



Autumn Skies & Pumpkin Pies

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Category: Romance

Description: Rocker Gordon had it all. The model girlfriend, an NFL career and more money than he knew what to do with until one wrong play cost him everything. He knew his career would eventually end but he didn't expect it to be so soon. Now, he's returning back to his hometown to coach the local high school football team. It was always part of his long term plan but back then someone else was a part of it too.

Warbee Carter never had the desire to leave her hometown. She wanted the small town simple life with her granny's bakery. So when Rocker left after high school graduation she knew she had to let him go for good. It broke her heart but also left her determined to fulfill the rest of her dreams.

When Rocker and Warbee end up back on the same football field they said goodbye on years before, will they be able to find their love again or has it changed just like the sky in autumn?

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PROLOGUE

Warbee

Life is like autumn in a constant state of change. Leaves change colors and then fall from the trees every year. People are like leaves; we're always in a constant state of change. It's one of the reasons that autumn is my favorite season. The crisp, fresh air, the array of colors all around you, holiday's, and the scents and flavors that come along with the season. I've always loved it even as a little girl. Growing up in Blue Ridge, Georgia made autumn so much more though.

Blue Ridge is a small town of people. Everyone here knows everyone else. You can't do one thing without the whole town knowing about it within an hour, but it's home. Blue Ridge sits just north of Atlanta on the Georgia-Tennessee-North Carolina line. We're surrounded by a forest, which means you can always go outside and find something to do. Water is another thing we have an abundance of, so it's perfect for the sports loving people who enjoy hiking and water sports. That's never been me, though.

I'm more of a nose in a book kind of gal. When my parents would send me outside to play as a kid, I'd grab my book and go sit on the swing under the large tree in the front yard. Hours would pass with me lost in those pages, the characters my only friends until my mom would come outside and usher me back in. Books and baking were the two things that made me happy. My grandmother owned a local bakery that was well known in the area. Whenever I got to go spend time with her there my day was made.

Years later, I'm still in Blue Ridge with a bakery of my own. Books are still among my favorite things along with anything autumn, oversized sweaters to go with my oversized glasses, and my best friends Keefer and Teaganne. I wasn't like the kids I grew up with that dreamed of escaping to a big city. Hustle and bustle wasn't my kind of thing. I prefer the small and quiet atmosphere that Blue Ridge gives its citizens. It never bothered me that everyone knew my business, because I never really had much business for them to gossip about. I'd been off the gossip radar since the end of my junior year of high school for the most part. Now, you can probably guess this has to do with a boy, but he wasn't just any boy. Rocker Gordon wastheboy. The town's golden boy and football god who was smart to top it off. He didn't walk around like he owned the place, like the rest of the jocks did, although Rocker didownthe place.

Rocker was mine for a short time. It started in autumn and ended by the next year, but the in between was nothing but love and change. Rocker was the star running back of the local high school football team. He worked hard and had southern manners. Every girl wanted to date him, and every guy wanted to be him. He was also my chemistry lab partner and that's where this story truly starts.

ONE

Warbee

First day of school, the final reminder that summer is over, and autumn is just around the corner. The warmth is gone and the cool sets in. Shorts and flip flops are traded for jeans, boots, and hoodies. My favorite time of year. While almost everyone else is sad to say goodbye to summer, I couldn't be more excited. Then again, I'm a bit of a nerd. I look forward to going back to school. The rest of the students...not so much. I'm standing outside on the porch of my home waiting for my two best friends, well, my only real friends if you want to get technical. A lot of people know me mostly because of my family. My father manages the scenic railroad, and my mom owns a

popular antique shop as well as a boutique. If anyone else knows me, it's because I'm at the top of my class and that's while being placed in all classes above my grade level. They only know me because they need help with a paper or project.

Keefer's royal blue truck pulls into view and my smile is instant. I'm glad to see he already has Teaganne sitting in the passenger seat. I know that made her day. It sucks that Keefer still can't see the crush that Teaganne is harboring for him. As I climb inside, they both greet me. Keefer must have had the truck detailed recently, because the dull smell of French fries isn't as noticeable as normal. This truck was passed down to Keefer when his older brother, Keith, went off to college. Even though he gets to use the truck, he's still expected to keep up on the maintenance, insurance, and gas. Teaganne and Keefer both worked for the Shake and Shout until Keefer had to quit for football camp. I'm not sure if he'll come back now. "Do we have time to grab coffee before we head to school?" Teaganne asks Keefer. Keefer Dunn is a born and raised Blue Ridge citizen. His mom is a stay at home mother who can often be found at my house. His father works at City Hall. He has one older brother, Keith, who is off at college, but talking about joining the military. Keefer takes after his mother, though, with his collar-length, chestnut brown hair, tanned skin, and dark blue eyes.

He shakes his head. "I'm sorry, ladies. I have to get to practice." Keefer made the varsity football team this year as their starting kicker. He was so excited, but it also means that we've seen a lot less of him than we are used to. He was gone for an entire month during the summer. Teaganne and I were both lost without him around. He's crazy goofy to my studious and quiet, and Teaganne's artistic and fashionista. The three of us have been inseparable. Keefer and I have known one another since we were born. Our mothers' have been best friends since their cheerleading days. We nabbed Teaganne when her family moved to Blue Ridge from Chicago during junior high. Her family was looking for a safer environment to raise their kids in. Teaganne is the next to oldest of seven children.

Teaganne Voss is a force to be reckoned with. She's tall. Normally, her high heels are

sky like, as though she needs them. She is half Egyptian, so her olive skin tone is tanned year-round, and compliments her long, raven colored hair and honey brown eyes.

As we quickly and easily make our way to school, we each give one prediction for the upcoming school year. It's kind of our ritual. Keefer says that the football team will win state. Both Teaganne and I laugh because that's a given. This has been one of the best teams we've had. Teaganne's prediction is that she will get early acceptance into the Fashion Institute she's been dreaming about in Los Angeles. When they both ask me, I freeze. I'm not sure what to expect, so I give the lame answer of expecting the unexpected this year. Something just feels different in the air. This year is going to be different; I can feel it in my bones.

Once we reach the student parking lot we climb out of the truck. Keefer walks with us as we discuss our schedules and pass many terrified looking faces of the fresh meat entering their first year of high school. They've had the first two days to adjust to the school, but I'm sure it's different to have the upper-class students with them now. I remember when that was us. It's so odd to think that next year will be the last time we walk through those doors for the first day of school. Once we reach the courtyard, Keefer says goodbye and heads for the football field. Teaganne and I grab a soda from the vending machine and take a seat on one of the outside benches. "I love this dress on you by the way," Teaganne tells me, as we watch the rest of the students move around waiting on the first bell.

I look down at the mustard yellow wrap dress I picked for today and my brown sandals. My mom was so excited, but I told her to take a picture because it would last longer. Tomorrow, I'll be back in my jeans and cute shirts. "Thanks," I tell her, as I roll my eyes.

"I bet your mom loved it," she comments.

I nod my head. “You know it. I can’t complain though, she really doesn’t give me a hard time like some of the parents. I mean, I’m sure somewhere out there is a mom that is all over her daughter about not dressing the way she imagined she would.”

“True. So anyways, are you ready to be in classes with seniors?”

Shrugging, I take a sip of my soda. “I mean, it’s really no different than the rest of my education career.”

“Warbee, I swear, who says things like education career?”

“Me apparently,” I tell her with a laugh.

Silence falls between us and I breathe in the crisp, slightly cooler air. You can feel autumn coming. “It’s going to be different though. I mean, all of your classes are going to be loaded with seniors who are ready to leave Blue Ridge. This is their last year,” Teaganne tells me.

“But it’s not mine.”

Just as I’m about to reply, the football team appears, jogging around the courtyard. I swear, you could hear the collective sigh from the female students as Rocker Gordon passes, shirtless and sweaty. His brownish blonde hair is falling over his forehead slightly. His smile is broad and showcasing his dimples. Rocker wasn’t overly tall at five feet, seven inches, but to me he’s a giant. I barely hit five feet even. Most girls are taller than him especially, in their heels, but they don’t care because it’s Rocker Gordon. To be honest, I never really saw the huge appeal of him.

If I’m being really honest, I’ve never fit in with my peers. When they are running around wanting to party, I’m at home studying, reading, or watching old movies. Sports are not my thing, never have been and never will be. My mom was the head

cheerleader in her day and my father was a jock that played every sport. I'm not sure why I didn't get that gene, but I didn't. The one time I tried out for the cheerleading team was a disaster. We had to do flips, like front and back flips. I can barely do a cartwheel without falling over so you can imagine how that went. I ended up breaking my wrist attempting a front flip and that was the end of my cheerleading career. So, I've never wasted my time on thinking about the popular and elite of high school cliques, the jocks being at the top, because they wouldn't notice me unless they needed help with an assignment.

My first few classes go smoothly. We get our assigned seats, class schedule, and books. It isn't until my fourth period class, Chemistry, that things get interesting. Mr. Cook is standing at the door and gives us a copied seating chart that shows which person will double as our lab partner for the year. To my surprise, my name is written next to, none other than, Rocker Gordon. My mind has gone quiet as I make my way to the table and take a seat, while waiting for my partner to join us.

TWO

Rocker

First day of senior year. You would think I would be on top of the world right now. I mean, this is the last first day of high school for me. I should be excited and starting a countdown until graduation, but instead...I'm sweating bullets and terrified. What comes after high school? I know what I have planned: college, NFL, coaching, and then retirement. It seems straightforward and simple. It should be. I know, I am the star running back of our team, number two overall in the state. It doesn't get much better, but I also know that there will come a day when I can't play anymore. I don't know when that day will be, but it'll happen. It could be my next game or a hundred games from now, but one of these days I won't be Rocker Gordon, star football player. I'll just be Rocker Gordon and I'm not sure who he is.

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As I climb into my Jeep and start the engine, I rub my hands over the thighs of my jeans while taking a deep breath. There's something different in the air today. The air is fresher and crisper. I decide to make a stop at the local bakery, June Bug's. It's a staple in Blue Ridge. Warbee, the owner June's granddaughter, goes to school with me. I think she's a grade level behind me. She's a quiet one, cute and smart, but obviously doesn't like attention. Her grandmother makes the best doughnuts and coffee I've ever had. Luckily, I got out of my house early enough to make a quick stop before practice and school.

I grab the first parking spot I can find and jog up the block to the bakery. As soon as I open the front door, the familiar scents of fall fill the air. Cinnamon and pumpkin make my empty stomach rumble. June Bug's is decorated simply. A few small tables sit around the space with all the walls holding glass containers of baked goods. Behind the counter are all kinds of crazy gadgets and brewers for coffee and tea. The walls are painted a mild yellow, with dark wood tables and chairs sit around the cafe style building. It's cheerful and welcoming. Bright and colorful paintings hang around the walls as well as few black and white photographs showing Blue Ridge throughout the years. The line isn't too long, so I get my items pretty quickly. June appears at the counter. Her granddaughter resembles her. I remember as a child, June's soft shade of red hair and hazel green eyes with freckles over the bridge of her nose. Her glasses were always either hanging around her neck or perched low on her nose. A few of those things I've noticed about Warbee, too. I've only seen her in passing, but she's hard to miss even if she tries to blend in. "Well, well, if it isn't the infamous Rocker Gordon?"

"Good morning, ma'am," I reply.

She waves her hand in dismissal. “Ma’am makes me sound old and I may be a grandmother, but I am not old, you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I slap my free hand over my mouth after calling her ma’am again.

June cracks up laughing. “Always with the manners. You have a great first day of school.”

“Thank you. I’ll try.”

“Look out for my Bee, will you?” she asks.

I nod my head as I head for the door. “Yes, ma’am,” I call over my shoulder. In the reflection of the glass I see her shake her head at my response. On my way to school, I manage to devour the three doughnuts I purchased and drink my coffee. I park close to the field house and make my way through the gates.

The field house is humid as hell. It feels more like a sauna than anything else. The smell of sweat and dirty clothes hits me instantly. It’s a far cry from the smells of the bakery I just left. The team greets me as I enter. You’d think we hadn’t seen each other all summer by the way we holler at each other. We’ve spent most of the summer together either on the field, at football camp, or hanging out at the lake with what free time we have had. However, their excitement is contagious.

Coach Brime comes into the locker room and it grows quiet. “Everyone go change for a run. I don’t want y’all throwing up on your clothes the first day of school.” We all change into workout clothes and meet the Coach outside the field house. He gives us our directions for the path we will take for our run, before he blows his whistle and starts his timer. We take off. Some of the freshmen make the rookie mistake of starting out in a full out run. Rookie mistake. They’ll tire themselves out before they even get a fourth of the run done. You have to pace yourself with something like this.

It's something they'll learn.

Mase, my best friend, and Keefer come up to join me as we jog. When we reach the outskirts of the courtyard, I notice a familiar head of red hair. Warbee Carter sits on a bench with Teaganne Voss. Warbee's hair has grown out since she cut it last year. It looks good, really good. There's something different about her besides her hair. It's like she has this quiet confidence about her now. My eyes can't seem to look away even if I know I should. Teaganne waves and at first, I think she's waving at me, but then I remember that Keefer and Teaganne have a thing. Keefer apparently doesn't get that, but everyone else can see it.

I try to listen to Mase and Keefer as we jog, but my mind keeps going back to Warbee. I'm trying to pinpoint what is so different about her, but I can't. Even though I've seen her around school, I rarely see her outside of school unless she's at the bakery with her grandmother. Warbee sticks with Keefer and Teaganne and she doesn't come to the football games or the lake with the rest of us. Maybe this year she will since Keefer is on the team. A new spark of excitement sets off in my chest. I'm not sure why, but it has to do with Warbee.

After practice, I got through the motions of my classes. I take notes when I need to because I need decent grades in order to play football, as well as get into college. Chemistry is the subject I'm dreading the most. Science has never really been my thing, so when I take the seating chart from Mr. Cook and see my lab partner is Warbee Carter I'm excited for two reasons. One, everyone knows that Warbee is a tiny genius and two, I get to sit next to the girl who has my interest piqued. Maybe, senior year won't be so bad after all.

THREE

Warbee

My body seems to be hyper aware of Rocker because the moment he steps into the classroom, my eyes zone in on him. My heart rate is crazy as he gets closer to me, which is silly, because I'm usually not affected by the jocks of our school. I've listened to Teaganne for years go on and on about this jock or that one, but I've never felt anything towards any of them. She even had a short-lived crush on my soon-to-be lab partner, so I spent a few weeks watching his every move with her, but even then, I didn't feel that spark I'm always looking for. My heart definitely didn't act like this. As he takes his seat next to me, I advert my eyes. I picked the seat closest to the window. I figured it'd be a good way to distract myself from the less than smart jock sitting beside me. Actually, Rocker could be smart, but I'm assuming he's not. It's a general stereotype, but he could prove me wrong.

There's a large tree outside the window and I watch as the leaves start to turn slightly yellow in spots. A few of the leaves dance along the ground as they fall. Rocker pulls the stool out and takes a seat. His scent engulfs me for a moment. I expected an over-priced cologne scent, but instead, his scent is inviting. It's fresh and clean almost like he just put on clothes that came straight out of the dryer. I turn my head involuntarily. His blue eyes lock with mine. Rocker smiles that signature smile that drives all of the female student body and half the town's female citizens crazy. I've never understood it until now. Dimples appear and I swear, I feel my cheeks flush. "Looks like I'm going to be your lab partner."

I bite down on my bottom lip before nodding. "Seems that way," I reply.

He extends his hand to me. "I'm Rocker Gordon."

The laugh that escapes me isn't intentional, but I couldn't silence it if I tried. Rocker's face screws up in confusion. I wave my hand around trying to tell him I'm not actually laughing at him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude, but the fact that you think it would be necessary to introduce yourself to anyone in the student body is hilarious. I mean, you're Rocker Gordon. Everyone in town knows your name and

probably your stats.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true. Everyone does know me in some way.”

I shake my head. “No, they don’t know you. They think they do, but in reality, they only know you as the town’s golden boy with good manners and looks. They know your stats because you’ll win us state, but I highly doubt many of them actually know you.”

Rocker’s head drifts to the side. His eyes make me want to fidget. The way he stares is so unwavering that it’s unnerving. “You’re not what I was expecting.”

I study him for a moment. Decision time Warbee. “That makes two of us.”

Rocker chuckles and the deep tone of it skates over my skin. Is this what a crush feels like? “Don’t set that bar too high. I’m not a dumb jock like most of everyone assumes, but science is not my subject.”

“Lucky for you. It’s mine.” I wink at him from behind my glasses. I mean, I actually wink. What in the actual hell am I doing? The reaction I have to Rocker is completely uncharted territory for me. I think I need a map. Rocker’s smile grows and his dimples deepen; and it’s like I can feel my insides melting. This moment reminds me of all my favorite books. Rocker leans towards me slightly, and I find my own body inching closer to his, involuntarily. I’m completely drawn to him.

“Then it’s my lucky day,” he tells me, just as Mr. Cook takes his place at the front of the class. He goes to the whiteboard and starts writing. Instantly, I’m in student mode. Rocker is forgotten, if that’s possible, as I take my notes.

Mr. Cook checks the time on his watch. “Okay, I think that’s a good stopping point for today. The pack of papers I’m passing out now will have the class schedule as

well as the supplies you will need for lab days. It's just the basics, so don't panic. Any questions?"

The students begin packing up their belongings. I skim over the schedule so when the bell rings, I start to scurry around to get everything in my backpack. My favorite pen goes flying off the lab table and rolling across the floor. I take off after it, but collide with someone's butt. I cringe. I did not just run into someone's ass! My cheeks flood with a blush. My eyes screw shut. "I'm so sorry! I was just trying to chase down my pen and obviously I wasn't looking where I was going."

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A chuckle rings through my ears and I peek one eye open. Rocker stands in front of me, my pen in his hand and a smirk on his lips. His totally kissable lips. Whoa! Where did that come from? “I’m not complaining. I believe this is what you were after.” I nod my head as I take the pen from his hand. Our skin grazes one another, and butterflies form in my stomach. Rocker smirks as he starts to pass me, but he leans down and whispers into my ear at the last minute. “You know if you wanted to touch my ass, though, all you had to do was ask. See you around.”

Mortified, I stand there looking at the damn pen until I hear his friends greet him in the hallway. I grab my backpack and rush towards lunch, because I need some sense of normalcy right now. Chemistry class was supposed to be my easy one, along with English, but Rocker is a distraction. A very cute and sweet distraction, but something I should definitely ignore. I meet up with Teaganne who announces that we will be sitting with Keefer and the rest of the high school’s elite, Rocker included. So much for ignoring him now.

FOUR

Rocker

This first week of school has flown by. I’m kind of worried that this will be the pace for the entire school year. I’m not ready to say goodbye to this place. As I get ready for school, I think about this week in Chemistry class. Warbee has started to open up a little more each day. I’ve also discovered that she has perfect handwriting and epic note taking skills. Her favorite color is green. She always smells like the bakery and that despite being small in stature, she’s full of life. Warbee could rule this world if she wanted to. I’ve noticed other things, too, like how she bites on her lower lip while

taking notes. The way her glasses slowly descend her nose until she pushes them back up into place. When she's not taking notes, she doodles swirls and flowers all around the border of the piece of paper.

We don't talk that much since we only get a few minutes before and after class, but starting next week we'll have actual lab days. I'm looking forward to those, but I doubt she'll be concerned with anything aside from the assignment. I need to see Warbee outside of the classroom. I'm drawn to her and I need to figure it out before it messes up my game. Warbee is so serious during class, and she rarely talks to anyone aside from Teaganne or Keefer during lunch. She's impossible to read. When Keefer had announced on the first day of school that he was going to sit with Teaganne and Warbee at a different table, I think I shocked everyone with my response, myself included. Our table was invitation only and as silly as that sounds, it's true. My high school isn't so different from any other high school. They all have cliques and a food chain, so to speak. Jocks are at the top. Why? I don't know. It's silly when you consider it's the brainiacs like Warbee who will end up running almost everything in the future. I had insisted that Keefer have Teaganne and Warbee join us at our table.

I didn't miss the glare that Beth had shot in my direction. Beth and I sort of dated last year. In my mind, it was never serious but apparently it was in her's. She was the captain of the cheerleading squad and one of the most judgmental mean girls I had ever met. I met her glare, as a warning to leave Teaganne and Warbee alone. I was excited thinking that I would be able to finally see and talk to Warbee outside of the classroom. I didn't want to seem too eager, so I played it cool the first day with the intention to talk to her the following day. It didn't happen. Warbee is just as serious and quiet at lunch as she is in class. Although, Teaganne and her tend to laugh a lot.

I'm hoping to talk to her today in class. I'm going to haul ass to try and get to class early. The minute the third period bell rings, I'm out of my seat and in the hallway. I give a new meaning to power walk. When I practically jog into class, I'm surprised to see Warbee hasn't arrived yet. I take my seat as one of my legs bounces up and down,

anticipating her arrival. I'm not sure what is going on with me, but I don't question it too much. I know I just want to get to know her better. Finally, Warbee comes in and to my surprise she looks...skittish. Something is definitely bothering her. She doesn't even meet my eyes as she sits down. As she passes by me, the sweet scent from the bakery that lingers on her clothes and skin engulfs me. Once she sits, I turn to her, but she still refuses to meet my eyes. "Warbee, are you okay?" I finally ask.

She nods her head. "Yeah, I'm fine. How are you?" She's talking, but she still doesn't look at me. I mumble my reply and turn back toward the front of the classroom and try to figure out what is going on. I'm distracted all class and I barely took any notes. I sneak peeks at Warbee, but she is always continuously writing notes, so engrossed in the lecture that she doesn't even notice when I look at her.

As the bell finally rings, I turn to Warbee. Since Teaganne and Warbee started to sit with us, Warbee and I have been walking down to the cafeteria together. Today though, she's moving at a snail's pace. When she looks up, I can see her mind working. "Are you ready?"

"I need to stop by my locker and then meet with one of my teachers so I'm skipping lunch today." Her voice sounds off and I think it's because she's lying.

She brushes past me at a brisk speed, but I catch up easily enough. "Warbee, what's going on?"

"Nothing, you should go to lunch, Rocker."

"I will once you tell me what's going on," I repeat.

Warbee stops, sighs and spins around. "Look, I don't need the drama or trouble of some high school relationship. If you want to make Beth jealous you need to find someone else. I don't like games."

Now, I'm just confused. My eyebrows knit together. "What the hell are you talking about? I'm not trying to make Beth jealous. I don't care what Beth does or who she does it with."

