen caught with a boy in her room. I leaned into Emery until his arm circled my waist. “What kind of word?” I asked.

Arthur didn’t comment on our closeness, but he took his time answering. “The cops just have some questions for him.”

Emery’s hand flexed on my hip. “I’ll be down in a minute.”

Arthur left, but I felt uneasy. Something wasn’t right.

I backed away from Emery and dashed stray hairs away from my face. “The cops don’t think you were involved in this, do they?”

He had left Esther’s because of me. He could have gone on a drive to clear his mind. He might not have an alibi.

He unfurled his long body, coming to stand in front of me, and suddenly, I was the smaller one, vulnerable. Afraid of what he’d say next.

He brushed his knuckles down my cheek. “There’s nothing for you to worry about. I told the police I’d help in any way I can. I know where these guys hang out. There’s a chance I can win their trust again. Help bring them down.”

I caught his wrist, stilling his tenderness. “You mean you’ll be bait.”

“They have to be punished for what they did, Scarlett. I’ve got to do something to help. Find a way to make this right.”

“No, you don’t. You don’t have to do anything. Let the police do their jobs. Let them put themselves at risk.”

He freed his hand from my grip and captured one of my curls. He rubbed it between his fingers. “Nothing’s happening today. They have to put a plan together, which means it’ll be organized. I won’t get hurt.”

“But…you won’t be safe after. Or will they put you in some kind of witness protection program?” Disappear him from my world.

“I’m not a witness in a trial, Scarlett. And even if it came to that, I wouldn’t hide. Not from the Vipers. Not from my past. I wouldn’t hurt my sister like that or…” He swallowed whatever he was about to say and sighed. “I can take care of myself. Please, don’t worry about me.”

His rationality didn’t dent my worry or my rising need to have him close. “Will you move back here? To your loft? And where’s Twinkie? Did you bring him with you?”

“He’s at the place where I’m staying—a room in a house Arthur helped me find. They look after him when I’m out, but I’d love to move back here. I hate the idea of you being alone after all this, but only if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure,” I said quickly. The lines between right and wrong with Emery had blurred from day one. I wasn’t sure what I could offer him in the future. I wanted to live in the moment for a change.

He stared down at me, so much emotion blowing through his dark eyes, and I felt ensnared. Unable to blink or look away. His attention fell to my lips, the inevitable pull between us still there, still tugging at my chest like an overheated magnet.

Slowly, he cupped the back of my neck and lowered his head, the smallest sigh escaping him as his lips brushed mine. It was the most tender kiss of my life. The softest touch from this brute of a man. A kiss that ended soon after it began, but there was no end to how deeply Emery affected me.

TWENTY-NINE

Seeing the vandalism in daylight was less scary than under a blackened sky, but no less traumatic. The dogs had been taken away, leaving an eerie quiet, the extent of the damage to the enclosures and property staggering. Officers were still investigating the scene, snapping photos, taking measurements and blood samples. It was like being on a *CSI* set, except this was real life.

Emery's embroilment with the Vipers might have brought trouble to the farm, but my father's history with them had made us targets.

Part of me still wanted to hide from Jacob Ackerman's criminal legacy, run back to New York and hide, but replaying Emery's story gave me strength. Someone had recognized his vulnerability and anger and had weaponized those weaknesses, funneling them into a fog of false belonging so thick he couldn't breathe without inhaling it.

They gave him attention, freedom, purpose, support, money. So easy to be seduced. So hard to admit you'd been wrong to succumb, but Emery wasn't backing down or changing his course. He was leaning into his newfound purpose.

Overwhelmed, I stood in front of my gum tree's thick trunk. Dried blood dripped down its alligator bark, bleeding through the gnarled cracks and fissures. It bled for the father I both loved and hated, for the childhood

I'd lost, for the years I'd spent lying about who I was, for the dogs who'd lost their lives. It bled, and I felt it in my bones.

Arthur joined me by the tree, his hands tucked into his front pockets. "How you holding up?"

I rubbed my eyes until they hurt. "I'm exhausted and sick about what happened. I hate the idea of Emery working with the cops, and I keep picturing you here by yourself and how much worse it could've been." I slipped my arm around his waist, rested my head on his shoulder. "I could have lost you."

He wrapped his arm around me, gently kissed my forehead. In the span of one night, Arthur had learned how to show love. I guess we had that.

"I'm not going anywhere, kiddo. And I'm sorry about Randal. I wanted so badly to believe these men would change that I was blind to his nature. You should never have been in that position with him. I should have seen through his lies."

We stood together, leaning on each other for the first time in our lives. "Is it okay if I stay in Fernlow? We've never talked about it—how long I'll be here. But this feels like home." Arthur felt like home. "I could build my own place, something small on the property."

My body moved with the slow rise and fall of his chest. "I'd like that a lot. As long as I have a key to your place. Someone needs to keep your cupboard shelves in line."

I laughed and blinked back tears. "I'm sorry I was such a brat as a kid."

"I'm sorry it took this scare for me to tell you I love you."

The *when* of his words didn't matter. Hearing them at all mattered, especially in front of my gum tree.

Arthur patted my back and faced me. "We've been getting calls from reporters. They figured out who we are—who your father was. They smell a story and want interviews. It's up to you how you want to proceed. If we talk to them, they'll splash our names all over the news."

I'd spent twenty years avoiding that kind of attention, but this was a chance to stand strong and own who I was.

"I'll do it," I told him. "I'll give an interview. We could use the attention to raise money for the Pups in Prison program, so you're not always struggling with it. Especially with the repairs needed."

A car approached from the street as I spoke. First one, then two. Then more.

I walked toward them, unsure what was going on. The Malakoffs, who'd hosted Passover, got out of the first car. Esther and her family left another, then Joan Rosen, who'd filled Arthur's fridge with food. Tavi's family pulled up, along with a car that looked a hell of a lot like Kenna's.

I turned and searched Arthur's face. "Did you do this?"

"Strangest thing," he said, smirking that smirk of his. "Someone stole my phone and put a bunch of numbers in it. Figured I should use them."

A fresh wave of emotion crested over me, for Arthur and these people in this small town.

Our community filtered onto the property, hugs and compassion offered.

Winston exited one of the cars. The big man strode over and wrapped Arthur and me in a hug. "This ain't right," he blubbered over us. "Just ain't right."

No. It wasn't right, but this outpouring of support made it easier.

Once we were allowed to enter the crime scene, everyone helped. Some people worked on removing the warped and cut fences, swept the broken glass into garbage cans. Others got on their hands and knees and scrubbed blood from the floors. A restaurant owner showed up with food and more hugs. A van arrived from a business we didn't know and offered to replace the shattered windows, free of charge. Arthur's voice cracked when he thanked them.

Emery was there through it all. He lugged debris away, organized food, piled damaged kennel doors and fencing. He scoured the blood on my gum

tree so roughly I worried he'd hurt his already cut-up hand. And he was sad. The anguish during his confession was visible on his face, dragging the corners of his mouth down. But when I found myself at Captain Underbite's dog run, silent tears tracking my cheeks, he appeared at my side, those strong arms of his circling me.

"She was a great dog," he said. "You gave her a good life."

I burrowed deeper into his side. "I'm so glad Twinkie wasn't here."

He stroked my back until I settled.

By nightfall, I was drained. A patrol car was parked by the road, keeping watch over the property. Kenna and Tavi sat with me on the half-painted porch, flanking me on the large swing.

"I still can't believe this happened," Kenna said. "I mean, what kind of monsters kill innocent dogs?"

Emery's story made it easier to understand, but no less painful. "Part of me feels badly for the men who did this. Living with that much hate and violence in your heart must be exhausting. Part of me wants them to suffer."

Another part hoped they'd see the light as Emery had. His plan to educate and help people leave gangs was a step in the right direction, but his drive to change minds had already made him a target.

"Emery said the police want his help," I told Kenna and Tavi. "And I know it's a good thing, but it scares me."

The porch swing creaked as it swayed. Kenna looked down the driveway, toward the police car keeping vigil. "He's not running out on his own, half-cocked, seeking revenge. This is what cops do for a living. He'll be safe."

I sighed. "He said the same thing, but I'm still freaking out."

