



Griffin (Stone Brothers #5)

Author: Tess Oliver

Category: Romance

Description: The bestselling Stone Brothers series is back with a brand new generation!

How can someone so incredible be stuck with so much baggage?

When I saw the beautiful woman and her scone surrounded by rude, greedy gulls, I jumped in to save her. I never expected for her to steal my heart, but steal it, she did.

Only one problem ... and it's a big, dangerous one. Shay Kennedy is married to an undeserving man who rules her life with an iron fist. Dad warned me it was none of my business, but my need to protect Shay is too strong to resist.

My resolve to solve my own problems is tested when a determined hero insists on being part of the chaos.

Griffin Stone is everything I've dreamed of, but I'm married to a nightmare, and breaking free is never easy. Tate is controlling, abusive and his mental health grows more unstable each day. He refuses to get help, and I know my time is running out.

The last thing I want is to drag Griffin into my messy life, but aside from being drop-dead gorgeous, he is stubborn. When my marriage takes a dramatic turn that I never saw coming, all I can do is hope that Griffin will be waiting on the other side ... if and when I make it through.

Griffin Stone is Colt Jade's son, and he carries with him the fiercely protective, deeply loving traits that you loved in Stone Cold Bad.

Total Pages (Source): 32

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:56 am

ONE

GRIFFIN

"T heo, I'm not waiting another fucking minute!

" I called up the stairs. No answer. I pounded up the creaky steps, making sure to hit each of the squeakiest ones with extra weight.

Crusoe and Theo had stayed up late partying in the basement.

When my cousin Theo wasn't working, he was riding bikes, playing video games and fucking women.

Our other cousin Crusoe usually skipped the work part and went straight to video games and women.

He occasionally came out to the construction site to work, but he preferred to stay attached to his game controller and whatever nice pair of tits he had visiting at the moment.

Theo and Crusoe were best friends and my two roommates at the Shack.

The Shack was an old beach house that had seen more than its share of coastal squalls and gale force windstorms, yet it still stood, slightly crooked and bearing all the scars of mother nature.

We'd been renting it cheaply from the owner for a few years.

Even though the house was crummy, it was big.

But lately, it wasn't big enough for me.

My two roommates and their constant gaming parties down in the basement were starting to get on my nerves.

I reached Theo's door and decided I'd waited long enough for him that I was past the politeness of a knock.

I knew exactly what I'd find inside and was not disappointed.

In fact, impressed might have been a better word.

Theo was on his stomach, fast asleep, his arm draped over the side of the mattress.

A woman had her arm and leg draped across his naked body.

Next to her was another woman with dyed purple hair and a giant dragon tattoo on her back.

And a third woman was stretched out across the bottom of the mattress.

She'd managed to win the sheet tug-of-war and was wrapped in it like a mummy.

A blanket and two pillows lay on the floor between piles of clothes and shoes.

I walked over to the bed and yanked Theo's head up by his long hair. "Ouch, fuck, what are you doing?" The women started to stir. The one draped over Theo's body

turned over to her other side with a grouchy groan.

"I'm leaving for work. You know—the place where you go so you can have money to live. You said your car battery was dead and that you needed a ride, but that ride is leaving in two minutes."

Theo growled in anger and pushed to sitting.

"Cover your junk. I just ate breakfast," I said.

Theo reached around blindly for a sheet to cover himself, but the sheet was still wrapped around the blonde mummy at the end of the bed. I spun around and grabbed the first thing I could reach. It was a black, lacy bra. I threw it at him. He snatched it from the air and dropped it on his balls.

There was hardly any light in the room, but Theo squinted up at me as if I was shining an interrogation beam at him. "Can you give me twenty? I need to shower away this haze in my head."

I shook my head. "Nope. You're on your own." I turned to leave.

"Ah, come on, Fin. Okay, ten. Ten minutes."

I lifted my middle finger at him and walked out.

"Thanks a lot, asshole," I heard him mutter as I reached the stairs.

I'd waited for Theo, and now, I was running late myself.

My dad, Colt Stone, owned Stone Construction.

He'd built the business from literally a tool box and some good skills.

As a kid, I used to sit in the garage and watch him build stuff, and I knew then that I'd follow in the old man's footsteps.

Working for your dad came with both challenges and bonuses, but we'd found a good working relationship.

He worked hard to not be too big of a bossy asshole, and I worked hard to not be a nepo baby slacker.

Dad had landed a big contract building a set of condos inland from the coast. It meant a longer commute, but it also meant steady work for at least a year.

Dad rang as soon as I climbed into the truck. "Just leaving," I said.

"You're leaving late."

"Yeah, talk to Theo about that."

"Well, since I caught you still in Trayton, I need you to stop off at Brew and Scones. Stella is packing us up a box of scones. Thought I'd try and make us at least look civil to the new office manager. She starts today."

"Yeah, all right. See you soon." I dialed Theo. He answered grumpily.

"What, are you gonna rub it in now? I can't find a ride. Might have to ride my bike." Female voices floated around behind him.

"You're going to ride your bike on the freeway?" I drove down the dirt driveway. Years ago, the path would have been covered in heavy gravel, but after decades of

weather and vehicles, the gravel had either washed away or had been ground to sand.

"No, I'll take roads. Should be there right about lunchtime."

"Yeah, yeah, put away the tiny fucking violin.

I've got to stop by and get some scones from LaLa.

Apparently, Dad wants to put on a show and convince the new office manager that we aren't a bunch of sweat-soaked heathens.

I'll get the scones and then come back here to pick up your sorry ass.

I swear, Theo, I'm just going to roll past the house, and you'd better fly out that fucking door and into the truck before I turn down the driveway. "

"Yeah, yeah, I'll be ready. See you soon."

I headed to the pier. Brew and Scones was a small shop midway down the pier. My cousin, Stella, twin sister of my cousin Jaxon, was working at the shop while she was earning her degree in archaeology.

It was still early. The crisp fall weather made a morning walk on the pier, even for a scone and coffee, less inviting, so parking was easy.

A row of the usuals, old guys who sat most mornings with their poles lined up on the railing waiting for a bite, filled one side of the pier.

They spent a lot more time bullshitting and guzzling coffee than catching fish.

A row of rock pigeons sat along the opposite railing waiting for scone crumbs.

A few white gulls meandered up and down the planks looking for the same.

A woman walked out of the scone shop with a paper bag and a cup of coffee.

I'd never seen her before, but she had an amazing ass wrapped in tight jeans, and the rest of her was pretty spectacular too.

Thick mahogany-brown hair was cropped short on her head, and big brown eyes took up most of her face.

She glanced my way, smiled politely and walked over to the railing to stare out at the rippling ocean while she ate her scone.

Stella was filling a box with scones when I walked in.

Stella and my sister, Jules, were the only two girls in the Stone cousin group.

We'd all been calling Stella LaLa since she was a little girl, and the nickname stuck.

Stella was one of those women who could step inside a crowded room and stop all the conversations.

She never liked the attention, but there was no way for her to turn off that natural light that always seemed to follow her around.

She could be wild and, at the same time, grounded.

She was close to my sister, Jules, but there was no one she knew better than her twin, Jaxon.

Jaxon used to live in the Shack, but he'd recently moved in with his girlfriend,

Bridget.

Lucky bastard escaped, and now it was just me and the two idiots.

"Hey, Fin, I'm almost done with your order."

Admittedly, my attention was still on the woman outside the window. I motioned with my head. "Who's that?" I asked.

Stella twisted around to see who I was talking about. She rolled her eyes. "Oh my god, one track—all of you—one fucking track, and I have no idea who she is. She just innocently walked her fantastic figure and face into the scone shop probably thinking she could eat a scone without getting ogled."

I held up my hand to slow her tirade. "Whoa, sorry for asking. And is ogled a word?"

Another eye roll. "Considering how much time you guys spend doing it, you really should look it up. And sorry for the rant. I'm having—" She shook her head. "Never mind."

I moved closer to the counter. "LaLa? What's going on? Is it that asshole, Vincent, again?" Stella had gone out with the guy twice and decided he wasn't for her, but he was still bothering her.

She didn't answer.

"Look, Jax and I will drive over to his place—" Stella started shaking her head. "Just hear me out. We won't hurt him, but we'll let him know he needs to stay the fuck away from you. You know when Jax and I team up, we can be pretty damn persuasive."

Stella placed the box on the counter for me to take. "I'll handle it."

Theo, Jaxon, Crusoe, Cormac and I were hyper-protective when it came to Stella and Jules, but as they got older, they'd started to get annoyed by our constant vigilance. I couldn't blame them, but at the same time, I couldn't turn off that instinct to protect them and neither could the others.

"You know all you have to do is say the word," I said.

"Jeez, now you sound like a mafia member. It's fine. I've got it handled."

"Yeah, you said, only both times that you said it, you didn't sound the least bit convincing."

"Your dad already paid for these." She pushed the box forward a few inches to remind me why I was there. "See you later."

"All right. And don't be mad, LaLa. You know it's just?—"

"I know. Now go. You'll be late for work."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:56 am

TWO

SHAY

A deep blue ocean rippled almost nervously under the pier.

Or maybe it was just my own case of nerves.

I took a bite of the blueberry scone. Crumbs dropped and took off like dust in the wind.

The nearby pigeons immediately swooped down from the railing to clean up the mess.

I glanced back to watch them eagerly vacuum up the crumbs and looked up just as the incredibly hot man walked out of the scone shop.

Talk about a movie-star caliber face, and everything beneath the face was breathtaking too.

He was wearing a black T-shirt under a flannel button down, but I could tell by the breadth of his shoulders and the way the shirt hugged his arms that he was built.

One of the pigeons walked right up and tapped my shoe.

I startled and laughed before purposely dropping a crumb down for the pushy bird.

It was a mistake. Instantly, birds of every shape and size dropped from some invisible bird chute in the sky.

Seconds later, I was surrounded by at least thirty nosy, greedy pigeons and gulls.

I took a few steps forward to try and remove myself from the beaky circle, but they moved with me, all of their black, beady eyes focused on the scone in my hand.

I frantically tossed out a few crumbs and realized I'd just made the classic "pouring water on a grease fire" mistake.

More birds showed up. It seemed every feathered animal on the coast had heard word about the silly lady tossing out blueberry scone pieces.

There just wasn't that much scone to go around, so some of the birds started moving in on me, determined to be the winner in the contest for a crumb.

