



One Boiling Summer

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Category: Romance

Description: I never expected to fall for my ex's brother.

I came home to Texas thinking I'd finally get my happily ever after—with him. My first love. The guy I'd been dreaming about for years. But instead of rekindling old flames, I walked straight into heartbreak. He was engaged to someone else.

I tried to hold onto my sunshine, even in the sweltering heat of a Texas summer, but part of me dimmed. Until Hudson stepped in—his brother. The quiet, grumpy firefighter who'd always been in the background.

I never expected him to truly see me—and to step forward with a slow, smoldering kind of devotion that rekindled my soul. He reminded me what it felt like to be wanted, cherished... loved.

He claimed he spent years pining for me in silence. Now he was ready to prove how, in this summer's Texas heat, a steady man like him could be sizzling in the sheets.

Could I finally admit that the one I never saw coming was the one that was meant to be?

Enjoy this sizzling side story based on a character found in Zee Irwin's It Happened Series.

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HIGHWAYS AND HEARTACHES

LACEY ANDREWS

One minute I was crushing on my handsome boss in New York, and the next minute I realized he would never look at me the way he did Maisy Calhoun.

Who could blame Brooks Bellamy, though? Apparently, once he met her a few years prior, he fell hard. I never got the memo.

So here I was, driving with a crushed infatuation and a packed car to Texas, giving up on the big city. Ten years away from my hometown had been enough, and if I hadn't met my goals by now, I might never. I knew when to call it, and this was it.

"Poppy Valley, here I come." I finally passed the state line into Texas. I never thought turning thirty would mean having this monumental, What the eff am I even doing with my life? moment, but here it was.

Distance became the perfect elixir I needed to forget these things as I drove home. To think there was a point, back in high school, when getting the hell out of this small town was all I dreamed about. I wanted to live in the bright lights of a big city that never slept. Now, I hoped the quiet of the town I once ran from would help me figure out my next path in life.

But my thoughts kept circling back to Mom. Who I wouldn't find when I stepped onto

her porch. She wouldn't be there to welcome me with open arms, a plate of her chicken fried steak and pecan pie waiting on the old oak table.

I'd visit her grave soon—flowers and apologies and tears overdue. How awful I'd been to leave again after her funeral. The gossips in town probably had a heyday when I rushed back to New York, as if it wasn't bad enough that I'd left Poppy Valley after high school, leaving Mom alone here in the first place.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. Avoided crying, just like I'd avoided home the past few years. My grip tightened on the steering wheel. But it was fine. I'd be fine. I'd come to terms with the fact that part of this trip home would include a reckoning.

Mom wouldn't want me wallowing in it. She'd loved this town, but was proud that I'd left it. New York had been about as different a life as I could find—like living on another planet.

She'd visited me one time and stayed for a week. I took her to the top of the Empire State Building, out to a fancy dinner, and to a Broadway musical. She loved it. At least I could rest easy knowing she'd gotten to leave Texas once.

"Oh, Mom," I sighed, hit again and again with memories, regrets, and unfulfilled dreams.

In New York, I'd graduated with my degree in business, learned to wear the right clothes, and taught myself to let go of my Texas drawl to properly answer the phone in any Manhattan office. But none of it had earned me anything but a string of administrative assistant positions.

I hid my true self well—and all for what? To end up defeated. No love life, no friends, a workaholic with a career going nowhere fast. What would happen next was anyone's guess.

At least I'd have Carson in Poppy Valley.

He'd always been there for me. Friends since kindergarten, first loves in high school. We swore we'd marry at thirty if we were both unattached. A pinkie promise the night of graduation, the night before I left town for New York, as if love could be a plan you made, fate be damned.

Well. I'd reached a point where I'd like to collect on that promise.

He'd picked me up through every disaster—Daddy's death in the fire, Mom's diagnosis, the funeral arrangements. The house he'd watched over while I'd been gone. Carson had always been there. I didn't see that changing now.

I pulled over to a gas station to fill up. As I waited, I leaned against the hatchback and scrolled through my GPS map, making sure I remembered my way home. Like I'd ever forget. Then a call came in from New York.

I chuckled at the name on the screen and answered it. "Hi Archer..." Brooks' brother. Twins actually, both my former bosses. Only there were enough subtle differences between them to tell them apart. Mainly, Archer was the one with solid, well-timed wit. But somehow he always tried too hard in certain situations, I noticed, especially with women. His love life was a disaster.

Whereas Brooks exuded a more casual, debonair quality. He didn't need to try at all, and women would flaunt themselves at him. But he was blinded to anyone else, especially me, because of Maisy.

"Have you changed your mind yet? No one I've interviewed this week has impressed me." Archer's voice bled desperation through the line.

"Considering I just crossed into Texas, there's no turning back now."

“Dammit. Seriously though, I need you back here. What’ll it take? Salary increase? Name your price.”

“You really are desperate.”

“Desperate? Nah. Just your average visionary CEO under duress. Nothing a good stiff drink won’t cure,” he quipped.

The line made me laugh—classic Archer.

“Call it what you want. I can hear the stress loud and clear.”

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“Yeah, well, I’m sorry we didn’t appreciate you more while you were here, Lacey.” The sound of cabinet drawers slamming in the background only accentuated his irritation. “Should have given you a title, let you take over the entire office, and Brooks and I could have worked for you.”

Now he chooses to offer bigger and better? Tempting. If he’d offered before I’d put in my resignation letter, I might have stayed, but I was almost home. I could practically feel my past and everything I needed to face calling to me, including Mom.

“You sound like you’re searching for something?” I asked.

“You wouldn’t happen to remember where the Calbott plans are, would you? They want to resurrect the project, give it another try.” He sighed heavily into the phone. Ugh, their architect’s office was a mess before I was hired.

“Of course I do. I’m the one who organized all the plans in the first place.” I proceeded to tell him where to find them plus filled him in quickly on my system for the next time.

“Perfect. Thank you. And Lacey... the offer stands. If you want to come back, just call me.”

“Thanks. I need to take care of things at home for now. But reach out anytime you can’t find something.” I chuckled into the phone at how good it felt to be appreciated, even if it was a little too late. We finished with some small talk and clicked off.

I continued down the highway, putting more miles between me and New York,

unsure if Archer was really serious about his offer or not. But I couldn't think about that now.

So what the actual eff was I doing with my life? Hopefully Carson would help me figure it out.

I snorted. Who was I kidding? Did I think he'd throw me a welcome-home parade? Hold out his arms, wish me a happy thirtieth with a pastor on standby to marry us?

Not likely. But once I found him, I'd remind him of our deal. We could work on rekindling things. Until the end of summer, anyway.

Somehow I had that in my head as enough time to figure things out between us. And if we didn't by then, I could always leave again and start fresh somewhere new, or take Archer up on his offer if he was serious. Because without Carson, without Mom, there wasn't much left tying me down to this town.

I hadn't talked to Carson in—how long? I thought back, and even further back, and groaned. Not since the first Christmas without Mom that I'd stayed back in the city instead of coming home. He'd called to check on me on Christmas Eve. After that, I rarely texted him back when he reached out, so it's been a few years too long.

I should've let him know I was on my way. But Carson was Carson. Always on the periphery of my life and my heart. He'd never vanish.

Even if I had.

LACEY

My heart fluttered awake, as if seeing the town sign reinvigorated it. The slogan “Welcome to Poppy Valley, where wild things bloom, and hearts find home,” blared like a reminder, already drawing me into its arms for a warm, familiar embrace.

Ten years ago I ran from it. Tonight, I needed that hug.

By the time I arrived it was late, the sun going down behind the hills, casting just enough glow on the old Victorian windowpanes of Poppy Street. The main thoroughfare had changed little from what I could tell—red poppy flowers and greenery in floral boxes beneath each store window, same as always. A few new shops had popped up, though. I’d have to wander through them one afternoon.

Of course, right in the middle by the old town square, stood Carson’s pride and joy.

After high school, he’d served in the Army, but returned after his first enlistment. For whatever reason, owning a coffee shop had appealed to him.

I remembered his emails and calls back then, excited and telling me all about his plans to renovate one of the old buildings downtown. Now, the sign for Goodson’s JavaCompany sparked a burst of pride in me. I snickered at the thought that we used to call Carson the sleepy dwarf, being the last of seven Goodson boys, and now he must have to wake up pretty early to serve up morning coffee for his customers.

Not that the Goodson boys were short. Nope. They’d all grown up to be rather tall, well-built men. All seven of them, handsome as could be.

It had taken Carson years, but he finally opened his dream coffee place after Mom’s funeral.

Only... I hadn't stayed to see it happen.

What kind of friend did that make me?

Surely Carson would forgive me. He knew I couldn't bear to stay when everything here reminded me of Mom. Even now, as I sniffed the air with the windows rolled down, my heart ached for her.

I kept driving, just a block more to go until the turn toward home—when I noticed the park packed with people. Everyone must be out tonight celebrating something, typical for this town to have festivals of some sort or another.

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Scanning the parking lot, my breath caught at the sight of Blue Betsy—Carson’s old Ford truck. He’d rebuilt and painted it himself and treated it like gold.

Those butterflies in my stomach came alive. I knew full well how many first times we’d had in that truck together, although we never went “all the way.” Nope, my virginity stayed intact until the first jerk I’d dated in college.

A wave of nostalgia hit as the scent of brisket drifted in the air. String lights blurred against the darkening sky. It didn’t matter who the party was for—anyone could stop in and say hey. That was small town living.

Surely I’d run into Carson here.

Without thinking, I spun the car around in the middle of the street and parked.

Unfolding from the driver’s seat, I stretched long. Caught my reflection in the window and fluffed my hair. I smoothed my blue and white striped seersucker dress with both hands, which was more fitting for a garden party at the Hamptons than a hometown barbecue.

I’d have loved to change, or at least ditched these proper white flats for a pair of cowboy boots, just so I wouldn’t look so preppy, but this would have to do. Suddenly, I was anxious—itching—to make my grand re-entrance into the town I used to call home.

I headed down the stone path toward the crowd, picking up speed. My eyes scanned every face, every group, searching for the cutest boy next door ever. Carson

Goodson—voted exactly that in our senior yearbook.

A man brushed past me, lugging a galvanized tub of ice and beer bottles, nearly knocking me off the path. I glared after him—used to that kind of treatment in New York, but here?

Wait. That walk... those faded Wrangler jeans... my heart skipped.

“Carson?” I called.

The man turned.

Only—it wasn’t Carson.

“Lacey?” Hudson blinked, almost stumbling upon seeing me, carrying the heavy tub like it weighed nothing in those muscular arms. I should have known. Carson had never been as built as him, with those broad shoulders.

“Hudson! Hi. How are you?” I croaked, moving toward him.

His gaze swept over me like he couldn’t believe I’d appeared out of thin air. I did the same to him. Considering he was what... seven years older than me? I’d dated some older men in New York, so the age gap was of no consequence—wait, why was I even thinking of Hudson like this?

Since he seemed tongue-tied, I supplied the basics. “I just got into town tonight. I’ll be here a while. At least through the summer. Maybe longer. I don’t know.”

“What? Wow, that’s... great.” He shifted the tub and glanced toward the party. “Did Carson know you were coming?”

“No. Thought I’d surprise everyone. So... surprise.” I chuckled, nervously waving my hands. This was probably the most Hudson and I had ever spoken in some time.

As the eldest Goodson brother, forced to always look after us when we were younger, he did it with a scowling face. The quiet one. The responsible one. Carson and I used to call him the Grumpy one—like one of Snow White’s dwarves. The seven Goodson brothers each had their own quirks, and we’d given each a nickname.

“Big surprise.” He darted another glance to the group behind him. That’s when my eyes followed—and landed on the sign.

Happy Engagement, Carson and?—

“Emme? Who the hell is Emme?” My breath caught. Another crushed moment. Another reminder that I didn’t know what the hell I was doing with my life.

“Uh, I think you’d better come with me.” Hudson tipped his head. Numb, I followed.

Whispers started as I passed through the crowd.

That Lacey Andrews? Come back to cause a scene?

Poor Lacey doesn’t stand a chance next to Emme.

Oh good. Just what this town needs—drama.

But they were all wrong.

Face-to-face with Carson as Hudson set the beers down, I saw how happy he looked. And one glance at the beautiful woman beside him explained why.

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“Lacey? Wh—where the hell did you come from?” Carson’s smile faltered as he realized I stood before him, and his eyes searched mine.

What kind of friend would I be to wish them anything but happiness?

“Back from the city.” I forced a bright tone. “I read about your engagement in Poppy Daily Online,” I lied. “And I knew I had to come back and wish you well.”

I kept talking—to Emme this time—pasting on a smile. “Oh, and look at you. Aren’t you just gorgeous?”

I pulled her into a too-tight hug.

“Why thank you so much,” Emme said with the sweetest Texas twang, while grinning, and bless her heart for keeping her little left hand hooked into Carson’s elbow. There was his grandmother’s ring on full display, catching the lights—the ring I always thought would look perfect on me.

“Really, I couldn’t be happier for you both. Carson, where’d you find this gem of a woman?” My old Texas twang came back with a vengeance.

“Uh... we went to school with her, remember?” He shifted awkwardly on his feet.

“Well, only the last half of senior year,” Emme added with a laugh. “You probably don’t remember me what with the thick glasses and braces I had back then.”

It clicked. The shy girl we’d teased. She’d transformed—polished, glowing. Oh shit.

A woman called out for Carson, and I recognized her as Mama Goodson. We'd always gotten along, and I even convinced myself she wanted me to be married to one of her boys someday.

"We'd better go, honey. Time for speeches," Emme urged.

"Right. See you around, Lacey," Carson added quickly, following her like he needed to get far away from me. Like our previous years together meant nothing.

I stood there, stunned. That's when I realized—Hudson was still standing beside me.

"Look. You gonna be all right?" He asked, his voice low and deep and concerned, took me by surprise. Why would he care if I just drove thousands of miles only to find out my old best friend didn't believe in pinkie promises?

He handed me a beer, cap already off. I took it, grateful to have something cold to hold to ground me. "Why don't you stick around, Lace? There's plenty of food. Dancing later. I gotta give a speech, but I'll come check on you soon, okay?"

I couldn't answer. Couldn't meet his eyes. Couldn't think.

I stood there and watched as one by one, speeches were given. The crowd cheered for the pending union of Carson and Emme, which I gathered would be in another month. A rather quick wedding.

I didn't know what Hudson said during his speech, but after he finished, he headed my way until one of his brothers intercepted. My eyes darted from him to Carson to Emme and back, trying to make sense of it all.

My homecoming wasn't supposed to be like this. Like a fish out of water, I watched their world from afar—one I no longer belonged in. What the hell made me think I

could just waltz back in like I'd never left?

3

THREE BEERS AND A BAD IDEA

HUDSON GOODSON

The entire time I was obligated to partake of the family engagement festivities, I kept one eye on Lacey. That plastered smile was nothing more than a veiled attempt at hiding her true feelings, I could tell. I'm guessing she came back expecting to find Carson waiting for her.

Hell, that was exactly why I should ignore her. Even if her legs looked stunning under that dress, slender feet set in a pair of fancy leather flats she probably bought at some pricey store on Fifth Avenue.

Yep, just pretend she didn't exist. Even if I'd like to know what her manicured, painted pink nails would feel like raking down my back. Or her pink lips wrapped around my?—

"City girl visiting, huh? Can't imagine what the sight of her is doing to you," Anderson chortled, after I finished my speech. He offered me one of two beers in his hands, but I declined. I had originally intended to party hard tonight with my brothers to celebrate, but with Lacey's sudden appearance, I stuck to Coke.

"Don't read into this," I warned with a growl. Of all my brothers, he was the only one I'd ever confided in about my attraction to her. I think specifically I'd admitted to it in a game of fuck, marry, or kill one night when we were shooting the breeze after work. I'd named Lacey to marry. Now I hoped I didn't come to regret it.

He and I were the closest, just a year or so apart. That's how it was with all of us boys. Before our parents knew it, they had seven sons to raise. The Goodson house was eternally chaotic. Despite it, loving above all. We had our good times and bad, but we stuck together.

"Mama's pleased as punch," I observed as her laughter carried over to us at something Emme said.

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“She couldn’t be happier to bring a female into the fold. Even better that it was Carson, her baby boy. First of us to get hitched.” Anderson shook his head.

I poked him in the ribs. “Well, Doc, if you’d quit chasing away every nurse from your clinic with that serious brain of yours, you might have caught one and married her by now.”

“Nope. Not me. I’ve got a ten-year plan. Settling down isn’t on it for a while.” He didn’t fool me. I suspected he had a nurse servicing him plenty now and then. “Maybe Lacey showing up is yours sign. Make your move right, you could be next. You know Mama always loved Lacey like her own daughter.”

“Knock it off. I’m not chasing her to New York. My life is here. Besides, she’s never even thought of me that way.”

“Aha. So you admit that in the short span of time between her showing up tonight and now, you’ve thought a thing or two about her and this situation.” He guffawed, but I maintained my scowl.

Then I saw Lacey take off with a few beers in her arms, heading back down the path to her car.

“Shit. Why’d she have to go and do that?” I sighed.

“Steal our beers?” he asked. “How dare she? Should we go after her?”

“I don’t care about the beers. I care about her. For someone with a high IQ and

professional bedside manners, you lack people skills, you know that?” I shouldn’t say things like that considering the man was the smartest of all of us. Mama and I worked hard to support him through med school, and he was a huge benefit to the community.

“Says the guy the whole town calls the grumpy fireman,” he ribbed back. “So we’re not going after her?”

“You’re not. I am. I’ll make damn sure she doesn’t drink and drive.”

“Good thinking. Don’t need Branson pulling her over. Hell, he might be bold enough to steal her from you.”

“Shut it. Spread the word—none of our brothers better look Lacey’s way. Got it?”

I left him, ignoring his laugh, and his yelling after me. “Go get her, tiger!”

I moved close enough to keep an eye on her, but still visible to the party, so Mama wouldn’t chew me out for ignoring family responsibilities. Although I’d leave in a heartbeat if I could.