Emery's light was on. He had moved back in to the barn loft quickly, few belongings to slow him down, but his mood had dimmed further as the evening had worn on. Guilt for bringing trouble here? Endless blame? Regret over kissing me?

Tavi blew on her tea. “Did I ever tell you about the day I met Naresh?”

“I don’t think so.” But I adored the love evident in Tavi’s marriage. The two of them were inspiring.

“We were set up by our parents,” she said. “Not like an arranged marriage or anything, but they were invested in the idea of us, and I was having major second thoughts. Naresh and I had spoken on the phone a few times, and it was always stilted. We’d swapped pictures by email, so I knew he was handsome, but the way our talks had gone made me question if it would work. I almost called ten times to cancel.”

“But you obviously went,” I said. “You went, and it was amazing.”

She tapped her fingers on her mug. “I went and it was *awful*. We barely talked. He couldn’t look me in the eye, and I spent the entire hour trying to figure out how to let him and my folks down.”

“I don’t get it,” Kenna said. “You two are adorably happy. What changed?”

“My mother told me to have faith. I got home, told my parents he was nice and cute but wasn’t my type. My mother said she’d support whatever decision I made, but that I should give him another chance. She said he was probably nervous to be around a girl as pretty as me.”

I nudged her elbow. “Your mother is the best.” A pang of envy hit me at their closeness, but I was done wallowing over my family shortcomings.

I hadn’t considered calling my mother these past weeks, letting her know about my divorce and moving to Fernlow. She wasn’t part of my everyday life, and that was fine. Some relationships weren’t worth fostering. Some relationships existed to give you a baseline—*this is not how I will treat the people I love.*

Tavi smiled. “My mother’s the nosiest woman this side of the equator, but I love her. So, I listened to her and gave him another chance. We went out again, and it was awesome. Naresh apologized and explained he gets

shy and didn't know how to act around me. We were honest with each other and ended up laughing and having a great time."

I pulled the blanket higher on my lap. "I feel like there's a lesson here, but I'm not getting it. Is it some kind of psychology voodoo?"

"I don't practice voodoo."

"Yeah, but psychologists are always infiltrating the mind. I know you're trying to teach me something."

She laughed into her tea. "I'm just trying to tell you there are often larger things at play, in a totally weird and unrelated way. You need to have a little faith. Emery's doing what he needs to do to make this right for himself. If he doesn't help the police because you ask him not to, he'll probably live with regret. He might continue blaming himself and question his place at this farm or his right to his freedom. Unconditional support is often the best thing you can offer someone. Things will work out as they should."

That was part of the problem. Emery wasn't a saint. His integrity had been tested, and he'd fallen short. He already questioned his worth in the aftermath of the pain he'd caused, and he was the type of man who'd put himself in harm's way if it meant making amends. What if things working out meant he'd have to pay the ultimate price for his crimes?

I hugged my blanket tighter and leaned against Tavi on my left, linking arms with Kenna on my right. "I need to sleep for a week."

Kenna scooched closer. "If you do, I'll draw a mustache on your face."

THIRTY

Have a little faith. Wise words from a smart psychologist and friend, but my patience was being tested. There had been no word from the police the past nine days, just a patrol car watching our property, and heaps of worry from me.

Emery and I fell back into our routine, jogging and working together. With more community help, we repaired the dog runs and rescued new pups. Seeing them brought fresh waves of grief for Captain Underbite and the other dogs we'd lost, but their presence was also healing. Emery and I even finished painting the house, but there was distance between us too.

I often found myself thinking about Daniel and my selfish choices with him. Turmoil I struggled to share with Emery. I'd disappear into my sketches instead, the scratching of my pencil somehow quieting my mind—my safe place. I wasn't sure Emery had a safe place of his own. He still joked with Winston and showered the new dogs with affection. He was sweet and kind with me, but he remained subdued. We hadn't kissed again or discussed our relationship. More often than not, he was solemn and quiet.

And all the time, we waited.

Soon, the phone would ring, and he'd be called away to help the police. I wasn't sure what Emery and I were to each other, but I wasn't ready to

cope with him being in danger. And I couldn't quit reliving the tender touch of his lips against mine.

I lay in bed now, as had been habit lately, staring at the ceiling, unable to sleep. I'd made arrangements with a reporter to discuss the vandalism at the farm. The prospect of fielding questions about my father was unpleasant, but I'd committed to the meeting. I wanted to face my history openly, help Arthur's prison program if I could.

Just as quickly, my thoughts skittered to Emery. I pictured him going on an undercover mission—being hurt, shot, *killed*—forcing my heart into a gallop.

I pressed my hand to my chest, tried to steady my breath. No luck.

Unable to stay lying down, I got up and looked out my window. Light shone from Emery's window, soft and faint—his bedside-table lamp was on.

Before I acknowledged what I was doing, I had my feet stuffed into slippers and was tiptoeing down the stairs, cringing with every creak. Arthur was a sound sleeper, but my luck would have him awake and alert. The last thing I wanted was a smirk from him as I snuck out of here like a rebellious teenager.

Once outside, I breathed easier. The air was brisk, the ground muddy. My slippers had no tread, sending me nearly sprawling twice, but I didn't turn back or overthink. The need to see Emery was too great, the hard pounding of my pulse too strong. I wasn't sure he'd want to see me like this—the two of us within distance of his bed. He hadn't made a move to get me alone since we'd kissed. I didn't know what I wanted from him now. I just couldn't stay away.

Carefully, I closed the barn door behind me and glanced at the ladder, toward his light.

Doubt shot through me.

Maybe this was a bad idea. Emery might be upset I'd let myself into his personal space. He might have been avoiding alone time with me for a reason.

Movement came from above, the quick shuffle of feet. Emery leaned over the loft edge, his brow creased. "Scarlett? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, yes. Sorry." I wasn't sure why I was apologizing. I wasn't sure why I was there. "I just needed to see you."

His chest expanded on a deep inhale. "I was thinking about you too. Come up."

My bravado left me in a rush, nerves infiltrating those hollowed places. I glanced at the barn door. Debated rushing out of there like the mouth breather I used to be around Emery. Instead, my feet moved toward the ladder. I toed off my muddy slippers, ascended the rungs. At the top, Emery took my arm and helped me into his space.

My mouth dried.

He wore black briefs, showcasing his powerful thighs. His white T-shirt stretched across his broad chest, his face as strikingly handsome as ever, and I didn't know where to look.

"Trouble sleeping?" he asked.

I nodded, glancing around the loft. Twinkie lifted his head from his donut-shaped bed, sniffed the air, then curled back up and closed his eyes. Emery's bed was against the wall. The sheets were creased and pulled back. A pen and journal were on his bedside table.

"Were you writing?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"While thinking about me?" He *had* said I'd been on his mind, which meant he could have been writing about me. An unnerving prospect.

He fitted his fingers under my chin, tilting my face until I had no choice but to meet his eyes. "I'm always thinking about you, Scarlett."

God, this man. Barely any words, and my stomach filled with a torrent of butterflies.

"I'm so scared," I whispered. Of him going on this mission. Of my constantly scattered emotions. Of the strength of my feelings for him.

He swallowed. "Me too."

I wasn't wearing a bra or underwear. I hadn't been thinking clearly when I'd left the farmhouse. Now every inch of my skin felt oversensitive, each brush of my drawstring pants and T-shirt sparking like tiny static shocks.

He ran his fingers through my loose hair, releasing a shuddering breath. "You're so beautiful, Scarlett. Prettiest thing I've ever seen."

"You must not get out much."

His lips quirked. "I've been out plenty. Seen plenty. Never seen anything like you."

Yeah, *wow*. Emery was pure intoxication, and I hadn't had anything to drink in a long time. I pressed my palms to his chest, felt the hard thump of his heart. "I think about you all the time, even when I'm with you."

"That kiss," he said softly.

I sighed. "That kiss."

"I'm sorry we haven't talked about it. I've been in my head a lot."

Something we had in common. "Do you regret us getting closer?"

"Honestly," he said in that sincere way of his, "sometimes. Not because I don't have feelings for you," he added quickly. "My feelings for you…" His intense gaze roamed my face. "I've never felt like this about anyone."

"Same," I said, pressing my palm harder to his breastbone. "Then what do you regret?"