"Well, you might want to tell her that. She made it perfectly clear what I was in this game between the two of you and I want no part in it, Rocker. I'm not all for the high school drama." Warbee turns around and starts to head down the hallway.

I jog to catch up and then step in front of her. She nearly runs into me, but manages to stop right before. "Rocker..."

"I'm not with Beth. I never really was, but she hasn't been my date to anything in months. The only game I'm playing is football, which I wanted to ask you to come and watch. Also, I would never use you to make Beth jealous. I think more of you than that." I watch her eyes as they change with her emotions. Eventually, they soften. "So, Warbee Carter will you come to the game tonight?"

She laughs. "I was already coming. Keefer's on the team, remember?"

I nod my head. That thought hadn't even crossed my mind. "Well, will you come for me instead?"

It sounds silly when I say it, but the giggle followed by the smile that I receive makes it well worth it. "Okay, I'll come for you, too."

The urge to jump and fist pump the air is real, but I manage to fight it. As we walk to the cafeteria with Warbee's excuse long gone, she explains to me what happened with Beth. I know it's something I'm going to have to take care of. Beth is the school's resident mean girl, and I don't want her targeting Warbee. Now, I just need a plan.

FIVE

Warbee

Well, we've survived the first six weeks of school," Teaganne says, as we look down at our report cards. It's hard to believe that it's already been six weeks. This year is flying by, which is actually kind of sad. Rocker and I have grown closer and closer with each passing day. Every day in Chemistry we now write back and forth to one another in a notebook. We talk during lunch and he shows up at the bakery on the weekends where we study together. Most nights he'll pop up on messenger where we talk until one of us falls asleep. We're still just friends which is fine, but I'd be lying if I said my crush on him hadn't grown. I look forward to all the time I get to spend getting to know him. It's silly, but true. I even daydream about him sometimes. I've become one of those girls. At least, I haven't started writing his name all over my notebook...yet.

I know Beth isn't happy, which worries me. She's not a nice girl, so I keep waiting for her to retaliate in some way. Rocker makes sure to be around me whenever Beth is nearby, but I know that's not possible all the time. We've just been lucky this far. I'm not good with confrontation. Besides, her threats are silly. Rocker and I just get along really well but he's so far out of my league that it's not even funny. Just because I'm crushing on him, doesn't mean anything.

A hand waves around in front of my face. "Earth to Warbee. Come in Warbee," Teaganne calls to me.

I shake my head. "I'm sorry. I got zoned out for a moment."

Teaganne laughs. "Yeah, I caught that. I know you've been zoning out more and more lately. I also know you deny your zoning out has anything to do with Rocker but, I'm pretty sure he is to blame."

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“They don’t. There’s nothing going on between us,” I tell her, for the thousandth time.

She rolls her eyes. “Sure, there isn’t. He just follows you around for no reason.”

“He doesn’t follow me around. We have a class together and after that class, we have lunch. We all sit together so of course we walk with one another. You’re reading too much into it.” This is the story I tell myself to keep from getting my hopes up over nothing. It’s a good thing she doesn’t know about the weekends at the bakery.

“Whatever you say,” Teaganne replies. “So, are we still going dress shopping after school?”

I sigh. Against my better judgement I agreed to go to the Homecoming dance on Saturday night. Dances are definitely not my thing and I have no reason to go, but Teaganne begged. I know she has been secretly hoping for Keefer to ask her, but he still hasn’t, so I guess I’ll be her friendly date. “Yes, we can still go. It’s so last minute and you could make any dress we pick so much better that it seems silly, but we’ll go.”

Teaganne claps her hands excitedly. “Yay, I can’t wait.”

“What are we so excited about?” Keefer asks, as he joins us.

“Homecoming dance,” Teaganne tells him.

Keefer nods his head. “Are y’all going?”

“Yeah, we both are.” Teaganne is getting defensive. I can tell by the tone of her voice. I just hope that Keefer thinks before he speaks. It’s not his strong suit, but one can hope that every now and then he uses his brain.

“I didn’t realize y’all had dates.”

Oh hell, here it goes. “It’s the twenty-first century, Keefer. I don’t need a damn date to go to high school dance. Besides, if I took a man-child like the ones that attend this school, I would be stuck babysitting. At least with Warbee, I’ll have fun.” Teaganne tosses her long, dark hair over her shoulder before walking a little faster. Just fast enough to leave us behind, so that we know she’s done with this conversation.

Keefer rolls his eyes, but I don’t say anything as we make our way down the hallway. When I reach my locker, I see a sunflower tapped to the outside, along with a note. It shocks me. I look around to see if anyone is going to claim the items, but when they don’t I step forward and pull them down. The note is addressed to me:

Warbee,

I’m not good at poetry and what not, so I won’t waste my time trying or yours to read it. I will say this, I hope your day is as beautiful as you and as bright as your smile. The sunflower reminded me of you, beautiful and bright, taller than all the rest of the flowers because of strength. You might be tiny, but you are mighty, little one.

Until I see you again,

Your Secret Admirer

I reread the note in my hand trying to figure out who could have written this. Sadly, it’s not handwritten, so I can’t try and decipher the handwriting. Surely, this is some mistake, but my name is on the note. I bring the sunflower to my nose and inhale

deeply. Very few people know that sunflowers are actually my favorite flower. I wonder if this person knew then I begin to wonder who this person might be.

By the time chemistry class rolls around, I'm completely distracted by the note and flower. It's been bugging me all day. However, if Rocker noticed I was quieter than normal; he didn't say anything. Finally, on the way to lunch he asks, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just thinking about a lot of stuff today."

"Anything I can help you with?" he asks.

I know he's just being polite, but I tell him everything. I even let him see the note. Some silly part of me really wanted him to show a sign of jealousy, even a little sign, but he doesn't. I knew he wouldn't, but the heart is often hoping for things that will never happen. "So, what do you think?"

"I think it seems like this person likes you," he replies.

We don't talk the rest of the way to the cafeteria and once we are seated, Rocker remains quiet. I do as well, but my mind keeps wandering back to the secret admirer. My heart wishes it was Rocker, but I know he'd never do anything like this. It's too romantic for a guy that doesn't have to be. I mean, any girl would fall at his feet, myself included, if he asked. He doesn't have to work this hard to get what he wants. I sigh and collect my tray as I leave. My eyes land on Beth, just down the table. She's watching me like a hawk, and it dawns on me that she's probably the one that taped that letter and flower to my locker. When I reach the trash can, I drop my tray then dig into my back pocket for the letter before dropping it in as well. I make sure she gets a clear view of this just so she knows she can't mess with me.

SIX

Warbee

Turns out, I couldn't find a dress for the homecoming which I thought would get me off the hook from having to go...it didn't. It was silly thinking on my part, considering Teaganne is an inspiring fashion designer. So now, we are standing in her room with material everywhere as she takes measurements of every part of my body. "I'm not sure you're going to have enough time to get this done."

"Girl, have some faith in me. I'll have it done by Friday to make sure it fits correctly, that way if I need to change any part of it, I can do it Saturday before the dance."

I shake my head. "If you say so."

Teaganne rolls her eyes. "I know so, honey."

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After Teaganne has measured every last part of me, I leave and walk the few blocks to my house. The minute I walk in, I'm hit with the smell of dinner, the aroma of sweet potato beckons me forward, and my stomach starts to rumble. I drop my backpack by the front door and head for the kitchen where I find my mom with her red hair piled on top of her head cutting apples. "Hey sweetie, how was your day? Did you find a dress?"

"No, but Teaganne is going to make me one. Do you want some help?" I offer, as I wash my hands in the sink. The French doors at the back of the house let's in plenty of natural light and glistens off the shiny hardwood floors of the house. The natural light makes the solid white kitchen, my mother's dream kitchen, seem even brighter.

She nods her head. "Yeah, that'd be great."

"Are you making pie or cobbler?" I ask.

"I couldn't decide. What do you think?"

My answer is instant and I'm sure she already knows. "Cobbler, of course."

We both laugh and once we finish the cobbler, dinner is served just after my dad gets home from work. We sit down and have family dinner. Afterwards, I do the dishes then go upstairs to do some homework. As I log into my computer, I get an instant message from someone signed in as a secret admirer. I shake my head because Beth is really going out of her way to try and humiliate me. I close the chat box and log off the site before turning back to my homework.

The next day at school, when I get to my locker there is another sunflower taped to the outside. As much as I want to walk to the trash can and throw the sunflower away, I can't. I love them too much to just throw away their beauty like that. I decide to keep it in my locker for the day, but when I open my locker tons of sunflower petals come cascading out. I jump back in shock. What in the world is going on? A note falls to the flower along with some of the petals. Teaganne and Keefer join me. "Girl, what is going on?" Teaganne asks.

I shake my head. "I'm not sure. I thought yesterday it was just Beth messing with me over Rocker, but now I'm not so sure. I mean, would she really go to all this trouble?"

"Beth is a bitch, but no I don't think even she would go this far." Keefer bends down and picks up the note before handing it to me. Reluctantly, I take it from him. "I think this is for real Warbee."

"Will y'all help me pick up these petals?"

Teaganne, Keefer, and I work on gathering the petals. I toss them into my backpack because I'm not sure what else to do with them, but like the sunflower I can't bring myself to throw them away. Students in the hallway look as they pass by and it makes me uncomfortable. I hate being the center of attention. Once all the petals are picked up, I grab what books I need, shove them into my backpack along with the petals and shut my locker. "Are you okay?" Teaganne asks.

I nod my head. "Yeah, it's just everyone is staring, and you know how that makes me feel."

"Yeah, but it's okay. They're just curious. Hell, I'm curious," she replies.

"I know. Thank you for the help. I'll see y'all at lunch," I tell Teaganne and Keefer,

as I turn and head for my first period class.

Once again, I'm distracted throughout my classes and when I reach chemistry, I'm shocked to see Rocker already in his seat. "Well hello, Warbee," he greets me.

"Hey, Rocker," I tell him, as my mood instantly lightens at the sight of him. His hair is a little longer than I'm used to, and this one stubborn strand falls forward, curling on his forehead. My fingers itch to reach over and move it, but I resist because that would seem odd. I place my backpack in my chair and pull out my book for class along with my notebook. Sunflower petals fall to the floor and I groan. Rocker chuckles. "I know girls carry some different stuff in their backpacks and purses, but I have to say...this is new to me."

I start collecting them without responding, but Rocker joins me. "Just shove them back in here."

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Yeah, it's just these things have caused enough attention for the day." I sit down with a plop on my stool and open my notebook to take notes.

"Do you not like sunflowers?"

"It's not that. I love them. They're my favorite flower actually, it's just everyone was looking when they came cascading out of my locker."

Rocker stiffens. "Who are they from?"

I shrug. "I don't know. I thought it was Beth yesterday trying to mess with me, but now I'm not so sure. I got a message last night from the supposed secret admirer, but I just signed off. Now, these are in my locker which is also kind of strange since

whoever it is, had to get my locker combination.”

“Why would you think it’s Beth?”

“Just because of the whole situation with you, but now I’m not so sure I was right.” I tap my pencil on the notebook as I try to think about who could be doing this. “I just wish whoever it was would stop doing all this and just talk to me. I mean, I hate the attention all this draws and it’s not necessary. Why not just talk to me?”

Rocker shrugs and looks away. “Maybe, he doesn’t know how.”

My laugh is instant. “It’s not like I’m one of the elite.”

“Maybe, that’s why he doesn’t talk to you,” Rocker says, as he turns back to face me.

My eyebrows pull together. “What?”

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“Maybe, he doesn’t know how to approach you because you’re in a league of your own. He knows he’s not smart enough or something like that. Maybe, if you were elite, he’d know what to do, but you’re different so he’s lost.” Rocker’s face and voice are serious, but I can’t picture anyone not knowing what to do with me. Mr. Cook calls the class to session and I just nod to let Rocker know I heard him, even if I don’t believe him. The whole class though his words play around in my head.

SEVEN

Warbee

This week has been a rollercoaster. My secret admirer still leaves a sunflower every day, but now it’s inside my locker and it’s just one flower. I never read the second note that was left because I’ve lost it. Somewhere between chemistry and getting home from school, it disappeared. I hate that I lost it. I was so curious about what it said. Rocker has been strangely quiet, but I’m thinking it’s because homecoming is tonight. It’s been a big week for him I’m sure. Lots of added pressure and there’s a rumor that some college scout is going to be at this game. I’m sure that’s not helping his stress level. Today is spirit day, so I let my mom do my hair in a curled, cheerleader type ponytail, with ribbons and all. I even let her paint my face. After glancing at the time, I tell her, “We have to go. We still need to pick up Teaganne before you can even take us to school.”

“I know, I know. We’ve got time,” she says calmly.

“We really don’t.” I point to the clock on the bedside table.

She glances back at it. “Oh shoot. Go grab your things. I'll meet you in the car in five.”

After collecting my things, I sit in the car and wait on my mom. This week, my mom has been the carpool since the football team has started practice at six in the morning. Keefer hasn't been able to give us a ride to school. I'll be glad when things get back to normal. My mom joins me in the car, and she speeds, more than she should, to get us to school on time.

When Teaganne and I enter the school, we aren't surprised to see that school spirit has thrown up everywhere. Streamers, banners, and anything else people could find to show spirit are hung around the halls. Almost every student is dressed in school colors as well. “I forgot to tell you how cute you look today,” Teaganne tells me, as we make our way to our lockers. She pulls one of my curls in my ponytail and let's it bounce back up with a giggle.

I laugh. “Oh yeah, I'm your typical cheerleader now.”

“You know if you wanted to be, I'm sure you could be.” I give her a look and she laughs. “Okay, yes I remember the catastrophe when you tried out. I'm sorry for mentioning it,” she tells me with a laugh. “I will say this your hair definitely has the genetics.”

I toss a piece of wadded paper at her before opening my locker. My heart stops, my lungs stop, everything stops. Inside is one sunflower painted in the school colors sitting inside a mason jar filled with pink and red starburst, my favorite. A little sign hangs around the mason jar ‘Happy Homecoming’. There is a letter taped to the side of the jar.

Happy Homecoming Warbee,

I hope you've enjoyed the week. I know I have, but a lot of that has been because of you. Please, be at the game tonight and the dance tomorrow. I look forward to them both as long as you will be there.

Your Secret Admirer

"Oh. My. God." Teaganne is standing behind me, reading over my shoulder. "This is so not Beth, you know that, right?"

"Yeah, I kind of figured that a while ago, but I mean, who else could it be?" I tell her. My mind wonders, but I can't come up with a possible face except for the face I want it to be, but know it never will be. Rocker talks to me five days a week in class. He wouldn't need to go through all this to get my attention. He already has it.

"Girl, I know that you live in the world of books and grades and baking, but a lot of guys totally check you out. You just never pay attention enough to notice it."

I scoff. "Yeah right."

"It's true. Ask Keefer. Even he's noticed it. Especially, since we've filled out more. Although he never notices me," Teaganne adds quietly.

I hate that Keefer is oblivious to Teaganne's feelings for him. I'm not sure how he hasn't figured it out. Everyone else has noticed. An idea comes into my mind. "I'll catch up with you at lunch," I tell Teaganne, as I take off down the hallway. By the time I reach the football field, I'm out of breath. "Coach Brime," I call out.

He turns to look at me. "Warbee, what can I do for you?"

"I know you're busy with practice, but I really need to speak with Keefer for a moment." He starts to shake his head, so I come up with the best believable lie I can.

“It’s concerning a project I helped him with that he has to turn in today. It could make him ineligible to play, because I realized we messed up on a part of it.”

Coach sighs before bringing his whistle to his mouth and letting it rip. “Keefer!”

Keefer jogs over while giving me a curious look. As Coach explains to Keefer, I scan the field and see Rocker standing there, glistening with sweat under the morning sun, but his blue eyes are locked on me. I give him a small smile before my attention moves to Keefer. We walk a few steps away from the Coach so he can’t overhear our conversation. “What is going on, Warbee?” Keefer asks.

“Here’s the thing you’re clueless. Teaganne likes you and I think you like Teaganne, but for whatever reason you won’t make a move and it’s starting to get really frustrating. Teaganne is a catch, so I’m telling you that you need to man up and ask her to the dance tomorrow night. You’ll be doing yourself and Teaganne a favor,” I explain in one breath.

Keefer’s dark blue eyes grow large. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“Yeah, and you sound crazy. Teaganne isn’t into me. I can’t believe you interrupted my practice for this joke.” Keefer starts to walk away, but I grab the back of his jersey and yank him back.

“You listen to me, buddy. She likes you. You’re either blind or dumb and to be honest, I’m not sure which it is right now. So, get it together and ask her. If you don’t want to take my word on it then ask someone else if I’m right. Everyone but you know it.” I turn around and make my way back to the school. If I run, I might just make it to class on time after all.

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EIGHT

Rocker

When I looked over and saw Warbee on the sidelines with Keefer, I couldn't lie; I couldn't take my eyes off her. Whatever feelings I have for Warbee have thrown me off kilter. It's not something I expected. I look forward to Chemistry class and lunch every day. I've even started looking for her between classes. Weekends at the bakery is one of my favorite past times now and talking until late at night on messenger has become my favorite way to fall asleep. However, this secret admirer thing is going to cause issues for me. I can see that already.

After practice Mase, Keefer, and I head out of the locker room. As we're crossing the field to reach the school Keefer asks, "Do you guys think that Teaganne has a crush on me?"

I laugh. I can't help it. Everyone in town knows that Teaganne has a crush on Keefer. "Dude, please, tell me you knew that."

He shakes his head which causes Mase to laugh. "I never thought she noticed me like that before."

"What makes you think she does now?" I ask. My curiosity is high right now.

Keefer shrugs. "Warbee. That's why she was on the field today. She told me to ask her to homecoming."

“You should. Teaganne does like you. I can tell. I think everyone but you can tell,” I reply. We walk in silence until Mase reaches his class. After he leaves, I turn to Keefer. “Is Warbee going to the homecoming dance?”

“Yeah, Teaganne somehow convinced her. Then they went dress shopping and Warbee couldn't find anything, so Teaganne made her dress. Honestly, I figured Warbee telling me to ask Teaganne was her last-ditch effort to get out of going to the dance,” Keefer explains.

“So, Warbee doesn't have a date to the homecoming dance?” I ask.

Keefer chuckles. “No, I mean, she wouldn't even be attending homecoming if it wasn't for Teaganne demanding it. Although, after Teaganne took the time to make the dress, I doubt she'd try to get out of it now.”

I nod my head. “Cool.”

As we gather our books from our lockers it's quiet, but when I shut my locker Keefer and his dark blue eyes are watching me. “If you like Warbee, and I think that you do, I support it. However, I should tell you.... don't hurt her. If you hurt her, I'll have to hurt you.”

Instantly, I try to dismiss the idea. I thought I was being discreet about my crush on Warbee, but maybe I was wrong. “I don't know what you're talking about, man.”

Keefer scoffs. “Yeah, okay. Keep telling me that. Look, you do a pretty damn good job of hiding it, but I see it. I think you'd be good together.”

“Really? We're complete opposites,” I tell him. It's true, we don't have a ton in common.

“Yeah, but that’s why it would work. The two of you would balance one another. Those are the best kind of relationships,” he tells me with a shrug. “Anyways, I got to get to class. I’ll catch you at lunch.”

Before Keefer disappears, I call out to him, “Keefer.” He turns around. “That advice you just gave me...you should take for yourself and Teaganne, too.” He rolls his eyes, but his smile lets me know I’m right.

The rest of the day goes by in a blur. I soaked up my moments with Warbee the best I could, but the game is on my mind. It’s important that I stay focused, because I’ve already been notified that there will be scouts in the stands tonight. I need to impress. I need to play the best damn game ever. My entire future depends on it.

When I pull up to the high school stadium tonight with my bag of gear beside me, the truth of tonight hits me like a ton of bricks. This is my last homecoming game. It’s the last time I’ll play for this team with my hometown cheering me on. This game already has so much riding on it, that as I step out of my truck it feels final. Senior year is so bittersweet, and I haven’t decided how I’m going to deal with it all yet.

The locker room is quiet as we change into our gear and uniforms. It’s the calm before the storm. Coach Brime steps out of his office with his game face on. The assistant coaches flank him. We all take a seat when he clears his throat. His pre-game speech is about to start. As I sit there and listen to him go on about the game and its meaning, I can’t help but feel sentimental. I take in my surroundings and by the time he’s finished his speech, I’m more than ready to take the field and bring home this win.

As we stand at the entrance of the field house, we can hear the cheers and chants coming from the stands. Our town is here to show their support, but my mind

wanders to one person in particular. I'm curious if a certain girl is sitting in the stands, cheering with the rest of them. She's been at every home game so far this season, so I can't imagine her not being here tonight. I hope she's here. I need her to be.

The night goes by in a blur of plays, runs, catches, and touchdowns. By the end of the night, I'm covered in sweat, but so damn proud of myself and this team and how we came together. We won the game forty-two to ten. My smile is so large my cheeks ache. When the people in the stands descend to join us on the field, I search for that familiar head of red hair. About ten yards away, I see her hugging Keefer. Our eyes catch and she starts to walk towards me. I meet her halfway.

"You did amazing tonight! Congratulations!"

If it's possible my smile broadens even more. "Thank you. I'm glad you were here."

"Me, too," she tells me. The crowd thickens around us and Warbee gets jostled by them, I reach out to steady her. "Thanks. I guess quick reflexes are a must for you." Her laugh sounds nervous and without another thought, I pull her into me. Everything is in slow motion. The way the moonlight catches her red hair and how her hazel eyes look green under the stadium lights. I move on instinct as I drop my helmet to the ground and bring my hand up to wrap around the back of her neck. Our lips meet and I know there will never be another night like this.

NINE

Warbee

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When I wake up in my bed, I pinch myself. I'm certain that last night was a dream that my overactive imagination has fabricated on its own. There is no possible way that Rucker Gordon kissed me on the football field in the midst of our entire town after winning our homecoming game. I mean, that kind of stuff only happens in movies and books, so there's no way it happened to me, right?

However, I'm still in the same position and place when after the pinch so maybe, just maybe, it's true. I feel like I'm on cloud nine. When I roll over and look at the clock, I know exactly what I'm going to do today. Once I pull myself from my bed I shower, get dressed, and grab my bike from the garage. As I ride through the quiet streets of Blue Ridge, I realize that last night did happen. I look up and see the leaves have turned to that beautiful dark, burnt orange color. It's almost as if everything changed overnight. I know I did.