As the oldest, and as happy as I was for Carson, it didn’t sit right with me that my youngest brother would be the first to settle down. Hell, Carson barely got his shit together the past few years running the Java Company. If it weren’t for Emme getting a loan from her folks—arguably the richest family in town—I doubted Carson’s business would’ve stayed afloat.

Sure he loved her—no dispute. Just hoped he knew what he was getting himself into, mixing business and family like that.

Moonlight shone off the glass of a bottle in Lacey’s hand. As I suspected, she sat in

her car, drinking. Probably crying. That stabbed my gut, knowing after all this time she'd cry over Carson. It'd always been clear to me she loved him more than he loved her. Maybe now, seeing him with Emme, she'd get the hint.

I let her get through three beers before I intervened. She hadn't noticed my approach, and startled when I rapped on her driver's side window.

"Oh, Hudson? What do you want?" She swiped quickly at her face, as if I couldn't tell from her wobbling voice she'd been crying.

"Come on. Out. I'm driving you home," I ordered. As second in command at the firehouse full of men, I'd gotten used to barking orders. I opened her door and offered my hand.

She grabbed the door to pull it closed. "Thank you kindly, but I don't need your help."

As much as she tugged, my grip on the door held firm.

"Fight me all you want, Lacey Andrews. But you're not driving home in this condition. Now, give me those keys—please." I tried a softer approach.

"Nope."

"Don't make me call Branson over here. He'll arrest you before you even set out."

"Aw, how is Officer B? Still sneezy?" She snickered. The old joke in town about us seven Goodson boys, each being like one of the seven dwarves, got old and made my teeth grind.

"His allergies are under control. Now get your little ass outta that seat."

“Fine. It’s just a few blocks to Mom’s. I’ll walk.” She exited her hatchback and proceeded to tug at a bag and suitcase buried in the trunk. I sighed and came around behind her, giving the handle a good yank—too hard. The whole thing pulled free, and we tumbled backward.

Lacey landed on top of me, far too close to my family jewels. I groaned. Couldn’t help it. My cock had never been this near to Lacey before. I’d thought about it now and then—what it might be like inside her tight walls. The fantasy now ignited fully under the weight of her, thanks to sparks of electricity pinging between our bodies.

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She righted herself. I quickly did the same.

“Hudson Goodson, I don’t need your help.” Full of fire, she ran a hand over her hair to smooth it, then continued with her palms straightening out her dress, like a prim and proper city girl. But I could see the Texas chick inside of her still. Wonder what it’d take to wake that wild side of hers up again?

She grabbed her things and huffed away, stumbling across the parking lot. With her suitcase rolling beside her, she balanced a few bags on her shoulders, redistributing the weight, looking about to fall over.

“You really have been gone a while. Your mama’s house is this way.” I called after her and thumbed behind me.

She stopped, sighed loudly, and then she slumped over, head down, shoulders shaking. Her cries hit me hard and I ran toward her, but too late. She leaned too far on the handle of the case and it collapsed, sending her to her knees on the ground.

I scooped her up and carried her back to my truck. In my arms, her body weighed next to nothing. Too bad I wasn’t carrying her to my bed instead.

“Wha-what are y-you doing?” She sobbed, bringing her arms around my neck and holding onto me tight.

“Taking you home.” I opened the passenger door of Blue Betsy and deposited her gently on the seat. Then I ran back and collected her things from the middle of the parking lot and threw those into the back.

When I reached her side, her face scrunched as she swiped her tears away. “Why are you driving Carson’s truck?”

“Carson’s? It’s been mine for a few years. He needed money to start his shop, so I bought it.”

“He sold her to you? But... he loved this truck. He put so much time and effort into it.” She reached out, running a hand along the dashboard as if petting a loyal family dog.

“Shoot. Either you’ve had more to drink than I thought, or your memory’s bad. Who do you think taught him how to fix this thing up? I probably put in just as much—if not more—work into it. Couldn’t see letting this beauty go to someone outside of the family.”

Which was my problem in a nutshell. Couldn’t let go of my infatuation with Lacey, either.

Up until her sophomore year, I’d thought nothing of her. Just an irritating friend of my brother’s. Then I’d gone off to firefighter school in Austin and worked there a couple of years until I finally got a job at our hometown station.

The day I moved back, she and Carson were celebrating their eighteenth birthdays with a combined party at our house. Somehow, she’d blossomed into a gorgeous young woman. And a helluva lot less irritating.

I admired her for all of her talk about moving to a city, even more when she actually did it. Many people in this small town had dreams, very few fulfilled them. Yeah, she got my heart racing. But being years older, I ignored it. Not to mention, being Carson’s girl and best friend at the time, I wouldn’t dare pursue her.

How time changed everything... He moved on. She moved away. Even when she would visit her mom on rare holidays, they hung out, but just as friends. I asked him once about their relationship. He claimed no interest in her beyond friendship.

Now he'd popped the question to Emme, Lacey returned to town, and here I was, unattached, and undeniably bothered by the sight of her. But how would Carson take it if I pursued her? Hell, she probably wouldn't even want me if I tried.

In her seat, she tugged at the seat belt, but it wouldn't give. I stepped up on the sideboard. "Here. Let me do it. The old belt gets stuck now and then."

I leaned over her and buckled her in, to the sound of her breath catching. Her chest rose and fell. The creamy skin there called my name, as if begging to be touched.

"Thanks," she breathed.

"No problem, Lace."

"Hm. Besides my mother, you're the only one who ever called me that." Then she bit her lip and looked away.

I backed off before she could cry, or before I did something stupid to that bottom lip of hers, like capture it with my mouth. I shut the door and ran around to my side. All kinds of warnings went off in my head.

What the hell was I doing? Getting any closer to her would be a bad idea. What would Carson say? Besides, she said she'd be here for the summer. Not forever.

I needed to keep myself in check around her. I reached down to adjust myself before opening my door, because fuck if my cock didn't get the message.

CHAMOMILE AND CONFESSIONS

HUDSON

Good old BlueBetsy rumbled to life.

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Lacey smiled and inhaled deeply. “Love this truck. I’m glad you didn’t sell it,” she whispered, caressing the leather seat.

I knew she loved it. She used to bug us in the barn when I taught my little brother the basics of mechanics, trying to take Dad’s place once he wasn’t around. Every single time, she’d tell us how much the truck meant to her and how cool it was that Carson fixed it up.

Carson. It was always about him.

“This old town hasn’t changed one bit,” she said, watching the shops go by as we turned onto her street.

“Actually, the town population’s grown twenty-five percent, according to Poppy Daily. Might not sound like much, but down at the firehouse, we feel it. Cap grumbles about it, and Doc complains his clinic’s busier than ever. Even Branson says the officers are spread thin. More people means more emergency services needed. We should hire more folks, and the mayor’s trying, but the budget can’t keep up,” I explained.

Talk of budgets—boring but safe. Definitely nothing that screamed, I’d like to show you around the firehouse, especially give you a look at my big hose. Best I kept that to myself.

“Here we are,” I mumbled.

At the end of the cul-de-sac sat her family home. A small Victorian that had once

been pretty. But after the fire that claimed her father's life—and my dad's as well, both in the line of duty—it became harder for her and her mom to keep it up.

“That tree over there in the side yard is the one Mom and I planted in memory of Dad. Look how tall it is now.” She didn't move at first, her eyes sweeping over the lot, as if longing for days gone by. “Carson's done a great job keeping up this place. I'll have to remember to thank him.”

I snorted and got out. Carson. Carson. Carson.

I ran around to her side and opened the door. She ignored my hand, her eyes still far away.

I lugged her stuff up to the porch. She unlocked the door and walked in, tracing her fingers over objects as if they were memories come to life.

I heard her whisper, “Oh, Mom,” under her breath as I adjusted the thermostat.

“It doesn't even look dusty,” Lacey said, glancing over her shoulder like she half-expected Carson to be standing behind me. “He could hardly keep his room clean growing up. I didn't expect this level of detail when I asked him to watch the place while I was gone. I'm impressed.”

Her eyes were bright, and damn it if something in me didn't twist at the sight.

“Yeah. Must've been some real hard labor for him,” I replied, my tone as dry as the Texas heat outside. And dammit all to hell if her perfume hinting of lilacs didn't already fill the house.

I stood back while she took it all in. The attraction between us was like a one-way street from my body to hers. She didn't have a clue. Whatever. I wanted her

happy—even if it wasn't with me.

"This place is sacred to me. Why was I gone so long?" she whispered, fingers brushing the framed photos lining the walls.

She lingered over one of her and Carson, about twelve, sitting on a fence, all limbs and grins and cowboy boots. She probably didn't notice I was in the picture too, blurry in the background.

Suddenly, her shoulders shook again. A sob reached me and grabbed hold, forcing me toward her. My hands reached out, wanting—yearning—to hold her and promise her everything would be okay.

"Hey, Lace..." I struggled for words.

"No. I'll be fine. Just give me a minute," she cried, running down the hall to the bathroom.

With a heavy sigh at the door slamming closed, I pushed a hand through my hair. I should leave, like I always had—always watching her from afar. But I needed to make sure she'd be okay tonight.

I wasn't the guy who'd run out on a woman who'd drunk three beers and then bawled her eyes out in the bathroom. But I was still the coward who wouldn't say a damn word about my attraction to her, so I let my actions speak instead.

Moving through the kitchen with ease, I filled a kettle and set it on the stove. Found her favorite chamomile tea in the cupboard. I remembered Carson making it for her during the last visit after her mother had passed. I set two mugs on the counter and waited.

“Think I need something stronger than tea,” she snorted behind me, back sooner than I’d expected.

I turned to find her leaning in the doorway, red-eyed from tears but dry—for now. Wouldn’t surprise me if she cried herself to sleep once I left.

“Not sure that’s a good idea,” I said, cocking my head.

“No. You’re right. Tea it is.”

The kettle whistled. I fixed us both a mug with a splash of honey, no milk.

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“You remember how I take my tea?” Her voice was curious.

“Just like mine.” I handed hers over.

Our fingers tangled for a beat—accidental, but the sparks weren’t, at least on my end. The flush rising in her cheeks became my new favorite hue.

“It’s strange being back,” she said, eyes on the mug. “Everything fell apart the last time I visited.”

“No one can blame you. People grieve in different ways. None of us boys dealt with our dad’s passing the same. If anything ever happened to Mama...” I shook my head and hated to think of it.

Lacey had gotten through her mother’s funeral service, holding it together with a stiff upper lip. I remembered that day vividly. Afterward, at the reception here, guilt and grief had overwhelmed her. She downed a few glasses of her mother’s strong strawberry wine, and got into a fight with Carson who tried to stop her from making a scene.

He got frustrated and left with the girl he’d brought with him, which I suspected was the cause of their argument in the first place. Then she stood on a chair and got everyone’s attention, insisting on giving a toast.

What came out was a mess—ranting about her failures as a daughter, the town judging her for leaving, the life she thought she wanted in the big city.

It ended in her tears, and with me carrying her upstairs to her room, hoping to save her from further embarrassment. I had laid her on her bed and covered her with a quilt. I stroked her back and promised her she'd be okay until she feel asleep.

To this day, town gossips still talked about it: "Lacey got drunk and made a scene at her mama's wake."

"Why'd you come back now?" My voice softened.

"Everything fell apart in New York too."

"I'm sensing a pattern."

"I figured things would be different if I came back to Poppy Valley. Ready to try living here with..."

She didn't say Carson's name, but it hung there between us like the steam from our mugs.

"Yep. Definitely a pattern. Your life gets messy, you run, and you hope Carson will be here for you when you fall." I had her figured out now.

"No. That's not true. Not quite." She chewed her cheek and crossed her arms. My eyebrows lifted, calling her out. "Okay, maybe I did expect him to be here for me. But clearly, with Emme by his side, he won't be."

"And don't get any ideas about breaking them apart. Emme's a nice girl. She's done a lot for him. He's really matured because of her."

"Do you think I'd be the kind of woman to come between them? He made his choice." Under her breath, she muttered, "Apparently, our marriage pact meant

nothing to him.”

“Uh, say what now?” I almost choked on chamomile.

“It was a silly teenage thing. We pinkie promised that if we were both single at thirty, we’d marry each other. So much for that plan.” She shook her head.

“Wait. You two turn thirty this winter.”

“Exactly. But clearly Emme got to him first.” She sighed, tossing the rest of her tea down the sink. “So here I am. All alone in a big house filled with memories and regrets and no idea what to do with my life.”

“Hey. First of all, you’re stronger than you think. You’ll get through this.” She blinked up at me like I was the first man to truly see her. “And second, you’re not alone. I’m here, Lace. Reach out anytime you need me. Day or night. I’ll come running.” The words slipped out before I could stop them. Hersoulful brown eyes held mine across the kitchen, glassy, about to cry again.

Another second of this and I’d admit truths I’d kept locked up for years.

Instead, I watched the girl who was never mine slip away, sashaying toward the front door.

“You should head back to the party. To your family. Thanks for the ride, though.” She held it open.

Resigned that I’d done enough for now, I followed.

“Hey, Lace...” I turned at the top of the porch steps, catching her womanly silhouette in the dim light of the family room behind her.

“Yeah?”

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“I’m glad you’re back. I mean it. I’m here for you.” The moment stretched, too loaded for comfort, heavy enough to give me hope.

The way she looked at me was new, different, almost like I was an equation she couldn’t solve.

Maybe that was wishful thinking. But I took the steps by two, lighter in my boots.

At the truck, I peered up. “Wow. Check out these stars. Bet New York doesn’t have a view like this.”

She stepped down to the first stair and peeked, her laugh light on the summer breeze.

“Wow, is right. I forgot how many there are. In the city, too many bright lights cut off the view. I missed this sky.” As if the younger, carefree Lacey had returned, she bounded out to the yard where she twirled, arms outstretched, face tipped to the moon.

I didn’t have words for the beauty before me. Didn’t need them. Resolve slapped me upside the head.

I’d made my presence known to her, offered my help—and there was no going back.

If it took reminding her every single day what was here for her—andwho—I’d do everything in my power to convince her to stay.

With me.

Now and beyond this hot summer in Texas.

5

COFFEE AND COMPLICATIONS

LACEY

I stepped into Goodson's Java Co., and the scent of coffee beans nearly bowled me over like a tornado. The farmhouse interior fit well in this ranching community—old green tractor parts decorated the walls, surrounded by barnwood planks, dried floral arrangements, and black-and-white photos from around the region. Yellow-checked tablecloths under plastic brightened the dark wood tables, each anchored by honeycomb candles in mason jars.

Cute but not overdone. Just right—and surprising that Carson had put this together. He had help, I assumed... from Emme?

It had always been his dream to do something like this. And now here I was, stepping into it.

After last night's fiasco, I'd hoped we could talk. I simply wanted to catch up on life with my old friend—and thank him for everything he'd done at Mom's house.

Although, while I showered this morning, the towel bar pulled clean off the wall. Then I discovered a leak beneath the kitchen sink. And in the daylight, the pretty blue paint Mom had once used on the porch appeared worn and tired.

I didn't have a plan. But with a growing list of things to fix, I figured I could at least take care of them while I figured out my life. Maybe sell the place?

No. My stomach lurched at the thought.

As I cried myself to sleep last night, I came to terms with one thing: Carson had moved on. While I stayed away, he'd built a life here. Or maybe he'd never really been mine in the first place.

I still didn't know what the hell I was doing, but I could use a friend. Someone to talk to. I thought maybe Carson could still be that—assuming Emme didn't mind.

Or maybe I could befriend her too.

Yep. That'd be me—becoming their third wheel. The single friend they'd invite along on outings or try to fix up with others out of pity. Just great.

For a Saturday morning, the café buzzed. Half the dozen tables were filled. I spotted a few familiar faces from high school, but I definitely stood out in my New York style—black linen pants, heels, pin-tuck blouse, a sweater draped around my shoulders, silk scarf tying up my ponytail.

I slipped off my designer sunglasses—a bargain find I'd hunted for like buried treasure at a designer warehouse—and scanned the tables, hoping to spot Carson.

No luck.

I stepped to the counter and smiled at the young woman working there. Her name tag read Hailey, and I vaguely remembered her from high school choir—maybe a year or two behind me.

“Morning. Is Carson around?” I asked.

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She smiled apologetically. “He took the day off. He and Emme went out to the lake after the engagement party last night.”

Of course they did. The Goodson property bordered Poppy Lake—one of the most scenic spots in the county.

I forced a smile. “Good for them.”

The ache was sharp but brief. I wasn’t here to pine. Might as well get coffee.

“You’re Lacey, right? The whole town is abuzz about you showing up.”

“Oh?”

She lowered her voice, leaning closer. “Some say you’re here to take Carson back. Is that true?”

“Uh, no. Absolutely not.” I snorted, cheeks burning. I glanced at the menu to avoid tearing up. Before I could decide what to order, a deep voice rumbled behind me.

“She’s here to have coffee with me.”

I turned—and sucked in a breath.

Hudson.

He stood close. Solid. Calm. Dressed in his PVFD tee and camo pants, hands in his

pockets, hair slightly mussed as if he'd skipped a comb this morning.

Some men just had that kind of hair and all the more handsome for it. That was Hudson.

"How are you feeling today, after last night?" he asked.

If I were into firemen... well, he'd do it for me. But then I remembered—Dad had been one too. He'd served this town and lost his life for it. I was young when it happened, but I'd grown up with the hole it left behind.

"I'm fine," I said, summoning a smile. "Thanks again for helping me get home."

"Anytime."

I turned back to Hailey and the menu. Her brows were lifted, watching our exchange with interest.

"The caramel cinnamon latte is calling my name, I think," I ordered, and reached into my bag, searching for cash.

"Iced?" she asked.

"No, hot is fine. And to-go, please."

"I'll take the same. Here, this'll cover both," Hudson said, pulling out a bill before I could stop him.

"You don't have to?—"

"I got it." He cut me off with a sly grin, brushing past me to hand her the cash.

The feel of him so close, the warmth, the scent of clean soap—it hit me unexpectedly.

“The man’s got it,” Hailey said with a giggle, disappearing behind the counter.

I shook my head, fighting a smile. “What are the odds we’d order the same thing?”

“We have good taste.” He winked.

“Are you on shift today?” I asked, trying not to blatantly stare at the curve of his bicep.