A gull tapped its long orange beak against my leg. I screamed and threw the entire scone up in the air. Flapping wings and angry squawks followed. I was trapped under a cloud of feathers, beaks and talons. I covered my head and crouched down. A large hand took hold of my arm.

"Go on, get out of here, you scavengers," he said as he flailed his big arm.

I tucked against him for shelter as he scared the last of them off.

To say I felt embarrassed and ridiculous was an understatement.

The beautiful woman running the scone shop had come out to see what the commotion was about.

She shot a wry smile and head shake toward the man and went back inside.

When the last pair of wings had flapped away, I felt safe enough to emerge from the protective cocoon of his arm.

My face was warm with a blush. "Apparently, birds like scones," I said in a nervous twitter.

The birds had gone, and my frayed nerves were starting to smooth, but something about the man standing just inches from me had set off a storm of butterflies in my stomach.

"Thank you for saving me from my Hitchcock nightmare. "

His smile was as stellar as the rest of him. "My pleasure. Hitchcock?" he asked, confused.

"You know, the old-time, horror-flick producer.

" I lowered my chin to give it a doubled up look and pushed my stomach out.

"Good evening," I said in the infamous Alfred Hitchcock baritone.

I'd now embarrassed myself twice because he clearly had no idea who I was talking about.

I waved my hand. "My mom and I used to watch black and white movies every Friday night, and there was this Hitchcock movie where the birds went nuts, and they attacked—well great, I'm rambling like a madwoman to add to my humiliation. "

"I think it's the cutest fucking rambling I've ever heard, and for future reference, in

case I'm not here next time, don't give them scones.

As you witnessed, they have a very big greedy bird network, and one little woman with a scone is no match for them.

I once watched a flock of gulls chase a woman all the way down the pier because she'd walked on eating a giant pretzel and had made the fatal mistake of dropping a piece.

" The man had incredible jewel-green eyes highlighted stunningly by black lashes.

His thick black hair was brushed back off his clean-shaven face.

"Well, if you're all right, then, I'm off to work.

" Another heartbreaking smile. "I'm Griffin, by the way. "

"I'm Shay, and I'm eternally grateful to you for saving me from what was destined to be a very bad morning. I've got to get to work, too. Thanks again, and I promise, no more scone tossing on this pier."

Griffin walked with me back down the pier, then with a moment of shy awkwardness we both smiled politely and went our separate ways.

I got in my car and moved the mirror to get one more glance at my hero before he climbed into his truck.

I was still in a cloud of shock and, frankly, feeling a little bit of heartache from the last few minutes on the pier.

The pushy birds had shocked me, and the handsome stranger who'd come to my

rescue had rekindled one of my favorite daydreams, the one where the handsome prince comes in to carry me away from reality.

It seemed good men really did exist, and some even came in incredible packages.

My phone buzzed. I picked it up and looked at the screen.

And then, there was the man who could instantly shatter my daydreams and remind me of the darker side of things.

"I'll be home in two days." It was short and to the point, and as simple as the message was, it sent a jolt of sadness through me.

Tate's return home meant my half-life, the one where I was a happy-go-lucky, single woman who could stay up all night and watch old movies while wearing oversized sweats and eating greasy popcorn if she felt like it, ended.

It meant breezing down the hallway and stepping into the house without the fear of an angry tirade, or worse, was over.

It meant being myself, laughing out loud, dancing and not having to watch what I said or did was over.

Tate's return obliterated that half-life.

The second he walked inside with his shit-stomper boots and angry scowl, I became his unhappy and perpetually on edge wife.

There was a time, back when we were in our early twenties, where I thought he was the coolest, hottest man on the planet.

How quickly a vile personality could make good looks vanish.

His trucking job took him away from home more than half the year, and I thanked my lucky stars for that job every day.

Flipping back to my single woman life was the only thing that kept me sane.

I dropped my phone in my purse. No response was needed, and he wasn't expecting one. I started the car and drove off toward work.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:56 am

THREE

GRIFFIN

Theo turned the volume down on the radio. He was miserable from a night of partying, so it was my responsibility to make sure he felt the full brunt of it. I turned the music back up.

"Fuckface," he muttered. He pulled down his sunglasses and slumped against the seat like a sulking kid.

"So, how was it with the long-legged trio?" I asked. "I'm impressed."

"Don't be. I was so drunk, I don't even remember it. No idea who the chick down at the end of the bed wrapped in the sheet was. Honestly, I think Crusoe kicked her out, and she just crawled into my bed. You know how grumpy Cru gets when the alcohol starts to leave his system."

Theo leaned over and reached for the box of scones.

"Just take one. Dad's trying to impress the new office manager."

Theo dropped a big chunk of scone in his mouth and then talked around it. "Hoo did he ire?"

"How the hell should I know? I know he was having a hard time finding someone who wanted to sit in a small trailer on a dusty construction site for the next year."

The scone seemed to revive Theo some. He sat up straighter and gave himself a little shake. "Shit, that's the last time I party before a workday."

I laughed. "Can I get that in writing?"

"Nope. Hey, Mac and I are going to ride after work. Interested in some mountain biking at Devil's Point? I noticed you're getting kind of soft in the middle." He reached over as if he might touch my stomach.

"Touch me and you won't be using that hand to jack off for the next ten years," I said.

Theo laughed. "Boy, someone is touchy about his soft middle."

"Nothing soft about my middle, buddy. How the hell are you going to bike down that rocky path in the dark? You won't get to Devil's Point before sundown. And I thought Mac was helping your dad paint the boat?"

"Gonna try out my new helmet light. Mac is helping Dad. Although Mac's form of helping includes checking his phone every five minutes and stopping to sext with Brianna."

"Is he still seeing Brianna? Hell, what is that? Three straight weeks?"

"Look who's talking, Mr. Love 'em and leave 'em before their panties are even dry."

I looked over at him. "Says the man who woke up surrounded by three naked women. Remember any names?"

Theo nodded. "Think one of them was Hannah or Helen or something with an H. Besides, they won't remember my name either. Cru kept pouring shots, and you know how you get to that point with tequila where you can't remember how many shots

you've had? We hit that point halfway through the evening."

"I thought you were competing in the Downhill Masters next month. Is tequila part of your training routine?" Theo was an awesome mountain biker. In fact, he was an all-around athlete, but biking was his passion.

"A little tequila now and then won't hurt."

"You were literally just talking about that point in time when you're so fucking plastered you can't remember how many shots you've had.

Not sure if that qualifies as a little tequila.

" I turned down the road that led to the construction site.

A lot of our coworkers were already hard at work.

My truck scared pigeons off the road reminding me of the start to the morning.

For some reason, the whole incident, and especially the woman, had really stuck with me.

"Shit, is Greg back on the site? I thought he hurt his thumb. Can't stand that blowhard," Theo said.

"Great, then I'll tell Dad to make sure he puts you on his team."

"Fuck you."

Dust kicked up as I pulled over to the parking area.

Dad was walking out of the trailer that would be his office for the next year.

I grabbed the box of scones, and we got out of the truck.

It was a clear day and about ten degrees warmer than it was on the coast. Dad spotted us and turned our direction.

"He's going to lecture us about being late," Theo muttered.

"Nah, I had to pick up his scones."

"Guys, you're late," Dad said.

Theo grinned smugly at me.

"Uh, the scones, remember? Plus, I had to double back to pick up this idiot."

"Take the scones inside, Fin, and Theo, I've got you scheduled to work on framing with Greg's team."

It was my turn to grin smugly.

Theo headed to the trailer with lockers and hard hats, and I walked off with the scones.

"Hey, Fin, Ms. Kennedy is here, and please don't pile on the Stone charm right off the bat. Besides, she's married."

"Fuck, what kind of an animal do you think I am? And Katie came on to me. I didn't even encourage it. Not my fault she quit."

"She specifically used the word 'heartbroken' in her resignation letter. Just tone down the Stone-ness, right?"

"Don't forget I got all my animal instincts from my dad." I was pleased to get in the final word.

I reached the trailer and stepped inside.

It was split into two halves. Dad's desk was at the front of the trailer and his office manager's desk was at the back.

The new manager was bent down picking up some fallen pencils.

I allowed myself to notice her nice ass before I turned off my "Stone-ness. "

"Hello," I said. "Brought some scones." No reason I couldn't make myself the good guy, the person who brought in scones for her first day.

She straightened and twisted around. "It's you." The pencils fell from her hand. She waved her hands, flustered. "Could my fingers be any more buttery?"

I put the scones on the table and hurried over to help her. I'd noticed her nice perfume on the pier, but it smelled even better not muted by the odors of a fishing pier.

I handed her the pencils I retrieved. Our fingers brushed past each other, and for some reason, her touch stayed on my skin long after I'd pulled my hand away.

I also noticed the gold band on her ring finger, which, given Dad's lecture five minutes ago, was probably a good thing.

She peered up at me with big brown eyes.

They were glinting with amusement as she once again mentioned her buttery fingers.

"Shay, right?" I asked even though I knew damn well that was her name.

"Yes, and you're Griffin. You're Colt's son." She smiled. "My goodness, those are some amazing family genes."

I smiled. "Call me Fin. Have you recuperated from your harrowing morning? Scones are probably the last thing you want."

"Actually, since I only got two bites of mine this morning, I'm looking forward to eating one without pigeons watching. I hope I do well here. I really need the job, and your dad seems like a cool boss." She looked at me with a hopeful eyebrow raise.

"Dad's all right. You'll be great. Have you lived in the area long?"

Shay looked down as if this was a hard question.

"Sorry, none of my business."

She lifted her face. There was a line of tiny star tattoos that ran up along her neck and ended behind her ear.

A kissing trail, I thought and then shook the idea from my head.

Her brown eyes held all kinds of secrets, all kinds of emotion.

The question had triggered something, and some of that amused gloss had faded.

"No, it's fine. We're—uh, my husband and I—moved into town a few months ago.

" That seemed to be all she wanted to say about the subject, and I was fine with that.

The door swung open, and the thin floor of the trailer creaked as Dad stepped inside.

"Hey, Fin, going to need you on the first unit. Electrician is finished with the rough electric in there, so we can start putting in insulation. I see you've met Ms. Kennedy."

"Please, call me Shay. Everyone can call me Shay.

Ms. Kennedy is far too formal, and I want to fit in as fast as possible.

It'll make me more comfortable and then I won't drop a dozen pencils on the floor and spill my coffee.

" She pointed to a wad of coffee-stained paper towels on her desk.

"And Fin is my hero. He rescued me from a terrible end this morning.