My mind replays last night over and over on my way to June Bug's Bakery. I pass some early morning workers and the middle school boy who does the paper route, but other than that, it's just me and my thoughts. By the time I reach the bakery, I've convinced myself that Rucker was just caught up in the moment. He'll probably act like it never happened, so I need to get my head on straight. Right now, I'm acting like a schoolgirl. Rucker had just won the game and I'm sure he impressed the college scout he had mentioned earlier in the week. His adrenaline was soaring, and the kiss was just a reaction from the excitement he had going on. I'm sure it meant nothing to him. Now, if only it hadn't meant everything to me.

I park my bike in the alley and knock on the door three times. A few minutes later, my granny opens the door. Her long silver hair piled on top of her head and her brown eyes wide and awake. "Well, I didn't expect to see you so early this morning."

“Why not? I always come around this time on the weekends to help you,” I tell her, as I step inside and lock the door back. I toss my purse into the corner, my go-to copy of *Pride and Prejudice* slides out onto the floor. I place the book back in my bag and grab my pumpkin printed apron.

My granny is mixing a bowl, but I see her shoulder shrug as I approach. “I just figured that after that big game last night you might sleep in for once.”

I laugh. I don’t think I’ve ever really slept in before. My body has always been an early riser. “This is me we’re talking about. Someone needs to tell my body that it can sleep in.”

“Well, you know I’m always thankful for the help. You can start mixing the batter for the muffins,” she says, as she points to the other side of the table where the ingredients are strewn about. We work in silence for a good while. That’s one of my favorite things about baking. It’s a quiet process but relaxing. Finally, my granny asks, “So, how was the game?” I tell her all about it and the smile on her face only grows. As the sun starts to rise, the bakery starts to smell like all my favorite scents pumpkin, apple, cinnamon, spice, and all those other amazing fall scents. Granny checks her watch. “I’m going to unlock. Do me a favor and pull those out?”

“You got it,” I tell her. Opening the oven, my stomach growls as the apple cinnamon muffins hit my nostrils. They smell amazing.

Granny calls out to me, “Bee, you’ve got a visitor.” That’s odd I think, but I pull all the muffins from the ovens first and place them on the cooling racks before I head into the dine-in bakery. I can’t imagine Teaganne would be up this early on a Saturday, but I don’t know who else would show up here. However, when I enter, I find Rocker standing on the other side of the counter talking to my granny. His eyes instantly move to me and lock in. My granny giggles and winks at me. “I’ll be in the back starting the pies.” As she walks past me, she pats me on the shoulder.

“Rocker, what are you doing here?” I finally ask. I can feel the blush on my cheeks from the intensity of his stare.

Rocker stands up a little taller and clears his throat. “I was looking for you. I was sitting outside on your porch steps when your dad came out to get the morning paper. He told me you weren’t home and where I could find you. I was just waiting for someone to unlock the doors.”

“How long were you out there?” I ask.

He checks the watch on his wrist. “Well at your house about thirty minutes. Outside the bakery for about an hour.”

“You’ve waited an hour and half to see me, why?” Confusion is clear in my voice. I can’t imagine what would be so important for him to go to all these measures. Unless he’s worried I read too much into the kiss last night. The blush on my cheeks deepens. This is so embarrassing. I need to downplay everything last night, so we don’t ruin our friendship.

Rocker gives me a curious look. “I wanted to see you and talk about last night.”

“Oh,” I say, then wave my hand dismissively. “You don’t have to. I know you just got caught up in the moment. You don’t have to explain that to me.”

“That wasn’t it, Warbee. I mean, yes I was caught up in the moment, but that wasn’t why I kissed you.” Rocker moves down the counter to the glass case that displays some of the baked goods, closer to where I’m standing. “I kissed you because I wanted to. I’m here because I have a question for you.” Emotions clog my throat. I try to swallow it down, but I can’t so eventually, I just nod for him to continue. “I know you were planning on going to the dance tonight with your friends, but I was hoping you might make a last-minute change.”

“Okay...”

Rocker glances down and for the first time I notice he’s holding something in his hands. He raises up the clear plastic box that holds a corsage. I don’t know where he got a corsage at this time in the morning but there is a beautiful corsage sitting in the box all white and blue to match my dress. “Will you go to the dance with me tonight?”

I’m stunned. Words won’t form in my mouth. I never thought I’d be one of those girls to crush out on a guy or want him to go to some silly high school dance with me, but here I am. My heart is beating erratically and it’s all I want. I nod my head and whisper, “Yes.”

Rocker smiles at me and lets out a breath I hadn’t realized he had been holding. “I’d really like to kiss you again, but I don’t want to come around the counter.” Without another word, I walk around the counter and straight into his arms where my lips find his.

TEN

Warbee

The rest of my day is so busy, it flies by. After Rocker finally left the bakery, I called Teaganne and told her what had happened this morning. She was so excited, she squealed into the phone and nearly deafened me then proceeded to tell me how Keefer had finally asked her to be his official date. I was so excited for her. I knew Keefer being her date would make for the perfect homecoming dance for her. Teaganne then tells me what time she will pick me up and runs through the list of things we have to do. My stress level instantly skyrockets, until my granny steps in front of me and pushes an apple cinnamon muffin into my hand. It’s her own secret recipe and my favorite.

Later, after things at the bakery finally slow down, Teaganne arrives, order's two spiced apple ciders and a dozen of our favorite muffins before she drags me from the bakery. My bike is momentarily forgotten in the rush. The town is still buzzing from the football game win last night. The windows of the local shops are still painted. A banner hangs on main street and streamers are still taped to all the light poles in the downtown area.

When we finally reach my house, Teaganne and I eat a couple of muffins before we head to my room to start getting ready. My stress has turned into nerves because I'm really not sure what to expect tonight, and the unexpected makes me nervous. Teaganne unzips one of the garment bags she laid on my bed. Inside is a white lace crop top with splashes of blue and a high waisted tulle skirt layered in blue and white. It's absolutely perfect and everything I could want in a formal dress. "Oh goodness, Teaganne." I step forward and run my hands over the tulle of the skirt. "How in the world did you manage to make something so perfect in such a short amount of time?"

Teaganne beams. "This was easy. Besides, I wanted to make sure you had the perfect homecoming dress which is good since you now have the perfect date."

I roll my eyes. "No one is perfect," I remind her.

"You know what I mean," she replies with a laugh. "Now, let's start with some makeup!"

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I laugh. “Teaganne, I don’t own much makeup, you know this.”

“I do, which is why I brought back up,” she informs me, as she dangles her keys from her hands. “We just have to go get the boxes.”

I start to follow her until the word boxes sinks in. “Boxes? Why would you need boxes of makeup?”

“Oh, it’s not just makeup. It’s also hair supplies, jewelry, and shoes. I just wanted to make sure everything was covered.” Teaganne leads us back outside where we do, in fact, gather boxes from her trunk. Once we get back to my room, she starts to unload everything. It’s overwhelming, but I know Teaganne knows what she’s doing.

A few hours later, after lots of laughs, I’m standing in front of the mirror, speechless. I never thought I could look like this. I trusted Teaganne to make me look amazing, but this is something else altogether. My mom appears in the doorway and judging by the tears forming in her eyes, she didn’t expect this either. “Oh goodness, would you look at y’all?”

Teaganne smiles and does a big turn allowing her silver ball gown to flow out. “Teaganne can work some magic,” I tease.

“That wasn’t me, that’s you. It’s all you. I just made certain things stand out more,” Teaganne adds.

My mom places her hands on my shoulders. “She’s right. It’s all you. You look beautiful. You both do.”

“Thanks, mom.” The doorbell rings and I jump. My nerves are ridiculously high now.

I start to gather stuff into my clutch when my mom stops me. “Your dad is getting the door for the guys. He wants to have a one on one talk with them.” I feel my eyes go large. It’s just like in the movies. I swear if I go downstairs and he has a shotgun I’m going to die of embarrassment. My mom laughs. “It’s not that bad, I promise. However, while they’re talking man to man,” she says, in a teasing tone. “Let me grab some pictures of you two beautiful girls. I’m sure Teaganne’s parents would like a few pictures.”

“Oh, I’m sure they’d love that,” Teaganne says, as she poses. After a few pictures, we head downstairs.

I take the stairs incredibly slow since I’m not used to wearing heels. When I reach the bottom, my eyes instantly find Rocker. He looks like some teen heartthrob from the movies that Teaganne and I like so much. I know my dad and even Keefer are around, but my eyes can’t find them. Rocker’s simple black tux makes him look older than he is. His hair has been cut since this morning. It’s shorter and styled perfectly into that messy, spikey way he wears so well. His stubble is gone, too, so now I can see his perfectly square jaw. His blue eyes are locked on mine as his lips break to show his white teeth in a smile. He steps forward with the corsage from this morning in his hands. “Wow Warbee, you look...gorgeous.”

I feel the blush as it takes over my whole body, not just my cheeks. “Thank you. You don’t look too bad yourself.”

He chuckles. “I’ll take that because coming from you it’s the highest compliment.” Rocker takes my hand in his and places the corsage on my wrist, before leaning in and pressing a kiss to my cheek. As we get ready to leave, my mom requests another round of pictures, this time the guys are included. Once my mom has enough pictures to fill an entire album, I hug her and my dad bye and take Rocker’s hand as we head

outside.

“We figured we could all ride together. I hope you ladies don’t mind,” Keefer says, as he leads us to his truck.

Rocker opens the door for me and helps me into the truck. The perfect southern gentleman. When he climbs in beside me, I can smell his cologne as it moves in the air. There’s a good chill in the air tonight. I shiver slightly, but Rocker, always so observant, quickly removes his tux jacket and drapes it over my shoulders. “Thank you.” I steal a glance in his direction and his smile is large.

“Are you ready for this dance?” he asks.

I shrug. “As ready as I can be. I do have a confession though.”

Rocker’s eyebrows go up in question. “What’s that?”

“This is my first dance.”

He looks stunned at first. “How is that possible. You’re a junior.”

“I just never went to any of them before,” I admit quietly.

“You never even went to one in junior high or one of the local barn dances?” he asks.

“I’ve gone to a couple barn dances but I never stayed long. It’s not my scene and I was just trying to appease my mom at the time.” I glance at him again.

Rocker smiles. “Well, I’m honored to take you to your first dance. I hope it’s everything you could imagine.”

I just smile, but in my head, I already know that this night will be so much more than anything I could dream of.

ELEVEN

Rocker

I'm more nervous tonight than I've ever been. With football I know what to expect, I know what I'm capable of, but this is different. Warbee isn't a football game that I'm trying to win. I made a promise to myself to never get distracted by a girl when I first got serious about trying to make it as a football player, but I never predicted her. I've grown up around her my entire life. Blue Ridge is a smaller town, everyone knows everyone in a roundabout way. I never paid attention until she was sitting next to me.

It's all the little things that has me breaking my promise right now. The way she always smells like her grandmother's bakery. How she chews on the end of her pen cap when she's reading or thinking. The way she giggles at all my dumb jokes. How she always gives me her dessert at lunch, because nothing can compare to her grandmother's, she's not wrong, but I still take the dessert. It's the way the blush creeps into her cheeks from her neck when I compliment her. It's everything.

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Tonight, when she appeared at the top of the stairs I literally forgot how to breathe for a minute. She's always beautiful and unique, but tonight it was a whole new level. I'm not sure what I expected but it wasn't this. After her father threatened Keefer and I, I'm not sure how I forgot he was in the room. He's a large wall of muscle but somehow when she came into my line of sight all else was forgotten.

Now, we're sitting in the decorated gym at a table, sipping on the worst punch I've ever tasted. My stomach rolls with nerves. I glance at Warbee and she seems nervous, too, which doesn't help. I clear my throat. "Do you want to dance?" I ask.

Warbee's eyes swing up to meet mine. Her's are large with surprise, but she eventually says, "Yes."

I take her hand in mine and we dance under the white Christmas lights and streamers. She fits perfectly next to me as we sway to the music. We only get about a minute of the slow song before it transitions into a faster, upbeat number. Keefer and Teaganne join us. Warbee seems unsure at first, but Teaganne grabs her hands and starts to spin around and before I know it, Warbee is letting loose. She's jumping around and laughing. The nerves I had been feeling fade away as I watch her, forcing myself to memorize this. "Are you having a good time?" I finally get to ask her, as the next slow song comes on.

She smiles at me. "The best. Thank you for asking me. I really didn't want to be the third wheel again."

"There's no way you could be the third wheel."

Warbee laughs. "Have you seen Keefer and Teaganne?"

I glance over my shoulder where they are dancing. "Okay, yeah, you have a point."

"They should be announcing homecoming king soon. Are you excited?" she asks.

I shrug. "To be honest, I don't really care either way. I mean, I know I'm nominated, and I feel like it kind of comes with the territory of playing football in this school, but I don't really care. I mean, I love football and I'd play it even if it wasn't a cool thing to do."

"Really?" Her head tilts to the side and her hair tickles my fingers.

"Yeah, I'm good at it and when I step out on that field, I know that I'm in control of what happens. I'm the master of my own destiny. It's a feeling I can't describe."

"I think you're doing a pretty good job," she tells me.

The song comes to an end and the principal takes the stage. "Okay, students, it's time to announce the Homecoming court and to crown this year's king and queen." He goes through the list of names and each one of us takes the stage side-by-side. Once we're all together, the student council president joins us with the crowns in her hands. I find Warbee standing with Teaganne and Keefer. I wink at her and even from here I know she's blushing. My name is called as the king and I step forward to allow Ashley to place the crown on my head. Mentally, I plead with whatever higher being that Beth is not named Queen. Someone though likes to toy with me because Beth is called. I cringe because now I have to spend an entire slow song dancing with her. I'm sure she'll go on and on about cheer and how someone is gossiping about her and trying to take her spot as captain. I'd really rather just dance with Warbee.

The song starts and we begin to sway to the music. Beth instantly starts to talk about

how she misses us. Internally, I roll my eyes. There was never really an us to miss. I think she just misses the popularity that came with a title like that. It never truly existed. Half way through the song she tries to step closer to me. I pull away. “I’m here with a date, Beth.”

Her eyes and demeanor change in a flash. “You mean, that little too smart for her own good reject?”

My jaw tightens and my hands fall away from her. Beth’s eyes rage with fire. “Watch what you say and how you talk about my date, Beth.”

“Aww...did I hit a button? You know everyone is wondering what the hell you are trying to pull with this little stunt. You know she doesn’t belong in our circle of friends. We’re the elite in case you’ve forgotten.” Beth smirks. I look over my shoulder and see Warbee standing there. Her eyes shine with doubt. A look of uncertainty is written all over her face. Warbee doesn’t get hurt by much. She has a quiet confidence that is unwavering but right now I know Beth just made her question everything. The anger I feel is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced before.

I take the crown off my head and toss it at Beth. “Find yourself another king of the elite. I’m out.” When I turn around, Warbee is gone. Teaganne and Keefer are easy to find and point me in the direction that Warbee went off in. I chase her down. By the time I reach her, she’s already reached the football field. My second home. “Warbee, wait, please.”

She stops, but doesn’t turn around. Once I’m close enough she tells me, “You should go back. Beth is right. That is where you belong, but it’s not my place.”

I step in front of her as she starts to walk away again. “Oh no you don’t. You belong wherever the hell I want you to, or wherever you want to. People like Beth belittle those around her to make herself feel better.”

Warbee shakes her head. “Maybe you’re right, but it doesn’t change the fact that part of what she said is true. You’re part of the elite and I’m just a nerd. We were crazy to think anyone would see that differently.”

“I don’t care! I don’t care what anyone thinks!”

Her eyes narrow as she studies me. “You will when they all start talking.”

An idea springs into my mind. “Please, stay here. I’ll be right back.” I run to the field house and find the hide a key that coach told me was here. Only a few of us know about it. I unlock the door and rush inside to my locker. I grab what I stashed inside earlier this week before running back to Warbee. She’s still standing there rubbing her bare arms. “I don’t care. I’ll never care. I didn’t care when they saw everything, I did to get your attention, did I?” I ask her, as I pull the dying sunflower from behind my back. A note still hangs from the stem where I tied it days ago, asking her to the dance.

Her hazel eyes go wide. “What is this?”

“I was your secret admirer.” The first time admitting that out loud is scarier than any team I’ve ever faced on this field. Warbee reaches out and takes the sunflower from me. As she opens the letter, I slip my tux jacket back off and place it over her shoulders.

“Why didn’t you tell me and why are the notes all printed off the computer?” she asks.

I shrug. “I wasn’t sure how to just ask you. You make me nervous, Warbee. I’m never nervous, so I’m not sure how to be around you sometimes. I typed the letters because I was worried, you’d recognize my handwriting.”

Warbee steps forward and wraps her arms around me, burying her face in my chest. With her heels on she's just right under my chin. "I wanted it to be you so badly."

“Really?”

“Yes,” she replies. She looks up at me and before I can overthink it, I wrap my hands around the back of her neck and kiss her under the autumn sky. On the field that calls to my soul the way she does. The kiss that would change my life forever.

TWELVE

Warbee

That night on that football field was the start of everything. When Rocker kissed me under the autumn moon, it was like I came to life. It was unexpected and exciting and like nothing I had ever experienced before in my life. He made my heart happy and it felt safe. Rocker would be my first everything. He was my first real crush, first kiss, first love...every exciting first a teenager can have, Rocker was there, front and center.

After homecoming, Rocker and I quickly became inseparable. Every chance we got we spent together. He showed up at my granny's bakery every Saturday morning bright and early. Granny gave him an apron and he'd spend the morning helping the two of us bake all sorts of goodies. We laughed and smiled. We had flour and frosting fights that left the kitchen and us a mess.

Rocker leaned over and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. It was unexpected, but I was learning to expect the unexpected with him. He was always showing me how

much he cared with random gestures, just like this. I look up at him. “What was that for?” I ask.

He shrugs. “I just figured you could use a little more sugar.” Rocker winked at me and I rolled my eyes.

“Wow, I didn’t realize my boyfriend liked to use cheesy pickup lines.”

“Only on you darlin’,” he said, his southern drawl making my heart swoon with his pet name for me. I always hated the idea of pet names, but he could call me anything and I’d go weak in the knees. I was officially one of those girls. Before I had time to think, I dipped my hand into the flour and when Rocker turned back around, I slammed it into his face. He didn’t know what hit him at first. My laughing became uncontrollable as I stared at his now flour covered face. It clung to his hair and navy-blue t-shirt as well. Rocker reached up and wiped the flour from his eyes. “Really? That’s how you want to play this darlin’?”

I giggled. “I think I already won.”

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you?”

Rocker remained silent. I figured he would finish his sentence, but when he doesn’t, I ask, “Tell me what?” I feel my eyebrows pull together in confusion.

“Don’t play games with someone who can play better.” Rocker smirks at me. Just as I’m about to reply, he slams a handful of vanilla buttercream into my hair and down my forehead. My glasses go askew. When I open my eyes, I see Rocker smiling at me as he licks frosting from his fingers. “Wow, this frosting is really good.”

I huff and before either of us have time to think flour, frosting, chocolate chips, and anything else that we can throw at each other is flying around the kitchen. I giggle

and squeal while he chuckles. We each hide behind a table in hopes of beating the other. Rocker eventually sneaks around my table, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me down on top of him on the dirty floor. He kisses my nose. “We made such a mess,” I tell him in a whisper.

“Why are you whispering?” he asks.

I smile. “I feel like we’re going to get into trouble.”

“Oh...I’m sure we are but it was so worth it.” He licks the frosting from my cheek. I squeal but then we both jump up as we hear the bell ring out in the front of the bakery. My granny was back. There was no hiding all the mess.

When my granny entered the kitchen, she stopped for a moment. Her eyes wide and mouth slack. She took one look at us and began to laugh out loud. “Oh, young love. I hope y’all had fun because you sure have a mess to clean up.” She turns around and walks back out to the front. Rocker and I exchange a look and crack up again.

That was the day I fell in love with Rocker Gordon. It was also the day that I knew he’d break my heart come the start of the next fall. He would leave and I would stay. Rocker was destined for a life outside of Blue Ridge. I just wanted to run my granny’s bakery when she retired. Even though I knew that we would end, and my heart would break, I was so excited for all the adventures in between that I took it all. So, when we said goodbye to one another that next autumn, I knew I’d had the time of my life.

THIRTEEN

Eleven Years Later

Rocker

I stand on the fifty-yard line of the field in the stadium that has been my home for the last seven years, ever since I graduated college and was drafted in the NFL. I always knew this day would come, that my career would end. I just never thought I'd barely be twenty-nine when it did. The air is crisp with autumn and the changes that come with it. My life is in an autumn phase, everything is changing, and I have to learn to accept it. I take in the stadium as I slowly spin in a circle with one deep breath, I walk away from the only thing I've ever known.

As I climb into my truck and start it up, I remind myself that even though I'm not a player anymore, I'll still be involved in football. Coaching the varsity football team at my high school was something I always wanted to do, I just didn't expect it to happen so quickly. I wasn't all that shocked when I got the call from Principal Thomas offering me the head coaching job. My dad had already told me what he had heard through the grapevine of town gossip, one of the joys of living in a small town.

Oddly, enough I'm looking forward to being back home. The slower pace, farmer's market on Saturday mornings, home owned diners to eat at, and people who smile when you pass them on the sidewalk. That's how Blue Ridge, Georgia was, and I never knew how much I'd miss it until I left. As a kid, when you're growing up, you often dream about bigger and better things but once you get out of the small town you realize just how much you loved it after all.

It's late when I finally pull back into Blue Ridge, but immediately that sense of comfort comes over me. There really is no place like home. I cut the air conditioner off and roll my windows down as I slowly make my way through the quiet streets, not much goes on here, but there's nowhere else I'd like to call home. Eventually, I find the log cabin I purchased on the outskirts of town. It's odd to say that even in the dark, the pictures I saw online don't do the cabin justice. It's surrounded by trees and if I listen closely, I can hear the water just behind. Luckily, it's furnished so I unlock the front door and climb the stairs before collapsing into the bed. As I close my eyes, I try to mentally prepare myself for my first day as a coach and not a player. Sleep

finds me, but not before a familiar pair of hazel eyes find me. I haven't thought of those eyes in a few years, but I guess being back in Blue Ridge would remind me of the girl I let get away, Warbee Carter.