“Yep. Twenty-four hours. Done tomorrow morning, then three days off.”

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“I remember that schedule. My dad’s was the same.”

He nodded. “Not much has changed at the firehouse—except Buxley’s cooking. He passed last year. New cook now. Younger guy who tries to make us eat healthy.” His lips twitched with humor, softening his whole face.

Hudson had nice eyes. Hazel. Warm.

“I’m sorry to hear about Bux. He was always so kind. After Dad died, he used to stop by and check on Mom.”

Hudson cleared his throat, sheepish. “Word around the firehouse was he had a thing for her.”

“A what?” I choked.

He chuckled and shrugged. “Just what we heard. Probably nothing to it.”

I blinked, stunned. But maybe I shouldn’t be. Mom had been lonely. She once told me she’d never remarry while I lived at home. Had I kept her from being happy?

Great. More guilt.

“Here we are—two lattes to go,” Hailey said cheerfully. “Now you two go on and enjoy your day together.”

The implication in her tone was clear. The gossips would have us paired off by

dinner.

“Thanks.” Hudson took both drinks and nodded toward the door. He held it open with one arm, and I stepped through, brushing past him again.

My stomach fluttered, but I chalked it up to hunger.

Surely it couldn’t be anything more.

He was Carson’s brother.

Carson was my ex long ago.

Anything more than friendship with Hudson would be...

Well, that would be just plain complicated.

6

PAINT BRUSHES AND PROMISES

HUDSON

I held the door open for Lacey and stepped out into the sunshine with her. We stood in the shade of the cedar tree by the sidewalk, leaning against the brick facade of the coffee shop.

“So, what’s your plan?” I asked.

She took a sip of her latte and gave me that long, searching look of hers. It always hit somewhere deep—like she saw more than she should.

“Hm. Are you asking about today or in general? Because believe me, I have nothing long-term figured out.”

“No one says you have to have your whole life mapped out, Lace.”

“Really? Because turning thirty feels monumental. Like I should have my crap together by now. I’m sure you had yours together when you turned thirty.”

I laughed softly. “If by ‘together’ you mean barely managing not to burn dinner and keeping my truck running, then sure.”

She smiled, and for a second, I could almost forget the years between us. Seven years wasn’t much. She was here now, standing in front of me, gorgeous as ever, and sipping coffee like a peer.

“You’re here for the summer. So take it one day at a time is my advice,” I suggested.

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“Right.” Her gaze drifted across the street to the hardware store. “I noticed some things that need fixing at the house. Not knocking what Carson did while I was gone, but the porch paint’s peeling something fierce. Figured I’d start there.”

I lifted a brow. “Porch paint, huh? That’s an ambitious first project.”

“How hard could it be?” She shrugged. “Loose towel bar, leak under the sink, flower beds overgrown, a few busted window screens. There are a lot of things that should keep me busy for a bit.”

I folded my arms and gave her a slow once-over. “You’re not planning to paint in those fancy linen pants, are you?”

She glanced down at herself. “Not ideal for home repairs?”

“Nope.” I grinned. “But you’re in luck. I’ve got a couple sets of painting overalls. I’ll swing by here in the morning. We can make a list, see what I can help with.”

Her eyes widened a little. “You’d do that for me?”

“Of course.”

“I don’t want to be a bother?—”

“You’re not.” I said it flatly, cutting her off. “You’d never be a bother to me.”

She hesitated, chewing on her bottom lip. “I can pay you. Not much, but?—”

“You think I want your money?” I gave her the grumpiest look I had in my arsenal.

“Do you even know how to fix things?”

“Who do you think Mama called when something broke after Dad passed?”

That wiped the teasing out of her eyes. My voice softened. “Speaking of, Sunday’s the anniversary of the fire. You thinking about going out to the cemetery?”

She shifted. “Eventually.”

“If you wait until Sunday, Mama’s having us all go after church. Come with us.”

“I don’t want to intrude.”

“Lace, come on. You’re practically family. Mama would love to see you.”

The clock on the square chimed, reminding me I needed to haul it or Cap would have my hide for being late.

“Pick up whatever supplies you need at the hardware store. Tell them I said you can charge it to my account. We’ll work on the house together,” I instructed.

“Okay. I could use all the help I can get.”

I tipped my head. “Then I’ll see you in the morning, Lace.”

I raced to the station and found our small crew gathered in the kitchen. I dropped my gear and handed my untouched coffee to Presley, who had a sweet tooth and a caffeine addiction to match—and a crush on Hailey.

“You’re not gonna drink it?” he asked, already popping the lid and reaching for the sugar on the counter.

“Nah. Ordered it by mistake while I was meeting someone for coffee.”

He smirked, and knew me all too well as one of my best friends. “Someone being a certain pretty brunette back in town?”

I didn’t answer, just grabbed a mug and poured a cup of strong black firehouse roast. I didn’t bother with cream or sugar.

“She’s lookin’ good,” Presley said casually. “The whole town’s buzzing about you taking her home last night.”

“So I’ve heard. No comment.”

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He laughed and wiggled his brows. “I’m sure I’ll get it out of you when we’re out fishing tomorrow. A few beers in, you’ll tell me all about what really happened last night.”

Shit. I forgot about that.

Cap came out of the office and barked. “You ladies going to hang out in the kitchen all day or get those firetrucks washed?”

“Nothing happened. Not yet. And about tomorrow... can’t. I promised Lacey I’d help her with some home repairs.” I put a lid on my coffee and headed back downstairs to the trucks. Presley followed.

“Aha. So you admit there’s more to the story?” He hounded me, but I refused to say another word about it. Partly because I needed to keep busy and stop thinking about Lacey in order to survive this shift.

Before lunch, I was still scrubbing bug guts off the bumper of our biggest rig when Carson’s truck pulled up. He climbed out looking like hell, which was saying something for a guy who usually had it all together.

In the family, we called him the charmed one. The baby of us who could get away with anything, and who always managed to come out on top.

I shut off the hose and dropped the scrub brush into the bucket, wiping my hands on my pants. “Everything okay?”

He shoved his hands into his pockets and shrugged. “Emme and I fought all night.”

“About?”

“Lacey.”

I frowned. “Why?”

“Emme wanted to know everything—our past, why Lacey was back, and all the rumors that flew around the party last night. Accused me of hiding things from her.”

“Were you?”

“No. We both dated plenty of people before we got together, and we didn’t exactly give each other all the details. I’m not sure why Lacey’s appearance suddenly made her spiral.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “We’re okay now, I think. But I wanted to check in with you. I, uh... know you drove Lacey home last night. Did she say anything?”

I crossed my arms. “About you? Not a word. She’s happy for you and Emme, though.” I might have stretched the truth a bit.

“I could tell my engagement came as a shock to her. I think she always thought we’d end up together someday.”

“Clearly you thought otherwise.”

“Right. So, do you think she’ll be okay? Maybe I should stop by and talk with her for old times’ sake?”

“She’s a grown woman, Carson. She doesn’t need you watching over her.” I’d like to

think she needed me. I'd spend this summer convincing her of that. "Tell you what, you worry about things with your bride-to-be, and I'll worry about Lacey. Deal?"

His gaze dropped. "I love Emme, but she's been on edge since her dad gave me the loan. And with the wedding planning, she's stressed. Things have been—stressful."

I tensed and shook my head. "Not sure mixing money issues with your soon to be new family is a good idea."

He sighed. "I needed help to get the café out of debt. I was stretched too thin, and her dad offered. It's been weird between me and her family ever since. Like I owe them something more than I already do."

I clenched my jaw. I'd been saving my money for years. I knew he was having trouble, and I'd already helped him launch this thing by buying Blue Betsy. That had made me hesitate to loan him more. If I'd moved faster, offered to help, he wouldn't be tangled up in Emme's family strings. That was on me.

As the oldest, I'd always taken on the protector roll for each of my brothers. Would do anything for them. A part of me feels like I let him down, although Mama tells me to let him be.

"I wanted to be sure that Java Co. would be on solid ground before we married," Carson added. "I'd never do anything to hurt Emme. I don't want this to come between us."

"I know," I said.

"And Lacey's just a friend. Always has been."

I nodded. "Glad you're clear on that, because you never know if she might meet

someone in town and settle down. How would you feel about it if she did?”

“Fine. As friends, I’d want her to be happy. Still, I should stop by and check in on her.”

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“Sounds like she’ll only be here for the summer while she figures some things out. I’m going to help her with repairs at the house. It’s probably best you give her space. Besides, you’re getting hitched next month. You’ve got enough on your plate with Emme and the wedding. So don’t worry, I can make sure Lacey is okay.”

He stared up at the sky and let out a long breath. I hoped the agony I perceived in him would go away. “You’re right. I’m glad I talked to you about this. Thanks.”

“Anytime. I’m always here for you.”

He gave me a final nod and walked back to his truck.

As I picked the hose back up, I couldn’t help but feel some of the weight in my chest lighten. Carson was in love with Emme. That wasn’t changing. He only thought of Lacey as a friend. But I didn’t dare let on yet that I could be something more to her.

Whether I wanted to admit it or not—every single time my eyes set on Lacey, something stirred inside of me where it hadn’t in years. I didn’t think I could ignore it any longer.

7

GOSSIP AND GUMPTION

LACEY

By the time I hit my third stop in town, I wanted to pack my car and forget I’d ever

come back to Poppy Valley.

The clerk at the hardware store gave me a once-over, like chic designer clothes meant I didn't know what a paintbrush was. At the grocery store, two women I vaguely remembered from school whispered loudly as I felt the options for a ripened avocado.

"Lacey must think she's better than us, waltzing in from New York like a shiny penny."

"I heard she forced Carson into promising to marry her by thirty if neither were attached."

"Well, clearly he thought little of it and proposed to Emme. If I were Lacey, I'd never be able to show my face in town again."

"She always did have a thing for drama." That one looked me dead in the eye as she said it when I rounded the produce aisle.

I didn't flinch. My spine stiffened and I stood taller, as if my silk scarf was armor instead of a flighty accessory from the clearance bin at H & M on Fifth Avenue.

By the time I returned to my car, nerves had me shaking. That familiar weight of being misunderstood, and not goodenough, hit me like an old friend. Well, I'd escaped this small-minded town once before. I could do it again.

I floored it home, and after I carried in the paint cans and groceries, I could no longer hold my chin up. I sagged against the cabinet like the weight of the world had followed me home and where it still smelled like Mom. Even now I could discern her floral scent from the dust like she was just here yesterday, as if snapdragons or lilies grew wild in here.

“I miss you so damn much it hurts.”

The pain ripped through my heart. There was no way I could face this town, the house—visit the cemetery. I flew down to my room and pulled out my suitcases. I stuffed my clothes in, not bothered to fold them nicely.

The cases bulged and wheels squealed along the floor of the hall. I left them there and sat down on the old, creaky stool by the island and opened my phone. My thumb hovered over a message to Archer, the most sensible person—friend?—I had in New York.

Lacey: Maybe I should come back. I’m not sure there’s anything left for me here. Job offer still stands?

I hadn’t hit send yet when a knock on the screen door startled me.

I turned and blinked. “Mama Goodson?”

She smiled, soft and warm, holding a basket of baked goods in her arms like she’d stepped out of a Southern welcoming committee.

“Hi baby girl. You gonna just stand there and let my knees give out on your porch?” Her thick twang as soulful as Mom’s, and the size of her about the same as well, my eyes betrayed me at first. My heart lurched wishing for a hug, for strong arms and a warm bosom to lay my head on, belonging to a woman who had lived through it all and had the stories to tell about it.

I batted away a few stray tears and moved quickly, opening the door. “Sorry. Come in, please.”

She breezed in and hugged me tight. Yep. Her soft chest smelled like cinnamon and

the same perfume she wore the day of my mother's funeral. Mama Goodson had been Mom's best friend, and like a second mother to me.

"You look thin and pale," she said, pinching my cheeks for color. "You eating enough? Don't tell me you're one of them fancy girls up north who starves themselves to fit into the latest fashion."

"I just get busy. A lot on my mind."

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“Well, sit and get busy eating this muffin. Still warm.” She tempted me, placing the basket on the table. As I sat, she shoved a napkin before me and produced the most plump blueberry muffin I ever saw. My mouth salivated. Never in my years of New York had anyplace produced a muffin of this monumental size, or as tasty.

I swallowed the first bite along with a lump in my throat. “Thank you. Really.”

She settled into one of the kitchen chairs like she’d always do when visiting Mom. She looked around the place, and poked a finger at the suitcases nearby.

“You still haven’t unpacked yet? My word, your clothes will be all wrinkled. Need my help? I think I recall where your mama kept the iron?—”

I caught her hand with mine. “No, please. I was just about to do that when you knocked. Just sit and visit. It’s so good to see you.” Giving her plump hand one more pat I let it go.

“You holding up okay?” She asked, paired with bright blue eyes that could probably see right through me.

“I’m trying.” I sank more into the seat. “It’s been a lot.”

She nodded knowingly. “Coming home often is. Especially when folks are too small-minded to welcome someone back with grace.”

I froze. “So you’ve heard all the rumors,” I whispered, keeping an eye on the muffin as I picked at the edges with my nails.

“Honey, this town’s had a gossip problem since before I was born. It’s not you—it’s them. Always something. Last month, they were busy ripping up poor Jasmine over her salacious divorce from the mayor. Now they’ve moved on to you. Next week will be somebody new.”

My chest clenched. “Please believe me. I didn’t come here to mess with Carson or Emme. I would never do that.”

She waved it away. “I know that. So does Carson, I’m sure. That boy has a good head on his shoulders, and Emme’s there for him. Even if right now she’s a little high-strung, bless her heart. It’s her wedding nerves talkin’, and helping Carson keep that business running ain’t no easy task.”

“I just hate feeling like I’m the town villain.”

“You’re not. Far from it. People just love to chit chat over drama, blowing things way outta proportion.” She pushed the muffin on the napkin closer to me. “You’re just a girl who lost her mama. You came home to figure some things out, which was a good idea, by the way. Let me get some butter for that muffin.”

She rose and didn’t let the suitcases stand in her path. With her strong arms she plucked them up and carried them to my room.

“Guess I’m staying,” I muttered under my breath, with a twitch of my lips. Mama knew exactly what she was doing. A few minutes later, after rifling through my grocery bags and putting most of the items away, she returned with fresh butter and a knife. She proceeded to cut the muffin into four bits and slathered them.

“Mom always said everything was better with butter.”

“And she was right.

My eyes stung again, but I managed not to cry.

“Now. Hudson tells me he’s coming by in the morning to help you fix the place up?” Again, she pushed the napkin closer to me. For her sake, I took a big bite, and offered a well-deserved moan at the goodness of it.

When I could speak again, my brows lifted. “He told you that?”

“He tells me plenty,” she said, with a knowing twinkle in her eye. I literally just left him a couple of hours ago, and he already told his mother? “That boy’s been carrying this family on his back since his daddy died. Hudson took over as the head of our house. Don’t know what I would have done without him.”

Her smile turned misty. “You know he worked a second job just to send Anderson money when he was struggling through med school? Paid Branson’s Police Academy application fee without ever saying a word. Fixed up every one of their old beat-up trucks, even taught Dawson and Lawson how to weld.”

I blinked. “I had no idea.” I never thought about everything he must have been going through after his dad died when we were younger, considering anytime he was stuck having to watch Carson and I he did it with a scowling face.

“Hudson never wants credit. Refuses the spotlight. You’ll never know a more steady man. The kind who puts family first. He’d make someone a damn fine husband and father someday. But he’s not getting any younger.”

Suddenly, my stomach twisted. I knew her game. I couldn’t have Carson, so she was throwing me the next best thing.

She reached across the table and patted my hand. “You’ve been through a lot, Lacey. And I don’t pretend to know what your future looks like. But keep your eyes open,

sweetheart. The right man might not be the one you thought you'd end up with."

I got up from the table, holding my sides. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry at this point. I stopped at the first photo in the hallway.

"The last few months of her life, your mama insisted on changing out those photographs. Poured through her albums, searching for the right ones."

"Hm. Yes, so many of Carson and I through the years."

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“If you look closer I think you’ll see so much more.” She stood and pressed her cotton dress down the front of her, as I scrunched my face trying to figure out what she meant. “Well, I should go. I have a committee meeting up at the ladies auxiliary.”

After another big hug that I relished, she left a few minutes later, making me promise to eat, and to be there at the cemetery this weekend. I waved from the porch until she was out of view, then plunked down on the first step. In the afternoon heat, I watched the shadows grow long, unable to move for some time. Thinking. Overthinking. Crying.

Finally, I moved into the house and unpacked. And ate. Everything Mama Goodson told me do. I even looked at the photos of Carson and I and saw nothing more. Whatever.

Exhausted, I curled up on the couch in pajama pants and a tank top, half a pint of mint chocolate chip melting in my lap, watching an old movie I didn’t even like. Until a knock came at the door.

I wasn’t expecting anyone. My hair was a mess and there was melted ice cream on my top. Hopefully it wasn’t Carson finally coming to see me at my finest.

But when I opened the door, it was Jasmine.

My old best-friend-who-wasn’t-Carson.

She looked just the same, save for a few more laugh lines around her eyes, but still held that wild sparkle I remembered from our senior year. Her jeans were tight, shirt

cropped showing an envious midriff, fancy cowboy boots, and her grin was pure mischief.

“I heard you were back.” We hugged hard, both shrieking, tilting each other side to side. “Don’t you look amazing, by the way.”

I pointed at my shirt. “Yep, that’s me. In the latest loser fashion.”

“And you’re giving the gossips exactly what they want.” She stepped inside, plopping onto the couch, and crossed one leg over the other. “Do you really want to do that?”

“No. This sucks.” I landed beside her.

“Don’t I know it? In a way I should thank you. My divorce from Mayor Dickhead-who-can’t-keep-it-in-his-pants has been fodder for far too long. Thanks to you and your fresh scandal, the gossip train has officially left my station. Now you carry the torch. So guess what?”

I blinked. “What?”

“We’re going out. You and me. Painting this town just like old times. I hear one too many drinks calling our name down at the old Whiskey Shack.”