"Pulling you into my life, my troubles. I'm terrified if I pursue you more, something bad will happen to you."

I was worried, too, but not in the way he'd meant. I was afraid to fall harder for Emery. Scared to get hurt, lose him down the road. I was *terrified*

I'd overthink my feelings and never experience true intimacy with this man.

"I don't know what this is between us," I said, filling the growing silence. "We both still have a lot to work through, but I know feeling this much for a person can't be bad. Having you in my life is the *opposite* of bad. I feel better around you, like I can be myself—*truly* myself—for the first time in forever. And this thing you're doing with the cops scares me to death. The thought of losing you is just… I can't even go there. But if you don't feel the same, if you're not ready or need a fresh start with someone else, I understand. I won't ever kick you off the property again. I want you to be happy, even if it's without me. Which I should have thought about before barging in here. I'm sorry if coming here was a bad—"

Emery's lips were suddenly on mine, cutting off my prattling. This was not the tender brush of nine days ago. His movements were hard, hungry—*needy*—as he claimed my mouth in a bruising kiss. He teased my lips open, coaxing a moan from me, and I swear I could taste his pain and the fragility of his hope. So much turmoil in every stroke of his tongue.

I clutched his back. He crushed me against his chest.

The heat building between us was almost too much. So new and foreign that a blistering awareness lit my body. *This* was passion. This was what I'd exchanged for the safety of a predictable future.

He disengaged our lips, pressed his forehead against mine. "Sorry if I got carried away."

I blinked, slowly realizing what I was doing. "My hands are on your ass, Emery. If one of us got carried away, it was me."

His butt clenched, a hint of cockiness in his smirk. "You won't hear me complaining."

The only man I'd ever slept with was Daniel. I hadn't been forward with him or overtly seductive. Something about Emery had me feeling sexier and confident, but getting naked with him wasn't simple.

I moved my hands toward his abdomen and grasped the edge of his T-shirt. “Can I take this off?”

His features sharpened, the scars on his eyebrow and chin casting in starker relief. “I can keep it on, if you want.”

“I wasn’t lying last week in my room, Emery. I see *you*. I see your goodness, the man you are *now*. Let me show you I accept all of you.”

Brow pinched, he nodded.

Keeping my hands steady, I lifted his shirt as he lifted his arms. When the effort required more height, Emery took over, only breaking eye contact when the shirt passed his face.

Slowly, he let the fabric fall.

I readied myself to feel conflicted, have second thoughts.

Only compassion struck.

I looked at the viper tattoo on his chest and the rest of his dark ink—a black gun, a sword and skull, drops of blood, other grim images and words scratched into his skin—and I softened my expression. “This is not who you are.”

Moisture sheened his eyes. “It was.”

“But it’s not now.”

He sucked in a bigger breath and let it out. “No, it’s not now.”

I leaned forward and kissed the worst of it—the bloody viper—and felt more than heard his quiet huff of sadness. I kissed the middle of his sternum, the Celtic cross on his neck, the angry ink on his shoulder and arm until I had his hand held tightly in mine.

“I see you,” I said again and kissed the center of his palm.

“Scarlett.” My name was part groan, part prayer as he bent down and captured my lips again, more demanding this time.

Our hands were quickly everywhere, greedy and grasping. Sounds I couldn’t control escaped me. Shaking slightly, I undid the drawstring of my

sleep pants, not waiting for Emery to make the move. I'd never known this insatiable desire for a person. This all-consuming need.

Patience was no longer a virtue.

Taking my hint, he pulled up my top, his eyes falling heavy when I was naked before him. He stilled, no longer touching me. At least, not with his hands. His potent gaze traveled over every inch of me, so thorough the urge to cover myself struck.

Instead, I stood taller.

I was thinner than I'd been in months, but this wasn't the body of my youth—the days when I'd worked out and dieted to ensure I'd be the same size as Chelsea and her friends, the perfect wife for Daniel. The only person I needed to impress now was *me*, and this was the healthiest I'd ever felt, physically, mentally.

"You," Emery said, licking his lips, "are so gorgeous it hurts to look at you. I'm scared to blink."

I wrapped my arms around him, gasping at the feel of his skin flush against mine. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Yeah, you are." He picked me up like I weighed nothing and carried me to his bed.

This kissing was more luxurious. Seductive with teasing nips and traded groans, his thigh firmly wedged between mine as we touched and explored. Then his fingers dipped lower, deft, insistent. My sounds became incoherent things. I clutched at him, bit down on his shoulder, utterly lost to everything but Emery. He broke me apart in seconds, so thoroughly I worried Arthur would hear my cries in the main house.

But Emery wasn't done.

His mouth was all over me—my breasts, my belly, across my inner thighs—until I was worked up again. "I didn't bring a condom," I said on a pant.

"I've got us covered." He stood and pulled off his briefs.

If I weren't lying down, I'd probably faint from the sheer magnificence of him. I was so distracted it took a moment to register the condoms he was pulling from his nightstand.

"Have you been with anyone?" I asked, suddenly uneasy. "Since you've been out."

This sharp stab of discomfort wasn't unease. My knee-jerk worry was jealousy.

Emery tossed a condom on the bed and lay beside me, raked his hand through the side of my hair. "There's been no one else, Scarlett. I don't *want* anyone else. I bought these hoping I'd have the courage to make a move on you, but you were the brave one."

So strange, to hear the word *brave* in relation to me. *Coward* was the only word that could describe me over the past twenty years. "I don't want kids," was my nonsensical reply.

Abrupt. Out of context. *Way to go, me.*

Emery frowned and stroked my hip. "Okay…"

"Am I ruining the moment? I feel like I'm ruining the moment. I just never told my ex, and it became a thing, and I want you to know."

Emery brushed his nose against mine. "Thank you for telling me, and I don't want kids either. So, no worries there. And as far as ruining this moment goes," he said as he moved over me, "I've been fantasizing about having you for months. The only thing that'll be ruined tonight is *you* when we're done."

He nipped my ear, dropped openmouthed kisses down my neck, spending enough time on my breasts to have me bowing off the mattress. He fumbled with the condom a moment, the shakiness of his hands showing just how long this had been for him. Or maybe that was the intensity of his emotions.

Mine were certainly hovering close to the surface, my eyes burning as his hips lowered into the valley of my thighs. Deeper feelings than I'd ever

experienced clogged my throat. I still couldn't believe I'd had the courage to come here tonight. I had no clue what a future with Emery looked like, but when he pushed into me, my name dropping from his lips in a reverent whisper, I held on to him and allowed myself to let go.

THIRTY-ONE

I walked into Milk & Bean with Emery behind me, another emotional day ahead. I was still nervous about discussing my father with a reporter, but I wouldn't falter now.

Emery reached my side and surveyed the room. "Do you know what the reporter looks like?"

"She said she'd be wearing a red blouse, but I don't think we needed the heads-up."

Chantal wasn't tough to spot in this now-familiar place. The baristas could enter my order before I opened my mouth, most patrons knew my name, and Stacey at the cheese counter loved telling me when they'd received new stock.

Unfortunately, I wasn't here to chat about cheesy goodness.

I gestured toward the reporter, her dress pants and red blouse conspicuous against the plaid-and-denim backdrop. "She's the one who keeps checking her watch."

He scratched his neck, frowning. "We can leave, if you want. You don't have to do this."

Yes, I did. For many reasons. "It's fine. I'll talk to her on my own, but I'd love if you sat nearby. It feels better with you here."

He searched my face and said, “Whatever you need.” His words were reassuring, but there was no missing the somberness in his tone.

We’d spent every night together the past week. Emery ate with Arthur and me in the main house. After cleaning up, Arthur would shoo us out with a knowing look that made Emery blush in the sweetest way. We’d go for nighttime walks, talk more about Emery’s outreach plans, the fact that Esther sometimes cheated at cards, Arthur’s new habit of patting my shoulder to show affection. We’d made love every night—intense, clutching, passion-fueled love—and slept tucked together in Emery’s bed.

Every morning, I’d wake up alone.

Emery was still struggling emotionally. He worked to be present and upbeat with me, but he remained quiet and distracted too. Not that I’d been much better. I spent more of my free time sketching, distant in my own way, exhuming the sordid details of my life through my restless hands. I’d even started painting. A self-portrait with thick paint and bold strokes, trying to find the woman buried under a decade of lies.