Warbee with her sassy, smart mouth, red hair, large rimmed glasses with hazel eyes behind. A small splattering of freckles covering the bridge of her nose. She was everything to me once upon a time. Warbee was the girl I considered giving it all up for, but then she stood on the same field where I first kissed her and let me go. At times I was angry and heartbroken but now I get it. She knew I'd never be happy without trying to achieve my dream. She was the bigger person out of the two of us.

In my sleep, she finds me. We're standing in her grandmother's bakery. I'm helping her close up the shop for the night. As I mop the floor the music on the speakers plays softly. I can hear Warbee humming along as she sways to the beat while wiping down the counters. You Save Me by Kenny Chesney comes on and I know it's her favorite right now. I watch her for a moment as the muted lighting makes her red hair look darker and her skin even more porcelain than normal. She's so damn beautiful and she doesn't even know it. My heart beats a hundred miles a second when I look at her. I'm truly in love with her.

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I place the mop back into the bucket and walk up behind her. I place my hand on top of hers as she wipes the counter. My other hand moves to her waist and I turn her to face me. “Rocker...what are you doing?” Without answering her question, I slip my hand behind her neck and bring her mouth to meet mine. Home. I never thought a person could make you feel like you are home, but she does that to me.

We begin to sway to the song and by the time I release her mouth we are in the middle of the bakery, dancing to the song she loves. “Dance with me,” I tell her.

“I don’t think I have much choice in the matter.” She giggles and I watch a blush flood her cheeks. I pull her close and breathe her in, the familiar scent of spices, apple and pumpkin, the scent that will forever be tied to her and every memory I have of her. “Rocker,” she says with a sigh.

The song comes to an end. I pull back just enough to see her eyes, which are a little greener today than normal. “I love you.”

Her eyes widen at first, her cheeks darken once more and then she moves to her tiptoes and places her lips to mine in a quick kiss. “I love you, too,” she whispers against my cheek. My heart soars because I was so scared, she wouldn’t feel the same. It’s only been a week since our first date to the homecoming dance. I know to most that’s not long enough, but for me...it’s been a lifetime.

FOURTEEN

Warbee

My alarm goes off and I reach for it blindly on the nightstand. Three in the morning comes too early, but it's also necessary. I never thought I'd be one to take on farmer's hours, but here I am. Slowly, I pull myself from my bed and into the shower. The hot water beats against my skin and starts to wake me up. Afterwards, I make my way through my one-bedroom rental house to the kitchen where I start my pot of coffee, before I go back and get dressed for the day.

I stand in front of my closet admiring my autumn wardrobe. It's one of my favorite things about the season. Eventually, I decide on a pair of dark wash denim jeans, olive green t-shirt, and rust orange cardigan with matching booties. I dry my hair and leave it down in its natural wave. As I head out the door, I grab my to-go cup and fill it with coffee and pumpkin spice creamer before heading out.

The streets are still dead, and the sun is hours from rising, but balancing two jobs right now means I'm on a tight schedule. I pull behind the bakery and grab my keys to unlock. Once I'm inside my first stop are the ovens to get them preheated. I slip off my cardigan, pull my hair into a ponytail, slip on my apron and get to work. My bakery has every fall flavor you could want. Today's specialties are the apple cinnamon scones and tea. Every day I do a special, something that matches the season. Autumn's flavors are my favorite. I'll take pumpkin, apple, sweet potato and spices any day of the week.

By the time Capri, my manager, comes through the back door the entire bakery smells like apple cinnamon. "I love when you come in early to start the baking."

I laugh. "I'm glad you approve. That's actually the last batch in the oven, do you think you can pull them out?"

"Of course. Did you leave the recipe for the tea?"

I nod my head. "Yeah, it's taped to the side of the brewer. If you need more scones,

send me a text and I'll swing by during lunch to make the batter for you guys," I tell her, as I start to clean up.

Capri walks over and takes the rag from me. "You should go on over to the school and get the classroom ready for your first day. I can clean this up and we'll be baking the rest of the goodies soon enough."

"Are you sure?"

She nods. "Yes, we can hold down the fort here. You go have some fun. I think it's great you're filing in during Mrs. Prado's maternity leave."

"I'm actually really excited, but nervous." Admitting that seems silly. I'm just teaching at the cooking class at the local high school for the next six weeks, but for some reason it's a bit nerve wracking.

"You've got this, now go be your bad baking self," she tells me, as she nudges me with her hips. I laugh and roll my eyes as I grab my cardigan and head out the back door.

I pass vehicles and school buses this time on the road. When I get to the high school, I find the faculty parking and climb out of my Jeep. As I make my way to the building, I spot the football field in the distance. A pang of regret settles in my heart. I've avoided this place because of the memories attached to it. The boy attached to it to be more accurate. I decide to take a closer look because I've always been one to yank the Band-Aid off quickly. Might as well get it over with.

As I cross the parking lot to reach the field, the memories of that day come flooding back and my heart hurts.

Summer was ending and the first chill breeze of autumn had arrived. Rocker leaves

tomorrow for college in Florida. It was a full ride scholarship to the college of his dream. I knew what I was coming here to do today, but my heart still wasn't prepared. I'm not sure there was a way to prepare yourself for shattering your heart. No matter what I couldn't find anything to make it easier. I saw him up ahead standing on the field with some of the other graduates. The guys he had played football with who had also graduated this past year wanted to gather here to say goodbye.

Rocker had his back to me, but I could find him in a crowd of a thousand people, blindfolded, if I had to. My heart and soul were connected to his and I feared they always would be. Letting him go was going to be the hardest thing I ever had to do. As if he was just as connected to me and could sense my arrival, he turns around and his eyes find me instantly. His smile is large and instant. Those dimples I love appear and my heart begins to break.

I stay back to give the guys time to say their goodbye to one another and this field. Once they're finished, Rocker turns around and heads towards me. I didn't realize until he almost reaches me that I'm standing where we were the night of the homecoming dance when he kissed me. I can feel the pinpricks in the back of my eyes, but I take a deep breath and force them away the best I can. He pulls me into him, wrapping his arms around my waist, tightly. "I was going to head to the bakery. I figured that's where you'd be."

I nod my head. "I was, but I figured you should get all your goodbyes done at one time."

Rocker pulls back but I can't bring myself to meet his eyes even though I can feel his burning into me. "What are you talking about?"

I clear my throat as the lump of emotions begins to form, making it difficult to talk or even breathe. "You were already saying goodbye, so I figured we might as well get

ours over with.”

His hands fall away, and I feel their absence instantly. “No! You’re not doing this. We’re not doing this. We talked about this.”

“No, you talked. I listened, but I have a say so too.” My voice sounds stronger than I feel.

Rocker shakes his head, and he begins to pace back and forth. “I’m not saying goodbye to you, Warbee.”

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“You have to.”

“The hell I do! I love you. I told you at the beginning of the summer I’d stay if you wanted me to. I told you that if it came down to you or leaving for college, I’d pick you,” he reminds me.

I step towards him. “I know and I love you so much. I wish you could see that right now, but I have to love you enough to let you go.”

“That’s such bullshit!”

“It’s not! I know you don’t see it right now, but you will. You’ll understand once you’ve had time to come to terms with it. This is the best thing for you. You’re destined for greatness, Roker. You’re destined for a life outside of Blue Ridge. You deserve that and I want it for you. You have to let me go.” These are the daily reminders I tell myself. I thought they would prepare me for this moment, but they’ve done nothing but give me the perfect speech.

Roker scrubs his hands over his face. “You can’t do this.”

I step into him, wrapping my arms around his waist. I breathe in the scent of his soap and cologne before reaching up and pressing a kiss to his cheek. “I have to. I hope someday you understand. I love you enough to let you go.”

“And I love you enough to hold on,” he counters. His hand locks with mine. The warmth and safety of it breaks me in a whole new way.

I almost give in because the idea that this could be the last time, I feel his hand in mine is too much to bear. After taking a deep breath I meet his blue eyes, they're swimming in moisture. "I know you do, but I'm walking away and eventually you'll see this is the right thing to do. I'll see you again someday under the autumn sky." I pull my hands free, spin on my heels and nearly run to my car. Once I'm finally inside, I glance at the field. I half expected him to chase after me, but he seems to be frozen in place. The tears break like a dam in a river, the uncontrollable sobbing hits me like a tidal wave. I have no idea how I'm going to survive this.

Even now that memory seems like just yesterday. My heart feels like it's breaking all over again. I can feel those same pin pricks at the back of my eyes as I draw closer to the field where I found and lost the love of my life.

FIFTEEN

Rocker

This morning was a rough one. I slept harder than anticipated and even though my house came furnished, it did not come with a coffee maker. I'm not sure what that's all about, but I don't trust people who can survive without coffee. I got dressed quickly after calling my mom to let her know I arrived in town safely and then headed out the door. I had to find some coffee. On my way to the high school I spotted a little local bakery, Bee's Batter. It's the spot that used to belong to June, Warbee's granny. It makes me sad to see June Bug's is no longer around. The sign for Bee's Batter is hard to miss with the mixing bowl of spilling batter and a spoon lying beside it being circled by a few honeybees. It was cute, catchy, and perfect for our small town. Luckily, there was a truck backing out of a parking space as I got closer.

The moment I enter the bakery, I'm hit with all the scents of autumn and I love it. Although, with this time of year and the scents that accompany it, the memories of Warbee are hard to ignore. Regardless, it is still my favorite time of year. By the time

I finish ordering, my arms are piled high. I ended up buying way too much, but it all looked and smelled amazing. I don't even wait until I reach the school to bite into the apple cinnamon scone calling my name. It's even better than it looks. By the time I reach the school, I'm beyond full and wide awake. I grab the second to-go cup. The bakery's special today was apple cinnamon tea and even though I'm not a big tea fan I couldn't turn it down.

I watch as the students stand around in the cliques as I make my way to the football field. It's going to be a bittersweet moment to step onto that field again, so I figured it was best to do it alone and not in front of the team I'm going to be coaching. Memories from my glory days come flooding back at full speed. The pep rallies and football games with an entire town cheering for you. Those were the memories that I thought I'd always hold on to. Then Warbee happened and now this field is tied to her in more ways than one, and nothing can come close to that.

As I approach the football field, I notice a female student just standing on the fifty-yard line, our yard line. The yard line where I confessed, I was her secret admirer, kissed her for the first time and had my heart shattered. It's odd to see a female student on the football field unless she's a cheerleader. The alarm on my phone starts to go off, alerting the student I'm approaching. However, when she turns around, I realize she's not a student. She's just petite. I guess some things never change because Warbee Carter is still no taller than five-feet tall. Her red hair hangs just past her shoulders as it dances in the wind. She pushes her large, black rimmed glasses back up her nose with one finger. "Rocker." Her voice is barely audible, but I could read those lips from a hundred yards away. The lips that I had tried my hardest to forget my freshman year of college but no matter who I kissed, they never compared to hers.

"Warbee," I reply. Silence falls between us as the autumn wind moves between us. I can hear the students and rustling of leaves in the distance, but I'm lost in her hazel eyes. It's like I'm seventeen all over again. "It's good to see you. I didn't know you

worked here.”

“I do...kind of. I heard a rumor you were returning to be the head football coach.” She pulls the sleeve of her sweater down until her slender hands are tucked inside. It’s a nervous gesture that I’m guessing she never outgrew. Something about that makes me smile.

I nod my head. “Some rumors are true and that’s one of them. I’m back. I got a house just outside of town.”

Warbee looks away, almost as if she’s uncomfortable. “That’s good.” The bell rings and she turns back to me. “I guess that’s our sign.”

“Yeah, I guess it is. May I walk you to your classroom or office?” The question falls out before I can think about it.

A blush creeps up into her cheeks. “Yes, I’d love that.”

Neither of us says much as we walk among the students. I follow beside Warbee. Being in her presence again reminds me even more just how much I missed her. When we reach the cooking lab she turns around and smiles up at me. “Cooking class, huh?”

She nods her head. “Yep, if I remember correctly, I saved you a few times in this class back in the day.”

I chuckle. “You did. Although it was your fault, I switched my second semester elective to cooking.” She laughs and it’s still the same sound I remember. It’s sweet and makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. My heart speeds up as well.

Warbee shrugs. “It’s not my fault you assumed it’d be an easy A. You thought

because we spent so much time in my granny's bakery that you'd sail right through cooking class."

"Well, I didn't think that cooking and baking would be so different," I admit. Warbee smiles at me. I smile back and I watch that blush flood her cheeks. She's still the same yet so different at the same time. I skim her hand to see if a ring is on that oh so important finger. I breathe a little easier when I see it empty and no tan line from one either. I'm not sure why it even matters. It's been eleven years since I called her mine. I'm being silly for thinking I could do so again so easily. I'm sure a girl like Warbee has a boyfriend at least.

We stand there, facing each other but it's silent, neither of us sure what to say. I clear my throat. "Hey, does Blue Ridge still do the Blue Ridge's Bushels of Fun?" Bushels of Fun was the yearly fall festival. It started in September and continued to grow throughout the season.

"Of course! Some things never change. It kicks off this Friday," she tells me.

My smile is instant. "Well, if you aren't busy would you like to go with me on Friday evening? I mean we can take the hayride and pick some pumpkins and bob for apples."

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“You don’t have to ask me twice. I’d love to go,” she replies, her smile large and the blush returns.

“Well, then I’ll see around school I’m sure and I’ll pick you up Friday at seven,” I tell her, as I extend my phone out to her so she can input her number.

When she hands the phone back to me, she tells me, “See you at seven.” Then she turns around and heads inside her classroom. Warbee has crossed my mind so many times over the years, but I never expected to see her first thing this morning on my first day here. A part of me dreaded seeing her again after all these years. I thought maybe the hurt would still be there. Even though she was right, after some time I saw that what she did was for the best. I would have never made it to the NFL if she hadn’t been strong enough to let me go all those years ago. However, I never expected to practically ask her out on a date within the first ten minutes of being around her again.

One of the first times we hung out together outside of school was Bushels of Fun. The memory of the crisp, autumn day comes back to me.

I was standing with Mase and some of the other guys from the team when I noticed Keefer’s truck pull into the gravel parking lot. My apple cider is forgotten as I watch Warbee climb out of the backseat. The way the sun catches her red hair it almost looks copper. She laughs with Teaganne and Keefer as they head towards the apple orchard. I quickly use an excuse to ditch my friends and find my way to Warbee. “Hey y’all,” I greet them.

“Hey man,” Keefer replies. Warbee tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear and

she smiles. Teaganne waves.

“So, apple picking?” I ask. I’m searching for any reason to stay here around Warbee.

She nods. “Yeah, for my granny and the bakery. She’s got a ton of recipes that require apples for this time of the year, and these are the best apples in the county.”

“I won’t disagree with you there. Y’all need some more help?” I offer. Silently, I pray she says yes.

Warbee blushes but doesn’t reply before Teaganne does. “Most definitely. You and Warbee can take that side of the orchard. Keefer and I will take this side.” Teaganne points to the directions of the orchards. “We even came prepared,” she adds, as she points to the two red wagons with baskets sitting inside.

“I like your style,” I tell her, as I grab the handle of one of the red wagons.

Teaganne curtsies before winking. “Why thank you, sir,” she replies in her best southern accent. “Y’all don’t have too much fun now.”

Warbee’s cheeks are flaming red by the time we head towards our side of the orchard. The silence isn’t awkward, but I like to hear her talk, so I wrack my brain for something to say. “It’s really awesome that you help your granny with this.”

Her smile is bright and automatic. “I love it. I’d do anything for her. We used to come and pick apples and pumpkins every year together but as she’s gotten older, she has a harder time coming out here. So, now I come and luckily Teaganne and Keefer always come with me.”

“So, do you like to bake?”

Warbee rises to her tiptoes in an attempt to reach an apple, but she's still too short. Without a second thought I step forward and wrap my hands around her waist and lift her so that she can reach the apple. She squeals in surprise, but grabs the apple. When I place her back on the ground she spins around and swats at my upper arm playfully. "You shouldn't do that. You could hurt yourself."

My face scrunches up in confusion. "By picking you up to grab an apple?"

"Hey, it's possible." Warbee shrugs as she turns around and starts to make her way down the row of trees, looking up at every possible apple.

"You do realize I take some ridiculously hard hits while playing football, right?" I ask, with a chuckle.

She stops and turns back around to face me, readjusting her glasses. "Yes, which is why you shouldn't chance any injuries outside of the game. I can just read the headlines now, 'Strange Warbee Carter inflicts injury on Blue Ridge's Golden Boy.'"

I laugh. "You're kidding right?" She shakes her head. "I highly doubt that anyone in this town refers to me as the golden boy."

"Are you sure about that?" Warbee raises her eyebrows in question.

With a shrug I look away. I hate being seen that way. "It doesn't make it right. I'm just a guy who likes to play football and I was lucky enough to be pretty decent at it."

Now, she laughs. "Pretty decent? You're amazing at it, Rocker."

"Maybe, but it's just luck and a lot of hard work and dedication. It doesn't make me special or the golden boy."

“It does in their eyes. This town has placed all of their hopes and dreams of a state football championship on you. That can’t be easy to deal with.” Warbee studies me.

“It’s not, but it is what it is. We’ll win when we get there. Now, why did you refer to yourself as strange in that headline?” I ask. My curiosity is at an all-time high now.

Warbee sighs and turns around to continue walking. Just when I think she isn’t going to answer the question she speaks. “It’s how the town sees me.”

“Doubtful,” I reply with a scoff.

“It’s true. I’m too smart for my own good. They’ve never known what to do with me. I’m not like the other girls in town. I don’t do the pageants and big hair with a ton of makeup. I’m just lowkey and away from the spotlight.” I watch as her shoulders sag a little.

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I can't imagine anyone not seeing how truly amazing she is. Yes, she's different but that's what draws me to her. "But that's what makes you amazing. Who wants to be like everyone else?"

"I gave up on that a long time ago," she admits quietly.

The silence falls between us once more. "Hey, you never told me, do you like to bake?"

Warbee stops and grabs some apples. "These apples are great." She brings one to her nose and takes a deep breath. "Get as many as you can." I start to pull apples and place them softly in the baskets. "Also, to answer your question. I love to bake. I want to own a bakery of my own someday."

"Really?"

She nods her head. "Yes, hopefully, my granny's."

"I could see that." By the time our two baskets are full, I've learned so much about Warbee. If it's possible I've fallen even harder for her. "We should hang out more often. I like being around you."

Warbee blushes. "I like being around you, too." Her voice is quiet and if I hadn't been as close to her as I am, I wouldn't have heard her reply.

That memory is one I visit often, especially this time of year. Being back in Blue Ridge and around Warbee is either going to be the best thing, or the most difficult. I

guess I'll just have to wait and see.

SIXTEEN

Warbee

My first week as a teacher has been interesting, to say the least. Luckily, we only had one minor fire and one knife cut. It's amazing though considering that some of the students could give the worst cooks in America a run for their money. Despite some of the craziness, I actually really enjoy teaching. I didn't expect that. Balancing both the bakery and teaching has been the biggest task, but luckily Capri makes it easier. I know I can trust her to take care of things on the home front, and let's face it that bakery is my home front.

It's my one day off, so I fix myself an omelet and a glass of spiced hot tea and take it outside to sit on my back porch with my cat, Sassy, to watch the morning sun rise. Even on my day off I'm up before the sun. The moment I step outside, the chilly morning air whips around my face, waking me up further. Sassy dashes by me and jumps into one of the chairs sitting at the table. My backyard is small, but kept up. My vegetable garden is officially becoming a thing of the past as well as the colorful flowers that normally line my fence. As the sun rises and the birds begin to chatter, I notice some of the leaves are already beginning to change. This time of the year is still my favorite, but it makes me miss Teaganne even more. Everyone was destined for a life outside of Blue Ridge, except me. I'm fine with that most days but right now I miss my best friend.

I check the time and try to calculate what time it would be in New York. Teaganne got accepted and graduated from one of the top fashion design schools in the country. After graduation, she interned with a top fashion designer before making a name for herself. Now, she's one of the most sought-after fashion designers with multiple lines, but her most successful being her children's line. She's married now to some

hot shot executive who to be honest, I don't care for. Teaganne does have two kids now which are her pride and joy. They're adorable and she's a great mother. I decide to go ahead and try to give her a call. I could really use one of the girls talks with my best friend. Lucky for me she picks up on the third ring. "Well hello, beautiful," she answers.

I laugh. "Hey, stranger."

"Oh, I know! I'm the worst. I'm horrible at keeping in touch." I hear rustling on her end.

I feel a pang of guilt for interrupting her. I know she's usually busy. "Don't apologize. I know you're busy. I was just missing you."

Teaganne sighs and even though I'm miles away I can tell she's exhausted. "I miss you, too, and I'm never too busy for you."

"How's life?" I ask her.

Teaganne tells me all about Silas and Seraphina and what they've been up to as well as her clothing lines. It doesn't go unnoticed that Joe, her husband, is never mentioned. I can feel the strain from here, but I don't bring it up because Teaganne won't talk about it until she wants to. "So, how's teaching school instead of being at the bakery all day?"

"It's interesting in a good way. I didn't expect to like it so much, but it's fun to see how excited some of the students get when the recipe turns out right." I continue to tell her about some of the funny times in class.

Teaganne hums on the other end of the line. "That's all super interesting, but I was more curious about your extracurricular activities."

“What?” I ask with a laugh.

She scoffs. “Oh, come on! Rocker Gordon is back in Blue Ridge and coaching the high school football team. The same place that you are currently teaching cooking. Blue Ridge is small, that high school is even smaller, so don’t tell me you’ve managed to avoid him.”

“I haven’t avoided him. We actually ran into each other the very first day.” I hear Teaganne squeal on the other end. “Oh goodness, this is why I didn’t mention it. You just deafened every dog in a twenty-mile radius.”

“Girl you better spill those details like yesterday!”

I laugh. “Well, we talk and what not. He’s brought me lunch every day this past week. Rocker is still the same in a lot of ways. It’s nice to see that the spotlight of adoring fans and being an NFL heartthrob didn’t change him. I mean, he’s grown up a lot but he’s still Rocker.”

“I’m swooning over here. I can just picture the two of you sitting there having lunch together. It’s just like old times.”

“Hardly. We aren’t together Teaganne. Life is different now.” My mind goes back to the past eleven years and everything I’ve been through. I know Rocker has had to go through obstacles, too. We’ve changed even though we haven’t shown it yet.

“I know life is different. I don’t think any of us ended up exactly how we thought we would. I know that year of your life was the most difficult, but look at you now. You’re a rockstar, Warbee Carter. I love you and Rocker Gordon will, too.” Her voice is so determined that I can’t help but laugh even though tears are pooling in my eyes.