“I don’t think I’m in the mood?—”

She held up a hand. “Shush. No excuses, now. I’ve been hiding long enough. This town needs a reminder that I’m still standing. And I’m bringing you down to hell with me, darling.”

I full-belly laughed, the first real one in some time. “Oh my God. I missed you.”

“Missed you too, sweetie, now come on, get fancy,” she said. “Let’s show them who they’re messing with.”

“Fine,” I said, standing up and tossing the ice cream pint in the trash. “Let’s give them something to talk about.”

And maybe I could start caring less about the whispers... and more about what—or who—I really wanted.

8

BOOTS AND BREAKDOWN

HUDSON

Branson called, waking me from an exhausted sleep. I was still on shift, it was way past midnight, and my crew and I had spent the past three hours looking for a missing man with Alzheimers after his wife reported a fire at their house. We found him, doused the flames, and did our jobs.

“This better be good,” I groaned into the phone.

“Come get your girl from the Whiskey Shack, or else she’s going to have to spend the night at my jailhouse suite. And as nice as those accommodations are, I’m betting you wouldn’t want that,” Branson yelled into the phone. In the background, I could hear loud country music playing.

“My girl?”

“Yeah. Anderson told me you were hot for Lacey.”

I slapped a hand to my forehead. “Fucking Doc, how in the world can he be so good at Doctor-Patient Confidentiality but so bad at keeping his own brother’s secrets?”

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“You coming or not? Because as much as she’s gorgeous dancing on top of the tables, the manager is pretty pissed about it.” I heard men in the background whistling at her, breaking my eardrums in the phone.

I jumped from my bunk as if flames were shooting out of it. “I’ll be there in ten.” I woke Presley and told him about the emergency and left as quickly as I could.

The Whiskey Shack sat about five miles outside of town, far enough away for most people in the valley to ignore, close enough to still be a nuisance. Like your typical dive bar, neon signs filled every window, and inside was dark and likely dirty. You wouldn’t dare eat off of it’s floor. And I did not like seeing a few motorcycles from a local gang parked out front.

Inside, my eyes adjusted and located Lacey right away. Long gone were her prissy city clothes. The small town cutie came out to play in cutoff shorts, and a blue halter top. Her white boots stomped on the table top as she danced, with a few admiring onlookers. Beyond her I could see Reed shaking his red face. It was bad enough he had to put up with the local bikers causing trouble in his bar on occasion, but a single drunk girl like her?

“How in the hell did this happen? When I left Lacey this morning, she seemed to have her shit together,” I asked Branson.

“According to some of the patrons here, she waltzed in with Jasmine Jones,” he explained.

“The mayor’s wife?” I scrunched my face and did not care for this one bit.

“Soon to be ex-wife. Apparently the two were drinking buddies, causing a ruckus, and dancing and such. Only when things got out of hand, Jasmine knew when to leave. And she left Lacey behind.”

“Some friend.” I snorted and marched over to Lacey. “Hey darlin’. Looks like you’re having a good time.”

“Hudson! Did you come to dance with me?” She fell to her knees, continued to gyrate her hips, pouting. “No one wants to have fun with me. I’m a prin—no, a piranha.”

“You are no such thing.”

“Then you’ll dance with me right? C’mon, let’s give them somethin’ to talk about...” She slurred her words and stood again and shook her ass in front of my face, and a part of me liked the show—er, but no. This wasn’t good.

“Branson, how about you do your job and get her the hell outta here? Put her in your drunk tank for the night,” Reed yelled.

“Not happening. We like the show,” one big ugly biker fucker hollered back, and sat too close to the table, licking his lips, eyes following her. He made a move to reach out and touch her leg, but I intercepted.

“Keep your grubby paws to yourself, or you’ll have me to deal with,” I scowled at him. Branson crossed his arms and glared at him, coming to my aid.

He backed off quickly.

I reached my hands up to her. “Hey Lace, come on down here and we can dance. I’ll show you my moves.”

She took me by surprise jumping off the table and landing in my arms without warning. I caught her though, and rushed for the door, the bikers shouting behind me. As we stepped outside I heard Branson use his voice of authority to shut them down.

I knew he'd be fine. No one messed with Branson, not only because he was the best officer in town, but because he was a Goodson. We'd all watched out for each other over the years and got into plenty enough scraps that proved we could handle ourselves in a bar brawl.

"Wee. I like you carrying me." Lacey flung her arms over her head. "Give me a ride around the parking lot. Pretty please?"

"Time to slow down there, young lady. Gotta get you home."

"You're not fun, Hudson. I came here to have a good time. You're ruining it."

Not true. I knew how to have a great time with a woman. Not like this though. And no way would I let Lacey make a fool of herself anymore than she already had.

"Are you kidding me? You had a ton of fun from what I heard. Hell, you closed the bar down. Now it's time to go home." I appeased her, and put her inside of Betty. I grabbed the seatbelt, but she yanked it from me.

"Stop. I can do this myself. I've been fine on my own. All by myself," she complained, tugging the seat belt over and over but it wouldn't budge. On the fourth tug she yanked the entire belt mechanism clear off of the frame. She gasped, holding it up the blue belt and silver clasp in front of her. "Oh no. I hurt Betsy. I'm so sorry Hudson. I didn't mean to," her words ran out in slurred, shaky cries.

"It's fine. Nothing I can't fix," I griped and pulled the belt from her hand, setting it on the floorboard. Just another thing to add to my list of things to do.

She hunched over, her face in her hands. “I’m a mess. All alone. I miss Mom and Carson. I have no one...” She blubbered on, the alcohol talking for her.

Now I was upset. I shoved away and paced, running a hand through my hair.

“You got me, Lacey. Jesus, if you’d just open your beautiful eyes and realize I’ve been here the entire time. But you don’t want me. I’m older than you, and you probably don’t even think I’m anything to look at. Carson was always the “cute one” you could never see past. I’m grumpy and fight fires for a living. Hell, you probably think I could never even measure up to those men in suits and penthouses back in the city that you’ve been dating?—”

Lacey suddenly fell over sideways onto the seat, passed out. My shoulders drooped. Even if she heard any of that, she’d probably forget every word by morning.

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I sighed and shut the door. With a protective hand on her, I drove to her place. I unlocked the front door first, then I carried her in, kicking the door closed behind us. I laid her on her bed, and took off her boots, allowing my eyes at least a slow crawl up her body. I'd give anything to spend the night beside her and know what she feels like there in my arms.

Instead, I covered her with a quilt, kissed her cheek, and whispered, "Good night, sweet thing."

In her kitchen, I texted Presley and then Cap to let them know the situation. Cap said he'd cover me for the rest of my shift so that I could stay and watch over her all night.

Worried she might wake up throwing up, I couldn't leave her. And in the morning, I didn't know what it would bring—but if she gave me the slightest chance, I'd show her I could be the man she never saw coming.

9

BACON AND BLUFFING

HUDSON

The unmistakable scent of sizzling bacon hit first, luring me out of sleep as if it were fish bait and me, the fish. I cracked open one eye. Still in Lacey's bedroom, and...ouch. I stretched, my back and neck cracking after sleeping sprawled half-sideways in a wooden chair that had definitely not been designed for a big guy like me to sleep in. I wiped my eyes and face. Judging by my wet chin, my drooling must

have made quite the impression because she wasn't here.

Her bed, the one I'd tucked her into way too late last night, was empty, and would have been a more comfortable option for both of us to sleep in. But how to convince her of that?

The quilt had slipped down one side, the pillows dented, and for a split second, I wondered if she'd slipped out to dance on another table. But then came the other scent—coffee, calling me to rise and face this woman.

I staggered into the kitchen, rubbing the crick in my neck, and wondered how the hell she was functioning like a human this morning after passing out.

There she was, standing at the stove in an oversized t-shirt. Her legs were bare like she had nothing on underneath—a fact I'd like to confirm. She'd piled her hair high on her head in that messy-perfect way some women pull off without even trying. The entire picture woke up my cock in a very good way—except the shirt happened to be Carson's old high school football shirt.

My jaw clenched. What the actual hell? Only when she turned and smiled at me, my entire world shifted. My heart stuttered at the effect this woman had on me and she didn't even know it.

"He has risen," she said, casting a huge grin like a spell on me, and wielding a spatula like it was a magic wand. "Coffee's fresh. Bacon's crispy. I'm hungry, and yes, I cooked enough for two. You're welcome."

I blinked at her, stepping cautiously into the room. "You're awake."

"Observant. They teach you that in fireman 101?" She winked with a sly glance sideways at me as she returned to tending the bacon

“I stand corrected. You’re awake and cheerful despite the fact you drank half the bar last night.”

“Three quarters.” She tossed me a goofy smile over her shoulder. “And don’t worry, I already hydrated, downed an ibuprofen, and did some yoga. Also, I never get hangovers when I drink.” She poured coffee into two mugs, and then, before I could stop her, she dropped heavy cream and sugar into both—correction, make that caramel cream.

“Considering I’ve seen you drunk twice in a few days, I’m wondering if you make this a habit?” I asked, worried if I really knew her at all anymore.

“Turns out I’m only an alcoholic when I come back to town and I’m put under scrutiny for everything I do.”

“Good to hear. Although you might want to slow down or else they’ll add ‘town lush’ to the list of gossip.” I advised and accepted the coffee she handed me. One small sip and I hid my wince. Nothing against sugary sweet things, but I needed my strong, black mug of Joe.

She leaned back against the counter. “If you think you can stand my cooking, then let’s eat. Go sit and I’ll bring a plate over.”

“Thought I’d find you curled around the toilet this morning.” I sat at the breakfast nook table.

She laughed and set our plates down, taking a seat across from me. “Well, I suppose I owe you a round of thanks for just about everything from the moment I stepped foot in Poppy Valley. And, you know, saving me from death by poor decisions last night. What a gentleman, too, only removing my boots.”

“What kind of country gent do you think I am? I wouldn’t take advantage of a woman who was passed-out drunk. Nope. I prefer to wait until you’re sober and thinking clearly.”

“You wish.” She giggled, and it reached her eyes, crinkling at me, while taking her first bite of bacon. And I did wish... for many things with her.

I took another drink of coffee, tolerating the sweetness poisoning my tongue. “You gonna tell me what that was all about last night?”

Her smile faltered. “I couldn’t go anywhere yesterday without people whispering and judging. Saying I came to town to break up Carson and Emme. It’s exhausting, Hudson. I sat here and hid away until Jasmine showed up and convinced me to go out. I guess I needed to feel seen.”

“I saw you last night in those cutoff shorts,” I muttered.

“Oh yeah? Get a good eyeful of me dancing?”

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“Maybe. You looked like a woman determined to find trouble.”

She waggled her eyebrows. “The fun kind?”

“Debatable.” I wiped my hands on the napkin. “If I hadn’t walked in when I did, the bikers might have been all too willing to take advantage of you.”

“Like I said before... thank you for saving me.” She added a strip of bacon to my plate, reducing her portion, like some kind of reward for being the hero. “Still, I regret nothing. Except for breaking Betsy’s seatbelt. Sorry about that.”

“You remembered? Is there anything else you remember?” I wiped my plate clean of the egg yolk with my last half of toast, hoping she might recall my monologue before she passed out. Only she shook her head.

“I cried right? I was pretty upset about these rumors going around. In fact, I almost left yesterday, back to New York. Except your mama stopped by to talk with me. Convinced me to stay. Even carried my suitcases back to my room.”

Thank God for Mama. I swallowed hard. “You always going to run when things get hard?”

“I don’t mean to. Just... things happen.”

“You need to stop running, Lace.”

“If you could find a way for people to keep their noses out of my business, I might.”

“Speaking of rumors... People probably recognize Blue Betsy out front. If people see me leaving your house this morning?—”

“They’ll jump to conclusions and think you’re doing the walk of shame,” she groaned and buried her face in her hands.

“Would that be such a bad thing? Besides, I’m not sure I’d feel one bit of shame after a night with you.”

“Oh, Hudson, this isn’t a time to be funny,” she scoffed.

I wasn’t trying to be.

“Although...” She suddenly got a crazy look in her eyes, chewing her cheek. “What if people did see you leaving, us walking hand in hand to your truck? Maybe they’d start talking about us instead of Carson and me. Shift the narrative, get the gossips going in a different direction.”

“Come again?” I narrowed my eyes at her.

“It makes total sense. You’re single, right?”

“Last time I checked.”

“I’m single. So...”

“What are you suggesting, exactly?” I shook my head, unsure of where this was headed.

“A distraction. You already said you’d help me fix up the house. We’re going to be spending some time together. People will naturally assume something is going on

between us. Why not lean into it?”

“Lean in—?” I crossed my arms. She wanted to use me as bait. I wasn’t sure whether to be offended or... intrigued. “You want people to think we’re a couple.”

“Not forever. Just long enough to shut down the worst of the gossip. It’s a perfect plan.” She stood to clear the plates, stepping so close to me I could reach out if I wanted, run my hands up her thighs and strip that t-shirt off of her. “It wouldn’t be that hard to pretend you like me, would it?”

I met her gaze head-on, letting the tension simmer. She was playing a game. Problem was, I didn’t want to play. Not unless I could win. And the prize would be her.

“Here’s the thing, Lace,” I said slowly. “I don’t like pretending. Not about this. Not with you.”

Her hopeful smile dropped, and she rushed away with the dishes to the sink. Shit. I’d do just about anything for her, but this? Although I couldn’t stand to see her sulking, and the thought of her suitcases being at the ready to leave anytime didn’t sit well either.

I could have her now, pretending to be something we weren’t. Or not have her at all. Or keep hoping she came to her senses and saw what we could be together, eventually. Maybe both—pretend with her and then convince her I wasn’t pretending.

Yeah. That last one could be a good plan.

I sauntered up beside her, resting my palms on the counter, and sighed as she did the dishes. “I can’t believe I’m going to agree to this.”

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She gasped and turned off the faucets, facing me with a grin. “You are? Oh, Hudson?—”

“But under one condition, for now, maybe more conditions later.”

“Name it. Anything.”

I faced her and tugged at the t-shirt at her waist. “You don’t wear anything Carson gave you or anything with his name on it while we’re together.”

She dropped her eyes, fingers fiddling with the hem of the shirt. “This old thing—er, guess that is a little weird for you. Do you think we should let Carson in on our plan?”

“He has Emme. Shouldn’t matter.” It probably would matter and require a lengthy discussion with him.

“But isn’t there some kind of bro code between you seven about not dating each other’s exes?”

She’s right. There had been, thanks to the twins. When Lawson and Dawson were in school, they’d fought over the same girl. We’d all established a rule right then about it.

“I’ll have a talk with him and let him know about you and me.” When she started to protest, I put my hands up. “He’ll be fine. Leave it to me.”

“If you’re sure, then this could work. Either that or it’ll cause more trouble.” She snorted and rolled her eyes.

“Like I said earlier, you are trouble, woman.”

She stared at me for a moment like I saw the real Lacey. Then she reached up and pressed a kiss to my cheek.

“And you like it. I’ll bet you lived a totally boring life before I came back to town.” She hummed to herself as she finished up washing the dishes and I dried.

I kept the smile to myself about what a spark she lit in my life. I didn’t know where this was headed, but I wasn’t about to waste my shot to get to her.

“Well, I need to return to the station and close out my shift. I’ll be back to tackle that porch painting with you before lunch, though. Ready to walk me out, head held high, hand in hand, and smile at anyone looking?”

“Yep. Give me one minute.” She rushed down the hall to her room, then exited a moment later wearing a yellow sundress. My pulse skyrocketed. The bright fabric fell just to her knees and held on only by thin spaghetti straps on her shoulders. Every inch of her creamy skin, for now, belonged to me.

She was the sun, born of light, and I was the moon. I’d follow her, set and rise on her. And soon make her mine.

“Nice dress,” I breathed, and held out my hand for her.

“I figured something bright would catch attention. Have to make this look good.” She shrugged it off like it was nothing. But that dress meant something.

Hand in hand, together we took the plunge and stepped outside. She gave quite a performance, practically skipping beside me, waving hello to a neighbor out jogging. She also yelled, “Hey there!” to another. And yet another dragged out their trashcan to the curb and waved back at us.

Little did she know I had my own performance to give. One I’d only been fantasizing about until now.

“Beautiful day,” she remarked at the truck, lifting her chin to the sky, soaking in the sun on her face. I reached up and pressed a lock of hair behind her ear. My hand cupped her neck, my thumb landing on her racing pulse. Breathlessly, she said, “Wow, you’re really selling this.”

“Not a hard sell when the only beautiful thing I see is you,” I growled, and leaned in. Her breath hitched, but she didn’t pull away when my lips landed on hers. Soft. Sensual.

And I was just warming up.

I deepened it a little. Enough for her lips to part on a sigh and for mine to press firmer. No rush. No pressure.

Her hand curled around my wrist, steadying herself. Her tongue tasted like sunshine and sweetened coffee and something I’d been craving for far too long.

When I finally pulled back, her lashes fluttered open, and she blinked at me, lips slightly parted, pink and breathless.

“Well,” she said, voice husky, cheeks flushed, “if we’re trying to convince the town, that was a solid start.”

I cocked a brow. “Solid?”

“Seven out of ten. Maybe nine.”

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She laughed it off, escaping from my arms and running back up to the porch.

“Don’t worry,” I yelled, smiling at the neighbor across the street, who was definitely watching. “I’ve got more where that came from.”

She waved. “Didn’t know you were so cocky, Hudson.”

“You do now.”

To the town, we probably looked like two flirty idiots playing a summer game.

But to me?

That kiss wasn’t a performance.

And I had no intention of pretending.

10

GLIMPSES AND GLANCES

LACEY

Hudson had a few days off and dedicated them to helping me fix up Mom’s porch—thank God. The old Victorian had a nearly wraparound one that ran all the way across the front and half way up both sides of the house. The job would have taken me much longer without him.

Day one was sanding day, which meant little time for talking thanks to the constant, ear-buzzing hum of the sander. But that didn't stop us from sharing our favorite music shared in our earbuds.

We both seemed to have a penchant for country from oldies and greatest hits to songs of today. I sang my heart out to The Judds. He countered with Tim McGraw. By mid-afternoon, when we finally unplugged the sanders and a Shania Twain track came on, he took me by the hand and spun me into the yard.