I stupidly tossed a scone crumb to a pushy pigeon out on the pier. "

Dad nodded. "I can see where this is going.

I once had a gull take a French fry right out of my hand.

" He looked at me with an accusatory glare.

"Well, hero, get to work. Your crew is waiting for you.

" He turned to Shay. "I emailed over those lists.

If you could generate some purchase orders, that would be great. "

"I'll get right on it. And once again, thank you so much for this job opportunity. I won't let you down."

"We're glad to have you, Shay."

Dad followed me out. I was expecting it. "Fin." This time the accusation was in his tone.

"I stepped in to scare away the birds, Dad. That's all. And I sure as fuck didn't know who she was at the time."

"Right. Well, just in case you didn't notice, she?—"

"She's wearing a wedding ring. Now, should I go to work, or do you want to continue with this stupid conversation?"

"Yes, go to work. Hero, my ass," he scoffed as he walked away.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:56 am

FOUR

SHAY

It seemed I'd had the full parade of workers walk through the trailer to introduce themselves.

I joked to a few that I might need them to wear name tags until I memorized names.

There was one name I already knew by heart.

Colt's son, Griffin, had stopped by during his break to check how things were going and to ask if my pencils were cooperating.

He had this sort of sigh-worthy quality about him—kindness mixed with hotness was always a refreshing combination, and rare.

In fact, kindness was scarce all around these days, but it seemed I'd found a good job.

I'd really gotten lucky, and luck wasn't something that landed in my lap often.

Colt stopped in the office. It was easy to see where Griffin got his looks. The two of them were nearly twins. "Some of us are making a run to Meg's Burgers. It's a little mom and pop place down the road. Are you interested in a burger? My treat."

"That's kind of you to offer, but I brought a lunch." I thought about my yogurt and banana lunch, and my stomach reached up and tapped my brain saying, "take the

burger ... please." I tamped down the idea.

"All right. If you're sure." Colt left and I walked to the small office refrigerator for my yogurt. I sat at the table and decided a blueberry scone might be the perfect dipper in lemon yogurt. That way the lunch wouldn't be a total disappointment.

I'd just settled into the chair with my scone and yogurt when my phone rang.

I jolted at the sound because it rarely rang.

Most of my friends vanished a few years after I married Tate.

They wanted nothing more to do with me, and I couldn't blame them.

I returned to the desk. It was him . My stomach tightened as if I was picking up a call from the doctor who was surely going to give me terrible news.

"Hello," I said, forcing an airy tone.

"Hey, hon, did you get my text?" I hated the sound of his voice, even when he wasn't being an asshole, mostly because I knew asshole Tate was just around the corner waiting to pop out.

"Yes, I'm sorry I didn't write back. I was busy. I started the new job today. It's really?—"

"What new job?" His tone sharpened.

"I told you about it. I'm office manager for a construction company. I think I'm really going to like it here."

"You never mentioned it."

"I did." I released a frustrated sigh. There was no sense in arguing because in his rock-hard head he was never wrong. "Anyway, it seems like a cool?—"

"How much?" he barked.

"How much?"

"Your fucking pay, dimwit. What else would I mean?" I went from hon to dimwit in a few short sentences. I actually preferred him acting like this because the other act was incredibly cringey.

"Twenty-five an hour and health insurance," I said proudly. I'd left behind thirty dollars an hour and four weeks' vacation, but I considered it a great starting salary.

He laughed. "What a fucking joke. Well, I guess since you're basically a novice at everything?—"

"I know my way around an office, Tate." It was much easier to respond sharply when he was far away in his truck and not within arm's distance where his fist could shoot out without warning.

"Yeah, whatever, but clearly the boss didn't think enough of you to pay a better salary."

My eyes started to ache, but I blinked fast to keep away tears. "I was glad to find a decent job. Remember, you're the reason we had to leave Parkhurst." I was feeling exceptionally brave because we were on the phone, but I was going to regret the conversation once he got back home.

The silence on his end was terrifying. "Only men working there?" he finally asked. His tone was so cold I felt a chill through the phone.

"What?" His icy tone had thrown me off balance. "Working where?"

"At the fucking circus, idiot, where do you think I mean?"

"Here, yes, I suppose so. It's a construction site.

" My voice wavered as I spoke, and I hated that because he knew that once again he'd broken me.

I'd planned to leave him many times, but that was almost scarier than staying with him.

Tate had assured me more than once that leaving him wasn't an option.

He was gone for more than half the year, so I had half a life where I was free and smiling and generally happy.

"Then start looking for another job. You're not working for a bunch of horny construction workers."

"There aren't that many jobs available, not ones that pay well and have health insurance."

His laugh was pure evil. "That is not good pay.

Look for another job, or I'll find you one when I get back.

" He hung up, and the tears started to flow.

Suddenly, my yogurt-scone combo didn't look so appealing.

I pushed the yogurt aside and slumped back against the chair.

Instead of a congratulations on my first day at a new job, my husband was telling me to quit and find something with more money and less men.

It was especially hard to swallow knowing that he'd come home more than once with another woman's perfume or lipstick on his shirt.

The first time it happened, I cried and yelled and had a general meltdown, but slowly, I realized I didn't give a damn what he did on his trucking jobs.

As long as he was miles away from me, he could screw every woman in every dive bar from here to fucking eternity.

I figured I might get lucky one day and some jealous boyfriend or husband would come after him with a hunting rifle and put a bullet in his head.

The door opened. I was sure the site was empty for lunch. I quickly wiped away the tears, sat up straighter and reached for my yogurt.

"Didn't mean to interrupt your lunch." How pathetic was I? I already recognized his voice. It was deep and smooth like everything else about him. "I left a slice of pizza in Dad's fridge. Wanted to see if it was still edible."

I opened the top on the yogurt. "How come you aren't off eating burgers with the rest of 'em?" I asked.

"Trying to save money." His work boots stomped the thin trailer floor behind me, and I actually felt my pulse speed up. "Mind if I sit?" he asked.

I waved at the empty chair. "Please. But no judgement when I dip a blueberry scone into my lemon yogurt."

Griffin's shoulders strained the fabric on his work shirt. There was a smudge of dirt on his face that I badly wanted to wipe away with my thumb, but I resisted. "Hey, you're talking to a guy who dips his fries in maple syrup. Not all the time but when the urge hits me."

I took a bite of scone and peered up to think about the combo. "You know? Not a bad idea. Don't think I'd make a habit of it, but I always say live dangerously when fries are involved."

He chuckled. "That's one of your life's philosophies, is it?"

"One of many," I said and turned toward him with a smile.

His own smile faded. "Anything the matter? Were you crying? I wasn't eavesdropping, but I heard you talking as I walked past the window. Anything I can do?"

Yes, carry me away on your white horse, I thought dreamily.

"Uh, no." I wiped clumsily at my face, but my eyes no doubt gave it away.

"My husband's grandmother's cat had to be put down today.

Charlie was a really neat cat." Living with Tate had made me an incredible liar.

Tear stains were always the easiest to explain away.

Bruises, cuts and pain were much harder.

"Oh wow, sad to hear. Was he old?" Griffin pulled a leathery looking slice of pizza from a baggie.

"Who?" I asked. I was good at coming up with the initial lie.

Not as good when follow-up questions were asked.

"Oh, you mean Charlie." I nodded. "Nineteen.

Not sure what that is in cat years, but I think he might have been around for Paul Revere's ride.

What are you saving for?" I was also a skilled topic changer, a necessity in my chaotic life.

"Let me guess. An engagement ring?" Yes, I was fishing, but a girl could dream.

The question made him blush lightly. "Nope. Not a ring. I rent a house with my two cousins, Theo and Crusoe, and let's just say, it's getting old. Love those guys but I need a place of my own."

"I know the feeling," I said absently and then pressed my fingers to my lips.

"Oops, that came out, didn't it? Of course, I have a place of my own—with my husband," I explained awkwardly.

"We're renting a house a few miles inland from the coast. It's crummy and needs paint and there's a disgusting tobacco smell through the whole place, but I'm slowly making it a home.

" I thought the last part was a nice touch to make up for the first part.

"That pizza looks very sad, by the way, and that is coming from a woman who is dipping a scone in yogurt.

" This time my subject change didn't work.

"It's not bad though," he said finishing a bite. "What does your husband do? If you don't mind me asking."

"He drives an eighteen-wheeler. He's in the Midwest right now, heading home in a few days.

" The last part made my throat dry up. My face must have shown my distress, too, and Griffin noticed.

A man who actually noticed when you were upset, I wasn't used to that.

The look of concern on his handsome face made my throat tighten.

I had to act quickly before tears started again.

I waved my hand in front of my face. "Just can't stop thinking about Charlie.

" I realized then how much I hated lying to him.

There was something so real, so genuine about him.

"I'm really sorry about the cat. I'm sure if he lived nineteen years he had a great life."

I nodded and stared down at my yogurt far too intensely.

I was embarrassed about the whole damn story.

What I really wanted to do was scream out that I hated my husband so much that it made me physically ill to know he was coming home soon.

But I kept it to myself, like always. I wasn't just ashamed of lying.

I was ashamed that I'd never mustered enough courage or independence to leave the man I hated.

Griffin's phone vibrated. He pulled it out of his shirt pocket. He texted something back and put the phone away.

"My cousin, Jaxon, wants me to join him at his mom's place for beer after work. Hey, have you been to the Lazy Daze? My Aunt Amy owns it. Occasionally, she gets in some cool bands, and the house beer is good."

I shook my head. "My visit to the pier this morning was my first big adventure past my little neighborhood."

"You should go sometime," he said enthusiastically and then tamped it down with a rounder posture. "I mean, you and your husband should give it a try."

If there was one thing worse than Tate Kennedy, it was Tate Kennedy after too many beers. I forced a smile. "Thanks, maybe we'll try it one night."

Trucks started rolling back up to the site. Griffin stretched up to see out of the small side window. "Looks like the boss has had his share of burgers. I'd better get back to work."

He'd hardly eaten any of the dry pizza slice. "How is a guy your size going to make it through the rest of the day on a few bites of stale pizza?" I asked.

He shrugged and took a scone. "A maple scone ought to get the blood sugar pumping. It was nice talking to you, and really, you guys should try Lazy Daze. It's a cool place."

"It's sweet how you spread the word about your aunt's business. Sounds like you have a big and amazing family."