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I hear Seraphina in the background calling for Teaganne. “I better let you go. Give love to the kids. Take care of yourself.”

“I will. You, too. Don’t forget to live in the now. Love you Bee.”

“Love you, too, Teag.” The phone line goes silent and for a moment I just sit and think. I miss her. Life was simple the last time Rocker was a part of it. So much changed in our time apart. I also don’t want to jump the gun and assume this is a second chance for us because it’s not. I can never give him what he wants, and I know that, but the other day on the football field I was shocked to say the least. Standing there in front of Rocker, I felt like I was sixteen all over again. It almost felt as if nothing and everything had changed between us at the same time. However, the comfort he made feel years ago was still present. I feel the inkling of a crush redeveloping, but I know it’s not a possibility. He’s had the spotlight, models on his arms and the world at his disposal. I wasn’t even sure how long he planned to stay in Blue Ridge, so I need to keep reminding myself to not get my hopes up.

The rest of my day I busy myself around the house until I get a text from Rocker. We’ve been texting, so I’m not sure why I’m surprised to see his name on my screen. All I know is it does surprise me and even causes some butterflies. I quickly read the text. Crap! I forgot that we are going to Bushels of Fun this afternoon. I look down and see I’m a mess after cleaning out the garden. I run inside with Sassy on my heels and head straight for the shower. Once I’m clean, I rush around grabbing cute but comfy clothes and applying a little makeup while attempting to do something with my hair.

In no time I hear the crunch of his vehicle in my driveway. My heart rate speeds up,

and I have to remind myself to breathe. The doorbell rings out through the cottage and I rush to the front door. When I pull it open, I'm relieved to see that Rocker didn't dress up for this occasion. His simple denim jeans, black boots, black t-shirt with red and black open flannel shirt looks better than anything I could have conjured up in my head. He smiles and those dimples appear. Every bone in my body turns to jelly. His red baseball cap is backwards just the way I always loved. "Hello, beautiful," he greets me, as he pulls one sunflower from behind his back.

I feel my skin heat with a blush. I'm always blushing like a maniac around Rocker. "Always the sunflowers with you, isn't it?" I tease him.

He shrugs. "Sunflowers for my sunshine." Rocker winks.

I laugh. "That was cheesy as hell."

"I know. I can't always be on the top of my game though."

Shaking my head, I step aside to let him in. "Come inside while I drop this in some water." Sassy comes running over to Rocker. She starts to rub against his ankles. "Well, apparently my cat likes you and she likes no one aside from Teaganne."

"Well, well, well," he says, as he bends down to scoop her up into his arms. Sassy purrs like I've never heard before. "Does this little beauty have a name?"

"Sassy but I'm thinking of trading that for Traitor at the moment." I head for my kitchen with the sunflower. I search under my sink for an empty vase. When Rocker enters, I can feel his presence.

"Aww...are you upset that she likes me?" he asks, his tone teasing.

I shake my head. "Not upset, just shocked. I know most cats are super independent,

but she gives it a whole new meaning.”

“Sounds like her mama,” he replies. He places Sassy on the floor and comes towards me. “Your house is really nice. Very inviting.”

“Thanks, I kind of like it.” I take one look at his shirt and instantly feel bad. “Oh, Rocker you’re covered in Sassy’s hair. Let me grab my lint roller.” After I grab the lint roller from my bedroom, I find Rocker in the hallway staring at the pictures lining the wall.

“Teaganne still looks the same,” he comments. I nod my head and turn him to face me so I can get the hair off his shirt. Being this close to him causes heat to rise in my body. I’m regretting this oversized, turtleneck, taupe sweater I picked to battle the autumn air tonight. Thankfully, I picked my distressed, black skinny jeans and taupe booties instead of fleece lined leggings.

“There, I think you’re all set,” I say a little breathless, as I step back from him. The scent of his cologne follows me into my bedroom. I’m surprised to find him still standing in the same spot of the hallway when I return.

He clears his throat. “Are you ready for Bushels of Fun?”

“Yeah, sounds great,” I tell him, as I grab my purse. As we head out the door, Rocker places his hand on the small of my back and leads me to his passenger side of his truck and opens the door. Rocker is always the gentleman. The cab of his truck smells like his cologne and leather. It’s intoxicating and I know I’m going to have a hard time keeping things straight.

SEVENTEEN

Rocker

I didn't expect to be this nervous tonight. I've played in front of thousands of people sitting in stands either rooting for me to help my team win the game or for me to fumble, and lose the game and I've never been this nervous. Warbee has always been a different experience for me. She's always made me feel so much that it's overwhelming. She's tested my beliefs and changed my life. She opened my heart and shattered it, but it only took one look from her for me to forget the hurt and only remember the way I felt within her presence. Warbee made me feel like I was on top of the world, I could conquer anything. She gave me the same feeling I got every damn time I stepped out onto that football field for a game. The difference was she gave me that feeling every day of my life.

Now, that she's sitting in my truck it feels just like old times except things are different. We're older and wiser. We've been apart for eleven years. I don't know this Warbee, but I want to. I have a surprise for her before we head to Bushels of Fun. Slowly, we make our way through town. Over the past week, it's been decorated for the season. Scarecrows, pumpkins and anything else that counts as a fall decoration can be seen. Leaf garlands wrap around the downtown light poles along with white Christmas lights. It really is beautiful. I slow as we approach our first stop.

Every day this week, I've come into Bee's Batter for my breakfast. I've even made a few stops after work just to grab some of the tea they serve. I'm not much of a tea drinker, that was always Warbee's thing but for some reason I'm a bit obsessed with these teas. It doesn't help that every time I step inside some memory from my time with Warbee comes back to me. Parking is easy enough which is odd, but then as I scan the buildings, I realize most of the buildings are closed. "What are we doing Rocker?" Warbee asks.

I sigh. This is an epic fail on my part. "Well, originally I was going to bring you to the bakery. They have this awesome tea, and it changes every few days, but all of it that I've tried has been amazing. I figured since tea was your thing, you'd enjoy it. I mean, you probably already know about it because you live here and it's your

granny's building, but it was just an idea.”

Warbee is silent and when I chance a glance in her direction, her head is tilted to the side as she studies me. Her hair has fallen over one shoulder and the lamp light behind her along with the setting sun casts a golden glow around her. She's got a smile on her face that she's fighting. “Since when did you become a fan of tea?”

I shrug with a chuckle. “To be honest, I'm not sure.” Warbee nods her head before climbing out of the truck. Where in the world is, she going? It's obvious the place is closed. In a hurry to catch up, I climb out of the truck and jog to catch up. The pain that shoots through my knee is the instant reminder of why my football career ended. I slow down and limp the rest of the way. “What are you doing? They're closed.”

“Yeah, they are for the opening night of Bushels of Fun. The owner here tries to participate in everything the community does. She doesn't like to over work her employees.” Warbee looks over her shoulder while she rummages through her purse. She notices my limp. “Did you hurt yourself?”

In my attempt to play it off, I wave off her concern. “Yeah, a while ago. A career ending injury, but I'm fine.” She bites her bottom lip, and I can see the questions flying around behind her glasses, in those intelligent hazel eyes.

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Warbee sighs. “Yeah, I know that part. I did keep up with you, but I meant did you hurt yourself just now?”

Some part of me takes satisfaction in the fact that she kept up with me after I left Blue Ridge. “No, I didn’t hurt myself now. It’s just running, or jogging is still difficult. My physical therapist said it’d never be the same but eventually I’d get back closer to my normal.” She turns away and I hear the sound of keys. “What are you doing?”

The door to the bakery flies open and Warbee turns back around to face me. She smiles and points up to the sign. “Welcome to my bakery.”

My mind is blown from this information. Although, now that I think about it the bakery belonging to Warbee makes perfect sense. I’m not sure why I didn’t put it together on my own. “Bee’s Batter...” I shake my head at my own lack of thinking. “Of course, it makes sense. I’m not sure how I missed it. Teaganne always called you Bee and your granny always called you her honeybee.” Warbee blushes but shrugs. “So, you teach school and own a bakery?”

Warbee is making her way inside, so I follow behind her. The bakery feels different, empty and dark. Suddenly, the lights come flooding on. “Grab a chair and have a seat. Also, to answer your question I don’t teach school normally. I’m just filling in for Mrs. Prado while she’s out on maternity leave. I thought it’d be fun when they asked, and the extra cash isn’t bad either.”

“Wow, I just assumed you were a teacher.”

Warbee giggles and it’s my favorite laugh she has. It’s carefree and all hers. “I know.

I never corrected you either. I guess, I just assumed you knew that I owned this place. Before my granny passed, she gave it to me under two conditions.”

I chuckle. “Of course, there were conditions.” June comes back to mind and I remember how strong willed, determined, and independent she was, much like her granddaughter standing in front of me now.

“Right? So, I had to take the money she left me and redecorate and rename the place.” I hear the machine start to brew as Warbee comes around the counter with two plates in her hands.

She sits the beautiful small plates on the table I picked. The leaf design against the mustard yellow of the plate fits in perfectly with Warbee’s love for autumn. “What’s this?” It looks like a cinnamon roll but smells like a pumpkin pie.

“Something you should love. It’s a pumpkin roll. The tea will take a little bit longer to get done. This roll though is tomorrow’s special and one of my most popular creations. However, I never serve it before Bushels of Fun opens up.” She takes a seat and waits for me to take a bite.

With her watchful eyes on me I break off a piece of the roll and let the white icing roll all over my fingers and plate. The minute the roll hits my tongue it’s like a burst of autumn in my mouth. All the flavors of fall that you love so much are in there, including apple. “Where is the apple?” I ask her.

The smile that comes over her face is large. “So, the dough that I use to make the roll itself is an apple butter dough then I use pumpkin with cinnamon, nutmeg and allspice to create the filling and top it off with a generous amount of ooey gooey icing. It’s my best creation.”

“I could eat a dozen of these without thinking twice. They’re amazing Warbee,” I tell

her, as I continue to eat. The brewer whistles and Warbee gets up.

“That’s the tea,” she tells me, as she heads behind the counter.

“May I use your restroom? I’m kind of covered in that icing,” I tell her.

“Yeah, you know where it is?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I call back to her. I’ve never had to use it before, but I’ve seen people coming in and out while waiting for my order in the mornings. As I come back out, I hear the sound of music playing softly. However, it’s all forgotten when I notice the corner of the bakery and the cork board with tons of laminated newspaper clippings hanging on it. Above it the wall reads, ‘Wall of Fame’. As I get closer, I notice that most of the clippings are about me. Either from high school, college or NFL, there are even a few magazine articles on there. She doesn’t say anything as she approaches. I don’t even hear her, I sense her. I feel her. I’m just as attuned to her now as I was back then. The board also holds articles about Teaganne and her fashion lines. “You kept up with all this?”

“Yeah,” she replies, like it’s the only thing that makes sense.

“But we broke up,” I answered, as I turned around. She hands me a large, steaming cup of tea.

“Apple pumpkin spice tea.” Warbee turns around and walks away from me. I’m dumbfounded. Throughout the years, I never truly got over her. I thought I had, but coming back home and being around her has made me realize I hadn’t, not even close. Even if I understood why she ended things with me all those years ago, a large part of me believed she had moved on.

“That’s all?” I ask. My voice rises and Warbee turns around to face me. “That’s all

you have to say?"

She shrugs. "What else is there to say?"

"How about starting with why?" I already think I know the answer to that one, but I need to hear her say it, out loud and to me. She needs to admit it because I feel like a part of her is always fighting to let me go.

Warbee shakes her head and rolls her eyes. "Sometimes, you can be so clueless."

"Sorry, I'm not the genius between the two of us." I meet her shocked eyes with my glare. I look angry I'm sure. A part of me is for some unknown reason. This wasn't how tonight was supposed to go.

"That's unfair."

My head shakes before I can stop it. "Life's not fair darlin' in case you hadn't noticed."

"Oh, I noticed! You want to know why Rocker because I loved you. Because it took me years to be okay with seeing you and knowing you were out there living a life without me. It killed me to some extent to let you go," she says, before turning around and slamming her mug down on the tiny wooden table.

I huff out air I had been holding without realizing. "You broke up with me!"

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“Because I loved you. You were trying to jeopardize everything you had ever worked for because of me and I couldn’t let you do that. You would have never been happy.”

“I would have been happy with you. I didn’t need all of this to be happy,” I tell her, as I point back towards the board.

Warbee shakes her head. “That’s easy to say now. You didn’t have to make that decision.”

“You’re right, I didn’t because you made it for me. I got no say in it. Besides, you could have joined me after graduation,” I remind her.

“It’s not what I wanted.” Her voice is quiet, barely above a whisper.

Those words are like ice cold daggers. “So, you let me go because I’m not what you wanted, but you loved me.”

“I never said I didn’t want you. I didn’t want the life you wanted. Spotlights and fame aren’t for me. Those things were for you and Teaganne. I love and support you no matter what, but I couldn’t let me hold you back. I’m always going to be this small-town girl and you needed more than that.” She turns around, her shoulders slump, but anger boils.

I slam my own cup down on the table. Warbee flinches and a pang of guilt shoots through my heart. “I needed you, but I didn’t get that, did I?” I tell her. As I leave the bakery, I hear sniffles and it pulls at every part of my heart. When I reach the truck, I climb inside and hit the steering wheel a few times. This is supposed to be our second

chance but I'm messing it all up because of some damn wall with clippings on it. It's the reminder that the life I used to have is over and that's what set me off. I love the idea that Warbee kept them throughout the years. However, the reminder that my career is over is one of the hardest things to swallow sometimes. I'm a man with pride and some ego, both are bruised from the injury that ended it all.

Once I've had time to calm down, I head back into the bakery. Warbee is sitting at the table. When I enter, she turns around, shock registers on her face. "Rocker?"

I cross the bakery and pull her into my arms. My lips find hers in a kiss full of years where we have missed one another. The moment we meet it's like I'm home. Home is a person, not a place, and I found mine once again.

EIGHTEEN

Warbee

When the bell over the door rings out through the bakery, I barely have time to react before Rocker is upon me. I quietly asked if it was him because I felt it was possible that I could be imagining things. A part of Rocker is so deeply ingrained in my soul that I find it hard to fight or ignore the pull he has over me. However, he never speaks; he just crosses the bakery until he reaches me. I knew it was coming, but I could have never prepared myself for this. Rocker pulls me into his arms. The arms that are so familiar in so many ways. Once upon a time, they were my safe haven, the place where I knew I could be myself. They're still the same arms, just bigger, more muscle, a larger sense of safety settles within the pit of my stomach as they wrap around me. His lips find mine with ease. Lips that I still dream about even if I don't want to admit it. The lips that were my first kiss. The fire that starts raging within my blood the moment our lips meet is unexpected. It's like nothing I've ever experienced. It's all consuming and exciting. My arms wrap around his waist and my hands tangle into his shirt. An anchor for me to hold myself firmly on the ground.

Eleven years of every emotion possible can be found between our lips in this kiss. It's passion, anger, hurt, longing, lust, curiosity, and love, all wrapped up into one incredibly intense moment. A moment so intense I can barely breathe but when I do it's all Rocker and I'm okay with that. It's scary how consumed I can become with him. It's possible he could be temporary in my life. I should guard myself more, but even as that thought comes into my head, I know it's silly. There's no way to guard yourself from Rocker Gordon, it's just not possible.

When Rocker's lips finally move away just enough for us to catch a breath, my head is dizzy. He's barely a centimeter away, but there's something completely overwhelming in breathing the same air he is. I finally find my voice of reason. "What are you doing?" It's a valid question. Rocker has been nothing but confusing in the last ten minutes. He went from happy and sweet and to upset and angry, and now after storming out of the bakery he returns to kiss me like I've never been kissed. A kiss that reminded me of those kisses in the old Hollywood movies I love so much.

He sighs and rests his forehead against mine. "I'm sorry for the mood swing. I guess, I'm still adjusting to this new reality and everything has been a little overwhelming since I returned."

"I could see how that would be possible." Rocker had a life so different than the one he has now. I was wondering if he was making the transition as easily as he seemed." You know what I like to do when I'm overwhelmed?" He shakes his head. "I like to bake. Do you want to bake with me?"

"I'd love to," he replies. I take his hand and lead him through my bakery to the kitchen. I turn on the oven so it can preheat and grab aprons from the hooks by the swing wood doors that separate the kitchen for the rest of the bakery. The kitchen is large and fresh. Exposed brick walls and all stainless-steel appliances, tables and anything else I could find. it's a mixture of the old and the new. I head into the pantry and Rocker follows me without me asking. I grab some mixing bowls and start to pile

the ingredients into the bowls in Rocker's arms. We make our way to one of the long stainless-steel tables. "What are we making?"

I shrug but smile. "I thought we'd keep it simple and go with a classic...pumpkin pie." It was always one of Rocker's favorites. I start adding the ingredients for the crust and have him work it and roll it out before we place it into a pie pan and form it. Next, we move onto the pumpkin pie filling. The smell of pumpkin, cinnamon and all spice consumes my senses. It's one of my favorite things about baking. Once it's mixed, I take a spoon and let Rocker try it. He moans in appreciation. "It's good, right?"

"The best. You should try it." Rocker dips his finger into the mix and places it on my lips, waiting for my invitation. I try to fight the fiery pit in my stomach but lose and eventually lick the mix from his finger.

I laugh. "It's a good thing this pie is for us and I'm not trying to sell it considering you just stuck your finger into it."

Rocker's eyes meet mine, he places a quick kiss on the tip of my nose, before stepping away a few inches. I feel the absence the minute he does and a part of me wants to protest but luckily, I remind myself that I don't need him. "You know my entire life was about getting to the NFL and I made it. Being there was amazing, but it also wasn't exactly everything I had hoped for. Don't get me wrong, I'm so grateful I was a part of it, but it wasn't all fame and glory like a lot of people assume."

I shake my head. "I never assumed that."

He looks at me and smiles. "Of course, you didn't. You were always a step ahead of the rest of us. As tiring as it could be though, I still knew that when I stepped out onto that field, I was doing exactly what I should be doing. I knew I was great at it and that's an intoxicating and addicting feeling to have. Then the injury happened..."

Rocker trails off and falls silent. I step forward and take his hand, the pie forgotten. “Did you know before the doctor told you?” From the moment I heard the news about his knee injury, I wondered if Rocker knew before the doctor told him or if he was hoping he could recover and play again.

“I knew the moment I landed on the field that it was done. I was done. Everyone around me kept trying to build me up and give me false hope, but I knew. I felt my knee rip in ways that can’t be repaired. So, when the doctor told me I thought I was prepared, but I guess there’s no real way to prepare to end your career at twenty-nine.” Rocker takes his ball cap off and runs his fingers through his hair before replacing it.

I look around the kitchen of my bakery and try to remember what it felt like for the year that I didn’t have the energy to bake. However, I knew there was a possibility for me to bake again. Rocker didn’t get that. The wall of fame comes to mind and it all falls into place. The wall set off the reminder that his life has changed, and he has been forced to let the game go. My hand reaches up and caresses his cheek. “I don’t have any words of wisdom for you. I wish I did, but I’m not sure there are any. You’ve had to let go of the one thing you loved more than anything.” That I could relate to as I sit here looking at this boy who somewhere along the way grew into a man.

Rocker gives me a sad smile. “The second thing I was forced to let go. The first thing I loved more than anything, including football, forced me to let her walk away eleven years ago.”

My heart jumps into my throat and I retract my hand from his face. “You can’t say stuff like that.” It’s more of a mumble and I hate how weak it sounds.

“Why not?” he asks.

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“Because I did what had to be done.”

Rocker squeezes his eyes shut while pinching the bridge of his nose. “So, you kept saying then and apparently now but it would have been nice to have a say in it Warbee. It was so easy for you to just walk away from me, but a piece of me has always been here, with you. It left with you that day on the football field.”

“Easy for me? You think that was easy for me?” I ask, my voice rises with emotion. Rocker’s eyes widen in shock. I rarely raise my voice, but right now I have no control over anything. This was not how I saw tonight going. I knew that if we kept seeing one another eventually this talk would happen, but I didn’t expect it tonight.

“Well yeah, it seemed that way,” he finally replies.

I shake my head and stand up, but I can’t be still, so I begin to pace. “That was by far the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do and let me tell you I’ve handled some shit in the eleven years you’ve been gone, but walking away from you is still the top spot on the list. But you know what? I’d do it again.” Rocker stands up straighter, but I can tell by the tensing of his muscles that he didn’t expect me to say that. I nod my head to reinforce what I just said. “Yes, I’d do it again because you had to go. You had to live your dream.”

“A dream that was only half a dream without you Warbee. Don’t you get it? I made it to the NFL, but while the rest of my team was looking into those boxes and seeing the people they loved, mine was missing. I got half my dream, Warbee, but the NFL wasn’t the top of my list,” he admits quietly.

His words shock me. My world spins backwards on its axis for a minute. “What?” It’s barely a whisper and I’m not sure how he even hears me over the music playing and the distance between us.

“That night on the football field at the homecoming dance changed me. You changed me Warbee. Football stopped being at the top of my list and you quietly slid into it. So yes, I made it to the NFL, but it always felt half empty to me. Then eleven years after having to watch you walk away, I get offered a job here and the first thing that came to mind was...you. My mind instantly thought that maybe this could be our second chance, because a second chance with you is the only thing I’ve been wanting since that day.” Tears stream down my face quietly. My makeup is forgotten and ruined. Rocker changed my life and he never knew it. Yes, I dated throughout the years, but no one could compare to him and the way he made me feel. I never expected to get a second chance with him. I never thought he’d return to Blue Ridge, but here he is. He closes the distance between us and cups my face in hands while using his thumbs to wipe away my tears. “Don’t cry darlin’.”

“We can’t just pick up where we left off Rocker. Things are different. We’re different,” I tell him.

Rocker smiles and those dimples make me weak in the knees. “I never said anything about picking up where we left off. I want a new story with you, Warbee. One with a better ending. An ending where you don’t walk away because it was the right thing to do. I just want you anyway I can have you.”

My bottom lip trembles. “You shouldn’t want me,” I tell him. He doesn’t know about my past and I need to tell him. The life we once had planned can never be. I can’t give him false hope, but before I can confess everything his lips are on mine and my thoughts are forgotten.

When he pulls away this time he chuckles. “Well, I guess that’s too bad because I

do.” My heart speeds up and I feel lighter than a feather. I can fill him in later right now I just want to be with Rocker. One of those slow country love songs comes on and Rocker takes my hands as we begin to sway to the music. Dancing with Rocker was always one of my favorite things.