I never knew he had moves like that—twirling me in and out, two-stepping like he was born to dance. I laughed like I hadn't in ages. He may even have cracked new laugh lines he didn't know he had.

Mrs. Blevenda Jones, the retired high school biology teacher next door, gawked through her kitchen window, and Hudson, cool as ever, tipped her a salute with his old Poppy Valley High School baseball cap. Then he turned it backwards, leaned in, and kissed my cheek... and didn't stop there with the surprisingly sexy moves.

His lips found the shell of my ear, then trailed to my neck—sweet, slow-burn, panty-melting kisses that were supposed to be for show but left a lingering heat long after they ended.

Dang he was good at putting on this act in front of others.

And how long had it been since I'd had any man showering me with affection like this? Even if only pretend, the butterflies awakened within me, fluttering at his every touch and every glance the longer we spent time together.

“Good show,” I sighed, as I parted from the dance and giggled, forcing myself to remember why we were doing this in the first place.

Day two, the painting began. To start the morning, he'd brought me iced caramel coffee and pastries from Java Co.

"Our plan is working. Intel says the town has officially shifted their gossip," he boasted, handing me the cup when I greeted him on the sanded porch.

"So soon?" I opened my coffee lid and took a sniff of the caramel goodness.

"We're the hot topic of the moment. Mary Temple from the Poppy Daily stopped me outside of Java and asked point blank if we were secretly married."

"Seriously? What did you say?" Part amused, I choked on a sip of coffee, although I was ultimately relieved. This plan was working.

"No comment." He shrugged.

Then I asked, "Was Carson there? What did he say?"

He took a long sip, watching me carefully. "Nope. But I know he and Emme have been arguing since you came back."

I chewed my cheek. "Sorry to hear that. I'm not even sure we need to talk at this point. Besides, what would we say? It's been forever since we last spoke."

Hudson gave a slow nod. "Maybe that's for the best."

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I looked away. He was probably right. Although I hated the small hole in my heart that could only be filled by Carson and our old friendship.

“Come on. Let’s get suited up. Lots of painting to do. With temps heading into the 80s we want to get going before it’s boiling.” Hudson held up overalls that looked straight out of an aliens movie, made of white gauze material that would supposedly protect us from paint splatters.

We got to work and the sun baked down. Dry heat, no breeze, not a cloud in sight. Perfect for painting, not so wonderful for the painters. The overalls proved hot as hell, and not in a good way.

It wasn’t long before I stripped down to my thinnest jogging shorts and a black sports bra, hoping to survive. Hudson went shirtless, too, with sun-kissed skin. Casual in khaki cargo shorts, his ball cap turned backward on his head, he walked out of my sexiest daydream, all hard ridges everywhere.

Not going to pretend at all that I didn't notice. He could put a lot of those pale New York City men working all day at their computers in the skyscrapers to shame. I also pretended not to notice the loaded and coy gazes he turned on me now and then as we talked.

“Whew. Hot day. Need a refill on your sweet tea?” I asked.

“Only if it comes with a pretty view.” He winked. When I took his glass off of his hands, he liberally looked me up and down.

“Flirty glance there.”

“Must be the paint fumes talking.” He smirked. “Just enjoying the perks of volunteering.”

I tossed an unused paintbrush at him. “You call this volunteering?”

He caught it with ease. “Sure. Volunteer gossip decoy. Volunteer porch whisperer. Anything else I could volunteer to do for you?”

I shook my head, laughing at the way his voice deepened as I went to make a fresh batch of tea. “I’ll let you know if I get any ideas.”

The afternoon wore on as we painted and reminisced about days gone by. He filled me in on several of the people we knew from school. And of course, he told me what his other brothers have been up to lately.

“Doc is the primary care physician at the local clinic. We tease him that if someone has a serious disease, a venereal disease, or a common cold, he knows all about it because everyone goes to him practically. Add to that Branson as police officer, and I supposed you could say the Goodson boys pretty much know everything about everyone in this town. But I am proud of them.” When he talks about the boys—all grown men now—it’s like he’s a proud father, his chest puffed out a little more, and rightly so, considering he basically helped Mama Goodson raise them all.

As he talked more, I admired the way his eyes lit up. I could just imagine him with his own children, how good he’d be, taking care of them and a wife like he always took care of everyone who meant something to him. His family was his life.

I envied their large brood. I’d never had that. Mom tried to be there for me and did her best, while dealing with her own grief. But without any other family around,

things were tough.

I gazed upon Hudson with fresh eyes all of a sudden. Here was a loyal, hardworking, decent man. Okay a little grumpy at times. Vastly different from men I'd dated in New York. Which had been my problem all along. Whatever I was searching for in New York, I didn't find it.

Yes. Hudson had grown into a fine man. One who knew how to deliver a kiss, without any intention behind it. What would it be like when he really meant it? When he really loved a woman and went all out for her?

Wait. Why was I thinking of him this way? I gave my head a shake and focused back on what he was saying.

"Once I leaned into Lawson being more artistic than Dawson, he seems to have found his path in life, even if it's more of a creative lifestyle."

I held in a giggle about their nicknames, Happy and Dopey. Dawson was the funny one of that family, always quick witted. Whereas Lawson was chill, very laid back, always finding his own rhythm with things.

"In fact, it was going to be a surprise to everyone in town, but I'll tell you. On Saturday after our gathering at the cemetery, we're going back to Java where Lawson will unveil his plans for a mural he's going to paint on the building for Carson. It'll memorialize that fateful town hall fire and honor both of our fathers and all the firefighters who are dedicated to serving this community." He finished with a wistful stare. "I miss Dad sometimes."

"Oh, Hudson. I do, too." I paused mid stroke of the brush and fought back the lump in my throat, as if going through the night of the fire all over again, even though I was younger when it happened, and he was older. He'd had the chance to know his father

better than I had mine. But loss was loss, and I knew the same deeper pain from the loss of my mother.

Our eyes met up across the porch with a sudden connection so strong, as if it reached across our past and time, and brought us closer together.

“Anyway...” he broke the silence first that stretched too long between us. “Then there is Grayson, the shy one.”

“Aw Grayson. He was always so bashful and sweet, with those cute dimples of his.” He and Carson were the babies of the guys. Grayson wouldn’t have gotten into half the trouble he did if not for Carson dragging him into it.

“Yep. I never thought he’d find his path in life, skipping from job to job, until he started working for this no-kill animal shelter right outside of town a couple of years ago. Turns out caring for animals is his thing. So, that’s it. All seven of us kids. Time had a way of making things work out for us.”

I huffed. “It’s more than time. You’re not giving yourself enough credit, Hudson. You had a hand in that, too.”

“You sound like Mama.”

“Everyone in Poppy Valley knows she’s a smart woman.” Her words came flooding back to me. Keep your eyes open, sweetheart. The right man might not be the one you thought you’d end up with.

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“Hey, are you okay?” He jolted me out of my thoughts.

“Yeah. Sure. Looks like we’re almost done. Only the steps left to go.” We’d planned this just right, leaving ourselves an out at the steps.

“We can finish before sundown, unless you want to put it off until tomorrow?” He quirked a brow.

“I’m game to keep going if you are.”

He was right. When we finally finished, the sun threatened to go down behind the hills.

My skin glistened with sweat, and his did too. We sat under the old cedar tree in the yard, gulping tea like it was a lifeline. We both took off our shoes and socks, wiggling our toes in the cool grass. My glass empty, I took to sucking on the ice. Then I ran an ice cube around my neck and collarbone, sighing with relief at the coolness of it.

Hudson stared, lips parted. I caught a hint of groan from him.

“Bet a dip in the lake would feel amazing right now,” I said, tipping my glass of ice toward him. He took a cube and did the same on his skin as I eyed the drops of water descending down his muscular ridges.

“Too bad I don’t have the energy to move.” He laid back in the grass and tilted his cap over his eyes.

I spotted the hose still coiled near the flower beds and got a flicker of an idea. “Be right back.” I grabbed our glasses, making like I was going to refill. He only grunted something that sounded like thanks.

I twisted the hose spigot, waited a second, then tiptoed back.

“Hey Hudson,” I called sweetly.

He lifted the brim of his cap, and I blasted him with cold water.

He shot up, cursing and laughing, water dripping from his shorts. “Think you’re some kind of fire fighter, like you can handle a hose? You’re gonna regret that!”

I squealed and ran, but he caught me fast, wrestled the hose out of my hands, and sprayed my back. I shrieked, drenched and trying to catch my breath between laughs. But blessedly cooled off.

Then I tackled him, hoping to wrestle him for the hose, but he was stronger, faster. He caught me mid-lunge and I landed against his chest, gasping.

Then he kissed me. His mouth hot and wild. His arms strong like oak, hands cradling my ass. My legs circled his waist before I even thought twice. He walked us straight to the porch, up the steps that somehow managed to dry fast, still kissing me like I was his oxygen.

Anyone in the neighborhood certainly got their eyeful. We were really good at play acting. Soaked and laughing when we stumbled inside, we dripped all over the hardwood floor.

Suddenly, a horrible rattling noise echoed from the basement.

We froze.

“What was that?” My face scrunched and I flew behind him as if he’d be my shield if a monster attacked.

“Uh. Could be your air conditioner? It’s pretty warm in here.” Hudson scratched the back of his neck.

“Oh, no,” I groaned.

“I’ll check it out. Grab us some towels?”

I nodded and darted to the hallway closet while he bolted downstairs. By the time he returned, the noise had stopped, and he shook his head.

“I think it’s shot, but I don’t know. Your mom’s system is older than sin, and HVAC is beyond my pay grade,” he explained.

“Crap,” I whined, towel-wrapping my hair. “I don’t think I can afford a whole new unit. If I stay here all summer, I’ll die of the heat. Oh, it’s no use. What made me think I could keep this place going on my own and with no job yet? But I can’t bare to sell it. It’s all I have left of Mom.”

“No. You can’t do that.” He placed his hands on my arms, reassuring. “Look, let me call Dawson. He’s helped with our Firehouse system now and then and has done some work on houses we’ve fixed up and sold. He might be able to repair it for a whole lot less.”

“Really? That’d be great. Can you call him now?”

“Sure. Unless you’d like to pick up where we left off before the air conditioner stole

my thunder.”

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I snorted. “Sorry. Basement monster noise is a total mood killer for me.”

“Noted. No HVAC interruptions next time.” He gave me a teasing, smoldering grin as he walked into the kitchen to make that call.

“Next time?” I whispered under my breath. Would there be a next time? The town was buying our charade. We were winning by pretending. But for how long? And what if this was all becoming far too real?

11

SIBLINGS AND SLY SMILES

HUDSON

About fifteen minutes after the call, Dawson parked his work truck in front of Lacey’s house. Only he didn’t come alone. Lawson and Grayson jumped out, too, like a ragtag repair crew who came with their own soundtrack. Lawson carried the toolbox, Dawson barked orders, and Grayson awkwardly juggled two boxes labeled “fuses?” and “might-need-this.”

Lacey leaned in the doorway behind me, hiding a smile. “What a fine crew if I ever did see one.”

I jerked my chin toward Dawson. “You’d be amazed how often this duct-tape genius saves the firehouse.”

“Hey, I heard that,” Dawson grunted, passing me on the porch with a grin.

“You were meant to, asswipe.”

“Thanks for showing up so fast,” Lacey remarked giving each of them a hug as they went inside. When she got to Dawson, he handed me two boxes of pizza, and then he wrapped her up in his arms for a bear hug. He gave me a wink over her shoulder, and I wanted to growl at him for daring to touch her.

“When we got the call, we were just picking up pizza. Mama’s at her quilting circle, so I thought we’d all come over and make a night of it,” Dawson returned to his truck and brought out a cooler. “Got the beers, too.”

“Thanks,” I clipped at him when he passed by. Lacey had followed the others inside.

“Hey. Whatever it costs to fix this just let me know. I’ll take care of it.”

He cocked a brow with a knowing look. “Taking care of her, you mean.”

“Whatever. Just figure out how to get the damn thing running again,” I grumbled. Glad he was here, not so happy about the interruption in my small world I was trying to build with Lacey.

“So testy. But I worked hard all day. Do you mind if I at least eat first? Then I’ll see what I can do to fix your girlfriend’s AC.” He winked and guffawed into the house like he enjoyed this and knew exactly how to get to me.

We gathered around the old oak kitchen table, a spread of greasy boxes and bottles of beer laid out like a potluck. The whole house smelled like pepperoni, paint fumes, and pine cleaner.

The guys were getting rowdy, taking to share some of my most embarrassing

moments with Lacey.

“Remember the time Hudson broke the dock at the lake ‘cause he tried to impress that Jennings girl with a fancy dive?” Lawson asked around a mouthful of crust.

“Correction,” I said, pointing my last slice at him. “You were the one who dared me.”

Grayson chuckled. “You earned the title of Belly-Flop King instead, tripping on into the lake after the last board came loose. Poor dock never recovered.”

Lacey giggled. “I remember that. I was home from college and Carson and I were roasting hot dogs on the shore. I think I recall you turned bright red, and not just from the sunburn.”

“Oh, he was red all right,” Dawson said, flicking his eyes toward me with a grin. “How’d that work out for you and the Jennings girl anyway?”

“Even better question is how are things between you two?” Lawson picked up where his twin left off, pointing between me and Lacey.

“Lots of rumors about how quickly the two of you have hit it off,” Grayson added, his bashful dimples making a fine show for her.

“Knock it off,” I warned them all, giving a sheepish peek at Lacey.

She chewed her bite slowly, but I caught the soft smile she tried to hide. I didn’t miss the warmth I felt watching her here with my brothers, laughing like she’d always been part of our family. In many ways, she had.

“I’m just sayin’. Do we need to make room for Lacey out at the camp? Bring in another bed... or a bed big enough for two?” Dawson pressed with a shit-eating grin.

“I bought a camper off of a buddy a few years ago. So every summer, we set up a camp on the lake shore, complete with tents and fire pit,” I explained for her sake.

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“I miss the lake.” Her gaze drifted down, picking at her crust. “There was a certain way it smelled right before sunset. Arguably the prettiest spot on your Mama’s property.”

We all agreed and I filed that away. Something in me stirred at the idea of taking her back there. Just the two of us. No distractions. My cock stirred as well.

“Welp...” Dawson tipped his beer up and finished it off. “It’s getting late. I hate to keep you two lovebirds from getting to bed. Best get this clunker down in the basement checked out. See what we’re dealing with. ”

Lacey flushed red and hung back watching the activity while the guys spread out. Lawson knocked on the ancient thermostatlike it owed him money. Grayson had a flashlight in his mouth inspecting the vents. Dawson stood at the top of the basement stairs. "If I don’t come back, give Mama my love.”

Lacey and I exchanged a glance. “I forgot how fun your brothers are. You’re very lucky to have such an amazing family.”

“They can be a handful.” I shoved my hands in my pockets and leaned back against the basement doorframe. “Sorry about their inquisition.”

“It’s fine?—”

Before she could say more, Dawson called up. “Uh. Hud? Better get down here.”

A half an hour later, we delivered the news to Lacey.

“The old unit is completely fried, like no hope whatsoever of fixing it,” Dawson delivered the bad news. Her shoulders drooped at that.

“The problem ties back to the electric panel. I’m concerned this entire house could be a fire hazard. Last thing you need is to lose this place to an electrical fire, Lace.” I eyed Dawson, who’d agreed with me downstairs. Then I put my foot down. “There’s no way you’re spending another night here until this gets fixed.”

Lacey’s horror-stricken face fell into her hands. “Oh no. And Mom lived like this? What kind of daughter am I that I just left her here and lived thousands of miles away?”

“Hey, Lace, come here.” Yes I took full advantage of the situation to bring her into my arms and console her. She fit perfectly under my chin and I kissed the top of her forehead. “We’re here for you, and we have a plan.”

Dawson explained, “We’ve all been investing in older homes and fixing them up, then either renting them out or selling them. In one, I just installed a new unit, but in my workshop I was able to refurbish the old. It’s in good enough shape. At least it will get you by for now until you can get a new one.”

Her eyes widened and she parted from me.. “You’re serious?”

“Yep. I’ll bring it by tomorrow, install it with Hudson’s help.”

“And I’ll call in a buddy of Branson’s, a fellow officer who does electrical work on the side who owes me a favor. He can tackle that electrical panel,” I filled in with the rest of the good news.

“I don’t know what to say.” She peered up at me with hope in her eyes returning.

“Say you’ll make us some sweet tea while we work tomorrow. That’s enough.” Dawson said, grinning.

“You Goodson boys drive a hard bargain. It’s a deal.”

A few minutes later, the guys filed out the door, leaving with all the tools and things they’d brought in.

Grayson peeked at Lacey from under his mop of hair with shy sincerity. “I’m glad you’re back. And I’m glad you’re putting a smile on this guy’s face.” He slugged my shoulder.

Lacey blinked. “Right. Thanks, Grayson. That means a lot.”

He ducked his head as he followed the others out.

She and I stepped out onto the porch into the warm night air and waved them off. The fireflies danced on her lawn, the breeze rustled the trees, and from somewhere far off, a dog barked.

“It’s not much cooler out here than in the house,” she said, fanning herself then tugging her ponytail tighter. “Be a night for sleeping with nothing on.”

I cleared my throat, hesitating a second too long on that image of her. “Listen, Dawson won’t be back until tomorrow. And there’s no way I’ll let you stay the night here in this fire hazard?—”

“I’ll be fine,” she cut me off, insisting.

“Just let me finish. I had a thought.”

She arched a brow.

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“Come camp on the lake with me for the night. It’s nothin’ fancy, but it’s clean. We can take a midnight swim to cool off. You could actually sleep without melting.” In the nude, even better, but I bit my tongue.

Her eyes lit up. “Really?”

I nodded. “It only has a bunkbed though. Hope that’s not a dealbreaker.”

“Top or bottom?” She tilted her head and asked with a purr, pairing it with a sly grin.

Well, hell. Should I read a whole lot into that? My aching balls did.

12

CRAVINGS AND CAMPSITES

HUDSON

An hour later, Blue Betsy’s headlights bumped along the dirt road until we reached the lakeside clearing. The water shimmered in the moonlight, glassy and inviting. The camper sat in the clearing, ready for occupants.