Griffin's face lit up at the mention of his family. He was truly what Holly, my best friend in high school, would have called a 10 to the tenth power. "Big? Yes. Amazing?" He turned up his green eyes in thought. "Most of the time. See ya."

I watched him walk out, and there was an instant ache in my chest. It was hard knowing there were men like Griffin Stone in the world when I was stuck with a man like Tate Kennedy.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:56 am

FIVE

GRIFFIN

Jaxon had grabbed his favorite booth by the bar. It was still early and Monday night, so Lazy Daze was mostly empty. Stella's long ponytail swung back and forth as she laughed at something her mom said.

Amy spotted me walking in. Her face lit up with a smile. "Well, look who is gracing us with his presence on a Monday." She walked around the end of the bar and came straight over for a hug. All the moms were big-time huggers. She reached up and wiped something off my chin.

"Gee thanks, Ma," I teased.

"Just be lucky she didn't lick that thumb first," Jaxon called from behind his mug of beer.

"One time," Amy said. "One time I made the mistake of licking my thumb to wipe a smudge of dirt off his face, and apparently, that one motherly act has scarred him for life."

"She always leaves out the truly psycho part," Jaxon said. "You know the part about doing it right in front of my friends on the third-grade field trip. They all called me 'Licky Boy' for a week."

Stella laughed. "No one ever teased you about anything in your whole life because

you were six feet tall on your seventh birthday."

Jaxon raised a brow at her.

"Well, maybe not six feet tall, but for our seventh birthday, dad hung that big unicorn pinata, and you walked up and obliterated it with one swing. No one else even got a chance at bat."

"Hey, I got you the candy, didn't I?" Jaxon asked. "Fin, buddy, get over here, and LaLa, instead of standing around, why don't you bring our dear cousin a beer?"

I walked, cautiously now, over to his table. "Buddy? Dear cousin? You must want something from me. Where's Bridget?"

"She's getting a tattoo. She says she wants to catch up to my ink display, but I told her no fucking way."

"Chauvinist," Stella said as she set down the beer. She scowled at her twin brother. "Why the hell can't Gidge get a bunch of tattoos? You're more tattoo than skin."

"I know, and I'm regretting about half of them. That skull and crossbones on my abs is starting to look like a bulldog with a bone."

Stella laughed. "That's cuz now that you're not single you've let that six-pack shrink to a four pack of minis."

Jaxon patted his stomach. "Not true. The tattoo artist just did a crappy job."

"You should have them all removed," Stella suggested. "I could do it with my flat iron. That sucker gets hot enough to sear off skin. Just let me know when you want me to fire it up." She pressed two fingers to her forearm and made a sizzling sound.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Jaxon asked. It seemed I'd walked into a twin moment. They had them often, and Stella was the only person who could tease Jaxon mercilessly and get away with it.

"I'll bet I could make you cry," she quipped and walked away.

Jaxon scoffed loudly at her remark. "What's up?" He took a drink of beer.

"That's what I'm asking you. I feel like this invite just became a trap. What house project do you need me for this time?"

"What? No. Can't a guy just ask his cousin to join him for a beer without raising suspicion?"

I picked up my beer and stared at him, waiting for the other shoe. It dropped like a steel-toed boot.

"I'm going to put the new roof on myself." Bridget had bought a cool fixer-upper that overlooked the beach, but the place came with a ton of problems.

"A roof that size needs a full professional crew, Jax. And you'll still need permits."

"Yeah, but now that you have your contractor's license, we can get one. We got three bids, all of them fifty thousand plus. If I do it myself?—"

"Uh, with me, you mean."

"Right, and I'm sure Cru would be happy to make some money. Now that winter's coming, Slade won't be taking many people out on the boat, and Crusoe is going to be hard up for cash."

I placed down the beer and looked at him. "You're going to put your brother, Cru, the guy who practically has his own personal bed just waiting for him in the ER, up on that roof?" I shook my head. "You've lost your fucking mind."

"We'll put a rope around his waist and tie him to the chimney." He picked up his beer and finished it off.

"Excuse me if I'm wrong, but isn't your girlfriend extremely wealthy?"

"She's got a nice bank account, but I'm still Jaxon Stone from the household where my mom made us drink all the milk out of our cereal bowls and where we had to use bar soap to wash our hair because she thought shampoo was a waste of money."

"So, what you're saying is you're a penny-pincher?"

"Sure, now what do you say? Wanna help a cousin in need?"

I finished my beer. "We both work, so we're just going to do it on the weekends? How does that work?"

"Haven't thought about that. LaLa, where are the peanuts?" Jaxon called across the bar. He was taking advantage of the fact that there were almost no other customers.

"Actually, bring us some nachos. Extra cheese."

Stella stared at him across the room.

"I think you'd better say please," I said.

"C'mon, twins don't say please. We can read each other's minds, and she knows I'm already saying it right up here in my brain." Jaxon closed his eyes. "What am I thinking right now, LaLa? Show him how we read each other's minds."

"Hmm, let me see, you're thinking 'I must be an even bigger asshole than I thought if I think I can just order my sister around.'"

I chuckled and got up to get a beer refill. I picked up Jaxon's glass too. I reached the counter. Amy was drying glasses. "Colt said he hired a new office manager. What's she like? Did you meet her?"

"I did. In fact, I helped her out of a bind this morning when a bunch of birds surrounded her as she ate a scone on the pier."

Stella came around the corner from the kitchen area. "Was that the new office manager?" Stella excelled at the dramatic frown. "Not another broken-hearted resignation. Katie still comes in here to drink wine and talk about you."

"Katie dreamt up something that never happened," I explained.

"I never came on to her. I was just polite because she was running the office and worked for my dad.

I don't know what happened there, but as I told Dad, I'm not taking the blame.

And Shay, the new manager, is married, so that's the end of it. "

Stella and Amy both laughed loud enough to get Jaxon's attention. "Shit, what am I missing over there?"

We ignored Jaxon. "I don't know why that's funny," I said. "Yes, she's hot, but she's married."

"Right, and that's stopped you before or did you forget Margot?" Amy asked.

"In my defense, she didn't tell me she was married ... at first."

Stella crossed her arms. "And how long did it go on after she told you?"

"I just came up here for a beer. Not an interrogation."

Amy reached over and pinched my cheek. "You're so cute when you're flustered."

LaLa, fill the beers and then cut your brother off.

He'll be grumpy at work tomorrow if he keeps going, and if he's grumpy, then your dad will be grumpy and then I'll be grumpy and it'll be this whole grumpy domino thing.

"Amy walked away, and Stella refilled the beers."

She slid them across the counter to me. "What's he trying to talk you into? I sensed a whole buttering up thing happening when you sat down."

"Yep, buttered me up like a damn holiday turkey. He wants me to help him put on a new roof."

A laugh shot from Stella's mouth. "Gidge already told him no way on that. She's going to hire a roofing company."

"See, that's reasonable." I picked up the beers and carried them back to the table. Jaxon was just hanging up from a phone call.

"Gidge?" I asked.

"Yeah. Told her I'd be home in an hour."

I shook my head. "If anyone had ever told me that my cousin Jax would be settled down with one woman and promising to end his beer night early to get home to her, I'd have told them they were nuts."

"Yeah, yeah. Anyway, don't knock it until you try it."

Stella's mention of being buttered up reminded me of the morning and of Shay.

"Jax, I never asked you this. How did you know?"

How did you know with Bridget? Other than the fact that she's incredible to look at.

You've been out with other stunning girls, but you never fell hard for them. You were hooked from day one."

"Sure as fuck was. She jumped from that boat, swam out to me on my jet ski and wrapped herself around me.

The whole thing just triggered this weird deep reaction.

I felt this connection with her that I'd never felt before.

She felt it too. Which I guess was lucky for me.

" Jaxon rested back against the seat and squinted at me.

"Why you askin'?" He sat forward so fast the table jiggled and beer sloshed over the mugs. "Did you meet someone?"

"What? No. No, I was just wondering. I mean I watched you date so many women and then this one woman stepped—or I should say swam —into your life, and you

were like a stray puppy, wanting nothing more than to be curled up in her lap."

"Don't know if I was quite that pathetic, but yeah, I guess that's a close description." He reached over and patted me hard on the shoulder. "Can't wait until it happens to you."

"How do you know it will?"

"It will and then I can make fun of you, too."

"Oh good, who are we making fun of?" Stella asked as she set down a plate of nachos between us.

"Fin is looking for his love match," Jaxon said.

I shook my head as I grabbed a chip filled with toppings. The tough piece of pizza wasn't holding me any longer. "Never said anything about a love match. Hmm, good nachos. Hey, LaLa, can you get another bowl of salsa? Not nearly enough on these."

"Yes, milord, anything else before I'm off to do your bidding?" she asked.

I tapped my chin arrogantly. "Nope, that should do for now."

"I'd better get a good tip, and one of your pre-punched free sandwich cards doesn't count." Stella's long ponytail swung out as she spun around on her heels and walked away.

Jaxon and I plowed into the nachos, and the rest of the night, Jaxon's words "weird deep reaction" played on repeat in my head.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:57 am

SIX

SHAY

I poured maple syrup on my frozen waffle and downed it quickly with a cup of coffee.

The small kitchen had been dirty and squalid when we moved in, but the owner had given me permission to paint the cupboards white, and the blue tile, which looked outdated but was growing on me, had cleaned up nicely with a good scrubbing.

I'd hung the two pieces of artwork I'd brought with me, a fun one with a little girl riding on the back of a silver dragon and one where a bunch of cows were gathered in a field of lavender.

Keeping the house cozy was one of my coping mechanisms. It helped me get through days when things felt especially grim.

And whenever that six-foot-two pillar of darkness took off for his next job, I could pretend that I was living in my own little house, a house decorated just for me.

It was one of the ways I stayed sane in an impossible marriage, and since Tate took no notice about how the house was decorated, I was free to do as I pleased.

It was possibly the only part of my life that felt free.

The waffle was tasty, and I was enjoying a few more minutes more of relax time

when the kitchen table vibrated.

The familiar and much-despised rumble that followed made the waffle turn over in my stomach.

It was just the tractor of his truck, but it made enough noise to set off the neighbor's car alarm.

The brakes hissed as he parked the truck in front of the house.

My phone vibrated next, and I was so on edge already, I jolted at the sound.

"Move that fucking car out of the driveway. I need to pull in and work on my engine."

I texted back. "I'm leaving anyway. Be right out."

"I'm going to need your car. I'll take you to work. Thought I told you to quit that job."