I still hadn’t gotten into the details of my separation with Emery. I hadn’t explained my dishonesty with Daniel, how I’d manipulated him and myself to have a different life. Every time I tried to confess, shame would swallow my words.

I watched Emery as he joined the coffee line now, wondering what our relationship would be like if we’d met as slightly different people. Alternate versions of ourselves. No irrevocable violence or emotionally abusive father in Emery’s life. No hurtful lies or criminal father in mine. A metaverse with infinite possibilities, but we lived in this one. The harder one.

Taking a deep breath, I turned my attention to the journalist who’d be telling my story. Chantal had promised to write about how hurtful the media had been to my family, how rough they’d made my life. Maybe someone reading her article would judge others less harshly, not condemn a kid for

their parents' mistakes. I would talk publicly about my father for the first time and trust she'd say some of what I wanted, while using that experience and the vandalism at the farm to raise money for Arthur's Pups in Prison program.

I approached the reporter with measured steps. "You must be Chantal."

She stood and held out her hand. "It's nice to meet you, Scarlett. I appreciate you speaking with me."

I nodded, sat down, and shocked myself with my candor. I didn't just speak. I unloaded for *two hours*—memories shared, remembered, and confessed. She prodded me with the odd question, but I led us, my history spilling out in this cute café, Emery nearby, a newfound confidence in my voice.

By the time Emery and I were back in the truck, I was verging on a cathartic high. I couldn't sit still or quit talking. Rehashing my past must have loosened my brain.

"I think it went well," I said. "Well enough, at least. She seemed nice, but you never know with reporters. She could write that I'm a chip off my father's block or that I'm an attention junkie, you know—a narcissist after one of those reality show contracts, which would be ridiculous. Those shows are the worst, but Kenna loves them. She—"

"Scarlett."

I sucked in a breath and let it out. "Yeah?"

"You're adorable when you're nervous. You always talk a lot."

I pressed my lips together, my quiet reply barely squeaking out. "I do not."

"I seem to remember something about me working construction and you telling me to wear sunscreen so I didn't burn like your husband."

I deflated on the seat. “I am totally a nervous talker.”

“Like I said, it’s adorable.” He smiled at me, then the creases by his mouth tightened.

I tried not to think too much about Emery’s wavering moods. Our good times together felt easy, but we still hadn’t heard from the cops, and his absence in the mornings worried me.

I wasn’t sure if his reintegration into society was getting easier or harder for him or if he was having second thoughts about dating me. I didn’t know if his remorse over his past was too big. Suffocating guilt that would blot out the goodness between us—end this romance before it had the chance to truly start. I’d shied away from broaching the subject, unsure I wanted to hear his reply.

My talkativeness in the aftermath of that interview ceased. Emery drove the speed limit, gripping the wheel at ten and two, casting odd glances my way. Like he wanted to say something but wasn’t sure how.

“You’re the opposite,” I said.

“Opposite of what?”

“When you’re nervous, you get quiet.”

He chewed his lip, the stretching silence making me fidget. Without warning, he yanked the truck to the side of the road and parked. He didn’t look at me.

Worried for a million reasons, I curled my hands around my seat belt. “What’s going on? Did something happen with the cops?”

Emery cleared his throat. “I…” He closed his eyes briefly, then shook his head. “Yeah, it’s about the cops. They called this morning, before we left.”

“This morning?” That didn’t make sense. He’d had hours to tell me.

“They’ll be waiting at the farm when we get back. The bust is going down tonight, but there’s more involved than I realized.”

“More involved, how?”

He studied my face, his attention drifting to my lips and up again. “Since I’ve been in jail, the Vipers’ activities have escalated—arms dealing that has big implications. The FBI is involved, and we’ve been in contact this week.”

“This week? But you didn’t say anything.”

“I didn’t want you to worry.”

What I wanted was to scream. This was another version of Arthur’s *I didn’t want to be a burden*, the men in my life so quick to decide what was best for me. “Consider me worried, which means you need to tell me everything. And don’t you dare lie to make me feel better. If you do, I’ll get more nervous, and there’s no telling what nonsense I’ll say.”

He huffed out a soft laugh, then passed his hand over his mouth. “The FBI needs me to find out the location of an arms deal going down and wants me to get a confession. So I made contact with my old crew, told them I wanted back in. Said Arthur brainwashed me into thinking the Vipers were using me, but that Arthur was the one taking advantage—not paying me properly, treating me like shit now that I was out. I told them they were the only real family I’d ever had and that I wanted to prove it. They’re willing to speak with me, which is a start. We’re meeting tonight, and I’ll be wearing a wire.”

“A wire?” God, my voice sounded so small.

He brushed stray hairs back from my forehead, his fingers lingering before he let them fall. “That’s another of your nervous tics. You repeat my last word, but as a question.”

I wasn’t sure I liked this whole mind-reading business—a skill he’d probably learned from Arthur—and I wanted his fingers back in my hair, his nails dragging along my scalp.

I clicked off my seat belt and shifted toward him. “I don’t want you to go.”

His amusement faded. “I have to do this, Scarlett. For myself, but also for you and Arthur. For Dario and every other person I hurt. It’s not a choice. I need you to understand that.”

All my arguments fled. This was the battle he fought daily: to face his demons, not run from them. Holding him back would do more damage than letting him go, not that I had a say in the matter. “You have to be careful. You have to promise you’ll come back safe and sound.”

A muscle in his jaw bunched. “I promise, but I—”

I kissed him, my fingers tangling in his hair as I swallowed his words. *But I…*

There would be no *but*. He would come home to me. As strained as things had sometimes been with us, there was no other option. We just needed more time together. If we actually talked about the dark thoughts in our heads, we could help each other heal, couldn’t we? We might make it through these hard days stronger.

Emery responded to my kiss, tenderly at first, then hungrily as the weight of the future pressed us together. I tried not to picture him getting hurt. I banished thoughts of us not working out. He dragged me onto his lap. Gripped me to him, his lips moving with mine in a rhythm we’d perfected, but there was more passion today. More emotion burning through *me*.

I tried to slow down, tell him I loved him—words I hadn’t realized I ached to say. I was too overwhelmed to speak. I kissed one of his closed eyelids instead, then the other. I kissed his cheeks and nose and every place I could reach.

He exhaled on a sigh, helping me back into my seat. “I need you to promise me something.”

“Anything.”

He opened the glove compartment and pulled out his journal, held it briefly before laying it on my lap. “If something goes wrong and I don’t

make it back, I won't be able to run outreach programs like I planned. If that happens, I want you to read this and share it. I want other kids to hear my story, to know there's a way out. That living a life filled with hate is the wrong choice."

"No. No way." I shoved the book at him, panic rising with my frantic moves. "Don't leave this with me. I won't take it. You're coming back."

He stilled my hands, his expression unbearably tender. "Please, Scarlett, give me this peace of mind. I don't have the right to ask you for anything, but I'm asking anyway. Please, promise me you'll read this and find a way to share it."

There was vulnerability under his vehemence—a hint of fear—and my resolve shattered. He was about to risk his life to save others and make a difference in the world.

Who was I to deny him comfort?

"I promise. But only because you're coming back, and this whole thing will be moot."

His eyes were glassy, but his shoulders lowered. "Thank you."

I fretted the rest of the drive home, that stupid journal gripped in my lap. An unmarked police car was waiting at the farm as expected, but I made Emery sit with me before getting out. I tried to memorize his face: the scars cleaving his chin and eyebrow, the bump on his nose, those bottomless eyes that still took me by surprise.

"When will you be back?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said quietly. "Please don't wait up. Try to get some sleep."

Fat chance of that happening, but I nodded and forced myself to leave the truck. He kissed me goodbye at my door, so hard my lips felt bruised, leaving me raw and more worried than before. He slid into the waiting unmarked car and didn't glance back.

I touched my lips as I watched them drive away.

Before doing anything else, I headed for Emery's loft and left his journal on his bed, far from my sight, because he *would* be coming home. A man who kissed a woman with that much intensity would come home to her.

Then I started cleaning.

I scoured the kitchen, the living room, the bedrooms, the bathrooms. By nightfall, I had run out of rooms to clean. A police car was still stationed on our property, watching over us.