The rest of the night we spend inside the closed bakery with music playing and talking about memories. We don’t talk about the years we were absent from one another’s lives or even the future. We’re just in the now which gives me an excuse to avoid the reason why we shouldn’t try again. Bushels of Fun is forgotten, but then again there’s always next week.

Later that night, Rocker walks me to my door and kisses me good night as I step inside my cottage. The front door shuts and I slide down the closed door until my butt hits the floor. Sassy looks at me from across the room. Fear and guilt churn in my stomach and as if she can sense my need for comfort, she crosses the room and climbs into my lap. I snuggle her while asking, “What am I going to do?”

NINETEEN

Rocker

This past week has been crazy. It started when Warbee woke up Saturday morning feeling under the weather. Our Bushels of Fun date got postponed for the following weekend. Instead, I ran around town and gathered everything a cold could possibly need and showed up on her doorstep to try and nurse her back to health. At first, she seemed shocked and a little reluctant but once we got comfortable on the couch, we found a routine. The rest of the weekend we hung out at her place watching cheesy autumn movies on Hallmark and Halloween movies. Luckily, she has started to feel better this week.

Now, this week it’s been my turn to stress, and she knows it so every morning I have

stopped to grab my breakfast and tea. It's ready to go the moment I walk through the door. She leaves Capri instructions on what I want and what time I should be in. Cutting the line is a blessing, but also makes me feel guilty. Warbee has also provided us with lunch every day this week. I've been tucked away in my office inside the field house, lost in my playbook or game tape, when she shows up like the angel she is.

This week is the first game that we'll have with me as the head coach. So far, there's been two games and the team has lost one and won the other. The assistant coaches had been coaching the team until I arrived. Now, it's been me and the team all week, but we're playing a rough team this week. I know the town is expecting a win, but I don't. The team is great and completely capable of being undefeated. They work well together, and they're used to each other. I'm the newbie that will cost them the win. My plays are complex and new to them along with my coaching style. It takes time to get used to a change while playing any sport. I hate the pressure I feel to hand a win to the town, because it's unfair to my players but I know it's what is expected of me.

I texted Warbee this morning and told her I wouldn't be by the bakery. I didn't want her to waste the items she makes her living off of. There's this tradition that I've always done before a game. That morning, early, when the dew is still wet on the grass and there's still a slight misty fog in the air, I go to the football field. I stand in the endzone and visualize how I want the game to go. Then I talk and plead with whatever football gods there are to help me win and keep everyone safe. In high school, my team thought it was silly, but it doesn't feel right unless I do it.

So, this morning I drove on nearly empty and darkened streets to the football field. The smell of autumn clung in the air with the freshness of early morning. I made my way to the end zone where I sat on the moist ground and did what I always do. That's where I am when Keffer finds me. The sun is up but it's overcast today. Students have begun to arrive, but I still sit on the grass. "Well, I heard there was some hot shot football player here, but all I see is a lawn gnome." I'd know that voice

anywhere. When I look over my shoulder, I see Keefer walking towards me. He still looks the same just a little older. I stand up and greet him. He's about the only one I kept in contact with after I left Blue Ridge. It shocked me because I expected Mase, who I had been friends with my entire life to always be there. However, after leaving I saw that wasn't going to happen. The only one who really tried to meet me halfway was Keefer.

"Why don't you shut the hell up?" We shake hands and do the awkward hug guys exchange when seeing each other.

Keefer smiles while scratching at the stubble coating his jawline. "It's good to see you man."

"You too. I didn't know you were in town."

Keefer's face breaks into a shit eating grin. "Like I would miss the first game you coach on this field for our team. This is partly my legacy too man. So, don't screw it up."

I give him a sarcastic laugh. "Thanks, no pressure, right?"

"Nope, none. So, how's life after football?" he asks, after a stretch of silence.

I shrug. I'd be lying if it didn't still sting a little. There's a good chance I'll always miss it to some extent, but I have other things to look forward to in my life now. "It's different. I knew this day would come, though."

"Yeah, but not at twenty-nine. No one saw that coming."

"So, what are you up to? How's the accounting world?" I ask

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Keefer gets an unusual look in on his face, one I can't read before he shrugs. "It's good."

I keep waiting for him to say more, I can feel it hanging in the air between us, but he's fallen silent, so I ask, "But?"

"I don't know man. I'm kind of over the big city." When he admits that I notice the dark circles of exhaustion under his eyes.

I nod my head. "Really?"

"Yeah, it's definitely not all it's cracked up to be. It's nothing like you expect when you're growing up. The big city holds so much potential when you're young, but then when you get there everything is different. It's hustle and bustle and you strive to keep up with everything going on around you that you never get to actually enjoy anything." Keefer stares off across the football field like he's lost in thought. A wistful smile comes over his face and turns back to face me. "It's funny Teaganne and I always wanted to get out of here. It was like our driving force then there was Warbee, who was the genius and fine with being right here. It's almost like she knew this is exactly where we would all end up again."

"Are you thinking of coming back?" I ask.

Keefer shrugs. "I don't know for sure. I do know I'm ready for a change, so it's definitely on the plate."

I smile at him. "Good, so what do you have planned for today?"

“Nothing really.”

“Then why don’t you hang around here with me. Help me go over some plays and what not? You were always great at spotting things that no one else did,” I offer.

Keefer smiles. “I’d like that.”

The rest of the morning Keefer and I go through game tape. Just like I suspected, he catches things that none of us noticed before. If he comes back to Blue Ridge, I’ll definitely have to see if I can talk him into being an assistant coach. He’s made for this. Around lunch Warbee shows up in my office. When she sees Keefer, she squeals and runs straight to him, throwing herself in his arms. “I didn’t know you were here!” Her voice is excited.

“I wanted to surprise you guys. I also didn’t want to miss the first game Rocker coaches,” he says.

Warbee steps back and bites her lip, her excitement traded for nervousness. I’m not sure what she’s nervous about. “I have a surprise of my own.”

Just as she opens her mouth to explain, Teaganne Voss steps into the doorway with sacks from the local deli in her hands and a large smile on her face. She dressed like she’s still in New York, but Teaganne was always about fashion. Her smile doesn’t falter until she notices Keefer. It’s a brief fall, but I catch it. “Well, looks like the gangs all together again after all.”

The rest of lunch goes by quickly with only a few awkward silences. For the most part, Warbee and I keep things light and friendly. I’m not sure what happened between Keefer and Teaganne but obviously there are some unresolved issues. After lunch, the girls leave Keefer and I to finish going over the playbook.

Hours later, I'm standing on the field before heading into the field house to give my team a pep talk. Once more, I'm talking to whatever football gods can hear me. I'm so lost in thought; I don't hear her approach. It's not until she wraps her arms around my waist from behind me that I realize she's here. She presses a kiss on my spine. "How are you doing?"

"Honestly, I'm nervous as hell. The town expects a win, but what if I can't make that happen?" I ask.

She walks around to stand in front of me. Warbee is decked out in school spirit with ribbons in her ponytail and paint on her face, as well as a t-shirt showing support for the local high school. She smiles at me. "Then it doesn't happen. All you can do is coach these boys and all they can do is their best, and if that's not enough to win, then it isn't. But you can teach them there's also more than just winning in this game. You can teach them there is life outside this game. Life lessons can be taught on this field just like everywhere else, win or lose."

Her words are exactly what I needed to hear. I step forward and pull her into my arms. Pressing a kiss to her forehead, tip of her nose and then her lips which taste like vanilla. I hum in appreciation. "You're amazing."

Warbee blushes and shrugs. "I try. I also brought you something for good luck." She pulls out a brand-new silver whistle attached to a midnight blue and white lanyard.

"Thank you. It's perfect."

She steps forward, her hands frame my face, making me meet her eyes. "You're perfect. Now, go teach those boys." She kisses me softly and quickly on the lips before turning and walking away. I watch as she meets Teaganne who smiles and waves before I turn around and head to my field house. The cars are already starting to show up in the parking lot.

When I enter my boys turn to look at me. Keefer gives me an encouraging smile. With Warbee's words fresh in my mind I give my first pep talk as a coach. "I know that for a lot of you this is your last year of football. Some of you will go on to play in college and some won't and trust me when I say this, that both outcomes are okay. I know the town expects a win since I'm your coach now, but I want you to know that I don't expect that of you. It's not because you can't win because you can, but if you don't it's okay. The only thing I want is for you guys to go out there and give it your all. Leave it all out on the field so when the game is over you can feel proud of what you did, win or lose. Nobody knows better than me how much football can mean to a person but it's also important to remember that it is just a game. It's a small portion of your life overall. It's okay to love it, but never base your life around it because someday it will end and if you never learn how to live outside of it, then you'll have nothing. Now, every game has two possible outcomes and when we step onto the field, you'll have a fifty/fifty chance of winning or losing. Take what you get, but play your hearts out, not for me, not for the town but for yourself. Go out there and have fun, make memories and remember it's just one game and I'm proud of you all, win or lose."

The guys stand up and clap then turn to form a circle and do their chant to get hyped up. Keefer steps up beside me. "Damn man, that was an awesome pep talk."

I smile as Warbee comes to mind. "I had some help," I tell him, just as we line up to head out onto the field. The energy from the crowd can be felt the moment we exit the field house. The stands are full of people in school spirit. The high school band plays our fight song while the cheerleaders keep the energy up. My boys start to run for the paper banner, determined to bust through it. My nerves morph into anticipation. This is the same feeling I got every time I stepped onto this field to play. It's a feeling I never thought I'd have again. This feeling is why autumn has always been my favorite season.

The game was rough, like I expected but these boys played their hearts out and in the

last few minutes they managed to intercept the ball and run over seventy yards for a touchdown that ended up winning the game. Behind me the crowd goes insanely wild. Keefer jumps up and down with the team while I turn and find the only person, I care about celebrating with. Warbee is on the front row with Teaganne, my parents and hers. Her smile is one of pride and it makes me feel like I didn't lose so much of myself after all.

TWENTY

Warbee

Last night was crazy. I couldn't be happier for Rocker and the football team though. How they managed to squeeze in that win I'll never know. Seeing Rocker's face light up with such excitement was the best part of it all. Afterwards, I left Rocker with Keefer and the rest of the guys to celebrate while Teaganne and I headed back to my house.

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This morning when I heard the doorbell, I had assumed it was either my mom or Rocker. The last person I expected to be on my doorstep was Teaganne. She rarely makes it back to Blue Ridge these days. So, when I saw her long, wavy brown hair and honey eyes I froze. My first instinct was to assume something happened. She said nothing happened and that she just needed to get away from the city, but I'm not sure I believe that. When I questioned her more last night, she told me her parents just wanted to see their grandchildren. Another line I don't believe.

I'm hoping today I can get the real story before I head out to Bushels of Fun with Rocker. My guest bedroom door is already open with sunlight pouring into the hallway. I peek inside and see no sign of Teaganne, so I move through the house but pause when I hear the distinct sounds of running water and sniffing. I wait and listen for a few more seconds just to be sure I'm hearing correctly. Once I know she's sniffing, I rush towards the kitchen. As I enter, she looks up, her eyes are red and puffy, tears stain her cheeks and in all the time I've known her, I've never seen her look so not put together. Her nightgown hangs off one shoulder from weight loss that worries me. The dark circles under eyes are evident without the makeup to cover them. Teaganne's hair is unkempt and wild. "Oh, Teag, what's wrong?" I ask, as I approach her. The sob that rips from her body sends Sassy running in the other direction and me towards her. She collapses into my arms and we slide to the floor, our backs against my white cabinets. Her body wracks with sobs for what feels like forever but eventually they morph into hiccups and then into sniffles. "Teag, are you okay?"

I can feel her nod her head against my shoulder. "Everything is a mess."

“What do you mean?” I ask her.

Teaganne pulls away and looks straight ahead and in the most monotone and solemn voice I’ve ever heard she replies, “My life.”

I chuckle. “I don’t believe that for one minute.”

“Why not? It’s true!” She stands up abruptly and starts to wash the already clean coffee mug once more. I stand up and pull the mug from her grasp and turn off the water. She looks at me. “I didn’t just come here to see Rucker coach his first game.”

“I figured that. You usually only make one trip down here a year and that should have been next week.” Every week for the past five, soon to be six years, Teaganne packs up and comes back to Blue Ridge for a week. It’s a celebration of life thing that we started years ago.

“I was coming for that of course, but I hit my breaking point Bee. I can’t keep living like I’m living. I’m miserable and I hate my life. Well, not all my life Silas and Seraphina are the best thing that ever happened to me. I love my job, but my marriage is a joke. Joe is never around and when he is there, it’s only physically. I came here to look for a house for me and the kids. I’m filing for a divorce.” Tears spring to her eyes again. I start to hug her, but she waves me off. “No, this is just silly. I’m leaving and yet I’m crying.”

“You’re giving up a piece of your life. That’s something worth crying over. I gave up Rucker and I still cried.” That memory slices through my heart once more. I guess, it’ll always be fresh in my mind.

“But that was different, you and Rucker loved each other. Joe and I don’t anymore. I’m not sure we ever really did. I’m beginning to think I got caught up in all of it, him, his money, his lifestyle. It had been everything I ever wanted and all of a sudden

it could be mine too. He was so sweet and attentive at first. Then after the first year, things changed. I was going to leave, but then I found out I was pregnant with Silas. I felt like he deserved a father. Joe was a great one until after Seraphina turned seven months. Now, he's just an absentee father and husband. He's cheating all the time. We live separate lives, sleep in different beds. We rarely see one another and when we do it's usually in passing in our own home." Her shoulders sag and I want nothing more than to make her feel better but there are no words to change something like this.

I step forward and wrap my arms around her shoulders. "Then you come back here. I'll help you look for a house. It'll be great. You'll start over."

"What if I can't?" Her voice wavers with uncertainty.

My hands lock on her shoulders and turn her to face me. "If I did then you can."

"You're right and I've been a horrible friend. How are you feeling?" she asks. The concern in her eyes makes me look away.

I shrug. "I'm good. There was a time I felt really sluggish and got scared so I went to the doctor and had it checked out, but I'm all clear."

"Good. Now, we need to get you ready for your date," she tells me. She starts to name off things I need before I can leave.

"I can reschedule if you want me to," I offer.

Teaganne rolls her eyes and shakes her head. "Nope, I have to go grab my kiddos in a bit anyways. I'll be occupied with them. Don't worry about me."

Later after Teaganne has left I stand in the mirror and check my outfit once more before Rocker arrives, which will be any minute. The plaid skirt with black tights underneath and brown knee-high boots compliments the black sweater and brown suede vest with fringe that Teaganne dressed me in. She French braided the scalp of my hair before pulling it all into a big messy bun. Teaganne even convinced me to trade my glasses for contacts today.

The doorbell rings and I grab my purse and double check to make sure everything is off in the bathroom. When I open the door Rocker's face is hidden behind a bouquet of Sunflowers. I feel the blush instantly. "For you darlin'," he tells me, as he holds them out to me. I thought he might bring flowers again. It's always been his thing, so I filled a vase with water and placed it on the cabinet by the door.

I take the Sunflowers and breathe in their scent before turning and dropping them into the vase. "Thank you so much. They're beautiful."

"I was just thinking the same thing about you. So, do you want to hear the plan for today?" I nod my head yes as we head out the door. "I was thinking we could do some apple and pumpkin picking then grab a late lunch before heading over to the farmer's market and arts and craft show. Later, we can hit the fall festival carnival if you want."

Rocker has always thought of everything and tonight's no different. "I love all that." We listen to the country music on the radio as we make our way out to Bushels of Fun. We spend hours gathering apples that Rocker brought baskets for. They'll be great for the bakery. After that, we get a few pumpkins. We take random pictures of one another and together behind big pieces of wood with a cutout for your face to show through. They've been hand painted with characters and scenes in front. I always love to see the new ones they add each year. Afterwards, we load our apples and pumpkins into Rocker's truck. "Are you ready to grab some food?"

“Yes, I’m starving.” We decided to check out one of the hot dog booths that serve the resident Georgia dog. Georgia dogs are unlike any hot dog you’ve ever seen, but they are amazing. You can’t pick them up and eat them like you would normally assume. Nope, ours require a fork. Its bun is open faced, with the hot dog itself sliced up, topped with cheese, chili, onion, pickle, oyster crackers, ketchup, and mustard.

“I haven’t had one of these in so long,” Rocker admits, as he digs in.

My mind begins to think of a thousand questions concerning his past, but the first one is easy. “Did you ever come back home?”

Rocker sighs and studies his plate for a minute while tracing the orange and white checkered tablecloth covering the wood picnic table we’re currently sitting at. “I did a couple of times, but they were brief trips. It was hard being back here.”

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“I never saw you when you visited.”

“I mostly just stayed at my parent’s house while I was here. I didn’t want any outside media knowing where I was and bombarding the town, so my parents always kept it quiet, too,” he explains.

Silence falls between us. A part of me wishes I had seen him over the last eleven years, but the other part of me is glad I didn’t because we needed that time to grow into the people we are today. These versions of us have a chance at starting over. I’m not sure another version would have. My hand finds his. His blue eyes find mine. “I’m glad you’re here now.”

He smiles, his dimples show, I fall a little more. “Me too, darlin’.”

Twenty-One

Rocker

After grabbing food and relaxing for a bit at the table, I notice the hayride about to start up. The hayride is a big tradition in Blue Ridge. You climb into a large wagon pulled by two horses with bales of hay as the seats. The wagon takes you around the property and you get to enjoy the trees, mountains and the natural beauty of the area. I haven’t been on one since my last Bushels of Fun...with Warbee. I lean over towards her. “How do you feel about a hayride?”

Her eyes light up. It’s one of my favorite sights to see. It’s better than anything I’ll see on the hayride, that’s for sure. “I’d love to.”

I stand up and take her hand as we make our way to the hayride. “If I remember correctly this was one of your favorite parts about the festival.”

“It is. You still remember that?” she asks. The curiosity in her voice makes me feel silly for saying anything, but it’s not like I can hide anything from her anyways.

My shoulders shrug. If she only knew exactly how much I remembered. It was on this hayride all those years ago I first realized I’d change my entire life for her. The memory comes back to me now as if it was yesterday.

My nerves are higher than they’ve ever been before. I’m not sure what to do. I realized something last night while lying in bed and now I can’t seem to ignore it. As I’m walking to the door, it opens and the prettiest damn girl I’ve ever seen appears. She grabs her sweater and scarf from the hooks by her front door. It’s not too chilly out right now, but by the time the night is through it’ll be really crisp. Warbee pulls the door to her house shut, double checking to make sure it’s locked before turning to face me. I pull her into my arms and breathe her in. She’s everything I’ve ever needed, but never knew I wanted. It’s all happened so quickly, but I don’t care. I just know that I need her in my life, today, tomorrow...forever.

“Well hello to you, too,” she says with a giggle, as I press a kiss to her cheek.

My heart slams rapidly against my chest. Yep, that feeling is still there, and it scares the hell out of me. “You look beautiful.”

The blush on her skin only makes me want this moment to last forever. I know if anyone else knew what I was feeling they’d say it’s just young puppy love, but I know it’s not. It’s real. It’s different. “Rocker,” she says, with a sigh of contentment.

“We should get going so we can make it in time for the hayride.”

Her face lights up like the fireworks on Fourth of July. “We’re going on the hayride?”

“Yeah, of course.”

She does this adorable little skip and claps her hands before telling me, “The hayride is one of my favorite things to do at the festival.” I don’t admit to her that I might have been tipped off about that from her granny. I just smile and lace my fingers through hers and lead us to my truck. As we make our way through town, Warbee hums along to the radio until a song comes on. She stops and leans forward to turn it up. “I love this song!”

The fact that she loves this song is enough reason for me to love it, too. Besides, Garth Brooks is a classic. What can I say? My girl knows her music. I watch as she sings along and sways to the melody. I never would have guessed the quiet, genius girl who hid behind books and her large glasses could be so carefree. I’m glad I got to see this side of her. We pull up as the song comes to an end. “Hang on,” I tell her, as she goes to open her door.

I rush to the passenger side and help her out of the truck. “Always the gentleman.”

“My mama raised me right,” I tell her. We both laugh, but in all seriousness if I didn’t open the door for my date, my mom would have the hide off my backside. We get in line for the hayride and I turn back towards Warbee who is looking around the grounds. “So, what is it that makes you like the hayride so much?”

“You’re going to think I’m silly,” she says. Warbee averts her gaze.

I slip my finger under her chin and urge her to meet my eyes once more. “I won’t.” She sighs and just as she’s about to tell me we get ushered into the wagon. Once we start rolling forward, I lean over and whisper into her ear. “You’re not getting off that easy.”

Warbee giggles. “The hayride reminds me of everything I love about this place and this time of year. Blue Ridge is so beautiful, and I know everyone is just itching to get away from it but I’m not. I love it here and this reminds me why. Plus, you get to see how nature changes in the autumn. The leaves change colors and fall to the ground to give hope for a new season of leaves. The air is fresher this time of year and you can just feel it from right here in this wagon.”

When she talks like this, I know what I’m feeling is real. I lean forward and press a kiss to her vanilla lips. “I love you.” Those three words may terrify me, but I’ve also never said anything truer in my life. They fell from my lips so easily. We haven’t said them since the first time, the week after homecoming. It was real then, but it didn’t feel like this. I’d change my entire life for her. I’d live and die in Blue Ridge and leave the NFL dream on the shelf as long as I had Warbee.

Her eyes widen with shock behind her glasses and she pulls her bottom lip between her teeth. I know she’s probably wondering why I’m saying it now, but I hope she can see that when I say it this time, it means everything. Her lip breaks free from her teeth and she gives me the smallest of smiles. “I love you.” Who knew three simple words could change your entire life? Who knew one girl you never expected could change your whole world?

“Rocker, are you okay?” Warbee asks.

I shake my head to clear my mind. “I’m sorry. I got zoned out there for a minute.”

“Hopefully, on something good.”

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I take a step closer to her and lean down so I'm right next to her ear. "Always you darlin'. Some things never change." I press my lips to the skin right behind her ear. I can feel her pulse racing and hear the small intake of shocked breath she takes.

"You know, the hayride was always my favorite, but I haven't been on one since the last one I took with you."

That catches me off guard. The world falls away as I stare into her hazel eyes. All the people, all the sounds, the children's laughter, the people talking, the animals, it all goes silent in this moment and it's just Warbee and I. I only have one question. "Why?"