Lacey hopped out, flinging off her sundress onto a beach chair, and revealing a bright blue bikini underneath. I almost choked upon taking in a good eyeful of her curves in the moonlight. Never in the years since she turned eighteen did I ever believe I’d be with her on a night like this.

“You’re going in already? I’ll join you.” I pulled off my shirt overhead and stepped out of my shorts, leaving only black boxers.

She glanced back at me, her eyes trailing down my body. “Nice cannonball attire.”

I chuckled. “Don’t tempt me.”

She ran straight down the small dock and into the water with a squeal, and my eyes bounced off her pretty ass the entire way. I followed with the most awesome cannonball ever.

“Impressed?” I asked when I resurfaced beside her.

“Maybe a little.” She floated away on her back. “God, this feels amazing,” she yelled into the night.

“Glad I could provide.”

She chuckled and lightly splashed in my direction. “Comparing yourself to the Almighty? Cocky much?”

“Very. Especially when it comes to you.”

Upright, she circled me, side swimming just out of reach. “There’s no one here to see us now, Hudson. You can stand down with all your tempting flirtations and looks.”

“What if I don’t want to?” I swam closer, my hand brushing her hip. “You think I invited you out here for the temperature?”

“Didn’t you?”

“Only half of it. The other half is because I enjoy your company.”

Her expression softened, unspoken words blooming between us.

“Remember how I volunteered for this? I meant it, that I’d do anything for you.” I reached out and fingered the ends of her long wet hair fanning out in the water. “So what do you want, Lace?”

“It’s been a long time since a man asked me that.” Her throat worked. My craving for her multiplied, my need for her ramped up.

“How long?” My other hand slid around her waist to her lower back. My cock twitched, dying to know the feel of her. To have her so close... She swallowed as I tugged her in even closer.

“Tell me. How long has it been since a man pleased you and made you scream into the night?”

Her breath hitched then she whispered, “Far, far too long.”

“Then I’m happy to volunteer.” I cupped her face and kissed her, deepening from the start. Her lips parted, body melding into mine.

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She wrapped her legs around my waist, holding on tight as the moonlight gleamed off her skin.

One hand slid down her ribs, fingers tracing the line of her bikini bottoms. “Let me in. I can make you feel so good. Worshipped even,” I whispered.

She nodded, breath catching.

My fingers slipped past the fabric, teasing soft and slow. Her forehead dropped to mine, breath shuddering. I parted her seam and found her clit. To the tune of her moans.

“Oh, Hudson...”

“I’ve got you, baby. Just let go.” This was everything I’ve wanted since the night she waltzed back to town. Me and her. Together. This was only the start.

She clutched my shoulders, gasping as I strummed. Her hips worked with me, grinding against my hand, as I slowly brought her toward the edge she hadn’t known she needed.

“Yes. That’s it. Such a good girl. Don’t hold back,” I encouraged, claiming her lips with mine. Our tongues danced, the water rippled around us, and I hoped this night would last forever.

Her moans grew loud, echoing out into the lake, legs squeezing around me.

“That’s it. Come for me, baby. Let me hear it.”

She cried out my name, her breath hot against my neck.

This was what I craved. Not the act. Not the pretending. Only her.

And given my enlarged cock, I wasn’t pretending a damn thing.

“I need you so fucking much.” I carried her out of the lake toward the camper, water sluicing off of us. All went well until she broke away at the door, landing on her feet.

“Wait. Hudson, we can’t. I-I mean, we shouldn’t. Right?”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re you, this pillar of the Goodson family, and shouldn’t be tainted by me. Then there’s Carson?—”

I scoffed and shook my head, my cock deflating. Dammit, I should have known. “First of all, you’re not tainting anything. Don’t let other people tear down your confidence, baby. And as for my brother, do you still have feelings for him?”

“No. Not like that. Not anymore. As a friend, though, yes. He and I shared many wonderful times before we broke up and went our separate ways after graduation.”

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to wrap my head around this tangled web. “I know he was your first. I get that may seem awkward, but I don’t care. Lace, you’re not that girl anymore. You went off and proved us all wrong, moving to New York so bravely on your own. You lasted ten years there, which frankly is about six years longer than most people who leave Poppy Valley and return. I respect you so much for that.”

I stepped closer to her once again. “I’m so fucking attracted to you. I only see the woman you are now before me as someone I’d like to get to know a whole lot better. Because I think you deserve a real man. Me. Not Carson.”

“You’re wrong.”

I blinked back. My heart sank. The air left my lungs leaving a hollow in my chest.

“Carson wasn’t my first. In fact, we never went all the way,” she said, clearing up a fact I’d always presumed.

A smile burst onto my face. “That’s good. Great, in fact. But something still holds you back.”

“I just don’t want things to be awkward if we push this further.”

I shirked at the notion. “What makes you think it would get awkward?”

“Hudson, if there’s one thing that’s become all too clear since I’ve been back here is that I don’t have a family anymore.” She paced away, shaking and rubbing her arms.

I grabbed a towel and came up behind her, wrapping her with it and my arms. “You have us. You’ve always been a part of the Goodsons.”

“That’s what I mean. Talking to Mama and being around you and your brothers has reminded me just how much I love and respect you all. It’s the closest thing I have to a family in this entire, lonely world. What if anything you and I do jeopardizes that?”

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“But what if anything we do makes it even better? Huh? Have you thought about that? Have you even thought about me and you together?”

She turned in my arms, her mouth opening and closing.

“Ah. I see. You haven’t.” I dropped my arms and stepped away.

"Look at you, Hudson. You've grown to be this gorgeous man, how could I not be curious and attracted to you. But it's all so new."

I draped a towel around my waist, securing it low. “Then what do you want, Lace?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“Don’t know or don’t want to see what’s right in front of you?”

“You’re serious,” she gasped.

“I’ve been serious since the moment you walked back into town.”

“So... you’re saying you wouldn’t mind if we spent more time together.”

“I already said I’d help you with the house and help dispel the rumors you faced. I’m just not great at being used for cover long-term. That plan has to have an expiration date, making way for something more. Or not.”

“It started as an idea to shift attention, but now you want more? With me?”

Hell yes, I did. But I also wanted her to want it. I needed to not be some temporary filler until she figured out her life or went back to New York.

I stepped closer. The intensity of the fear in her eyes killed me. “I want something real with you, Lace. But I know it’s a lot to think about. I know I’m finally letting you into my head and where I stand?—”

Suddenly, my phone rang. The ringtone playing Travis Tritt's old song, Trouble, told me that it was the fire station. About the only reason they’d call me on my day off was if they had a major situation and needed all guys on hand.

“That’s the station calling me with an emergency.” I picked up my shorts and pulled out my phone, glancing at the message. “Oh, fuck.”

“What is it?” She stepped closer.

“It’s your house, going up in flames.”

13

SMOKE AND TEARS

LACEY

We weren’t even fully out of the truck when I saw the flames. My entire body went numb.

My house was engulfed in an angry orange glow, thick smoke curling toward the sky like some monster had clawed its way out through the roof.

“No, no, no!” I flung open the door and ran toward the burning structure, screaming.

Strong arms wrapped around my waist from behind, lifting me clean off the ground before I could get too far.

“Lacey! You cannot go in there.” Hudson’s voice was thick with command. “It’s not safe.”

I kicked and fought him, finally sobbing against his chest as he held me still. “That house—everything in it—it’s all I had left of her.” I turned and bawled into his shirt.

He cradled the back of my head, pressing his forehead to mine for a brief second before kissing it and pulling away. His face tightened as a car roared up beside us. “Mama’s here. Go to her. Please.”

“No—Hudson, don’t leave me.”

But he handed me off, pushing me gently but firmly toward Mama Goodson, who looked every bit the strong matriarch in charge.

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She caught me up against her bosom, her arms wrapping around my shaking body like a warm quilt. “Let him do his job, baby girl. He’s trained for this.”

Hudson sped off toward the fire truck, where he tugged on a fire-resistant suit and boots with practiced speed, his muscles flexing with urgency. Another firefighter tossed him a helmet, and I watched, stunned, as he transformed into someone fierce. A protector. A battler of fires. Someone who could walk into hell if it meant saving people inside of it.

“That’s the only home I ever had,” I whispered, my chest aching as hot tears streamed down my cheeks.

Mama squeezed me tighter. “No, it ain’t. Your home is in your heart.”

“But all the photos, my mom’s favorite blanket, her record player—everything’s in there.”

“Things can burn,” Mama said softly. “But your mama? She’s still with you. Always has been. You’ve been carrying her with you this whole time, even when you were a thousand miles away.”

My lip quivered as more flames engulfed the house, as if it were resistant to the water from the hoses Hudson and his crew wielded at it. “This is like losing her all over again.”

Mama pulled back just enough to look me square in the face, her warm, steady hands holding my arms. “Sweetheart, home isn’t a house, but the love you carry in your

heart. The memories you cherish. The people who show up for you, standing by your side even when everything else falls apart.”

Before I could reply, a sudden boom shook us, cracking through the night. The roof fell in.

Everything stilled for one sick moment. Until the fire roared, shooting flames up into the sky. I wrestled with the weight of what had just happened. Then?—

“Man down! Presley’s down inside,” came a shout from a crew member, setting every nerve in my body on edge.

“Hudson?” I choked out.

He didn’t hesitate, tearing off down the smoky path and disappearing through the front door of the burning house.

“Hudson!” I screamed, trying to run after him again, but Mama yanked me back with surprising strength.

“Don’t you dare!” she cried. “He knows what he’s doing.”

But her voice trembled, and when I looked at her face, it was pale. Haunted.

“This is just like that night,” she whispered. “The night I lost my husband. Your daddy ran into the fire to get my husband out, and neither of them came back.”

My knees gave out, and we sank together onto the grass. My heart raced as the seconds dragged.

“I can’t lose him.” So much loss in my life, but, please, not Hudson, I prayed. Not

when he just admitted he wanted more with me. That those fake kisses and flirty dances and loaded glances had started turning into something he wanted more of. Suddenly, soft places in my heart opened up that I didn't know existed anymore.

If only I realized it sooner, if I could have told him that yes, I felt an attraction between us, too. So fast. A connection I didn't expect when I drove thousands of miles to Texas.

But...

Could I love a fireman? Could I give my heart to someone who'd always run straight into danger while I stayed behind, praying he'd come back? Was I destined to become my mother after all—a woman who knew what it meant to love a man who'd die for others? And what if I lost him and lived the rest of my days alone without him?

I recalled how Dad would dance with me in the living room, my feet on the tops of his sturdy shoes. The night after he died, Mom and I held each other on the couch and she cried herself to sleep, her head in my lap. Such tough times.

There were good times in the house, too, though. Like when I returned home from prom night and I stayed up late and told Mom I was going to marry Carson someday. That house had held every version of me... happy and sad, younger and older, and now it was gone.

A watched for agonizing minutes for any sign of Hudson to return, when another arm slipped around my back. I looked up, and my breath caught.

"Carson?" I asked, stunned. Beyond him, the other brothers had just arrived as well, each with panic on their faces and fists balled, ready to jump into the fire if needed to save their kin.

Carson's blue eyes were steady. "I got here as soon as I heard. Lacey, I'm here."

I buried my face into his shoulder and sobbed harder. But he wasn't mine anymore. I knew that now.

Somewhere in the haze of smoke and tears, I realized I had come back home hoping to find Carson waiting for me. What I found with Hudson could be so much more. But was I strong enough to love a man who ran into burning buildings?

WAITING AND WONDERING

LACEY

The gloomy atmosphere of the waiting room at the clinic stood out in stark contrast to the bright fluorescent lights above. Despite everything, Mama Goodson sat tall and strong in one of the stiff-backed chairs. Dawson, Lawson, and Grayson flanked her, all wearing soot-smeared clothes and expressions that swung between exhaustion and tension.

Carson sat beside me, his arm resting loosely around my shoulders, like I might unravel at any second. My body still shook from the inside out.

The scene played on a loop in my head, and I couldn't shut it off. The image of Hudson running into that burning house haunted me, followed minutes later by him staggering out, dragging another firefighter behind him. Both of them collapsed in the front yard as EMTs rushed to their aid.

Once they were on the gurneys with oxygen masks firmly in place, Mama and I only had enough time to squeeze his hand before they whisked him away in an ambulance.

Now we waited with no updates or information. At least he was alive. But what of his condition? It was the not knowing that drove me crazy. If Mom had ever gone through something like this with Dad, I must not remember it.

Lawson nudged Dawson with his elbow. "How about that dramatic exit? Wouldn't expect anything less from Hudson. The Showboat."

“Perfectly timed collapse for effect,” Dawson replied, his voice weary but trying to lighten the mood.

“Classic Goodson style,” Grayson murmured, tightening his hold on Mama’s arms.

She managed a soft chuckle and whispered, “My boys.”

I was grateful for their attempts to fill the silence.

Carson squeezed my shoulder. “You okay?”

I nodded and lied. “I guess.”

Mama reached over and patted my knee. “You’re doing better than most would, honey.”

I stared down at my soot-streaked hands and clothes, recalling the ash everywhere in the yard. “How are you so strong, Mama? I mean... you lost your husband fighting fires. Now Hudson is somewhere in this clinic? I don’t know how you ever let him follow in his father’s footsteps. I couldn’t bear it.”

She looked at me with soft, wise eyes. “There was never a version of him that wasn’t destined to be a firefighter. He worshipped his daddy. Hudson was a fireman almost every Halloween in grade school. I can remember he’d wear his little helmet from the costume year around whenever he’d play in the yard, pretending to fight fires with our garden hose.”

The lump in my throat swelled. I blinked hard, swallowing the wave of emotion clawing its way up.

“When you love someone, baby girl, you don’t get to pick who they are. You accept

them. You pray for them. And you love them no matter what they do.”

I smiled weakly, trying to put myself in her shoes. Would I grow to be strong like her someday?

“Want to get some air?” Carson whispered beside me.

I nodded and stood, following him down the hallway until we reached a quiet corner near the vending machines. He bought a pack of candy coated chocolate peanuts and shared a few with me, taking me back years to when we’d share candy all the time.

He faced me between bites, leaning his shoulder against the wall. “Lacey, I apologize I haven’t stopped by to talk to you before now. I wanted to. I definitely didn’t think it would take a fire to bring us together again like this.”

“Same.” I crossed my arms over my chest and tried not to shake.

“Emme’s kept me pretty busy with this wedding coming at us so fast. With Java Co. and all, I lose track of my days.”

“Time flies when you’re a groom about to get married,” I teased, the smile not quite reaching my eyes. “And I’m sorry about all these rumors. I did not come back here to break you up.”

He smiled softly. “It’s okay. I told Emme about our pinkie promise, and I think she told her mom and aunts and things kinda snowballed from there.”

“Small towns,” I chuckled, shaking my head.

“Lacey. I loved you once. You know that, right?” He leaned in, catching my gaze.

I nodded. “I know.”

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“But I didn’t take that pinkie promise seriously. Thought we were just kids, saying stuff. I knew the minute we both left town, going our separate ways, you to the city and me to the Army, that we’d grow apart, and we did.”

“Then you came back and started a whole new life here.”

He nodded. “While you stayed away.”

“You have Emme now.”

His smile widened, genuine this time. “I really do love her. She’s the one for me.”

“I’m happy for you. Truly.”

“Thanks.” He exhaled. “I’d like it if you two could become friendly.”

I shrugged. “I’ll try.”

“Now that you’re back, you need to have someone special in your life, too. I could fix you up with some of my friends.”

I looked away, laughing, tears stinging again. He must not have a clue how Hudson feels about me. “It’s the last thing on my mind when I just lost everything. I left New York trying to figure out who I was again. And now... my entire past just went up in flames.”

“No better place to start over than right here.”

“Right. Oh, by the way, I meant to thank you for taking care of Mom’s house for me while I was away. The lawn, the dusting, it was all very nice of you.”

He glanced down at his shoes, then back up with a sheepish look on his face. “Actually. That wasn’t me. I got so busy running Java, I’d let the grass grow tall. Hudson told me one day he’d take care of it. So you have him to thank.”

“Hudson?” My forehead scrunched. Why wouldn’t he just tell me it’d been him?

Carson straightened, seeing something over my shoulder down the hall. “There’s Doc. He must have news. We’d better head back.”

We returned to the waiting room behind him as he stepped in, everyone rising to their feet at once.

“Hudson’s going to be okay,” Anderson announced. “He has a moderate case of smoke inhalation. His oxygen saturation was low when he came in, but we got him on high-flow oxygen immediately. Lungs are irritated, but no serious damage. No burns. No broken bones. No ego damage either, although the news reports on the TV in his room are calling him a hero, so I suspect that might be inflating as we speak.”

The whole room of people exhaled. I chuckled at the thought of Hudson’s head growing bigger.

“Praise God,” Mama sniffled into a tissue.

“He’ll stay overnight for observation. We’re keeping him on oxygen, and he’s got fluids and corticosteroids to reduce any inflammation in his airways. I gave him something mild to help him rest, so he’s sleeping now, but he knows you’ve been out here. He’ll be out of it for the night. I recommend everyone go home and get some rest. It’s late and there’s nothing more you can do here tonight.”

Everyone began nodding, hugging, relief spreading from face to face. Mama consulted with Anderson in the corner, trying to get more information out of him.

My heart lurched. I just stood there with nowhere to go.

Home?

I didn't have one.

Tears welled up again before I could stop them, and I turned away, biting my lip.

Mama moved beside me in a heartbeat.

"You're coming home with me," she said firmly, not giving me an inch to argue. "I won't take no for an answer."

I blinked up at her, speechless.

"Baby girl," she said, cupping my cheek, "You think we'd let you go through this alone? You're family."

"Family?" I whispered.

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“Family,” Carson echoed. The other brothers bobbed their heads.

I searched each of them, hopping face to face. For the first time since I’d returned to Poppy Valley, I felt like I belonged.

15

ROOTS AND REMINDERS

LACEY

The guest bedroom at the Goodson house hadn’t changed much in the years I’d been away. The walls were still soft yellow, in a warm and friendly hue. I ran a hand along the square mirror above the dresser, its frame carved by Hudson and his dad back in high school for his woodworking project. It’d turned out so fine, he’d put it into the county fair that summer and won first prize in its category.