"I'll take the bus." I grabbed my keys and purse and walked out to move my car. He stayed in the truck, and I was glad. That way I didn't have to see him, and I could leave the house without us exchanging any actual words.

I pulled the car out and parked across the street. He backed up his tractor and pulled into the driveway. I started off on foot to the bus stop. I was going to be late for sure. I wouldn't have to quit. Tate would make sure I got fired.

Tate dropped down from the driver's seat.

I only saw his boots, and that was enough to send a chill through me.

He'd stepped on my hand hard one day when I reached for a fallen piece of toast. I can't even remember the lie I had to come up with at work to explain red tread marks on the back of my hand.

I just remembered a lot of looks of sympathy for the rest of the day.

There was nothing I hated more than being pitied.

"Shay, where are you going?"

"I'll be late for work!" I picked up the pace and was relieved when I reached the corner.

I turned down the next street and took my first real gulp of air since hearing his truck.

The nearest bus stop was only a mile away, but according to the app on my phone, I'd have to wait fifteen minutes for the bus that would drop me just a few blocks from the construction site.

Being late on my fourth day on the job was going to look bad.

I'd been enjoying the job and working hard.

Colt had told me at least three times that I was doing a great job and that he was really glad to have me on board.

Now I was going to give him reason to question his decision.

I had a hard time catching my breath, and my head felt light as if it was no longer attached to my neck.

It was that terrible panic moment where it felt like gravity was working extra hard to hold me down, and at the same time, my body was fighting extra hard against it, so hard that the two forces, working against each other, might just tear me in half.

The explosion of anxiety had started the moment I heard and felt that truck come around the corner.

I was relieved to reach the bus stop. There was a bench with a cover over it.

An older woman with dark gray hair pulled back by a silver hair clip was sitting on the bench holding three stunning pale-yellow roses.

Each soft petal was edged in cherry red.

A beautifully knitted bag sat next to her on the bench.

She pulled it closer to her and patted the empty space on the bench. "Have a seat. You look as if you could do with a rest."

I offered her a faint smile and took a seat. "That's a beautiful bag, by the way."

She patted it. Her fingers had a slight tremble, and her hands were spotted with age.

"Thank you. I knitted it myself, back when these fingers ...

and eyes"—she pointed to her pearl-framed glasses—"were still cooperating.

Now it takes me all day to knit three rows and then I usually end up pulling it all out to start again.

My knitting basket is filled with curly, tangled pieces of yarn.

Looks like a basket of colorful spaghetti.

" There was something comforting about her apple-cheeked grin and the way she spoke, sweet but with a nice edge of humor.

The short chat had already eased the sickening anxiety that had gripped me.

She reached into her bag, fished around for a second and pulled out a tiny tin of mints.

"Would you like one? I find that my throat is always dry at this time of year. "

"Thank you." I held out my palm, and she dropped a few mints on it. My throat was dry too, only it was from anxiety and seeing my wretched husband and not the brisk fall air.

"I can smell the perfume from those roses all the way over here," I noted.

She held them up for me to take a deeper whiff.

"Really nice. I've never seen that color before."

"They're called Double Delight. My daughter's favorite. I visit her most mornings, when my arthritis isn't giving me the runaround and when the sun is shining." She squinted up to the blue sky. "Best time of year, even if it does dry my throat."

A bus came around the corner. It was the one I'd been waiting for. I was almost sorry to see it. I was late now no matter what, but I was enjoying the conversation. It was way more effective than the dozens of meditation techniques I'd tried for anxiety.

"Well, here's my bus. I'm Annie, by the way." She held out a shaky hand. It was

warm and soft as I took it.

"I'm Shay, and this is my bus too."

"Wonderful, then we can sit together. I must warn you that there'll be a group of youngsters on there this morning.

They take the city bus to their school, and they are a bunch of stinkers.

I retired two years ago from the school cafeteria.

I worked well past the usual retirement age, but I loved it and it kept me busy. "

We stood up from the bench and walked to the curb. The bus door opened with a hiss. I'd purchased a bus pass when we first moved in because I knew Tate would use my car whenever he was in town. I much preferred public transportation to sitting in a car with him.

Annie hadn't exaggerated about the "stinkers" on the bus.

Boys mostly and at that annoying early teen age.

They were talking over themselves when we boarded.

They took up the rear few rows of the bus, and three of them stood up to whistle at me as I walked down the aisle. They hadn't seen Annie behind me.

She looked past me. "Sit down, Kyle, Robbie and Evan, or I'll let your moms know how you're behaving." That sent them right back down to their seats. A few of the other passengers applauded Annie.

"How many stops are you going?" Annie asked.

"I'm getting off at Greenwich Street," I said.

"I'm off two stops earlier, so I'll sit on the aisle if that's all right."

"Of course." I scooted in and sat down.

Annie released a loud sigh as her bottom hit the seat. "Didn't used to sigh like that. I sound just like that bus door when it opens and shuts." Right on cue, the bus doors shut with a loud sigh, and the two of us settled back for the ride.

Annie pointed to the gold band on my finger. "How long have you been married?"

Too long was the answer that popped into my head. "Uh, four years, I think."

Annie looked over at me. "Oh dear," she said quietly and then patted my hand.

She didn't ask anything else about my marriage.

I hadn't meant for my answer to be so telling but then it was a genuine response.

I'd tried hard to dash all memories of my dreadful little wedding and the months that had followed out of my head.

I was living half a life and the other half was cold and harsh and weighed down by a dark shadow, the man I once thought I loved.

Annie entertained me with stories of her childhood growing up on a wheat farm in the Midwest. I could have listened to her all day. Her stop came much sooner than I wanted. Annie pulled her bag onto her shoulder and kept a tight grip on the roses.

"Take care, Shay, and I hope we meet again."

I smiled up at her. "Your daughter is very lucky."

She winked at me and then shuffled down the aisle.

Fortunately, the boys had gotten off on the stop before because something told me they were only behaving because Annie was on the bus.

My stop came just a few blocks later. The remnants of my earlier anxiety were sitting quietly in the corner of my mind waiting for something to come along, dust them off and send them fluttering through my whole body again, but for now, I was feeling all right and ready to start my day.

I hoped Colt wouldn't be too angry. He seemed like a reasonable man.

Of course, what did I know? I'd married the most unreasonable man on the planet.

I hurried to the construction site and realized halfway there that I'd never packed a lunch. I so badly wanted to leave the house once Tate arrived, I'd forgotten all about it. Colt was sitting at his desk when I got inside. He didn't look angry but definitely disappointed.

"I'm so sorry, Colt. My husband got home from the road this morning, and he was having problems with his truck, so he needed to use my car for the day. I had to take the bus. I won't let it happen again."

"Hey, we all have mornings like that. I've left some lists on your desks for purchase orders, and there are a few phone calls to make."

I nodded. "I'll get on it right away and really, I'm so sorry about this morning."

He walked over. "Please don't stress about it, Shay. You work hard, and you're doing a great job."

I had to hold back tears. I was so used to only being criticized and told what a failure I was, it was overwhelming to be treated kindly and with respect.

There was no way I was leaving this job.

Tate could go straight to hell over it. In fact, he could go straight to hell anyway. It was where he belonged.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:57 am

SEVEN

GRIFFIN

I hadn't seen much of Shay all week, but I happened to look up from my work to see her on foot hurrying up the gravel drive to the site this morning.

She'd looked upset. I'd purposely kept myself from visiting her in the trailer.

I was having a hard fucking time getting her out of my head, which told me I needed to keep clear.

She was married, and Dad was pleased with his new hire, so he'd have my head if I messed it up.

The whistle blew for morning break. Lately, a Mexican food truck had been showing up for break time.

There was a literal stampede through the worksite for their breakfast burritos.

Shay stepped out into the sun as the dust from the stampede settled.

She sat at one of the picnic tables to sip her coffee.

I'd been a fucking saint for almost three days, but I couldn't stop my feet from walking that direction.

She was wearing a white sweater and jeans, and her short hair ruffled in the breeze.

A smile as white as her sweater appeared when she spotted me walking toward her.

"You're not in line at the truck? I really took you as a breakfast burrito kind of guy," she said. Her smile stayed, and it was incredible.

I threw my leg over and sat down on the bench across from her. "I love a good, spicy breakfast burrito as much as the next guy, but the only thing I crave after downing one of those monsters is a nap."

Colt walked past us. "No breakfast burrito, Fin?"

"Don't see you carrying one either."

"No way." Colt shook his head as he headed to the trailer.

"Better take some of those old man tummy pills," Griffin called to him.

Colt gave him the finger and disappeared inside.

"Did your car break down?" I asked. "Noticed you walked onto the site this morning."

"Oh that. Yes, it was a hectic morning. My husband got home, and he needed the car. I took the bus."

"Well, if you need a ride home—" The offer came out before I could give it a good once over. I was silently trying to convince myself the offer was just out of politeness and not an opportunity for me to spend more time with her.

"No, thanks," she said quickly. The offer flustered her, and I wanted to kick myself. "I'm fine. I enjoy riding the bus. I meet interesting people on buses."

"Sorry, I wasn't trying to—well, just if you needed it, that's all."

"Shit, the last time I felt nervous talking to a girl was back when I'd worked up the courage to ask Rebecca Johnson to the sixth-grade dance."

She'd accepted, but her dad put an end to the whole plan.

"You're not going out with a Stone" were the words Rebecca wrote in the letter she stuck in my backpack.

"Thanks again, but I'll be fine. This morning I met the most wonderful woman named Annie. She was on her way to visit her daughter, and she told me so many fun stories about her childhood." Shay tilted her head at me. "I'll bet you've got a few good ones yourself."

"Like the time when he got caught behind the high school gym making out with the school librarian."

"Theo's voice rolled over my shoulder. He plopped down hard next to me and added to his annoyance with a hearty slap on my back."

I gave him a look that assured him he'd be paying for the slap later, and he forced a smile and dropped his hand.

Theo reached across the table. "I'm Theo."

I haven't introduced myself yet. I'm Fin's cousin. "

"Oh right. I've seen you out here on site. I'm Shay."

Theo nudged me with an elbow. "She noticed me."

Shay laughed. "Well, like your cousin here, you are quite noticeable."

"Glad to hear it." Theo bowed his head. He was always a fucking idiot when it came to beautiful women. And they never seemed to mind. In fact, they drank up the idiot-ness with thirsty adoration.

Shay rested her forearms on the table and held her coffee cup between her long fingers.