Her smile is slightly sad. "Because I wanted that memory to last forever. I wanted my hayrides to always be with you and I knew they couldn't be. I actually never thought they would be again."

I step forward and pull her into me. My hands wrap around the back of her neck and I kiss her like she is the only oxygen on this earth. I don't care who sees us. All I care about is this girl, in my arms, my girl. When I pull away, I tell her, "It was always you darlin'."

She doesn't get to reply before we are ushered onto the wagon. As we take our seats the couple across from us catches my eye. Beth gives me a fake sweet smile that turns my stomach. "Well, well, if it isn't Warbee Carter and Rucker Gordon."

Warbee looks over and freezes. Her entire body stiffens. "Hey, Warbee," the man sitting beside Beth says.

“Kaden,” she finally replies.

Beth rolls her eyes. “Well, it looks like you got my sloppy seconds in high school and I guess I got yours now.”

“Beth, baby,” the guy named Kaden, says to her.

Warbee turns to look at me and shakes her head. “I don’t want to go on the hayride anymore.” She turns around, climbs off the wagon and walks away. By the time I get off the wagon, she’s almost to the truck. I have to run to catch up.

“Hey, what was that?”

Warbee shrugs. “Just my ex.”

Her words shock me. I mean, it’s not like I thought she never dated after I left, but I didn’t think she had someone she cared so much about that she ran away from him when she saw him now. “Just an ex?” She nods her head. “Yeah, kind of seems like a whole lot more than that.”

“Excuse me?”

“You literally saw him, froze and then ran away, so it seems like to me that you’re still into him,” I tell her.

Warbee shakes her head, moisture builds in her eyes and I really want to just pull her into my arms and kiss away the tears forming there, but I also really want, no need, some damn answers. “You don’t know a damn thing,” she spits out at me.

“You’re right. I don’t. So, change that. Tell me,” I plead with her.

I can see a war of emotions form in her eyes. I'm not sure which way she'll go, but I know Warbee hates being backed into a corner. I know the moment she decides. Her spine straightens and her shoulder square. My strong-willed girl is locking me out. "This was a mistake. We should have known we can't pick up where we left off. We're both being silly. It's been eleven years and a hell of a lot has happened. Sometimes things are better left broken," she says. She turns around and starts to walk away.

My gut feels like she just punched right through it, up to my heart and squeezed the life out of it. Why do I care so much for the girl who is always walking away from me? I watch as she disappears into the pumpkin patch. I climb into the truck to see if she comes back but I notice Keefer pulling up. Warbee emerges from the pumpkin patch moments later and climbs into his car and just like that, she's gone once again.

Twenty-Two

Warbee

Keefer picks me up and he never says a word until we are halfway to my house. The tears have been silently slipping down my face since the moment I got into his car. I noticed that Rocker hadn't left yet. He was waiting for me, I'm sure. He'd never leave me stranded like that. He's the thoughtful one and he deserves more than I can ever give him. Seeing Kaden reminded me of that tonight. As hard as it is and as bad as it hurts, I have to let Rocker go, again.

We pull to a stop at the red light by the bakery. Keefer leans forward and turns the radio down. "Did he do something to you? Because you know I will kick his ass if he did." Keefer's piercing blue eyes watch me.

I shake my head. "It's not him. It's me. He deserves more than I can give him."

“Why do you say that?” he asks. The confused look on his face would normally make me laugh, but not right now. I sigh and meet his eyes. My look conveys my meaning. Keefer looks away. “That was almost six years ago Bee.”

“Maybe, but it’s something I have to live with the consequences of for the rest of my life Keefer. I can’t drag him down with me like that. We talked about that when we were together in high school. I know what he wants out of life. I can’t give that to him.” The tears burn my eyes and blur my vision.

We start to move forward once again. “So, why the revelation tonight?”

I grab a tissue from my purse. “Kaden.” It’s the only explanation he needs. Keefer may not have lived in Blue Ridge when everything happened, but he made sure to be a rock for me during that year. He drove down all the time, gave me a place to stay when I was in Atlanta and it was the only time since they had broken up that I saw him and Teaganne be in the same room together without it being awkward.

“That douchebag. That’s what caused this?”

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“He didn’t cause it. He just reminded me,” I whisper.

The car ride is silent until we reach my house. It looks like every other house. The white siding and baby blue shutters are clean and freshly painted. The porch has my table and two rocking chairs on one side and my swing on the other. The front yard has just been cut back, thanks to some of my neighbors' sons. It looks like every other house, but you’d never know just how broken the girl living inside is. Keefer turns to me and takes my hand in his. He’s so warm and I’m so cold. “Have you told Rocker?”

“No, I don’t need or want a bunch of sympathy. Besides, I don’t like to talk about it.”

Keefer sighs and drops his head back against the headrest of the seat. “I understand that, I really do, but if you want a chance with Rocker, you need to tell him.”

“Why? So, he can leave me like Kaden? It’s better if I leave. It hurts less,” I tell him. That’s not exactly true, but if I leave then I have no one but myself to blame. I like that better. I don’t want to blame Rocker. In my mind, he’s such a huge part of my good memories. I don’t want to tarnish those with any more pain and hurt.

Keefer scoffs. “Rocker isn’t Kaden, Warbee. You need to realize that. Rocker loved you and to be honest, I think the guy still does but you never give him a chance to choose you. You always push him away and leave. Kaden is the only guy you gave half a chance to and he didn’t even deserve it. You deserve more than you allow yourself to have Bee.”

He’s right and I know it, but my head has its own logic on the matter. “I know they

aren't the same, but Rocker would settle if he chose me."

"I think that should be his decision. What you call settling might make him the happiest man on earth," he tells me quietly.

The floodgates are open again. "I can't give him that option. He was willing to leave his football career behind for me once upon a time. I couldn't let him do that then and I can't let him do that now. I loved him too much to let him and a part of me loves him now. I'll always love him to some degree, but that means I have to be the one to walk away when it needs to be done because he won't."

"Damn it, Warbee."

I lean over and wrap my arms around him. "Thank you for coming to get me. I love you. Be safe getting home and tell your family I said hi." I climb out of the car and rush towards my front door. The sobs break free and the tears run freely. Sassy takes off running across the floor, in the opposite direction once more. The house has seen enough tears for one day. Somehow, I manage to get myself up off the floor, stripped out of my clothes and into a hot shower. I'm still standing in the now cold shower when Teaganne shows up. She yanks the shower curtain back, but I'm so numb I don't even make a sound. I just stare at her.

"Oh goodness Bee," she tells me, as she grabs a towel and climbs into the shower with me. She turns off the water and pulls me into arms while I cry more tears, I didn't know I had.

After the crying subsides once more Teaganne helps me out of the shower and to get dressed and dry my hair before tucking me into my bed. I'm numb and exhausted, but I don't want to be alone. "Teaganne."

"I know, honey. I'm just going to change then I'll be right back." By the time she

returns I must be asleep, because when I wake up hours later, she's on the other side of the bed with Sassy between us. When I pull my phone to check the time, I find my phone's notifications empty. No calls or texts from Rocker, not that I want him to do that. I want him to be happy and have everything he wants even if it can't be with me. I lay the phone back down and roll over.

Twenty-Three

Rocker

It's been over a week since Warbee walked away from me at the festival. A week of avoiding the bakery and Warbee. A week of avoiding everything that had become a habit in my life so quickly. It's not that I've changed my mind about her. I still want Warbee in my life more than anyone else, but the problem is she won't let me in. I know Warbee well enough to know that she's not going to let me in until she wants to. I'm just worried she may never want to.

I miss her. The way she laughed at my dumb jokes. How her cheeks flooded with blush when I complimented her. The way she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth after I kissed her. Her cinnamon and spice scent that seems to cling to her everywhere she goes. How she rolled her eyes at me when I'd try to act cool, but she knew I was just pretending. I just miss her. It'd only been a few weeks and, yet, just like before she became such an important part in my life. I'd give anything to see her right now. The worst part is, I could see her right now. I could march through the halls to the cooking class and see her but what good would that do us?

Being so close to her and knowing I can't have her is a new form of torture that I never expected. I'm trying to do what Keefer asked me to do when he showed up at my house after dropping her off. He told me to give her time and that she'd come around, but I'm not sure that'll happen now.

I was sitting on my porch, beer in hand, trying to figure out what in the hell was going on with Warbee. She's holding something inside and until she wants to share it with me, we can't move forward. I wish I could make her understand that no matter what it is, it won't change how I feel about her. Warbee has her own logic though and until she decides to change it, she won't. I listen as a few straggling crickets and birds sing in the darkened night air. Blue Ridge is so different from Nashville where I was living. It's loud and active constantly. You never hear the quiet there.

Headlights appear in my driveway and I recognize Keefer's tiny rental car. When he gets out, I can tell by the tense muscles of his body he's not sure what to expect. As he approaches, I ask, "Is she okay?"

"I'm sorry, man. She called and I couldn't leave her hanging."

I hold up my hand to silence him. I'm not upset with him for picking her up. I'm glad she had him to call because she clearly didn't want to be with me any longer. "I'm glad you came to get her. She obviously needed to be away from me so I'm glad you were there. Is she okay?"

Keefer sighs. "I don't know. She'd be a lot better if she would just listen to someone and talk to you."

That pisses me off. "What in the hell are you talking about? What is the damn big secret that everyone else seems to know about except me?"

"I can't. I wish I could, but it's not my story or place to tell you. That's between you and Bee and you know her. She'll tell you when she's ready," he says. Keefer gives me an apologetic smile.

I take a deep breath before standing up and walking to the end of my porch, resting my hands against the railing. I stare out at the trees that darken the perimeter of my

cabin. “You know, I thought I had everything before, living the dream and what not. I mean, I had my dream career, a career most would kill for a chance at. Money was of no worry for me and women were a dime a dozen. Then I got hurt and it all ended. Before I knew it, I was back here, and I wasn’t really mad about that. I wasn’t exactly happy either. I was just here. At first, when I was recovering from the surgery I would ask why? I wanted some big answers. Then I got here, and I saw Warbee and it’s like it all made sense. I was going to be one lucky son of a bitch because I was going to get to live both of my dreams.” I turn around to face Keefer. “Because that’s what Warbee is to me, a dream. She was a dream I never gave much thought to until she was mine. Then I realized she was the real dream I wanted. She was the dream that could last a lifetime. Warbee was the one thing that could be there long after football had ended for me.”

Keefer lets out a low whistle. “Do you still love her?”

For a lot of people, his question would be a difficult one, but for me it’s the easiest. “Yeah, I don’t think I truly ever stopped. I never seriously dated anyone in all the time we’ve been apart. Back then I never gave it too much thought. Warbee was an untouchable topic for me. My parents never brought her up and I never asked. Hell, I didn’t even know Bee’s Batter was hers. But then I saw her, and that instant connection was still there, but it wasn’t until I kissed her that I realized I was still in love with her.”

Silence hangs between us and Keefer looks uncomfortable. Finally, he speaks. “Look, I wish I could tell you. Hell, I wish you would have asked about her throughout the years, but all I can say is give her some time. She truly cares about you still. Warbee has been through some shit and her logic needs time to know that you aren’t going anywhere when you find everything out. I know this probably isn’t helping, but it’s the best I can give you right now.” I roll my eyes. Vague answers are the worst, but it seems like that’s all I’ll be getting tonight. “I know you must be frustrated and I’m sorry for making it worse. I just wanted to ask you to give her some time. I’m

heading back to Atlanta, but I'll be in town next weekend.”

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I watched as he left, still trying to figure out what had happened to Warbee and how Kaden played into it all.

Keefer didn't make it back this past weekend though and when I thought I'd go sneak a peek at Warbee she wasn't in her classroom. A sub is in her place, so I stop by the office. "Hi Carol," I greet the secretary at the front office. Carol has been here since I attended high school. The only difference is her brown hair is now silver and she has some wrinkles around her green eyes.

"Hello Rocker. How are you today?" she asks.

I nod my head. "I'm good. How are you?"

"I'm great. You and the team are doing so well. I can't believe you won last weekend too," she comments.

The team is doing really well. We've won the first few games I've coached, and this week's game should be pretty easy. The team we are playing is sloppy and uncoordinated with basic plays. "I agree. They were a difficult team, but these boys have got some talent and serious dedication. It's all them. Hey, I had a question."

"Anything for you," she replies.

"Where's Warbee? I went by her classroom and I noticed she had a sub."

Carol's eyes get sad. "Oh yes, she's in Atlanta. You know that checkup she has to do every year. Fingers crossed it comes back all clear again. Poor Warbee, she's just so

young to have to deal with all that.”

I nod my head as my heart sinks to my stomach. Warbee is sick. “Thanks, Carol.” My voice is barely above a whisper as I leave out of the office. Everything around me is a blur and all sounds are muffled. Why didn’t anyone tell me she was sick?

Somehow, I manage to make it through the day but it’s all very disconnected for me. My mind keeps wandering back to Warbee. As soon as practice is over, I hightail it out of the parking lot and head straight for my parent’s house.

Twenty-Four

Rocker

It’s a good thing I could make the drive to my parent’s house in my sleep because I might as well be at this moment. I’m moving on autopilot. I’m numb, worried and scared to be honest. I pull up to the lake house that has been home for the majority of my life. My dad worked hard to get us a home on the lake. It was a dream him and my mother shared so when I was in the fourth grade, we finally moved into one. The beautiful, sage green house with white trimming comes into view as I pull into the circle drive. It’s lined by tall trees that make you feel like you are the only ones in the world. The two-car garage is closed, which means both of my parents are probably home. Knowing my dad, he’s probably sitting out back on the dock, fishing. I head up the porch and ring the doorbell. My parents made me keep my key, but I feel strange using it now.

My mom appears behind the screen door. Her golden-brown hair is piled on top of her head and her blue eyes that match mine are happy to see me. She must be cooking because her signature pink apron is on. “Rocker,” she says, as she opens the screen door. “Why don’t you just use your key?”

I shrug. “It just doesn’t feel right to me.”

My tone must seem off, because her face instantly morphs into worry. “What is it?”

“We need to talk, mom.”

She nods and walks towards the kitchen. When we reach the kitchen, my mom quickly makes a plate of snacks and passes them to my older sister, Rebel. “Well, I guess this is my cue to go hang out with dad.”

“Always good to see you Rebel.” I give her a quick hug.

When she pulls away, she looks concerned too. Damn, can everyone tell something is wrong with me? “I’m going to go hang with dad.” Rebel grabs the plate and heads out of the door, her golden blonde hair flying behind her.

My mom places a glass of iced sweet tea in front of one of the bar stools. My cue to take a seat. As I’m sitting, she cuts a piece of her apple pie and places it next to the glass. “So, let’s talk.”

I take a deep breath. “Did you know about Warbee?” I ask.

The guilt that flashes in my mother’s eyes is the only confirmation I need. “Yes, Rucker. This is Blue Ridge, not Nashville. It’s a small, tight knit community. We all knew, and we all did everything we could to help her through it.”

I need to know exactly what happened, but I know my mother. She’ll only give me the cliff note’s version because just like Keefer said the other night, it’s not their story to tell. I sigh and drop my head between my shoulders to gather my thoughts. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

My mother gives me that mom look, you know the one that asks what you mean? “Rocker, after you left Blue Ridge you made it clear where you stood when it came to Warbee. We knew you were hurting, but you also needed to focus. You couldn’t afford distractions from the game. I wanted to bring it up a thousand times, but I just couldn’t tell you. You never asked about her, so I assumed it was a closed subject.”

“What was it that she was sick with?” This is the part that could very well kill me. If she suffered, which I’m sure she did, while I was out living the high life I don’t know if I’ll be able to forgive myself.

“Rocker, you need to talk to her.”

“Mom, please,” I plead with her.

She looks away and I notice that on the side of the fridge is a picture of Warbee and I in high school. I never noticed it until now, but then again, my mother has just about every picture she’s ever been given crammed onto the sides of the fridge. “It was a form of cancer. I don’t remember all the details, but she was really sick for about a year.”

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That dreaded C word makes my stomach churn and tears burn the backs of my eyes and emotion clogs my throat. “And now?”

“From what her mother told me; she goes every year for a checkup to make sure it hasn’t returned.” The silence that hangs between us is heavy and she walks around the kitchen island that doubles as a bar. My mom takes a seat in the stool next to mine. “Rocker, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

Shaking my head, I turn to face her. “I should have asked. I was always curious, but I didn’t want to seem weak and ask about her. She was suffering that whole time and I was just out doing whatever the hell I wanted. Playing a game, I loved while she was fighting for her life.”

“Hey, now you stop that. That’s what Warbee would have wanted for you. She would have never wanted you to give up football for her. I love her for that alone. Warbee walked away when she knew you wouldn’t because she wanted you to have that dream. I’m sure she wishes that you had been by her side during that, but you have now Rocker. Right now, you can change the next step. Be there for her now.” My mother wraps her arms around my shoulders and pulls me into her. The tears break free and even though I’m a grown man, I cry on my mom’s shoulder until I can think straight.

Twenty-Five

Warbee

When my mom pulls back into Blue Ridge on Friday, I feel like a weight has been

lifted off my shoulders. For the past six years, every time the checkup rolls around, I become a mess. Unfortunately, Rocker caught the raw end of that this year. Even though I miss him terribly and hate the way things ended, I can't regret it. Rocker deserves to have the life we always dreamed and planned for. I can't give him that now. "How are you feeling, honey?"

I look over at my mom. Her red hair has lightened over the years. I think it's the gray moving in and it makes me sad. "I'm feeling relieved."

"Me, too," she admits quietly. "So, any stops you want to make before we hit your place?"

I know what she's hoping for. Keefer and her have both been on my case since we arrived in Atlanta. Keefer had been generous enough to us throughout the past six years to let me and whoever comes with me stay at his place whenever we're in town. However, this was the first year I had regretted accepting this offer. I know him, my mom and even Teaganne believe I'm making a mistake by ending things with Rocker, but they don't understand. I can't explain to them in a way to make them understand, so I just refuse to listen to them. "Yeah, swing by the bakery. I want to check on things."

"Honey, why don't you just go home and rest?"

"Mom, I have a clean bill of health right now and I want to go to my bakery. Please, swing by there," I tell her. She sighs and I know she's not happy about it, but she does as I ask. As I enter, I expect to see Capri behind the counter but instead it's my dad and Teaganne. Silas and Seraphina come running over as the door closes behind me. "Auntie Bee!" They both wrap their tiny arms around my waist or leg, whichever they can reach.

"Hi guys," I tell them. We talk for a minute before my mom gathers them up and

heads back to the table where they were seated coloring. “I thought you were in New York.”

“I was but then I knew I wanted to be here. So, I packed as much as I could and came back. You were already in Atlanta, so I figured I’d surprise you. This bakery has been crazy busy, in a sense I had no idea. I’ve been helping out around here since I had nothing else to do.” I rush around the counter and hug her.

Teaganne is the best friend I could have ever asked for. I remember when I first got diagnosed with cervical cancer how she became a rock for me. She basically lived with me in Atlanta for the entire year while my parents came to visit. Keefer helped out as well. It’s been one of the few times I’ve seen them not be awkward around one another since they’ve broken up. She was there for the surgery, every doctor visit, radiation and chemotherapy treatment. Teaganne held my hand while I was scared, angry, confused, and sad. She dried my tears when I found out my life would never be how I planned. Now, here she is again being the rock. I feel like our roles have reversed. In high school, I often chased around Teaganne keeping her out of trouble.

“You’re the best, Teaganne Erickson.”

She shakes her head. “Might as well go back to calling me Teaganne Voss. I filed for divorce. It’ll be my name again soon enough.”

“Oh, Teag.”

Teaganne waves off my sympathy. “It’s for the best.” After a beat of silence. “Enough about that! You’re healthy and we need to celebrate. Your father has so graciously offered to watch my munchkins for the night and close up shop.”

I laugh and shake my head. “No, I’m going home and curling up with a good book.”

“Oh no, you don’t. We’re going down to the Blue Bar and having a few drinks to celebrate.” Teaganne places her hands on her hips, her look stern. I know now how she manages her fashion lines so well. She’s a force to be reckoned with.

My dad walks over and wraps an arm around my shoulders. “She’s right. You should go out and celebrate. Act like a normal twenty something girl and enjoy it, just for tonight. This will all be here tomorrow.” He presses a kiss to the side of my head. “I’m glad you’re okay baby.”

He turns away so quickly that I can’t be sure, but I think he had tears in his eyes. I sigh and turn back to Teaganne. “Fine! Let’s go.”

Teaganne gives me a large, triumphant smile. “Yes!!! Let’s go.” She grabs my hand and pulls me around the counter and out of the bakery only stopping to kiss her kid's goodnight and tell them to behave. When we reach my house Teaganne ushers me inside. Teaganne throws me a pair of ripped up jeans, boots and black tank top. I slip them on while she digs around in her suitcase. At last, she hands me a black sparkly duster to go over my tank. It’s all her and nothing like me, but it is pretty. She pulls my hair down and makes quick work of pulling half up and leaving some wispy pieces down to frame my face. Teaganne darkens my eye makeup and calls it done.

As we head over to the bar, I look at Teaganne. “Thanks for not insisting on contacts tonight.”

“You got off lucky. Now, let’s go have some fun.” I know we’re celebrating my clean bill of health, but I also feel like tonight is about Teaganne. She’s obviously avoiding her life and everything going on in it. I hate to see her do this, but hopefully, it’s just a distraction for tonight and it doesn’t become a habit.

We head inside and grab a table. An hour later, and a couple of drinks, I’m feeling really good. Teaganne feels even better. We’ve been line dancing when I head to the

table for a break. I can feel his presence before I see him. When I turn around, I find his blue eyes on me. He's standing with a beer in one hand and a dart in the other. Mase, his high school friend, stands beside him. The hole in my heart rips back open. My eyes burn and I know there's no amount of alcohol to make me miss him less. Both of us living in Blue Ridge is going to be the worst thing ever. I turn away and grip the back of my chair.

I know he's going to come over here but when he leans in next to my ear, his scent mixing with his beer and the smoke of the bar, I nearly break. "We need to talk." I meet his eyes and I know that he knows. All the air leaves the room and the only thing I can think to do is run, so I turn around and rush out of the bar.

Twenty-Six

Rocker

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:59 am

I was shocked when Mase showed up at my house. We haven't really talked in years, but he insisted on me coming out with him tonight. Going out was really low on my list of priorities. I had done my fair share of partying in my younger years. To be honest, I was over it. There was also the constant worry in the back of my mind. Warbee had suffered from cancer. I couldn't shake that shit and it's messing with my damn head. However, Mase is persistent and annoying about it so eventually I gave in.