Some things like this I recalled so vividly. Other things, like the sound of my dad’s voice, had faded over time.

The bed creaked in a familiar, comforting way, as I balled up on top, bringing the quilt around me like a protective shell. The patchwork of old flannel shirts and faded denim had been stitched together by Mama Goodson.

The closet still had her extra craft bins lining the bottom, and a shelf filled with fabric she swore she was going to use to make more quilts someday. Some might call it clutter. At the moment, it was the safest place in the world to me.

I sat upright at the notification sound from my phone on the nightstand. I sniffed and wiped my cheeks, the tears never ending. It was a message from Archer.

Archer: Any decision yet about coming back to NY? Brooks took off with Maisy for some island time and I'm drowning in contracts and chaos. Please say yes.

I gaped at the screen. A week ago, I might've said yes without hesitation. But now?

Lacey: I lost my family home tonight in a fire. Everything's gone.

My phone rang immediately. I picked up, holding it to my ear with a shaky hand.

"Lacey?" Archer's voice was a mix of businesslike concern and genuine worry.

"I'm here," I croaked.

"Shit. I'm so sorry to hear this news. Are you okay?"

"I don't know," I said truthfully, my voice cracking.

A knock came on the door. I didn't even try to hide the tears.

"Come in," I called.

Mama stepped in, holding a steaming mug. "Warm milk," she offered gently. "Always helped me sleep after long nights."

I smiled weakly at her, grateful. Into the phone, I said, "I'll have to call you back, Archer."

She set the mug on the nightstand and sat beside me; the mattress dipping. I set the

quilt aside.

“I can’t stop crying,” I admitted. “That was my old boss in New York. He’s offered me my job back. Sounds like he really needs me.”

Mama didn’t rush to speak. Instead, she stood and moved toward the closet. From the highest shelf, she pulled down a photo album, wrapped in tissue paper.

“I’ve been waiting for the perfect time to give you this,” she said, sitting beside me again and placing the album in my lap.

I eyed it warily. “What is it?”

“When your mama started swapping out photos around her house, we got to talking. I had some of my own, and she had others. So we made copies. Spent whole afternoons reminiscing about each one. I didn’t know why, at the time, but I felt compelled to put them in an album. Now I’m grateful I did. They can replace the ones you lost tonight.”

I opened it to the first page where a picture of Mama and my mother, both in their twenties, stood arm in arm beside their husbands. All four of them looked sun-kissed and happy on the beach at the lake.

Mama got misty-eyed. “That was our senior year of high school. Double date to the lake. Ran out of gas on the way to taking your mother home. Your daddy had to walk a mile in cowboy boots to get gas.”

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I laughed through my tears as we flipped through the pages together. There was a photo of me on a tire swing, one of me and all the Goodson boys piled onto a hay ride, another of me and my mom baking cookies. Each picture tugged at a million heartstrings within me.

“These are precious memories,” I whispered.

“They are,” Mama said softly. “And no fire can take them from you.”

As we flipped further, a strange pattern emerged. In so many of the group shots—birthday parties, school events, even simple backyard barbecues—Hudson was there.

Always in the background. Always glancing at me.

In one photo, when we were in our twenties, Carson had his arm around me at a Fourth of July picnic, both of us grinning like fools. But a few feet away, Hudson stood with a plate of ribs and a barely concealed look on his face that made my chest clench.

“He was always there,” I murmured.

Mama smiled knowingly. “Always. That boy’s been carrying a torch for you for some time.”

“I never saw it.”

“You weren’t ready to.” Mama stood and kissed the top of my head. “It’s your life, sweetie. You can either head back to New York, or you can stay. People would understand. Either way, you always have a place in this family. You’re welcome to stay with me as long as you like. And I do hope you’ll stay. There comes a time when a person needs to put down roots.”

She left me in the soft glow of the bedside lamp. I kept flipping through, studying each photo, my eyes wet with every memory.

The final photo stopped me cold.

Hudson, in his fire academy uniform, standing tall and proud on graduation day. His grin was bright, eyes full of determination. A man who ran into fires, born with heroism in his blood. Because being a hero was just who he was.

Could I love someone like that? Someone I could lose in a heartbeat?

Was I brave enough?

My phone buzzed with a text.

Archer: When you’re ready to rebuild your house, I’d be honored to design it. My gift to you. Thank you for everything you did for me in New York.

My heart swelled. I looked back at the photo of Hudson, then down at Archer’s message.

Maybe I was ready to stay. Not just to rebuild a house, but to rebuild my life.

Right here. In Poppy Valley.

The next morning, I stirred slowly, not quite ready to face a new day, not when the fog of last night still hung heavy over me. But the scent of coffee and sweet bread wafted up the stairs, and I knew I couldn't hide forever.

I slipped into the soft sweats and oversized t-shirt Mama had left on the dresser, complete with fuzzy socks that looked like they'd been knit with love. Padding quietly down the stairs, I half-expected the kitchen to be empty, the house quiet, but it wasn't.

Voices drifted from the dining room, some familiar, others less so.

When I rounded the corner, I froze. Emme was standing near the table, surrounded by half a dozen women. I recognized them from around town, including one I'd overheard gossiping about me at the grocery store. My stomach dropped.

Emme saw me and stepped forward, wringing her hands but offering a tentative smile. "Lacey... we heard about the fire. And, well, we wanted to help."

She gestured to several large shopping bags piled near the door. "We gathered clothes—things we thought might fit. There's more on the way. We've spread the word across town. Some of my aunts' husbands are already loading up spare furniture and household goods people are donating to you. Nothing fancy, but it'll help for now."

I blinked, overwhelmed. "Why would you do this for me?"

One of her aunts cleared her throat. "Look, things get said in small towns. But when it comes down to it, when one of our own has a need, we take care of them."

My throat tightened. I blinked away tears, refusing to cry in front of them.

Emme stepped closer, her eyes kind. “Can we talk? Just us?”

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I nodded, letting her lead me out onto the porch. The morning air was cool for now, although another hot day had been predicted.

“I was jealous when I saw you at the engagement party,” she admitted. “Seeing you next to Carson stirred up old insecurities. I didn’t handle it well. I kept him busy, made excuses so he couldn’t be away from me, because I didn’t want him running into you again.”

“I get it,” I said softly. “And I’m sorry I didn’t give you a chance back in high school. I was young, but people change. I’d like to try again with you. As friends.”

She looked surprised, but then smiled. “I’d like that too.”

“Thanks for the clothes and thinking of me at this difficult time.”

She reached out and squeezed my hand. It might take a while, but I’d try to be a friend to her and get to know her better.

Mama stood with me on her porch, watching them go, a soft smile on her face.

“They mean well,” she said, slipping her arm around my shoulders. “Oh, this old small town... We may love our drama, but when the dust settles, we prove we still have heart.”

I nodded, emotion thickening in my chest. Exhausted, hungry, and worried, I leaned into Mama as the perfect support I needed right now.

RISK AND REWARD

HUDSON

I came to in the hospital and rubbed my eyes, only to find a figure at my bedside—broad-shouldered, arms crossed, lips twitching like he'd been waiting for me to wake up so he could pester me.

“Carson, what the hell? Been watching me sleep?” I grumbled.

“Morning, Sleeping Beauty,” he said, voice low. “Hope you’re feeling better?”

“About as good as can be expected for running into a burning building,” I croaked, my throat like sandpaper.

“Good. Water?”

“Yes.” He held up a cup and straw to my lips. I took a long thirst-quenching draw from it.

“Need an extra pillow?” He asked.

“No.”

“Blanket?”

“No.” He began to annoy me.

He knew it and grinned. “Do you have feelings for Lacey?”

“Yes—” The word popped out automatically. I fell for it, just like when we were kids. He tricked me into answering three harmless questions before sliding in the zinger. My brain finally caught up. “Aw, hell.”

“Still works.” Carson smirked. “Knew it.”

“So what if I do?” I shifted in the bed. My chest burned, but Doc said I’d be fine. “She’s beautiful, smart, tougher than she thinks, and she’s been dealt a rough hand. Only one problem—I don’t think she sees me as anything more than a friend.”

He scratched his jaw. “When I left her at Mama’s last night, she was pretty shook up about things. Tears me up inside. She’s one of my oldest friends, Hud. But dammit, I can’t be there for her the way she needs right now. I’ve got Java, and I’ve got Emme glued to my side, worried I’m going to leave her, but I wouldn’t. We’re about to be married, and she means everything to me. But you?” He lightly slugged me. “Lacey needs a friend, and I think you’re exactly who she needs. Start there, and if it turns into more, all the better.”

I gaped, needing clarification. “Are you saying you’d be fine if I go after her as more than a friend?”

“No better man in the county I’d rather see her with.” He shrugged like it was the most natural thing, me longing for his ex. “Besides, I’ve seen the way you’ve looked at her over the years whenever she’s come back for a visit, even if she never noticed.”

“Oh yeah? And what exactly do you think you see?”

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Before he could answer, the door swung open and Anderson strode in, wearing a white coat, stethoscope, and worry lines. “Morning. Feeling dizzy? Short of breath? Chest tightness?”

“No, no, and nope.” What was it with my brothers and these questions? “How is Presley?”

“Fortune favored him, too. He’ll need to stay here a little longer with a worse case than yours, but he’ll be fine.” It relieved me to know my efforts hadn’t been in vain. Doc continued. “Now, we’ll need to run a few more tests on you, then see if we can get you out of here today.”

“Doc, are these tests really necessary?” I complained.

“Merely precautionary. Need to be thorough,” he explained, flipping through my chart.

I yanked the pulse-ox off my finger. “Then I’m done. Let me out of here, Anderson.”

He sighed like one of those whiny little-brother noises. “Hud, smoke inhalation can take time to?—”

I caught Carson’s eye. “Where’s Lacey?”

“Mama took her to the lake this morning.” He grabbed his keys off my bedside table, already a step ahead of me.

“Perfect. Take me there.” I got out of the bed against Doc’s protests. “The fresh air at the lake is better than recycled clinic air, wouldn’t you agree? If I cough up a lung or something, I’ll come back.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose, as Carson tossed me a set of clothes no doubt Mama had sent for me.

“Come on, hero. Your ride awaits. See ya, Doc,” Carson headed out the door. Anderson had no defense against our tag team.

At the lake, I spotted Lacey in one of the Adirondack chairs by the fire ring, wrapped in a sweatshirt that dwarfed her. She stared sadly at the water like she hoped for answers to all of her problems.

I had the answer for her: Me. But would she ask the right question?

“Brought you someone,” Carson called.

I held up two Java Co. cups. “Someone, and caffeine.” My ribs ached and lungs burned a little, but nothing that could keep me down. Not today.

Surprise brightened her eyes, then worry clouded over. She got up and hugged Carson first—quick and grateful—then turned to me. Her arms slid around my waist, bringing her body fully against mine, and rested her head on my chest. She stayed there, and I planted kisses on top of her head.

“I’ve been so worried.” She whispered into my chest.

“I’m here and better now, with you,” I murmured into her hair, breathing in the lingering fragrance of minty shampoo. This was much better than that hospital air.

“Are you going to be okay?”

“Lungs sting some, but Doc gave me a clean bill of health.”

“Good.” She parted from me and slapped my chest. “You scared the hell out of me running into the fire like you did,” her voice shook, scolding.

Carson took the cups out of my hands and set them on the armrests. “Welp. This is where I should leave you two to figure things out. I gotta get back to the shop and to Emme. You two behave. Or not.” He winked and slapped me on the back like he wished me luck, then ducked back to his car.

“Lace, let me explain—” I tried, but she paced away from me, out of my reach facing the lake, hands holding her sides.

“No, Hudson. Last night was awful. But thanks to Mama, I got through it.”

“Mama’s the best.”

“I never wanted to be a fireman’s girl, Hudson.”

I dropped my shoulders. So she’s not going to give me a chance? “I understand.”

“But I will try. For you.”

Wait. Did I hear that right? I went up to her and wrapped my arms around her, holding her in my embrace. My head rested on her shoulder.

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“Here’s what you need to know about me. I’m tough, Lace. I’m sure what you saw last night appeared far worse than it really was. Remember, I’m a trained professional. I quickly calculated the risk and knew I’d make it out, and I trusted the first responders of this town would take care of me on the other side. I realize that requires a huge leap of faith for Mama and anyone who gets close to me.”

She faced me with her soulful brown eyes and my breath caught in my throat. “I’ll work on my faith. You work on staying safe. That’s the deal for us to move forward. Okay?”

A rush of feelings swept through me. “Hell yes.” I swooped her up and carried her back to the Adirondack chair, positioning her across my lap.

We sat and sipped our coffees. Only she made a face. “Ugh. Black? Think they forgot the caramel.”

I sniffed my cup and grimaced. Even in my condition, the smell proved too sweet. “That one’s mine, actually. To be honest, I prefer plain without all the sweet stuff.” I passed hers over.

She frowned. “You drink it straight? But you ordered caramel that first day.”

Sheepishly, I admitted, “It was silly, but I wanted any excuse to keep talking to you, so I ordered the same and it worked.” I took a long pull of the strong bitter brew and sighed further back into the seat.

“Guess it did.” She grinned and tucked a piece of hair behind her ear, then arched her

eyebrow at me. “I also found out that it wasn’t Carson, but you who looked after my house while I was gone.”

I focused on the far shore of our pretty town lake. “He needed help, and seemed way in over his head starting the shop up. I’d do anything for my brothers, so I guess, at first, I didn’t want you thinking any less of him that he couldn’t handle the extra responsibility.”

She placed her hand on my arm. “You could’ve called me, Hudson. The mowing, the dusting—you didn’t have to do all of that.”

“But that’s what I do,” I said quietly. “Take care of the people I care about.”

“And you care about me?” Her voice cracked like fragile glass.

I met her eyes, trying to say everything my heart needed to say with just one look. “More than breathing, Lace. I know you’ve only been back here a few days, but I can’t look at you without yearning for more.”

On her armrest, her phone buzzed, and I glanced down, reading the name Archer on the text. She let it go.

“Archer?” I cocked a brow, praying it wasn’t some city slick boyfriend of hers I’d have to deal with.

“That’s my old boss. We’ve been texting about things. He’s offered me my job with salary increase and more,” she explained.

So... I’d lost her before we’d barely began. Might as well lay my cards on the table. This was something I gave great consideration to as I tossed and turned in the hospital. I took in a shaky breath and leaned my head back. “I’m falling for you fast,

Lace. Told you as much last night. But if you need to go back to New York—I'll move, too. I'll get a job with a fire department there or something."

"What? No. You have it all wrong. Archer has simply offered to draft the plans to rebuild my house, as a gift." She suddenly straddled me in the chair, facing me head on. My heartstuttered, my hands landing on her thighs as her palms cupped my face.

"I don't need New York. I need you. Hudson, I'm scared, but I'm not running. I'm going to rebuild. Put down roots. Make Poppy Valley my home."

My lips twitched, searching her eyes for the truth. "Are you sure? Last night you hesitated."

"Yesterday I was drowning, but you've been there every step of the way to save me. Today I see everything so clearly." She kissed my lips, sweet and tempting. "I left Poppy Valley once to chase a dream. But it led me back here to you."

"Are you sure I'm what you want?" I brushed my palms up and down her thighs.

"Yes, Hudson. Let's see where this takes us." She pressed her lips to mine again, slow and savoring. I could sit here all day with her and die a happy man. But my cock got too excited, especially when she shifted against it on my lap.

I groaned. "Anything else I can help you with right now?"

A wicked glint lit her eyes. "I could come up with a list." She rocked her hips, not doing me any favors.

"You know I'm good with lists. Tell me what you need and I'll take care of you," I growled, hands sliding beneath the cardigan, beneath the t-shirt to her back—bare, warm, perfect. That's when I noticed she was wearing one of my old country bar

tees. My shirt. On her. The vibes messed with my head in every good way.

I deepened our kisses, taking what I needed, demanding that she meet me there.

She parted, breathlessly lost in the moment with me. “I want you, Hudson. Take me today.”

She didn’t need to ask me again. The heat in her eyes undid me. My jeans were already too tight. If I didn’t get her skin on mine soon, I was going to combust worse than a five-alarm fire.

ROUND ONE AND MORE

HUDSON

I shifted, standing with Lacey in my arms, her legs locked around my waist. We stumbled toward the soft grass near the shoreline. I intended to take her to the camper, but then I remembered one very important detail?—

“Bunk beds. Shit. Not exactly comforts of home.” I set her down on the grass instead.

She laughed and patted the greenery at her side. “Here?”

“No one is around to see us. And besides, my lungs need fresh air, remember?”

“Well, if we must follow Doc’s orders.” She winked and took off the cardigan, then spread it out, surprising me to be going for it. I picked her up again, knelt, and laid her back gently on top of it.

“Comfy?” I confirmed.

“Such a sweetheart. To think I had it wrong all those years that you were so grumpy.” She tugged my T-shirt upward, and I took it off overhead, tossing it aside. Her palms smoothed over my muscles, eyes trailing along. Gooseflesh sprouted across my skin. “You are one handsome man, Hudson. Now I see the real you,” she purred.

I covered her, kneeling her legs open, fitting myself just right between them. Then I claimed her lips again in a searing kiss, hot enough to start another fire as she ground

her core against the hard ridge of my cock. I held steady, intoxicated by her buildup to a frantic pace.

“Getting what you need?” I groaned, knowing she was on edge.

“Hudson,” she moaned my name. “I need more.”

My hands dove under the tee, stripping it off of her, only to find her tantalizingly bare. I licked my lips, my gaze lingering on every curve.

“I love this view.” My mouth grazed down her chest, sucking in a pert nipple. More of her moans chased the swirl of my tongue around it.

“Right now, there’s something else I want.” Her hands impatiently feathered down my torso, landing on my waist. Her fingers flicked open the button on my jeans.

I hissed, my muscles coiled tight. “Save it for later,” I teased her back. I dropped kisses further down to her thighs until I finally centered my face between them. She arched, fingers threading in my hair as I inhaled her scent. Definitely better than hospital air.