Arthur sat with me on the porch swing, casting furtive glances my way. "Everything will be fine," he said for the umpteenth time, "as long as you don't give yourself a heart attack before Emery gets back."

A heart attack was possible. I was his niece after all. "You don't have to stay here. Go inside and watch the news."

He crossed his arms.

At ten, I asked the police if there were any updates. I did the same again at half-hour intervals, but their answers never changed: "The second we hear anything, you'll be the first to know." It was silly of me to hound them. With an FBI operation, there would be questions afterward, paperwork to file. Emery was probably at a secret location, exhausted, retelling his story for the millionth time, but I'd lost all rationality.

"This is ridiculous," I told Arthur. "Those cops could at least call someone. Find out if things were delayed."

He covered a yawn with his hand. "Quit nagging them. Everyone's busy doing their jobs and keeping Emery safe. He'll be fine." But there was no hiding the nervous bounce of his heel.

We had no option but to wait and hope. This was the faith Tavi had talked about. I had to believe Emery and I were meant to be. That our story wasn't over. Emery had unfinished work in this world. As did I—a home to build, an uncle to love, dogs to rescue and train, book covers to design, an

honest life to live while I came to better terms with my past, with Emery at my side.

I kept Twinkie on my lap, cradled close, as though he were a part of Emery I could hold. He licked my hand. I couldn't believe he was the same dog who'd snarled and snapped at me. I couldn't believe I was the same angry teen who had stomped through this old house.

Arthur sat vigil with me, not talking, just being my support until his head and arms drooped with exhaustion. I made him go to sleep with the promise to wake him if I heard anything.

I didn't budge from my spot. I sat on the porch swing and watched the road, sure every noise was an approaching person, every gust of wind a whisper of Emery's return. I stroked Twinkie as the hours slipped by. When my thoughts turned dark, the pressure on my chest too much, I forced myself to think positive. I would plan a special night for Emery this week, a quiet picnic with cheese and meat and wine, just the two of us on a blanket, a bed of grass below. We would laugh and feed each other grapes. Watch the stars and explore each other, our skin brushing, his ink hidden by our closeness, my hands holding him together.

I would ask Emery to share his deepest thoughts, face them together and finally be honest with him about Daniel. Unburden ourselves fully.

Drowsiness crept up on me, a thin veil of sleep tugging my eyelids down.

Then a *crunch* sound.

My eyes snapped wide. Twinkie hopped off my lap and barked as an Emery-sized shape with wide shoulders and a steady stride advanced from the road. My pulse surged back to life.

I hadn't heard or noticed a new car, but I'd probably fallen asleep sitting here, halfway between dread and hope.

The shape walked faster, and I stood. "Emery?"

He was here. *Of course* he was here. I'd been a mess for nothing.

Then I noticed a change in his stride, a slight lean to the left I didn't recognize. Shoulders not as wide as I'd thought. A uniform instead of jeans.

Twinkie barked and snarled at the man, still a guard dog to the core.

My racing pulse now made me nauseous.

I didn't know this officer well. His first shift had been tonight, but he'd been patient with my nagging, kind in his replies. He had a stain on his shirt now, a hint of yellow as the porch light hit him. Mustard, maybe. He'd probably eaten a sandwich while waiting and hadn't been able to clean the spill or he hadn't noticed it, and why the hell was I thinking about stains when he was finally coming to give me news of Emery?

I inhaled and shook my head. With all these nerves, my mind had replaced my motor-mouth tendencies, working me into a panic. Something Emery and I would laugh about tomorrow. At least the officer was here. This night was finally ending.

Then he removed his cap.

That simple move stopped me cold. My limbs numbed, an eerie calm filling my mind. Twinkie gave up barking and wandered off. I was cemented in place. "Where's Emery?"

The screen door slammed, and Arthur shuffled out. He was still in the same jeans and flannel shirt, more rumpled, as though he'd slept in his clothes. His face was stiff. "What happened? Where is he?"

I wanted to run away before the cop spoke, pretend I was still tucked on Emery's lap, kissing him in the truck.

The officer dropped his gaze, then lifted his chin. "It's over, but things got out of control. Emery got hurt." He cradled his cap more tightly to his chest. "The paramedics took him to the hospital. He's in surgery now."

"Surgery?" I shared a worried glance with Arthur, my hand clutched to my chest. "What happened? How badly is he hurt?"

"I can't divulge information about the case, ma'am. All I know is he has a good team working on him."

“Can you take me to him?” I asked, already hurrying toward the patrol car. “I need to be with him. Arthur, you’ll come too?” I glanced over my shoulder, not breaking my stride.

“I’ll follow in my truck. Meet you there. And, Scarlett…” My feet stopped at his stern tone, but my heart continued racing. “Emery is strong,” he said. “He’ll come through this. Or he’ll have to deal with me.”

I nodded shakily. He damn well better come through.

THIRTY-TWO

I stared through the window into Emery's hospital room, overwrought but relieved. Emery was asleep, attached to machines, his skin pale and body lax. Last night had been the first time I'd said a prayer in my adult life. I wasn't sure asking God for help only when you needed a favor was good form. I still wasn't sure if I did or didn't believe in a higher power.

For Emery, I'd been willing to try.

Now, two gunshots and tons of blood loss later, he was stable. I felt like I was standing on a gale-swept ship.

Arthur joined me at the window and rubbed his tired eyes. "You can stare at him for the next hour and keep worrying, or you can go in and talk to the man."

"Easier said than done."

"Only if you've got a problem with your legs and voice."

I slanted him an unamused look.

He folded his arms. "What's worrying you?"

"The fact that you refuse to go home and get some sleep."

He *hmphed*, ignoring my reprimand. Arthur was still as immovable as that old gum tree. Secretly, I was glad he'd stayed.

I pressed my hand to the window, my tear ducts stinging as I watched Emery sleep. "He's been distant a lot since he's been at the farm, not open

about what's upsetting him. And tonight might set him back mentally. I'm scared he's going to push me away, that he's not ready for a relationship right now."

Arthur nodded slowly. "What about you?"

"What about me, what?"

"Are you ready for a relationship now?"

I startled at the question, unsure why I couldn't give an instant reply. I *loved* Emery. At least, I thought I did. Nothing about us made sense on paper, but he'd made me feel free and alive for the first time in my life. He was on my mind constantly. The past weeks, if I'd created a book cover I loved, I'd run to show him, wanting to see his reaction. When we rescued a new dog, I'd watch Emery training from afar—his focus and commitment absolute—and feel a deep contentment I couldn't describe.

Emery was nothing I expected and everything I wanted, but he wasn't the only one dealing with his past. I still had mountains of baggage to unpack after everything with Daniel and my feelings about my dad. I hadn't been able to share those worries with him yet, and I was terrified to walk into his hospital room.

"You two are young," Arthur said, talking over my anxious thoughts. "You have your whole lives to figure yourselves out. You'll make mistakes. Fix those mistakes. Make choices you feel good about, but sometimes the best decisions are the hardest. They hurt like hell but lead to better things down the road. Emery might be that hard decision for you. The tough choice that leads to something better for you both in the end."

"But I don't want to let him go."

"And I don't want to go home and sleep, but my pain-in-the-butt niece keeps ragging on me." He patted my shoulder with affection. "Letting go now doesn't mean you need to let go forever," he said. "Listen to your gut. It's usually right. Unless it tells you to mess up my cupboards."

He headed for the elevators, and I watched his back as a lump of tenderness lodged in my throat. Loving Arthur was a strange and wonderful experience.

Not ready to analyze the tough choice he'd hinted at, I finally walked into Emery's room, my wayward emotions setting sail again.

Stitches slashed through his cheek. A bandage was wrapped around his head. His broad chest rose and fell as the machines beside him beeped, and I tried really hard not to cry. I never thought I'd see Emery as anything but strappingly healthy.

Gingerly, I sat on the side of his bed and placed my hand on his arm.

His eyes fluttered open. His vision seemed to take a moment to focus, then his expression softened. "Scarlett."

My threatening tears leaked. I didn't bother wiping them away. "What were you thinking, getting shot like that?"

The skin by his eyes crinkled. "Ventilation for my organs?"

My watery laugh felt good. "You gave me a scare."