"Now that the intros are done, I absolutely have to hear about the make out session with the librarian, but let me preface it by saying our school library was run by a lady named Henrietta, and she'd been a marine, and well, let's just say we all trembled in our bedazzled sneakers whenever she looked our way in the library. "

"I knew you were the bedazzled sneaker type," I said.

Theo laughed. "Nice try on the topic switch, Fin.

Jolie, that was the librarian's name, was no marine, and I admit, she was hot and very young and our boy, Fin, here, really poured on the charm.

He also spent more time in the library that year than he'd spent in one his whole damn life.

Pretended to be reading but he was really just watching Jolie. "

I looked over at Theo and gave him another look that matched the one after the slap

on my back. "You done with your nonsense?"

"Hey, she asked."

Shay laughed. "I did, and I'm glad you didn't have a Henrietta like us because I just couldn't picture—" Shay lifted her dark brown eyes and then her whole body trembled briefly.

"Nope, don't even want to try and picture it.

I've got to get back to my desk. It was nice meeting you, Theo, and Fin, thanks for the visit. "

We both watched her walk back to the trailer. Theo sighed loudly. "Holy shit. She looked hot from a distance, but up close—wow. But Cody was telling me she's married. Big fucking bummer."

"Yeah," I said to myself after Theo walked away. "Big fucking bummer."

* * *

I stayed late to finish some framing that got fucked up the first time it was done. We'd hired a few new guys over the summer, and their skills were still questionable.

Theo slammed shut his locker. "Crusoe and Cormac are coming to pick me up. We're going to get something to eat at Lazy Daze and then head out to that 'Friday Eve' party at Noah's place. Sure you don't want to come?"

"Not in the mood," I said.

"Still grumpy because you can't have that sweetie pie in the office? Those damn

wedding rings are a bitch. But that ring is probably the thing that makes her extra intriguing. You know, impossible to get. That's not something Fin Stone deals with often."

"Are you done rambling on like a moron? I think I heard Mac's noise mobile out front."

"Yeah?" He opened the door and looked out. "Be right there!"

"Fuck, do you know how loud that sounded in this trailer, you fucking foghorn?"

Theo grabbed his backpack. "Sure you don't want to go tonight?"

"I'm sure. I'd tell you to have a good time but then I've never known you not to have one, so fuck off and don't drink too much."

"Mac's driving, so no promises on that. Besides, tomorrow's Friday."

Dad texted while I hung up my hard hat and got my things from the locker.

"Stop by the office real quick."

"Yeah, I'll be over in a second." I was glad to have any excuse to see and talk to Shay.

After meeting her, Theo kept rubbing it in that she was married because as he put it, he sensed there was an "attachment" coming from my side of the picnic table.

For such a rock head, he was pretty fucking dialed in.

Maybe he was right. Maybe it was just the ring, the forbidden fruit thing and all that.

I walked across to the trailer. Shay's long fingers were plunking away on her keyboard. She glanced up briefly to give me a smile. Nah, it wasn't the fucking ring. She was something else.

Dad waved a paper in the air to get my attention. "Hey, Mom's making lasagna tonight if you're interested. Or maybe you'd prefer stale cereal and toast for dinner."

"Cru actually went grocery shopping. We've got bread and cheese and ham and all sorts of other things that the civilized world eats. But Mom's lasagna? Fuck yeah, I'll be there."

"I don't blame you," Shay said. "Lasagna sounds delicious."

Dad backed up his chair and turned her direction. "You're invited too, if you'd like."

"That's so nice of you, but no, I've got to go home and make dinner for Tate. It's his first night home in a few weeks." She said the last part almost as if it left a bad taste in her mouth, even though she wore a smile.

The trailer door opened abruptly, and a tall stranger with a scowl stood in the doorway. The site had been cleared, and there was nothing friendly about the man. Dad stood up, and we joined together in the middle of the trailer.

"Can I help you?" Dad asked.

"He's here for me," Shay said meekly. I detected a tremor in her voice. "Tate, I was going to take the bus." I looked back at her. She was frantically cleaning up her desk. The pink that had stained her cheeks just seconds ago had faded.

Every muscle in my body tensed with adrenaline, and I sensed the same waves of tension from my dad.

"Hurry it up, Shay," he said brusquely.

"I'm Colt Stone." Dad stuck out his hand, but the whole politeness thing was forced. I was sure my dad was thinking the same thing as me. This fucking asshole needed to learn a lesson in civility, and there was no way in hell he deserved the sweet woman behind us.

He reluctantly shook Dad's hand. "Tate Kennedy. Twenty-five bucks is a garbage wage."

"Tate, please," Shay pleaded as she hurried faster to gather her things.

"It's what I pay for someone who is just starting," Dad said plainly.

Tate had a mean, slitted stare, like a fucking snake. He looked like the kind of guy who'd bite the head off a puppy.

"I'm ready. Let's go." Shay couldn't look at us as she swept past holding her purse and water bottle. "Please, I'm ready." Her entire demeanor had changed in her husband's presence. Her posture was tense, and she looked as if she might crumple into a sobbing mess at any moment.

Tate gave each of us a hard glare before turning around. He didn't even hold the door for Shay. She hurried out behind him. Dad and I walked to the small front window to watch them leave. They got into Shay's small car and left a long trail of dust as he punched the gas.

Dad and I stood silently for a moment, both of us in fucking shock about the last few minutes. Dad turned to look at me. "Is it just me, or do you also have an urge to throw your fist at something right now?"

"Not just you, Dad. Definitely, not just you. What the fuck? How could Shay be with someone like that?"

Dad shook his head. "Brings back some bad memories," he muttered to himself.

I knew that mom had gone through some stuff before she met Dad.

He'd saved her life and nearly died in the process, but neither of them ever wanted to give out any details, and that was probably good for Jules and me. Some things were better left untold.

Dad went back to his desk to clean up for the night.

His jaw was clenched tightly, and my teeth were packed pretty close together too.

"Dad? When—you know—when you and Mom met—did you get this feeling that you were going to do anything, even kill someone, just to keep her safe cuz that's how I'm feeling right now about Shay.

I know she's not mine, and she's married to that asshole, but if he hurts her?—"

Dad just nodded. "Like I said—that whole scene brought back some bad memories.

But you're right, Fin. She's not yours. Still, Stones don't look the other way when something isn't right, and something was definitely not right there.

I just hope she can keep her job. Seemed like he was looking for a reason for her to quit.

I'm about ready to get out of here and dive into that plate of lasagna. How about you?"

I nodded, but lasagna was the last thing on my mind.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:57 am

EIGHT

SHAY

Tate's foot pressed down hard on the gas.

We flew recklessly through the city streets.

I gripped the edges of my seat as he took a corner so fast, I worried the tires would leave the ground.

My heart was pounding so hard, I could feel it in my ears.

I knew that if I asked him to slow down, he'd just go faster.

My fingers were cramped when we finally reached our street, and I could release the seat.

I wasn't exactly sure how holding tightly to the seat would help me if we flipped over or rammed head on into a building or, worse, another car, but it was a technique I'd developed to help me get through his harrowing rides.

His truck was still in the driveway with the hood up and his tools sitting in a pile nearby.

He parked my car behind it. "Going to need your car again tomorrow," he said.

"That's fine. I don't mind the bus." He was trying to start a fight, but I didn't care enough about anything he said anymore to argue back.

"I've got some chicken breasts to fry," I said as I got out of the car.

I checked my phone on the way to the house, certain that Colt would have texted by now telling me he was letting me go.

Tate had come into the trailer ready for a fight, but Colt didn't take the bait.

Tate backed down quickly. He'd sized up his opponents and changed his mind.

As viciously strong as my husband was, something told me he was no match for Colt and Griffin Stone.

"I don't want chicken," Tate said as he stormed past me into the house.

He let the squeaky screen door shut in my face.

I stood on the stoop for a minute and closed my eyes telling my anxiety monster to stay hidden in that closet.

I couldn't deal with it right now. Tate was in a terrible mood, and I needed my wits about me.

I took several deep breaths and entered the house.

"You're not working for those assholes," Tate said the second I stepped inside.

"We need the money for the loan on your truck.

This house is half the size of our last rental and costs three times as much.

" Right then would have been a good time to remind him that he'd had to become an owner/operator trucker because he'd blown the goodwill of three trucking companies.

His temper had caused more than one accident, and trucking companies weren't big on second chances when you had a shitty track record to begin with.

That same temper had pushed us out of the last town, a town where rental prices were a third what they were here near the coast. He'd punched a neighbor over an argument about his truck being parked on the street for too long.

"Find another job and find something else to make for dinner." Tate walked away and slammed the bedroom door so hard the doorframe splintered.

I took off my coat and checked my phone once more. Maybe Colt would wait until the morning to fire me, and maybe I could talk him out of the decision. I pulled out a pot to heat some pasta for spaghetti.

I got lost in chopping carrots and onions and didn't hear Tate come in behind me.

I startled, and the knife slipped across my thumb as his arm snaked around my waist. I froze in repulsion as he leaned down and kissed the side of my neck.

"Missed these little stars," he said as his mouth pressed against my tattoo.

His mood swings were getting much starker, and they terrified me.

I'd spoken to him about medication once, and he pushed me through the screen door. I never brought it up again.

His hand swept under my shirt, and I had to swallow the bile that rose in my throat. The swipe of the knife had been deep enough to start a flow of blood.

"I need to get a bandage before I ruin the vegetables," I said and squirmed out of his hold.

"Fucking clumsy," he said tersely. And we were back to that Tate.

I hurried to the bathroom, shut the door and locked it. I held my hand under the water and let the red flow down the drain for a few seconds before I collected myself. I pulled a bandage out from the medicine cabinet and wrapped it tightly around my thumb to stop the blood.

The doorknob turned. I gasped, then silently thanked the landlord for putting in a door with a lock.

Our last house didn't have one, and I'd taken to pulling open the vanity drawer to keep Tate from barging in.

His fist pounded the door. It rattled on its hinges.

He'd have every door in the house hanging off its hinges before we were, once again, driven out of town by neighbors and people with pitchforks.

"I'll be right out to finish dinner," I called lightly, even though my feet were frozen to the spot, and my heart was racing.

"Never mind. I'm going out to get a burger. Do my laundry. I'm leaving Monday for a job."

"Yes, thank you, God," I mouthed to myself in the mirror.

"All right." I stood in the bathroom staring at the pathetic woman in the mirror.