I peeled her shorts off, dragging them past her ankles. No panties. My groan echoed off the lake. “You’re trying to kill me?”

“I’m trouble, remember?”

“Fuck, don’t I know it.” I snaked my tongue through her wet seam, finding her clit ready for me and responsive.

I flicked it with slow, deliberate strokes—long licks that drove her insane, circling her clit with the flat of my tongue until her thighs trembled around my ears. Every

gasp of hers made the fire in my veins burn hotter.

“Hudson. Mm.” Her hips lifted off the spread-out cardigan, seeking more pressure.

“Easy, baby.” I slid two fingers inside, curling just right and sucking lightly. Her nails scraped through my hair—pain and pleasure all in one.

I feathered her clit, coaxing, encouraging, until her entire body gave in. I learned the way her knees quivered, the hitch in her breathing right before she let go.

“That’s it, Lace,” I murmured against her slick heat. “Let me see how pretty you are when you come.”

She shattered with a cry of my name echoing all around us. Her face poised in ecstasy, mouth forming a cute oh. I drank her up, my heart thundering with primal satisfaction.

“Mine. All mine. You hear me, Lace? I’ll make a Goodson out of you, I swear it.” I hovered over her.

“Mm. Hudson... Is this how you move? So fast?”

“Better keep up with me. Now that I have you, I’m not letting you go.”

I nuzzled her neck until the ripples of pleasure subsided. She tugged me by the hairs, meeting my eyes, hers still glazed with aftershocks. I kissed her, letting her taste herself on my tongue. She moaned softly into my mouth.

“You’re lethal,” she whimpered as I ground my cock against her.

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Then I winced. “Fuck. I left my phone and wallet in Carson’s car.”

“Which means?” She gasped.

“No wallet. No condom.”

She tucked a damp strand of hair behind her ear, eyes meeting mine without a flicker of hesitation. “I have an IUD, and I’m clean. Besides, it’s been a while for me. Are you okay with that?”

Relief surged through me. “Better than okay. Last checkup was three months ago. A while for me, too. I want all of you, Lace.”

Her lips curved in a slow, wicked smile. “Then take me.”

I didn’t need to be told twice. I shoved my jeans down, adjusted between her thighs, and kissed her hard—needy, breathless—like I could taste forever on her lips.

She wrapped a hand around me, guiding me to her slick entrance. “Don’t hold back.”

With a groan, I sank into her, inch by aching inch, until I was buried to the hilt. She arched beneath me, breath catching. She welcomed me like this was more than lust—it was home.

“Oh, God... we fit,” she whispered.

I stilled, overwhelmed by the heat, the tight clutch of her body, the way she

welcomed me like she'd been waiting too.

"You were made for me," I rasped. "I've dreamed of this—of you—for so damn long."

Her hips lifted, urging me deeper, and I began to move, slow and steady, savoring every shiver and moan. Her nails dragged down my back, and I knew—I'd never be the same.

"How did you know you wanted me?" She asked.

"I don't know. Just hit me, on your eighteenth birthday, how special you were. Then each time you'd come to town, I couldn't take my eyes off of you."

"Destiny?"

"Maybe." I captured her mouth again. But she wasn't sated yet.

"You should have said something at some point about how you felt, Hudson."

"You were never ready. You were all about Carson. I think it took you being here now, for things to happen the way they did in order for us to make sense."

"Maybe you weren't ready either until now, Hudson. Life has a funny way of working out."

Sweat slicked our skin under the sweet summer sun. With no one around to see us as we lay in the tall grass, the breeze kissed our movements like blessings.

"Faster?" I applied my hand at her neck and leaned in, licking her pulse.

“I like this pace, like a lazy summer day.” She tightened around me. “Want to feel every second with you.”

We moved, unhurried, like the lake itself. Her moans branded on my soul. I slipped a hand between us, circling her clit. She gasped—clenched—whimpered my name.

“Let go on my cock, baby,” I urged. “I’ve got you.”

Pleasure ripped through her. The sight of her coming and the feel of her body rippling beneath me triggered me, too. I thrust once more, and spilled inside of her, my growl loud in the open air.

We stilled, hearts drumming together. Another breeze floated by our dampened skin. I rolled to my side, sighing and satisfied, keeping her close in my arms.

“Best summer day ever,” I breathed.

“Mm,” she sighed like a woman satisfied. “Mama said I could stay at her house as long as I need.” She traced circles on my chest.

“Hm. Mama’s got excellent hearing, though. To be honest, none of the beds at Mama’s place are comfortable enough for two.” I laughed and kissed her hair. “Because after today I have a feeling we’re going to be like kids, sneaking around. Guarantee it.”

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“I think you may be right. So you have a job but still live with Mama?” She laughed with me about it, although the tone of her voice worried me.

“That better not be a turnoff, Lace, not now after everything we’ve been through this week. I usually stay in the camper most of the year. But with bunk beds, it needs a remodel before it’s fitting enough for us. When Dad died, each of us kids got a couple of acres here on the property. I’ve saved more than enough money to build, but haven’t had time to think about it yet—or a reason to, until now.”

She seemed to ponder the situation for a minute. “And my house will need rebuilt once the insurance money comes in. It’s a lot to think about.”

“It is, but we have all the time in the world to talk and figure things out. Right now, I’m not able to think of anything beyond round two.”

“Round two?” She questioned, then yelped as I picked her up and carried her with me into the lake.

“I’ve had a five-alarm fire for you for far too long to stop at once today, baby.” I nearly died yesterday, but she didn’t need to know how much I thought about that. If this was my second chance, I’d damn well live in the moment with her.

She giggled, snuggling closer, holding me tighter the deeper in the water we got. The lake took us in with open arms like we belonged there together.

Somewhere behind us, life waited—houses to rebuild, rumors to rewrite, forever to figure out—but right now I had my whole world in my arms, and she wasn’t going

anywhere.

Not anymore.

18

ASHES AND ECHOES

HUDSON

At the cemetery, I stood tall, hand wrapped tight around Lacey's. Our fingers linked like they'd always known each other. She leaned slightly into me, her shoulder brushing mine, steady and silent. Just being here with her made everything bearable.

A few folding chairs had been set up, and half the town had turned out for the memorial because they cared. Mama sat front and center, dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. Carson was beside her, Emme tucked into his side. The other brothers stood around in jeans and boots and crisp, ironed shirts, heads bowed as we gathered to honor the two men who'd died one night—my dad, and Lacey's.

A shared town tragedy that had never stopped rippling through this community or our families.

I stepped forward when the pastor gave me a nod. My throat tightened, but I cleared it and held my head high.

"My dad wasn't the kind of man who needed a spotlight," I began, voice rougher than I liked. "He was the kind of man who fixed what was broken, showed up when it mattered, and didn't waste words. If he loved you, you knew it because he'd be the first to help you. Loyal to a fault."

A soft ripple of murmurs moved through the crowd, as if in agreement.

“I always thought being a good man meant doing something big. Heroic. But the truth is, being good means showing up for the people you love, every day, especially when it’s hard.”

I glanced at Mama, saw the pride in her eyes. Then looked at Lacey. I gave her a wink. With any luck, the fire, the hard times, would remain behind us.

“My dad died a hero. So did Paul Andrews, Lacey’s father. The best thing I can do is to build a life and raise a family here and hope it even comes close to what they stood for. Thank you for being here today and honoring these two brave men.”

I finished and was about to step away when I was interrupted by the mayor.

“Folks,” Mayor Jones said, stepping forward. “We’re not only honoring the past today—but a man who made us proud this week. Hudson Goodson saved a fellow firefighter’s life. For that, I’m honored to present him with the town’s honorary key.”

People clapped and cheered for me. The Poppy Daily reporter took a photo of me, but I didn’t do what I did for praise. I ducked my head and made my way back to Lacey. People clapped me on the back as I moved past them.

She squeezed my arm and dabbed at a tear in her eye. “I’m so proud of you,” she whispered.

There was a long pause and people quieted down before the pastor stepped back up, letting everyone know it was time to privately pay respects.

Lacey slipped away toward the far row where her mother’s and father’s graves sat, side by side. I followed but hung back, letting her have the moment with them she

deserved.

But I couldn't stop myself from inching a little closer—just enough to hear her soft words carried on the breeze.

She knelt between the stones, fingers brushing the top edge of her mother's name.

“Hi, Mom. I know it's been a while. I should've come home sooner. I just didn't know how to say goodbye.”

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She smiled, watery and wistful.

“The house and everything in it are gone. All I have left is what’s in my heart, but thanks to your photos and Mama’s album, I got your message loud and clear about Hudson.”

Me and a message? I’d have to ask her what that’s all about.

“I came back to Poppy Valley with certain expectations. What I found is so much more and something you’d be proud of. A man who sees me. His family who loves me. And a town that’s showing me grace. I once thought I needed New York and the lights of the big city to be somebody, but I don’t.”

She paused, and I caught the hitch in her voice as she patted the top of her father’s headstone.

“I’m ready to stay. To build something real, right here. So see, this isn’t goodbye after all. It took losing everything, though, to realize what I had right in front of me was what I wanted all along.”

My chest ached in the best kind of way as she wrapped up her visit. I waited for her to join me and I wrapped her in a hug.

“Everything okay now?” I whispered in her ear.

“Yes. I made my peace.”

“Do you think they approve of me, and of us, together?”

“Oh, yes. I have no doubts.” She laced her fingers with mine and we walked hand in hand together to join the others. I wasn’t sure I believed in fate, but damn if it didn’t feel like something bigger had brought her back to me in Poppy Valley.

Eventually, we made our way to Java Co. where Lawson had promised a surprise reveal of his planned mural as a memorial to our brave firefighters.

A group had gathered near the alley, where a fresh tarp hung over a poster on display in front of the brick exterior wall that would eventually be painted. Lawson stood front and center with a proud grin, looking like he’d just landed a major art show.

“All right, y’all,” he called out. “This right here’s my way of honoring my daddy and Paul Andrews. Been working on this with my friend Shelby. Well, she’s not technically a muralist, but she owns the art studio over in Marigold and she’s got some real talent when she’s not drinking wine and painting sunflowers.”

Mama arched a brow. Dawson and Grayson snickered.

Lacey leaned into me and whispered, “Shelby?”

I shrugged. “First I’ve heard of her.”

“Drumroll please,” Lawson demanded, then tugged the tarp down—and I’ll be damned. It was really good.

The sweeping mural depicted two firefighters in silhouette against a golden sunrise, one hand raised as if in farewell, very similar to a photo of Dad in Mama’s bedroom. The other walked hand in hand with a girl child. Lacey dabbed her eyes.

The mural was bold, striking, and full of heart. Man, I was so proud of Lawson. My chest burst, and my face heated, about to cry.

People clapped. Some sniffled. Even Mama dabbed at her eyes again.

Carson was the first to speak for the family. “Brother, I’d be honored to have you paint this on my building.”

Then Lawson turned to the crowd. “There’s a QR code in the corner, too. If you scan it, it links to a donation page for the county first responder fund. I figured Dad would’ve liked that better than just a statue.”

“Now that’s smart,” I said, as he made the rounds, everyone congratulating him. When he reached us, I complimented him on it. “Did you come up with that?”

“Nah,” Lawson muttered. “Shelby’s idea. She’s been the brains behind this with me.”

“Well, Shelby’s got good taste,” Lacey said, then nudged me. “Must run in the family.”

I slid my arm around her waist and squeezed. “You sayin’ I have good taste too?”

“Of course you do.” Lacey kissed me.

Mama’s voice boomed. “Best bring Shelby around for dinner sometime, Lawson.”

His cheeks turned a bright shade of red.

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We all laughed and hugged. Something about seeing the mural, the way people lingered to take it in, and about this day brought everything full circle for all of us.

Later that evening, the sky turned soft for the sunset as we returned to the camper. The memorial was gratifying, good to see everyone, but it was just me and Lacey. The way I liked it.

She came out of the tiny camper bathroom wearing one of my softest T-shirts—threadbare from years of firehouse laundry machines, loose enough to hang mid-thigh.

“You sure know how to fill out a plain ol’ shirt, sweetheart.”

She rolled her eyes, but her lips curved. “You always know what to say to a girl who’s emotionally spent.”

I stepped forward and pulled her close. “I know how to say it without words, too.”

Her arms looped around my neck, and I took her mouth in a kiss that was slow. No rush. Plenty of heat.

Her fingers slipped beneath my shirt and tugged it upward. I let her take it off, and then she reached for my belt. The way her touch lingered, slow and sure, told me she didn’t just want comfort—she wanted connection.

We stumbled back toward the narrow bunkbed, a mess of laughter and kisses and tangled limbs. The camper creaked with every move.

I laid her back against the pillows, slid the shirt up her body. She was nothing but soft curves and golden skin in the glow of the bedside lamp.

“Lace,” I said, cupping her cheek. “You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

She swallowed hard, eyes shining. “Today was a lot. Make me forget everything but us.”

I did.

With my mouth and my hands, I worshipped her until she was arching beneath me, gasping my name.

When I slid inside of her, she wrapped her legs around me and whispered, “Don’t ever leave me. Remember, you promised to be safe.”

I knew where this was coming from. I returned to work a shift tomorrow. The first one since we became “a thing.”

I vowed with my kisses like words into her skin that I’d do my duty, but always put her first.

We moved together slowly, our bodies already knowing the rhythm, the right pace, the perfect connection. We’d been together a week, but it already felt like a lifetime with her.

After, as she lay curled on top of me, her ear resting over my heart, the only way we could fit together in the bunk, she murmured, “Today was hard. But healing at the same time.”

I kissed her temple. “Good. Because I plan on giving you a thousand easy days after

this one.”

And I meant every word.

EPILOGUE

One Month Later

There’s something about a summer wedding by the lake that feels like a scene stolen from a dream—sunlight sparkling off the water, chairs lined up in neat rows across the grass, and an arch of wildflowers bursting with whites and yellows and bright pinks like something from a magazine.

But none of it compared to the man standing under that arch. My Hudson.

He stood tall as the best man beside his brother, in a line of Goodson brothers, all dressed in faded jeans, black boots, white button-downs, and matching vests that made them look like the world’s most ruggedly sexy wedding party. Hudson’s sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and even from my seat in the front row, I could see his veins and muscles. I shifted discreetly in my seat.

Next to me, Mama sniffled, already on her second tissue. Hudson caught her eye first and gave her that sideways grin that always made her heart melt. Then his gaze shifted to me—I forgot how to breathe.

That grin widened when our eyes met. Something in his expression changed. Lately he’d been softer, introspective. I’ve asked him what’s going on, but he kept saying I’ll know soon.

I had a feeling I knew what he planned for us. Things moved fast in Hudson’s world once he finally got what and who he wanted.

We'd lived in the camper all summer for privacy—first by the lake, then parked in Mama's driveway to make room for today's celebration. Even in the tight quarters, we'd made our own little sanctuary. Shared coffee, shared showers, shared more than a few kisses in the early morning before anyone else was awake.

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Nightly, I'd fall asleep on top of him in the bottom bunk, then I'd crawl up to the top bunk at some point in the middle of the night. When he woke in the morning, he'd pull me down on top of him again.

I wouldn't change it for the world.

The insurance settlement for the house came through a week ago—decent enough to start fresh, though the sentimental stuff could never be replaced. Archer was flying in next week to walk the lot with me, to help design something nice. Hudson insists on building it himself with his brothers, and I don't doubt for a second it'll be perfect.

We decided we'd sell it and with the money, we'd add to his savings and build a larger family home on the two acres from his family property.

And thanks to a nudge from Mama, I'd landed a job at the police station, helping their chief get the station's back office under control. Chief MacGregor was a legend, but his filing system belonged in a museum. Hudson also liked that Branson was there working with me and could keep a watch over me.

I really did it. And I put down roots right here in Poppy Valley.

As I watched Carson slip the ring on Emme's finger and say "I do," I felt Hudson's eyes on me again. He held up his hands in the shape of a heart and mouthed the words I'd been dying to hear from him for weeks.

I love you...

Later, after the barbecue was devoured, the wedding cake was cut, and the band played one too many line dances, Hudson took my hand and whispered something in my ear that made my champagne-happy heart skip.

“Come with me. I’ve got something to show you.”

I followed him down a wooded path, giggling when he tugged me along like he couldn’t wait another minute.

“Hudson,” I laughed, nearly tripping in my strappy heels on the hiking path. “Where exactly are you taking me? I cannot be trusted on uneven ground at the moment.”

He turned, caught me by the waist, and kissed me soft and slow. “You trust me, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Then just a little further.”

We wound through the trees until the brush gave way to an outcropping of rock that jutted out over the lake. The water shimmered below, reflecting the stars and strings of fairy lights from the party.

“Oh. It’s beautiful. I forgot about this rock.” In high school, we called it Make Out Rock.

He fiddled with his phone, until music played, a slow, sweet song.

“Dance with me.”

He pulled me into him, one hand on my lower back, the other threading through mine. We swayed together, body to body, heart to heart, the rest of the world melting

away.

He kissed my temple, then my cheek, then whispered against my skin, “I love you, Lacey.”

My breath caught.

“Finally,” I said, blinking back happy tears. “I was beginning to think you’d never say it.”

“I’ve wanted to say it since the day after the fire. I just knew you were it for me.”

“I love you too,” I whispered, holding him tighter. “More than I ever thought possible.”

We danced for another minute in silence. And then he whispered something else so softly, but I could hardly hear it.

“What was that?”

He got down on his knee and repeated, “Marry me, Lace.”

I froze, heart thumping loud enough to echo across the lake. I had no doubts about us, no fears, no worries about where we were headed. He’d become my everything no matter what the future held.

“Yes... I’ll marry you Hudson.” I gushed and jumped into his arms. He swung me around and I yelped, hoping we didn’t fall into the lake together. Then a thought hit me.

“Oh! Let’s keep it just between us. At least for tonight. Emme and Carson deserve their moment. We shouldn’t steal their thunder.”

He pressed his forehead to mine, eyes shining. “Deal. But tomorrow, I’m shouting it from the top of the fire truck right through the heart of town.”

I laughed, full and free and completely in love.

As we danced longer under the stars, this was the beginning of everything for us. My roots would be tangled firmly around Hudson Goodson for life.