"I was pretty scared myself, but the FBI got what they needed. I can't get into details, but some Vipers were killed in the bust, including the head of the gang, and the rest won't be seeing freedom for a long while. You and Arthur don't have to worry about your safety anymore."

I pressed my hand to my mouth, slumping slightly. I hadn't realized how worried I'd been about lingering danger until the threat was gone. "I'm so proud of you, Emery. To do what you did, to risk yourself like that—you have to know how important that is. How thankful I am."

"You have nothing to be thankful for. I did what needed to be done, but…" His next swallow seemed to pain him.

I hurried to the bathroom and filled a cup with water. When I was back at his side, he sipped gratefully, but the lines between his brows sank deeper.

He set the water aside and stared at his legs, not meeting my eyes. “I’ve been working through a lot since I’ve been out. Struggling more than I’ve let on—coming to terms with my life and my choices, dealing with my guilt.” A harsh exhale later, his eyes flicked up. “I love Arthur and the farm. I love working with the dogs, and I fucking love having you close, but I don’t think I can stay in Fernlow.”

I bit down on my cheek, attempting to stem more tears. The effort was useless. “Where would you go?”

“To LA,” he said, brushing my tears with his thumb. “I have flexibility where I do my parole—part of the deal for my help with the case.”

“But LA is so far.”

“I know, but I need to spend time with my sister. I finally contacted her, and she’s hurting more than I realized. Angry at me for a lot of reasons. It’s time I face that and try to re-earn her trust. Build our relationship back up. And working on outreach programs would be easier there—boots on the ground in a city saturated with gangs. Somewhere I can make a bigger difference. And as much as I love the slower way of life here and might want it again one day, there’s too much turmoil and anger in me to stay right now. If I do, I think it might burn through the few good parts left in me.”

“But you have so many good parts. I *love* those parts.”

“Scarlett.” My name sounded like a sigh. “You’re the only reason I’m halfway happy. If I don’t find a way to live with myself for *myself*, I’ll eventually drag us both down.”

“So, you’re leaving? Just like that?”

“No. Not just like that. Nothing’s easy about this decision. I’ve barely slept, trying to convince myself I can stay here. Stay with *you*. I’ve turned over all my options, and I keep coming back to the same one.”

“To leave me,” I whispered.

“Not if I have my way.”

I brushed my hair off my face, overheated and overtired, struggling to keep up with this awful conversation. “I don’t understand.”

His dark eyes softened. “I want to leave *with* you. You can do your job from anywhere. You could come with me. We could be together while I work on myself and build my outreach programs. I don’t want to end things with you.”

Yes, my mind chanted. The impulse was instant, my heart leaping at the prospect. But I pictured Arthur’s hand on my shoulder—the protruding veins along his fingers, the bulges of his knuckles, the reassuring weight of his quiet affection.

Going with Emery would mean leaving Arthur. I’d lose this close connection to my first true feelings of family in twenty years. I’d be far from Esther and this Jewish community I’d begun to embrace. I’d have to say goodbye to Winston, the dogs, my work with the prisoners, which had become important to me.

Pressure on my chest made breathing harder.

I looked at Emery, tried to say *other* words. The ones living in my heart*: Yes, I’ll come. I don’t want to live without you either.* “I can’t,” I whispered.

Emery’s face fell, but he quickly reached for my hand. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have asked. You need Arthur and this place as much as I need my sister and the city right now. You should stay.”

I held his hand tighter. “My heart doesn’t want to stay.”

“But this is where it belongs right now.”

I pushed closer to him, kissed his lips, being careful of his stitches. “Can we keep in touch?”

“I don’t know,” he said on a shuddered breath. “I’d love to say yes, but staying connected might be too hard for me emotionally. At least, for now. I think it’ll be easier if we say goodbye here.”

I curved forward, already feeling bereft. Angry at life. And maybe a bit hopeful. *Letting go now doesn't mean you need to let go forever.* Arthur's advice could prove true. We both needed more than each other right now. In time, when we were less weighed down by our pasts, we might reconnect. Or Emery would fade into a memory I'd always cherish.

"I'll have my things collected from the farm for me," he said, "but I want you to have my journal. I'm not good at explaining myself and want you to understand me better—my choices. Would you do that for me? Read it when you're not feeling so raw?"

I bit my lip and nodded.

His dark eyes grew damp. My chin trembled. I didn't tell him I loved him. He didn't say the words either. He gripped the back of my neck and kissed me as I envisioned the impossible task of getting over him while looking toward my future.

THIRTY-THREE

Back at the farm, I put on a brave face when telling Arthur that Emery wouldn't be back. He didn't flinch or seem surprised.

"It's hard now, but it's for the best," he said, then got on with preparing our dinner.

I escaped to my room, couldn't stop myself from standing at my window—the perch where I'd often watch Emery's light, wondering what he was doing, curious if he was thinking about me.

He had been. That much, I knew. He'd also been battling his demons, struggling even more than I'd thought. And I hadn't had the courage to ask why I'd woken up alone in his bed each morning. Why he'd so often been broody. If I'd prodded more, maybe we'd be in a different place now. If I'd opened up about my continued remorse over Daniel and my father, I might have been strong enough to leave with him. I really hated the word *if*.

At dinner, Arthur silently piled my plate with roasted vegetables and grilled chicken. He tucked into his food while I stared at mine.

"Winston took the new Rottweiler through the agility course," he said. "You should watch her run. She's a natural."

I cut a piece of chicken and forced it into my mouth, choosing chewing over speaking. My emotions were too close to the surface.

Arthur placed his cutlery down. “Remember when you were a kid and I used to make you clean the dog runs, and you’d try to kill me with your dirty looks?”

A watery laugh escaped me. “Yeah.”

“I did it because routine helped me heal after the army—the mundane stuff, keeping to a schedule. Taking the thinking out of my day-to-day helped me go about my work and get out of my head. It was comforting.”

Being with Arthur was a comfort. Having loved Emery was a comfort, even with this sharp ache. And I suddenly needed to know him better. Understand what he’d been going through, truly, deeply. He’d asked me to read his journal when my emotions were less raw. I was as raw as beef tartare, but avoiding that journal would only drag out this pain.

“If you don’t mind,” I said. “I’d like to spend some time in Emery’s loft. Say goodbye to him in my own way.”

Arthur gave me a stern look. “You sure that’s a good idea this soon?”

“No, but it’s what I need.”

I went outside and held the porch railing, trying to wrap my head around the events of recent weeks. So much devastation. The dogs and Captain Underbite lost. Emery heroic but shot, leaving to make amends and reclaim his soul. Maybe I’d call Tavi tomorrow. Ask her to refer me to a therapist. Talk to someone objective. Do some reclaiming of my own.

With hard work, that big *if* hanging over a possible future with Emery might mean we’d get another chance together one day.

I swallowed roughly and crossed the yard.

Emery’s loft hadn’t changed since I’d last been there, but it felt different. Emptier. The journal was sitting in the middle of his bed, exactly where I’d left it, refusing to believe he wasn’t coming home.

Unable to touch the book yet, I lifted his pillow and pressed it to my face. The fabric still smelled of him, so vivid I was sure I could touch his face. I bit my cheek, determined not to fall apart. Emery was alive. We were

both choosing the paths we needed. Eventually, I'd remember our time together and smile.

I blinked the sting from my eyes and finally picked up his journal. The edges were worn from use, the weight of it light. There was nothing light about the words it contained.

I inhaled another lungful of air—more scents of Emery in this space—then sat cross-legged on his bed. With a big swallow, I opened the cover.

Difficult words filled the pages: Emery's anguish, the extent to which he'd hated himself. More details of the Vipers, how easily he'd walked into their fold with scrawled questions below asking *why* and *how*. *How could I have been so blind?* Some words were slashed out, angrier ones substituted, pages filled with disgust and self-loathing, and remorse for pushing his sister away. Agony over Dario. Arthur's name popped up, as did Esther's. Hope woven with despair.

Then a plan: to help others the way he'd been helped, reach them sooner than he'd been reached. Spare them the hell he'd lived—*was still living*—and save a soul.

Picturing Emery still in the hospital made it hard to stay focused, but it was impossible to miss the absence of my name on most pages.