In my teens and early twenties, the reflection staring back at me would have been full of spunk and energy and ready to take on the world, but Tate had sucked the life out of me.

I waited for the front door to shut and for my car to start. I glanced out the small window over the toilet and waited for my car to turn the corner before leaving the bathroom.

I put away the cut vegetables and made myself a piece of peanut butter toast. I was alone, possibly for a few hours, so I allowed myself to slip back into my other life, the one where I did what I wanted like eat a piece of toast for dinner, and I could eat that same piece of toast without fear.

I sat on the back stoop and watched a few squirrels chase each other around the trunk of an oak tree.

They stopped more than once, their tiny noses twitching in the air, trying to figure out where the delicious peanut smell was coming from.

The night air was brisk, but I liked it.

It helped wash away some of the sticky wretchedness of the last hour.

When Tate stomped into the trailer, I wanted to sink into a hole in the ground.

And when he barked at Colt about my salary, I wanted someone to quickly fill in the dirt as I tucked down in that same hole.

There was no doubt in my mind that I'd lose this job, and that made me so angry,

tears started to fall.

Deep down, I knew I had to get out of this marriage.

I'd tried before and failed to shrug off this horrid, deadly disease.

He always found me. Once, I snuck out and stayed in a motel for a week.

Tate found me. A trucker knows every highway motel, every back country road, but it was a silly rookie mistake that caused him to show up at that motel.

I'd used my debit card at a nearby gas station.

He knocked the door down and carried me out kicking and screaming.

The little old lady running the motel was too afraid to do anything.

She just stood there, chin on the ground, as she watched Tate throw me in his truck.

I ended up in the hospital with a broken clavicle and bruises.

That was when I started getting really good at making up elaborate lies to explain my injuries.

"I fell going downhill on a mountain bike," I told the very skeptical ER doctor.

A nurse came in later to ask if I wanted to change my story, but I smiled politely and asked why I'd change it if it was the truth.

A night sky took over the smudged colors of dusk, and the autumn breeze intensified. I got up and went inside. I never knew how long my reprieve would be, and I never

let myself think about his return. I didn't want to disturb my "other" life with worry.

I walked into the bedroom. Tate's duffle was sitting in the middle of the room, reminding me that I had to dig through his dirty clothes and get them washed and ready for his next trip.

I carried the heavy duffle out to the service porch where a decades old washer and dryer sat.

I opened the duffle and leaned back out of the stink cloud as I pulled the dirty clothes out and pushed them into the washer.

My phone rang from somewhere in the house.

I walked in to answer it and saw Colt's name on the screen.

My heart sank. This was it. I was going to lose a great job, and I had no other prospects.

This time we wouldn't have to wait for the neighbors to run us out of town.

The landlord would get that privilege after we failed to pay the rent on time.

"Hello."

"Shay? It's me, Fin. Hope it's all right that I called. I'm at my dad's, and well—he was all right with me calling you cuz, to be honest, and just tell me if it's none of my business—are you all right?"

My throat tightened. Friends used to call and ask me the same thing, but I'd always answered with lies, so they eventually stopped asking. Having someone, a man who

barely knew me, call especially to ask made tears burn my eyes.

"Uh, I'm fine, Fin. Thanks. I'm sorry Tate was so rude. His social skills are lacking."

"Yeah, I'd say so, but it's not his social skills that had Dad and me worried." He left his statement at that. He knew.

"He can be a little gruff sometimes, but I know how to handle him." It was something I told people all the time, and it was quite possibly my biggest lie of all. "Is your dad terribly mad? I'd understand completely if he doesn't want me to return to the job."

"What? No, he wants you to stay."

"I'm glad."

"About the pay?—"

"Don't worry about that. It's a good, generous salary for a starting position. Tate has no idea about salaries because he's been driving a truck forever. He lives in a different world." If only that were the case, and a world far away from mine.

"Well, I'll let you go. I don't want to interrupt your evening. I just wanted to make sure?—"

"Fin, thanks for checking on me. Oh, and how was the lasagna?"

"It was brilliant. My mom knows how to make great lasagna. She always makes it for Christmas."

"My mom used to make blueberry waffles for Christmas."

I know. It's a little untraditional, but Dad was always on the road.

He was a trucker like Tate. So, Mom and I made the food we loved like blueberry waffles.

We'd put the maple syrup on the coffee table, snuggle down under a blanket and watch 'It's a Wonderful Life' while we downed sticky waffles.

And wow, now that I've taken that long boring trip back to memory lane, I'll say goodnight. I'll see you in the morning, Fin."

"Not long or boring and—take care, and Shay—" There was a long pause.

I could hear voices in the background, his family talking and laughing about something.

"If you ever, you know, if it's ever not okay—just let me know.

I'll set things right." He paused again, and my throat was too filled with a lump to speak. "Goodnight, Shay."

"Goodnight, Fin." The words creaked out. I hung up, sank down to my bottom and hugged my knees to my chest.

* * *

I took a long hot shower, read a few lines, mostly the same ones repeatedly, on the novel I'd started weeks ago and then pulled up the covers and fell asleep.

The front door opened and shut, and like always, I closed my eyes tightly and wished that it was some intruder, a stranger breaking in to steal the television, instead of my

husband.

Tate's heavy footsteps pounded the wooden floor.

He pushed open the door, not caring at all how much noise or light he let into the room.

I pulled the blanket tighter around me and closed my eyes so hard, it seemed they might get stuck that way.

Minutes later, he crawled into bed. The entire mattress shifted his direction.

He smelled of onions and sweat, and I was sure I smelled faint perfume.

Other women still saw a tall, good-looking man who knew how to turn on charm when he wanted.

What they didn't know was there was a genuine monster lurking beneath the handsome exterior, a monster who seemed to be getting less stable each day.

Somehow, I needed to find a way to escape the monster for good.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:57 am

NINE

GRIFFIN

I ended up staying late at my parents' house and fell asleep on the couch. Jules stood over me with a spatula in her hand. I squinted up at her. "That spatula better mean there are pancakes on the griddle and not that you were thinking of using it to smack me awake."

Jules pouted for a second. "Well, darn, I guess that was a missed opportunity. Yes, it's for pancakes, and I'm here to find out just how many you can eat this morning, and don't say twelve because I'm not standing at the stove all day."

I sat up and raked my fingers through my hair.

Jules was wearing my mom's apron over a pair of jeans and a blue turtleneck sweater.

She was one of those women who wore confidence with the perfect mix of humor and smarts.

She'd recently saved a beloved surfing beach from being destroyed by a developer.

While the rest of us were using our fists and tempers to claw back our local beach from, of all people, Nathan Walsh, the father of Bridget Walsh, Jaxon's girlfriend, Jules cleverly figured out a way to make sure the pristine stretch of coast was never touched by bulldozers or greedy developers.

It turned out the beach we'd all spent hours on was also the nesting site of a protected bird species.

That was all it took, and while the rest of us were standing around dumbstruck with bloody noses and black eyes, my little sister Jules became an instant hero.

Mom came downstairs. "Hey, sweetie, I didn't know you stayed the night. You should have told me. I would have cleared all those real estate brochures off your bed."

"Nah, I don't mind the couch."

Her phone rang, and she put up a finger to let me know she needed to answer it.

Mom and Aunt Britton had started their own real estate brokerage and after some struggles and a few tears getting it off the ground, it was finally starting to take off.

It also meant she was busy a lot, on the phone, showing houses, talking to clients.

I knew Dad was proud of her, and at the same time, I sensed he was feeling a little neglected.

Jules shrieked in the kitchen.

I hurried in. "Did you burn yourself?" I asked before I spotted her clutching her phone and scrolling wildly through it. It was just some shriek-worthy social media post.

Mom dashed into the kitchen, too, with the same question about getting burned.

Jules finally pulled her attention from her phone and shook her head. "I do know how to use a stove without burning myself."

"Well, you screamed," Mom said.

Dad's loud steps pounded down the stairs. "Why did Jules scream?" he asked as he reached the kitchen.

Jules stared at all of us. "Seriously, you people all need to get a life."

I chuckled. "We need to get a life? You just about caused all of us heart attacks because you read some ridiculous social media post and reacted with a scream."

"It was more of a shocked shriek, and it was not ridiculous. It was a stunner. Roxi Carhill, better known as the Banana Bandana, because she always wears a yellow bandana, was in Zion with her partner, Toby Barron, and she caught him making out with one of the forest rangers."

"Man or woman?" Dad asked.

Jules shrugged. "Good question. She didn't go into details, but she's devastated, and they're breaking up."

Dad looked over at mom. "Are these people we know personally?"

Jules huffed. "Sort of. I mean I've been following them for like two years, so I feel this breakup right here." She touched her chest. Jules was super level-headed about most things ... most of the time. Jules spun around to pour more batter onto the griddle.

My dad was still confused. "Roxi is a lifestyle influencer," Mom explained. "They travel all over the country and world and post pretty photos of themselves for people to comment on."

"Way to make it sound silly. They're a little more than that, Mom," Jules said without turning around from her task. "There's a stack ready for whoever wants it."

Dad looked at me to let me know that stack was his. I waved my hand toward the plate.

The four of us sat down at the table, something we rarely did anymore for breakfast. Mom seemed to be holding back a grin, but Dad was too involved with his stack of pancakes to notice.

"Good news, Mom?" I asked.

Her smile broke free. My mom had one of those light-up-a-room smiles. "Now that you ask, Fin."

Dad finally looked up from his plate of food.

"We sold that giant house. The owners just accepted the offer of 2.5 million."

"Holy shit, Mom," I said.

"Was it that older couple from France?" Jules asked. She worked in the brokerage office with Mom and Aunt Britton.

"It sure was. It's still early in the process, and there are many hoops to jump through, but it's a cash offer, so that takes away one hurdle."

Dad shook his head. "Can you imagine being able to offer cash on a multi-million-dollar house?"

"Maybe someday," Mom said with a teasing wink.

Dad reached over, took her hand and kissed it. "I knew I'd won the lottery when you pulled me in for that kiss in the bar."

Jules had heard far less than me about my parents' somewhat wild early days. She picked up her glass of orange juice. "What kiss? Do tell, please."

Mom's face went peachy pink, and Dad rubbed the back of his neck, a sure sign that he wasn't going to say a word.

Jules blinked at both of them with her big brown eyes. "Someone better spill the beans, or I'm going to come up with all kinds of scenarios in my very young and impressionable imagination, and none of them are going to be flattering."