Blue Bar is the local hole in the wall bar. Every town has one, even the smallest towns. It's small and smoky from the years of cigarette smoke the building has seen. The wood paneling on the wall has absorbed so much of it there's no chance of escaping the smell. It's dimly lit with little blue light fixtures above each worn wooden table. There's a small dance floor, stage, and a jukebox that's used more than the stage has ever been. Pool table and darts are tucked away in a corner. The beer is cheap, but it does what most people want, to numb your worries or pain for a period of time. Blue Bar is a bit run down, but it's a staple in our community.

When Mase and I arrive, the bar isn't too crowded for a Saturday night. I'm preoccupied as we play pool. Mase asks all kinds of questions to which I reply mostly in one worded answers. If I hurt his feelings it doesn't show. All I want is for Warbee to get back to Blue Ridge so I can pull her into my arms. "So, how was playing in the NFL?" Mase asks.

I have to resist the urge to roll my eyes at him. This was the question that I never understood why it got asked. "Well, it was a dream come true. It's everything I could have hoped for, but it was also a hell of a lot harder than I expected."

“Really?”

I nod my head. “Yeah, you think Coach Brime was rough back in the day...it’s nothing compared to the NFL. At the start of every preseason you spend more time throwing up from trying to get back into playing shape than anything else.”

Mase whistles. “I’m not sure I could have done that.”

“If you love it the way I do, you would have.”

“True. So, you and Warbee back together now? I’ve heard all about it from some of the guys around town.” Mase takes his shot and makes it. He was always much better at pool than football but no matter what he gave it his all. I can respect that.

A thought occurs to me, so I decide to run with it. “Yeah, for the most part. I mean we’re kind of in limbo right now, but we’ll get through it.” Mase nods and takes another shot and sinks it, too. “Hey, I got a question.”

“Yeah, what is it?” he asks, never looking up from his next target.

Taking a deep breath, I decide to dive right in. “What do you know about Warbee’s ex Kaden?”

Mase looks up, clearly thrown off by my question. “What do you mean? I know he’s with Beth now.”

“Yeah, I saw that, too. Poor guy, but I was more curious as to why they broke up.” I’m fishing for answers that I know I should wait and get from Warbee, herself, but I’m hoping Mase takes the bait.

Mase sighs. “That was a shit show. I never liked Kaden. Warbee has always been a

good girl. After y'all broke up I kind of still looked out for her you know. Then she got sick and she'd only been dating Kaden for a few months, but they never seemed really serious. About a week after she was diagnosed, he broke up with her. He used some excuse, but really it was just because he didn't want to have to help take care of her when things got bad, you know. I still can't stand that guy."

My blood boils at the thought that Kaden, a man who was supposed to be her boyfriend and someone she could rely on through thick or thin, just left her hanging when she needed him the most. If I saw him right now, I'd probably punch him straight in his nose. "What a shit move," I comment.

"Yeah, none of the town was too happy with him. Well, except Beth but you know how she is." Mase gets back to the game while my mind wanders to Warbee everything she's been through. I wish she was here right now.

A couple of hours later, Mase challenges me to a game of darts. It seems like an okay idea, so we move over to one of the dart boards. Then I get that sense of her being near and when I look up, I see her on the dance floor line dancing next to Teaganne. My entire world falls away as I watch the smile on her face. If she's smiling like that it must mean her doctor's appointment went okay. I watch as she leaves the dance floor and heads to a table. As if she can sense me as well, she looks up, our eyes lock and I'm too damn far away to read anything running through them then she turns around. I hand the darts and beer in my hands to Mase without ever letting my eyes leave her. "I'll be right back."

When I reach her, I tell her we need to talk. My tone is harsher than I expect, and I don't know what she sees in my eyes when she finally meets them again, but she takes off jogging out of the bar like a bat out of hell. I chase after her because I'm not letting her go again. Once I get outside, I find her easy enough. "Oh no you don't," I call out. I surge forward, my knee screams in protest, but I move on anyways. I'm just buzzed enough to reach her, wrap my arms around her waist and pull her back

against me. “Why the hell are you running?”

All of her gusto dies out. “Because I can’t do this.”

“Do what? Talk to me?”

I release her and she steps away from me before turning around to face me. “I can’t talk about what you’re wanting to talk about.”

“How do you know what I want to talk about? You haven’t spoken to me since you practically ran away at Bushels of Fun.” I cross my arms over my chest.

Warbee huffs in frustration. “I’m sorry. I know I keep running and I know that’s not fair to you, but I can’t deal with all this.”

“I’m not asking you to deal with anything. I’m asking you to have a conversation with me.” I didn’t think asking for her to talk to me would be so difficult, but then Warbee is used to being on her own. It’s just how she’s wired. It’s one of the things I loved about her, but it’s also very frustrating. I step forward and cup her face with my hands. “Please, darlin’. Talk to me.”

Tears well in her eyes. “There’s really nothing to say except I’ll always love you, Rocker, but you need to let me go.”

“How in the hell am I supposed to do that?” I ask, as I throw my hands up in the air. Frustration takes over. “You can’t tell me you will always love me and then ask me to let you go.”

“Rocker, I can’t give what you want,” she says, her voice breaks and she hugs herself so tightly, I’m afraid she’s literally breaking.

I surge forward once more and pull her into my arms. “Why don’t you let me be the judge of that?” She shakes her head. “What is it that you think I want, Warbee?”

“A future, a family.”

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“What?” I’m beyond confused by her words right now.

Warbee sighs. “I can’t guarantee you a future. I’ll always have to worry the cancer is going to come back. I know you’ve already heard about it. It’s true I had cancer. I’ve been lucky the last six years, but you never know when it might show back up. Don’t you get it? I can never give you what we talked about back then. I can’t have children now. I can’t give you that.”

She yanks away from me. I’m frozen. There are no words. I should have them. I need to have them, but I’m lost. Her tears slip over her cheeks and her head falls. Warbee walks away, and I let her this time.

Twenty-Seven

Warbee

Luckily, I don’t live too far from the bar, so I walk, and Blue Ridge is a pretty safe place. I make it home in record time, but I’m chilled to the bone and I can’t feel my face where the chilly wind has dried my tears. I grab my hidden key and let myself into my house. I knew that once Rocker knew everything he’d leave. He has to. Rocker wants things I can never give him. I had come to terms with the fact I’d never be a mother but now I’m angry again. Cancer has cost me so much already and now it’s cost me Rocker as well.

Once inside I shower and change into my pajamas. The doorbell rings and I assume it’s Teaganne so I open it without a second thought. Rocker stands on my porch and I forget how to speak or breathe. When he turns around to face me his eyes are full of

determination. “First of all, you don’t know what I want anymore. You remember me as that high school boy with idealistic fantasies. I’ve grown up. Life has happened and things have changed. I’ve changed. I don’t want the same things I wanted then except for one...you. I want you Warbee for all of my life. If you think children are a deal breaker for me then you really don’t know me at all. If we want children that badly there are options, but I don’t need anything except for you now. I don’t need football or the fame or any of the other bullshit, I’ve spent eleven years without you, I refuse to go a day longer.” Rocker steps inside my house and pulls me into him. When his lips crash down on mine it’s overwhelming, so much so that I’m breathless and dizzy.

The door slams shut, and his hands slide down my body until they hit the back of my thighs. He yanks me up, so I have no choice but to wrap my legs around his waist. Moisture clings to my cheeks once again but this time they aren’t sad. They’re happy tears. I’m pinned between the wall and Rocker when he finally comes up for air. “Tell me you want this. Tell me you want me because if not I’ll stop right now.”

I stare into his blue eyes. The ones that held my future back then and the ones I can see a new future in now. “It’s you, Rocker. It’s always been you. It’ll always be you. I love you.”

“Thank goodness,” he says, as his mouth finds mine again. My fingers dig into his shoulders to keep myself steady. He pulls away again. “I love you, darlin’.” I have no clue where we’ll end up in the future but for now this is enough.

Hours later while Rocker is asleep next to me, I trace the tattoo on his back. It’s a lifeline and in the middle the line morphs into a football before returning back to the lifeline. It’s unusual and perfect for him. Watching him sleep brings me a peace I hadn’t expected and most certainly haven’t felt in years. I rest my hand and watch as his back rises and falls with his breathing. “I know your mama told you that it’s rude to stare.”

I giggle. “You’re awake?”

One eye opens lazily. “I’ve been awake darlin’. I was watching you sleep earlier.”

“Creeper,” I tell him playfully.

He laughs and it fills the room. “Says the girl who was randomly drawing on my back.”

“Excuse me, you already have a random drawing on your back. I was simply tracing it.” I roll over and lay on my back.

He tosses an arm over my abdomen. Rocker makes slow and lazy circles over my skin. His finger brushes lower and I feel the falter. My sharp intake of breath doesn’t help matters. The scar from the surgery. My ugly as I refer to it. I feel the overwhelming emotion, the tears build behind my eyes. “Will you talk to me about it?” he asks.

I know I can’t avoid it forever. “I will if you stop touching it.”

“Why?” he asks. Rocker’s confused look on his face is adorable.

“Because that scar is hideous and I hate the fact that you even had to see it, so I really don’t want you to feel it.”

Rocker leans up on his elbows and looks down at me. “That scar isn’t hideous. That scar represents your strength, courage and bravery Warbee. It’s beautiful because that scar is the reason, you’re alive and I’m here with you, right now. I’m so damn thankful for that scar. I love it as much as I love you. I’m thankful you have that.”

A tear slips from my eye and slides down until it hits the pillow. “How? How do you

always know what to say?”

“I don’t. I just tell you what I think or how I feel. I don’t actually even consider if it’s the right thing to say or not.” He studies me. “How did you find out about the cancer? Were you in a lot of pain?”

I see the worry and guilt in his eyes. My hand reaches up and caresses his cheek. The stubble tickles the palm of my hand. He’s so grown up now. His boyish charm has grown into a swoon worthy man. “There was some pain but nothing that made me worry. I actually found out when I went for my routine checkup. The doctor wasn’t sure but wasn’t concerned by it. He assumed it was a cyst of some sort, so they took a biopsy and turns out it wasn’t just a cyst. Everything after that moved pretty quickly. I had a surgery to remove the area then some radiation and chemotherapy and almost a year later I got a clean bill of health.”

“And Kaden?” he asks. I can see the anger light up his eyes.

Shaking my head, I explain that situation. “Kaden and I had only been dating for a few months. It wasn’t that serious but when I told him I wouldn’t be able to have kids he ended things. It was probably for the best anyways. My heart could have never fully belonged to him. It only sucked at the time because I felt like it was just another blow.”

Rocker sighs, but the frustration in it has me sitting up in the bed. “I hate that you went through this alone, that I wasn’t here.”

“I didn’t go through it alone. I had my parents, Keefer and Teaganne. Keefer did everything he could to help out which was easy since we were in Atlanta and Teaganne basically uprooted her entire life in New York City to come take care of me. In her words, she could work from anywhere so why not work from beside me. I wasn’t alone at all.” This strong yet sweet man who is so concerned about me being

alone six years ago only makes me love him more.

“But I was off living the high life compared to you. If I had known, I would have come home immediately.” His words are so determined and hold so much conviction.

I lace my fingers with his. “You know, when the town found out about it, they did everything they could to help. So many of them that were retired or didn’t have to work volunteered at the bakery so I could keep it open. Everyone started coming to the bakery for something and they’d all leave a larger than necessary tip. Your mom was one of the first ones to come volunteer and she asked me if I wanted you to know and I told her no.”

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Rocker sits up abruptly, his hand falls away from mine. I know he's upset and may be to some extent he has a right to be but ultimately it was my decision. "Why would you tell her that? It wasn't just your decision to make."

"It was my decision, but I asked her not to tell you because I knew you'd drop everything to come and make sure I was okay, and I didn't want that. It made me feel better knowing you were out there playing the game you loved. Plus, you never know how something like that could turn out. Things weren't so pretty for a good period of time and I didn't want you to remember me that way...if things didn't turn out for the best. The memories you had of me, even the bad ones, were better than I was at that point in time. So, yes, I asked her not to tell you and a part of me is sorry that you got it thrown on you now. I should have told you myself sooner but in all honesty this subject is a difficult one for me to talk about. I don't like remembering it but you deserved to hear it from me instead of everyone else, for that I'm sorry, but I also didn't know how long you were actually staying here, in Blue Ridge," I admit.

Rocker shakes his head. "This is where I am now. This is my home and you're my girl, Warbee."

"Yeah, for now, but what happens when the big city calls again? What happens when you get offered a better job?" This is the part that scares me the most. Losing him again.

Rocker pulls me over and into his lap. "I'm not going anywhere. This is where I want to be. It's simple really. I want to be where you are, always."

Rocker

I lean over the counter and press a quick kiss to Warbee. Mrs. Prado finally returned from maternity leave so Warbee returned to the bakery full time. I miss being able to see her whenever I feel like it during the day, but I also know she loves the bakery more than anything. I'm lucky enough to be able to run over there for lunch every day. It's become our routine. Warbee is an amazing cook on top of baking. I've mentioned her expanding the bakery to include a restaurant, but right now she's happy and if she's happy then so am I.

After Warbee told me about her past, we found ourselves as individuals and as a couple. We were able to move forward without anything holding us back. It was a great feeling. Now, I wake up almost every morning to find Warbee running around getting ready to head to the bakery and every night I get to fall asleep with her in my arms. She completes me in ways I didn't know were missing.

"You know you shouldn't be kissing me while I'm working," she teases.

I look over my shoulder at the bakery full of citizens and a line behind me and wink. "I don't think they mind. It gives them something to talk about."

"You need to get to work. You have a few more games to win, if I'm not mistaken." Warbee pushes me away in that playful way that she does but I know she'd keep me all day if she could.

I chuckle. "Okay, okay, I'll go." I give her one more quick kiss before heading out to my truck. She's right though. The team has been doing amazing. We've been undefeated since the first game I coached. Expectations have risen even more, but the boys keep going out and playing their hearts out every single game and now their season is almost undefeated with the exception of one game.

Practice has been rough this week though. There's a really bad stomach bug going around town and it's taken over the school. Almost half the players on my team are out sick along with both of the assistant coaches, so Warbee has been helping me out at practice. She has no clue what she's doing but she helps keep the boys hydrated, which I appreciate. Keefer showed up by Wednesday to help out until further notice. I guess they have perks since they own their own businesses.

By Thursday, we're all starting to run down to empty. Our small town has felt the impact of the stomach bug and I've asked Warbee to stop coming to help since she already has a weaker immune system. Keefer and I can manage, but at this point it won't make much of a difference. I really don't know how we're going to manage to pull a win out this week.

Practice is over and I see Warbee walking towards Keefer and me. Just seeing her brings a smile to my face despite everything going on in the world. I stand up and pull her into my arms once she's close enough. Her scent is an instant balm to my soul. "God, I love you."

She smiles up at me. "I love you, too. Rough day y'all?" she asks.

"That's an understatement," Keefer replies.

We're standing there talking when I notice a car, one that definitely doesn't belong in Blue Ridge. The shiny BMW sparkles as the setting sun hits it. Warbee and Keefer fall silent as they follow my eyesight. "Who is that?" Keefer asks.

I shrug and shake my head because I honestly don't know. At least, not until he steps out of the car. KJ Sprouse, silent owner to a few of the NFL teams. I've met him a few times throughout my career. He's a nice guy and loaded with more money than he knows what to do with. As he crosses the field in his three-thousand-dollar suit, I can't help but wonder what he's doing here. "Rocker Gordon, you're a hard man to

find.”

I chuckle. “Not if you know where to look.”

“Touche.” As he approaches, he extends his hand to me. “It’s good to see you again.” After we shake, I introduce him to Warbee and Keefer. “This is a nice little town you have here.”

“Yeah, it is. We’re all fond of it.” Silence falls between us. After giving KJ a moment to inform us what he’s doing here I ask, “So, what brings you to our part of the country?”

“You, actually.” His dark brown eyes fall upon me and make me nervous.

“What about me?”

“I have an opportunity that I think you would be perfect for. I’ve recently bought into a B league NFL team that could use some damn good coaching. The kind of coaching that I’ve noticed you’ve been up to. You’ve managed to make this local high school team undefeated. Just imagine what you could do with a team like this. You’ll have access to state-of-the-art equipment, everything at your disposal and a very hefty salary.” I can see the sparkle in his eye. He thinks he’s offering me the world and a different me would have thought that as well. While his offer is tempting, I know the job won’t be in Blue Ridge. “Don’t answer now.” He hands me his card. “Just give me a call after you’ve had time to think about it.”

I tell him thank you and we watch as he leaves. “Let’s go grab some food. My treat,” I tell them. Warbee smiles but it doesn’t reach her eyes.

Later that night, while we’re lying in bed, Warbee rolls over and stares at me. “I think we should talk about today.”

“What about it?” I have a feeling the offer is bothering her. She’s been quiet ever since KJ has showed up.

Warbee sits up, so I do the same. We get comfortable against the headboard of my bed. “Mr. Sprouse’s offer is a really great opportunity. I think you should take it.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

She shakes her head. “No, I’m serious. I think this could be great for you and you deserve it.”

I grab her hand and pull her towards me. “I’m not losing you again.”

“You’re not. We can do long distance. The football season is only a few months out of the year, and I can come visit you. Capri is great with the bakery, so I know I can take time away.” She gives me a small smile. I start to decline her offer, but she stops me. “I think you should at last hear him out. Go have dinner and talk to him. That’s all I’m saying.” Warbee slides back down into the bed and gets comfortable. Apparently, this discussion is over, but now my mind is starting to wonder about this opportunity. I lie in bed, sleep never finding me and try to weigh the pros and cons of this possibility.

Twenty-Nine

Warbee

It’s been a couple of days since Mr. Sprouse showed up and offered Rocker a job. Teaganne has let me know just how crazy she believes I am for pushing him to talk to Mr. Sprouse about the job. Rocker deserves this chance, and I don’t want to be the thing that holds him back. Somehow, even after this crazy week, the team managed to win their game last night. Rocker’s face was so full of pride and it was then that I knew I had made the right decision. He deserves to coach wherever he wants to. We can figure it out.

So, tonight he went to have dinner with Mr. Sprouse and discuss the job. Most of the town is well again and tonight is the big fall dance. Bushels of Fun is winding down since Thanksgiving is next week, so it's time for the fall dance. It's something that is fun for all ages. It's held in a big red barn that's on the property where the festival is held.

Teaganne and I along with her kids pull into the crowded lot, but even from here you can see the barn. Along the walls of the barn are bales of hay that are covered in white and orange tablecloths where you can sit if you're not wanting to dance. White and orange Christmas lights are strung up all over the barn to light it up. The stage at the front of the barn has the band providing the music and the wagon used for the hayrides is filled with apple cider, pumpkin spice coffee choices, my apple pumpkin tea, candy, and caramel apples and other sweet treats from my bakery. There's a line of people waiting for sweet treats or something to drink. The rest are on the dance floor when Teaganne and I arrive.

Silas and Seraphina are both excited for their first fall dance. Silas looks so cute in his little cowboy boots. I notice Keefer talking to some girl. One glance at Teaganne and I know she's already noticed it as well. There's a frown on her face now. I wish I knew what really happened between them, but I've only ever gotten bits and pieces from either of them throughout the years. They had always seemed so happy together and now they both seem a little lost. "I'll be right back," I tell Teaganne, as I pass Seraphina to her.

Keefer notices I'm heading his direction, so he meets me halfway. "Don't you look pretty," he tells me

I blush but I have to admit I feel pretty. Teaganne showed up at my house shortly after Rocker left for his dinner with an adorable butterscotch brown baby doll dress made out of swiss dot fabric for me. It's a v-neck with short sleeves and hits right above my knee. I paired it with my rust brown knee-high boots and traded my glasses for contacts. Teaganne also curled my hair while adding a braid headband and light

makeup. “Thanks. So, I think you should talk Teaganne.”

Keefer laughs. “What?”

“You heard me Keefer. Go talk to her. I don’t really know what happened between the two of you, but it’s been years and she’s going through a lot of crap right now and to be honest you don’t seem the happiest either. Plus, with her moving here it would be nice if my two best friends could hang out together with me, you know at the same time.”

Keefer’s eyes have gone wide. “She’s moving here?” I nod my head. “What about her husband?”

I look around. This isn’t my business to tell him, but I did make it my business when I marched over her and told him to talk to her. “It’s a long story, but he’s not moving. Just promise me you’ll consider it.”

“I will. Where’s Roker?”

“He’s meeting with Mr. Sprouse about that job. Once he’s done there he’ll swing by,” I explain. As much as I’ve put on my brave face, I’m also really worried that we can’t make our relationship work if he does take this job.

Throughout the night I’ve danced with Silas and Seraphina, Keefer and my dad. I’m exhausted as the night drags on. My hopes have dwindled down to nothing on Roker making it to the dance. The last song of the night is announced and it’s our song, You Save Me by Kenny Chesney. I sigh and wish he could be here right now. Seraphina is asleep in my arms where I’m sitting, but when the people on the dancefloor begin to sway to the music, I see him. Roker is standing up by the stage with a bashful smile on his face and his hands behind his back. My mom reaches over and takes Seraphina from me. I make my way to him. Once I reach him, he pulls one large sunflower from behind his back. “May I have this dance?”

I take the flower and kiss him. “Of course.” As we sway to the music, I can’t help but wonder if we’ll have another moment like this. Considering he’ll be somewhere else during this time of the year, I doubt it. My insides are shaking as I ask, “How was there dinner?”

Rocker shrugs. “It was good. The job is great. A dream come true in a lot of ways for a lot of people.” I nod and look away. I’m afraid my eyes will show him my fear that we won’t make it through this. He leans into my ear. The warmth of his breaths sends chills over my skin. “A lot of people would consider it a dream come true...but not me. I’m holding my dream and it’s all I need.”

My heart slams rapidly in my chest. “Are you sure?”

“I lived my big NFL football dream. It’s time for the next chapter and the only dream I have in that chapter is you. It’s always you darlin’.”

I lean up and kiss him as if my life depends on it in the barn of our hometown, under the autumn sky that we shared our first kiss and what I thought would be our last. There’s a lot of things that change in autumn. People are like autumn in so many ways, but the one thing that has never truly changed for me is the love I have for Rocker and his love for me. We fell in love under the autumn sky and we found our way back to one another under it, too. Autumn in Blue Ridge will always be my favorite time of year and Rocker will always be who I want to spend it with.