Everything else was here, though, all his sorrow for me to read. How truly broken he'd been. Then built up, piece by piece, thought by thought, a miracle witnessed, like Arthur had said. But not fully healed. Emery's thoughts were clearer through his writing, as he'd hoped. I understood the hard work he still had ahead of him. Boots on the ground. Time spent with his sister to salvage their relationship, living in a city to help men like him and boys going down dark paths.

My boots would stay here, caked with mud. I would work on myself too. Hopefully learn to forgive myself in time. Force more hugs on Arthur and lean on my community.

I flipped the page to Emery's final entry, written his last morning here, and noticed my name partway down.

I didn't think I deserved forgiveness. I thought my mistakes defined me, that dying would be better than living with the knowledge of what I had been. I didn't understand how a person could hate themselves as much as I did and still have a beating heart. But death is the coward's way out. I'm done with self-pity. I choose to remember how hard I fell and that there were people who cared enough to lift me up. People who had every right to hate me.

Because of them, I choose to live with pain and the memories I despise. But I also choose to try harder, be kinder, to constantly better myself. Not just the easy stuff. The work that takes time and effort and sacrifice. It means making choices I'll be proud of, no matter the consequences.

Scarlett is one of those choices, the most unexpected part of my new life. She trusted me the first day we met, and she has no clue what that meant to me. How it helped me see good in myself on dark days. I would watch that prison door and wait for a glimpse of her curly hair, the smallest smile. I'd close my eyes at night and hear her laugh and remember what it was to be free.

She still makes me feel free, but I'm not sure she understands how amazing she is. She's a woman who has overcome, a woman who has found strength in her struggles, a woman willing to look past a man's defiled skin and see into his heart.

She has so much beauty and goodness in her I could cry, and I hope she learns to love herself even more in time. Because I'm proud as hell to love her and speak those words out loud, even if they're just whispered to her while she sleeps beside me. Every night, I tell her. Not when she's awake. I haven't been brave enough for that yet. Not sure I ever will be, but I'm finally ready to fight to be a man who might be worthy of her one day.

Whatever happens with us, I hope she knows I love her, now and always.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER

Strolling through Central Park for my first time in eons should have me relaxed and invigorated. I should be proud I could visit this city and its tough memories, but strolling with Kenna and Esther was like being trapped in a *Sex and the City* episode.

"Which one did you date?" Esther asked Kenna as they eyed two men jogging toward us.

"The one on the left, with the thick thighs. I swear, I couldn't walk straight for a week after that night."

Esther hooted. I cringed. The man in question gave Kenna the once-over and mouthed, *Call me*.

I raised an eyebrow at Kenna. "I think we can save your sexcapades for another visit."

One when we didn't have a ninety-three-year-old woman in our company.

"Do not listen to her," Esther said, her steps shuffling slowly. "At my age, the only not-walking-straight I do is to the bathroom. There is nothing wrong with enjoying your youth."

Kenna linked arms with Esther. "Tell that to Miss Scarlett. Every time I mention she should get out and date, she starts humming random tunes."

I gave Kenna my best stink eye. “It’s kind of hard to talk about men when I know you’ll just blab everything I say to Arthur.”

Get out of the house. Quit sulking. If you keep making that face, it’ll stay that way.

Those two had certainly been pushy the past year, always quick to gang up on me. They had also been my lifelines.

Accepting the role I’d played in my divorce had taken longer to settle than anticipated, lows still sneaking up on me at times. Thoughts of Emery —*missing him*—had been like lead weights strapped to my heart. But I’d hosted the occasional Shabbat dinner and had participated in the Jewish holidays. I’d visited my father’s gravesite and apologized for letting him down, then I placed flowers by his gravestone, next to a drawing of a dancing girl, stars in her eyes, clouds under her feet, her only wish to impress her dad.

I might not have built a house on Arthur’s property—*yet*—and designing book covers was sometimes a slog, but my therapy sessions had been a godsend. I loved living on the farm. I trained dogs and helped the men at Brackson believe in themselves.

Spending the past year on my own had been the best thing I could have done for myself. I was stronger than I’d ever been, but I hadn’t told Kenna that Emery and I had been corresponding for the past four months—written letters I kept in a box under my bed.

I wasn’t sure why I hadn’t told a soul.

Kenna guided us toward a free bench. We got Esther settled and sat on either side of her.

“All I’m saying,” Kenna pushed, “is if you’re waiting for the right time to hit the dating scene, you’ll be waiting forever.”

“Not all of us want wild nights like you had with jogger guy,” I said.

“It’s called having fun, Scarlett.”

I smiled at a mother pushing her baby in a stroller. “My kind of fun doesn’t involve sneaking out of someone’s bed in the morning.”

“I don’t sneak.” Kenna angled toward me, Esther between us as we argued good-naturedly. “It’s a mutually agreed upon—”

Esther made a clucking sound. “What is right for Kenna does not have to be right for you. She dives into lakes. You can slip in slowly.”

“And your lake can be a pond.” Kenna winked at me. “Even a kiddie pool.”

I laughed. Esther smiled at the busy park, content to be in *her* city. We watched a tour group as their guide gestured toward the green expanse. Bikers rolled by. Dogs tugged leashes. I was lucky to be here with friends, summer sun warming our skin, my belly full from our deli lunch. My mind, however, was stuck on Emery’s recent letters.

His first one had been a shock. Eight months of no contact, only memories that still made it hard to breathe some days. Then an actual *mailed* letter. Short and heartfelt.

I still think about you always. If you’re comfortable reaching out to me, please reply. If not, I understand.

Yours,

Emery

I’d grabbed a pen instantly, shaky lines forming each word as I’d crafted my reply. The first in a string of letters. I wasn’t sure why neither of us had suggested a text or call or email. The letters felt more intimate, which was worrying and thrilling.

We corresponded about light subjects at first: Arthur, the dogs, Emery’s sister and their stronger relationship. Then more personal topics: Emery writing that he no longer looked in the mirror and hated the person staring back. He described the foundation he’d built, talks he’d given in community centers. The outpouring of support and pleas from parents, desperate to save

their kids lost to gang violence, the banding together of others who'd gotten out. Building awareness and making a difference, like he'd hoped.

I wrote pages too, about my past and my present, sharing the hardest truths I hadn't been brave enough to speak when we'd been together. My culpability and lies with Daniel, and the self-hatred that still surfaced for me at times.

We hadn't broached the subject of us, though. Not until his last letter two weeks ago—his very last line: *Do you think the intensity of our feelings was a reaction to the drama and upheaval in our lives?*

I hadn't replied. His use of the past tense—*was*—had me second-guessing what had recently been happening between us. I hadn't dated anyone since we'd parted. At first, I hadn't been ready. Now I was falling for Emery all over again, from afar this time, hanging on each thoughtfully written word, but I was terrified he only wanted friendship. A pen pal.

"I can't go on a date," I said, no longer able to keep our letters to myself. "Emery and I have actually been talking. Not *talking* talking. Just writing letters, sharing stuff about ourselves and our lives." I nervously twined my fingers. "I think I'm still in love with him."

"Let me get this straight," Kenna said, balking at me. "Emery has been sending you love notes, and I'm just hearing about this now?"

"They aren't love notes. It's like we're getting to know each other again, in a deeper way this time."

"Semantics, my secretive friend. Why didn't you say anything?"

"Letters," Esther said with a pat to Kenna's knee, "are more personal. She was not ready to reveal her heart. This is much more romantic."

"But that's the thing." I clutched my purse on my lap. Emery's last letter was inside. I wasn't sure why I was walking around with it, why I had read that last line over and over. Why I hadn't replied. "He asked if I thought our feelings were so intense when we met because there had been so much drama going on. As in *past tense*, not present. That's not romance talk, and

I've wondered the same at times—that maybe we had been easy escapes for each other. But after all these letters, I know it wasn't that way for me. It *isn't* that way, but I'm not sure he feels the same. He might be looking for closure, not a new beginning."

"He's definitely looking for a new beginning," Kenna said.

I shot her a challenging look. "How can you possibly know that?"

She reached around the back of Esther's head, pressed her fingers to the side of my face, and turned my head toward the right.

I gasped.

One year. I hadn't seen Emery for a *year*. Now he was standing down the path, his attention focused on me, and I was terrified to blink.

I'd forgotten how tall he was, towering over every jogger and walker passing him. The sleeves of his T-shirt showed his ink and hugged his thick arms, his worn jeans riding low on his hips. His chest swelled so wide I worried his lungs would burst, and with his next exhale came a shimmering in his eyes that finally had me standing from the bench.

We moved at the same time—me running toward him, him taking long strides, meeting me halfway. He caught me in his arms. Crushed me so hard I could barely breathe.

"God, I missed you," he said into my hair, his arms vises around me.

I buried my face in his neck. "I've missed you so much."

Slowly, he lowered me down, but he didn't give me space. "Sorry for the surprise. Arthur told me where you'd be."

"Since when have you been talking to Arthur?"

"For a while now. I asked him not to tell you."

My shocked happiness at seeing Emery thinned under that admission. "Why didn't you want me to know?"

He scraped his teeth over his lower lip. "I wasn't ready to hear the truth."

"What truth?"

“The question in my last letter,” he said, his voice rough. “I’ve been struggling with it for a while, kind of scared to ask, but you never replied.”

“You came all this way to find out if what you used to feel for me was real?”

“Not *used to*, Scarlett. You and I…” He trailed off and worked his jaw. “Sorry, I’m not getting this out right.”

I pressed my hand to his chest, felt how fast his heart was racing. “It’s okay. Take your time.”

He nodded and licked his lips. “After I got out of Brackson, our time at the farm scared the hell out of me. I didn’t know I could feel like that about a person, but you were the only thing making me happy. I knew if we got in deeper and didn’t work out, any progress I’d made would fall apart. Then after…” He shrugged. “I kept wondering if I’d built up my feelings for you in my head. But I couldn’t stop thinking about you, missing you. So, I wrote you that first letter. Didn’t send it for weeks, worried you wouldn’t want to hear from me. You obviously know I caved, and when you replied, it was like I could finally breathe more fully.”

He spread his large hands along my back, intensity sharpening his features. “To be connected to you, even from afar, made me stronger—happier, in a healthier way this time. And getting to know you again through your letters was more than I could’ve hoped for. Honestly…” A tender smile softened his face. “I fell for you like a sack of bricks, harder this time, and I wasn’t ready to find out if you’d moved on. To know if I’d been a distraction for you during a tough time in your life or if you might want to try again with me. So, no, there’s no *used to* about my feelings for you, Scarlett. I’ve been in love with you since I heard you laugh in Brackson, and I’m hopelessly in love with you now.”

With trembling hands, I touched the scar through his eyebrow. I thought about how intensely emotional our short time together had been, my reticence to admit my love out loud, both of us stuck in our pasts, my

instant ambivalence when he'd asked me to come to LA with him. Then this last year apart, all the work I'd done to better understand myself and my choices. The time with Arthur, with my own thoughts. The letters I kept under my bed.

I looked at this complex man, who'd helped me find myself, and I said, "No."

His expression faltered. "No?"

"You came all this way to ask me a question, and my answer is *no*—you weren't a distraction for me. I was in love with you then, and I'm more in love with you now."

He closed his eyes on a rough exhale. "God, Scarlett. You have no idea…"

"Trust me," I said when he didn't finish. "I have some idea. I have *all the ideas* when it comes to you."

Dark eyes bright with emotion, he cupped my cheeks and kissed me so deep and long, I sagged into him. We stayed like that a moment, intertwined, not an inch of space between us.

Eventually, he ran his nose through my hair, inhaling deeply. "I don't need to be in LA regularly anymore. The programs I helped start can mostly run themselves. I miss the farm and the dogs. I miss you so fucking much. If you wouldn't mind a roommate, I'd love to move back to Fernlow. Travel to LA a couple times a year. Or I could get my own place. Take things more slowly."

"I don't need slow, Emery. I just need you."

He hugged me to him again, the rhythms of our breaths slowing in tandem.

We waited, each soft exhale said.

We're better for it.

We're not defined by our mistakes.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Writing this book was a labor of love and of exploration.

I used this experience to examine themes I've personally grappled with or found intriguing over the years: choosing not to have children and what that means about a woman's character, how childhood experiences affect adult choices, the depths of forgiveness, and the theme that set this novel in motion—spiritual identity.

I am a nonpracticing Jew who has always struggled with being Jewish.

Growing up, I didn't want to tell non-Jews I was Jewish. Like Scarlett, when asked about Christmas plans, I would give vague answers, instead of telling people I was Jewish and didn't celebrate the holiday. Not because I grew up in dangerous times or in a dangerous place. No one told me to hide my Judaism. There was just this innate feeling that I was different, would be quickly stereotyped, and possibly disliked.

When people asked me what my background was, I also felt confused.

My gut reaction was to answer *Jewish*, but people of other religions wouldn't answer by stating their belief system. They would say: *Canadian, Korean, Portuguese, Russian*. To me, there was, and *is*, an awareness that being Jewish is more than a religion.

Jewish is a cultural heritage—my "background," so to speak. If I'd suffered through the Holocaust, no one would have cared if I were a

practicing Jew who believed in God or if I were an atheist. My ancestry alone would have labeled me an enemy.

Writing this novel allowed me to explore these uncomfortable feelings and uncover the pride in my heritage. To accept who I am and feel part of something larger than myself.

Do I always feel comfortable in my Jewish skin now? No, especially with the rise of anti-Semitism in the world, but I no longer hide my identity. I feel stronger in who I am.

I still don't celebrate religious holidays or believe in God.

But I am Jewish.

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

1. During the novel, Scarlett struggles to come to terms with the fact that she doesn't want children. Do you think this is a selfish or a *selfless* choice for a woman to make? How do you feel society today judges this choice?

2. Arthur believes that giving prisoners a second chance includes not asking them about their crimes. Do you agree with this choice? Would you be able to curb your worry or curiosity and ignore their pasts?

3. Scarlett's traumatic childhood greatly shapes her choices into early adulthood. Did specific experiences when you were younger impact the good or bad choices you made in your life?

4. Scarlett's good memories of her father were tainted by his crimes. Do you think she should have forgiven him sooner?

5. Gold explores various Jewish characters on the page. Some lean into stereotypes, like Scarlett's father, showing the trickle-down impact that occurs when Jews are negatively portrayed in the media. Others, like Arthur, circumvent conventional notions of who Jewish people are and how they behave. Do you think mainstream media today reinforces Jewish stereotypes or shows a diversity of representation?

6. Scarlett lied to Daniel to reinvent herself and escape her past. Do you think she truly loved him during their relationship? If you were in her position, would you have lied to people?

7. When Scarlett first saw Emery's tattoo, she felt betrayed and banished him from the farm. Do you think he should have told her about his past sooner? Do you agree with Arthur and think her reaction was too harsh?

8. If a person has rehabilitated themselves and strives to make amends for their crimes, like Emery, do you think they deserve a second chance? Or are some crimes unforgivable?

9. Do you think prison therapy dog programs are a good way to rehabilitate inmates? What do you think it teaches the prisoners?

10. In the author’s note, Gold describes being Jewish as a cultural heritage for her, not a religion. Do you agree with this statement? Do you feel this applies to other religions?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My favorite part about writing is the revision process. Drafting can be a slog for me, but I love the challenge of taking what's on a page and leveling it up. Cutting sections. Fixing character arcs and improving pacing. Finding smarter ways to get an idea across without bogging the reader down with information.

Part of the reason I love this process so much is getting to work with smart, savvy authors and beta readers who kindly offer their objective feedback. Huge thank you to my early readers on this novel for giving me the tough love I needed: Jacqueline, Beth, Roselle, Flavia, Jen, Romi, Brenda, Sandra, and Michelle.

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To my husband, who is my rock, thank you for being my best friend in this adventure we call life. All my choices, good and bad, have led me to you, and I wouldn't change a thing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tasha Gold writes contemporary fiction that grips people by the heart and provokes in-depth conversation. She lives with her husband in the Canadian Rockies, where she skis, hikes, mountain bikes, and reads on her deck with a view of the majestic mountains.

When not writing and adventuring, she works as a freelance editor.

Scarlett Undone is her debut commercial fiction novel.

Visit Tasha's website for more information:
www.authortashagold.com

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