Mom sighed, knowing full well that Jules was not going to give up easily. "Let's just say, I was running from someone, and I needed a human shield, and your very large dad just happened to be nearby so I grabbed him and?—"

"You kissed him to hide from someone else?" Jules asked, her eyes as round as the pancake on her plate.

"I did."

Dad nodded. "It's true. I just happened to be big and have a pair of lips and let's end this topic.

" He looked at me. "I'm going to stop by another possible job this morning.

Make sure everyone has their assignments, and let Shay know I left a list on her desk.

You said she seemed all right after you talked to her last night? "

"Yeah, but I wasn't buying it. I mean we both met that asshole yesterday, and we both got the same bad feeling about him."

"She's protecting herself," Mom said. "It'll be worse if she says something." She wiped her mouth hastily. The subject had upset her. I knew Mom had been with an abusive monster before she met Dad, and those memories still haunted her.

Dad reached for her hand and squeezed it. She forced a smile. "I've got to get to work. There are a million things to take care of for this big real estate purchase." She hurried out of the kitchen.

Jules looked upset now too. Her eyes were glassy with tears.

"Guess that conversation would have been better away from the table," Dad said.

I nodded. "Guess so." One thing was for damn sure, I was going to be keeping a close eye on Shay, and I knew Dad was too.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:57 am

TEN

SHAY

I 'd learned to be as quiet as a church mouse over the past few years.

My dance skills helped. My mom used to joke that my feet never touched the ground when I walked.

Tate was out cold from his late night. There was a cloud of stale beer scent around him and his snores sounded like drums in the dark, quiet bedroom.

I managed to get dressed, collect my things, brew a cup of coffee and get out the door with his snores still rumbling through the house.

It was a beautiful morning with a clear blue sky and only the slightest hint of last night's chill still hanging on.

I'd pulled on a pink sweater, a khaki skirt and my black ankle boots.

I didn't have a big wardrobe. Most of our money went to rent, insurance and his truck loan.

It seemed the piles of debt only ever got heavier.

I hoped the new job would help me get rid of some of the layers.

I sipped hot coffee from my travel mug and took advantage of a nice, energetic walk to the bus stop.

I was feeling wide awake and light on anxiety by the time I reached the stop.

I was surprised to find Annie huddled down in a plaid coat as she watched the traffic roll past. There were three roses clutched tightly in her hand.

She looked up when she heard my footsteps.

She smiled politely at first, obviously not recognizing me.

"I didn't expect to see you here at this hour, Annie," I said.

She peered up at me through cloudy blue eyes, and her smile sparkled. "Shay, it's you. You're here early too."

I sat down next to her. "Actually, I was late yesterday. This is the time I need to be here to make sure I'm at work on time. And you? Visiting early?" I motioned toward the flowers.

"Yes, I am early." She sighed and tilted her head side to side.

"My friends have been begging me to come back to the knitting circle.

They meet three times a week. I do enjoy seeing them all.

We chatter like a bunch of busy hens and then stuff ourselves with tea-sized sandwiches and coffee cake and very little knitting gets done.

It's the knitting part that always makes me tense.

I used to knit circles around all of them.

I taught three of them how to knit in the first place, but I hate sitting there with my trembling fingers and my bad eyes and?—"

I placed my hand on hers. "They're probably just glad to have you there, Annie. I wish I had a circle of friends like that."

Our bus turned the corner and shambled toward us like a big, diesel-spewing dragon. The brakes squeaked so loud, we both flinched at the sound.

"Too early for the school kids," Annie said over her shoulder as she climbed aboard. We both settled into a pair of seats about halfway down the aisle. There were a few other people on the bus. Everyone looked as if they were heading to work like me.

The bus took off. Annie was silent at first. She stared down at the beautiful flowers in her hand.

"It's so nice of you to always remember to bring her flowers," I said.

Annie nodded and smiled at me. "No circle of friends? A pretty, young woman like you?" she asked.

I'd forgotten where our conversation left off. "Oh that. I don't mind. I'm sort of a loner, an introvert."

Annie stared straight ahead. "You know, there was a time in my life when friends were scarce.

I'd had plenty, and then one day, I couldn't count on any of them to call me back or invite me out for a cup of coffee.

" Annie looked down at the roses again. On our last trip together, she'd been so animated telling me about her childhood.

She laughed in between her stories, but this morning there was a much more serious woman sitting next to me.

"What happened? Did you get too busy with life?" I asked, naively.

"No, dear. They avoided me because of Harold."

I hadn't seen where this was going, and when it finally struck me, it stole my breath. How did Annie know?

"Harold and I met through church, and we hit it off right away.

I was in heaven. He had a thick head of dark hair and big broad shoulders.

We were so happy ... for the first year," she added grimly.

"He was always stressed about work and about earning enough money for the family.

I blamed that stress for a long time. I blamed his job and our constant struggle with money for how fast things between us disintegrated.

But the destruction wasn't coming from my side.

I did my part. I took care of Nina and the house and made sure he always had a hot meal to come home to.

I earned extra money working at the local fabric shop.

I did all I could to hold it together, but Harold grew angrier, harsher ...

" Annie rested back and turned her face my direction.

"I should have left him sooner," she said quietly.

"But it was hard, and I—I waited too long. "

I was holding back tears, and my throat was so tight I couldn't speak.

I'd met her one time, one short conversation that was only four bus stops long, and in that time, she'd figured out I was in the same boat.

It was a silent language that transpired between all of us, all of us trapped in the same nightmarish cycle.

Independence waited on the outside, trying to pry us out of the bad dream, but it took courage and unfortunately courage was in short supply when you were constantly living in fear.

I rested back with her, and we held hands in silence.

We'd created a sisterly bond that should never have to be.

We reached her stop, and she squeezed my hand once more before shuffling off the bus.

I closed my eyes, absorbing what she'd said and trying to figure out how to gather that elusive courage.

An elderly man stepped onto the bus. He was struggling looking for the right change

as he fished through his pockets.

The bus driver patiently waited while the man found the fare he needed.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a flash of yellow.

It was Annie's roses. I sat up straighter, hoping to catch her attention and wave to her, but she was focused straight ahead.

I looked back to watch as she turned and disappeared through a gate.

It was the local cemetery. I sat back, once again winded by the hardships that came with life.

I'd assumed Annie was going to meet with her daughter.

I imagined cups of coffee, some light conversation and a goodbye hug.

But I'd imagined it all wrong. Annie was visiting her daughter at the cemetery.

No coffee. No light conversation and no goodbye hug.

* * *

My bus ride and the reality that lovely Annie was going to visit her daughter's grave had slowed my pace.

I reached the worksite. Hammers echoed loudly and saws buzzed like swarms of angry bees.

The fresh wood smell that always clung to the air around the site reached me as I

headed up the long gravel path that led to the trailers.

I pushed my empty coffee cup into my bag and pulled out the water bottle.

Annie's chat had left my throat dry with anguish.

I needed to wash that emotion away, so I could focus on my job.

Tate and I had barely exchanged ten words since he arrived home, and most of those words had been about the job.

He also mentioned he'd be leaving again on Monday, and I held onto that sliver of a lifeline as if it was the most important news of my life.

I just needed to get through the weekend.

Avoidance had become my number one coping mechanism.

I planned to take several very long walks and possibly a bus down to the beach.

He usually spent his days off slumped on the couch, chugging beer, scrolling through his phone and watching sports.

I was always glad when his focus was on a football game instead of on me.

I reached the site and found myself glancing around for that one face.

Griffin's call had caused as much emotional upheaval as Annie's story.

It was upheaval in a good way. For a while, I'd been totally on my own, thinking it was me against the world, namely against the Tate world, but knowing that other

people had taken notice of my situation was one part embarrassing and one part emboldening.

I suddenly felt that there might be a safe place for me out in the world, away from Tate.

I was disappointed not to see Griffin but hoped he'd drop by during the day.

He always seemed to have a reason to stop in the trailer, and I hoped that I was one of the motivators for those frequent visits.

I reached for the trailer door, and it swung open before I could grab the handle.

Griffin's green eyes glittered in the sunlight pouring through the doorway.

"Shay, I'm sorry. I didn't hear you come up the steps.

I was just putting back the clipboard. Dad is running late, but he'll be here soon.

How was your evening? If you didn't bring lunch, we'll be ordering pizza.

It's a thing we do on Fridays, and now I'll shut up and let you come into the office.

" He shook his head. "Smooth as fucking cream, Stone," he said to himself.

I was sure I wasn't supposed to hear his self-admonishment, so I pretended not to.

"Pizza sounds good. All I brought is an apple and some stale crackers. I really need to get to the store." I walked to my desk. He'd been on his way out but he stayed.

I circled around behind my desk and smiled at him.

We both spoke at the same time. I laughed. "You first," I said.

"No, I mean, I was just going to say, I hope you don't mind that I called last night. It's none of my business but?—"

I circled back around to where he was standing.

The morning breeze rattled the trailer slightly, and the scent of freshly cut wood drifted through the open window.

I walked closer and ended up just a foot from him.

We stood facing each other, close enough that I could see a scar on his chin that looked as if it had been there for a long time.

His Adam's apple moved with a deep swallow, and suddenly, it seemed we were both holding back, holding back from touching each other. I swallowed too.

"Fin, I'm working on it. It's been a long time coming, but I appreciated the call. It reminded me that there are people who are worth knowing, people worth trusting."

His self-control broke first. He reached for my hand, and I pushed it willingly into his grip. "You can trust me, Shay. Just say the word and I'll be there to help."

We stayed that way, our gazes locked and our hands together until heavy footsteps hit the steps outside.

Reluctantly, he let go of my hand and stepped back.

Colt walked in. Our gazes remained locked, and it felt like a hurricane of energy had passed between us.

The tension snapped in two as he looked away.

"Morning, Shay," Colt said. His smile was always gracious and friendly. "Did Fin tell you about pizza Friday?" He looked at Fin, and there seemed to be a silent exchange of something that had nothing to do with pizza.

"He did and I'm all in. Thank you. I'll get right on that list you left me." I turned and walked back to my desk. I could still feel Fin's strong hand wrapped around mine as I sat down to start my work.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:57 am

ELEVEN

GRIFFIN

"P izza's here!" Dad yelled across the lot.

Two delivery kids were each carrying a tower of pizza boxes.

Dad had started the tradition of treating his workers to pizza two Fridays a month.

After working for some real assholes who thought work needed to be a punishment that you were glad to receive, Dad decided to be a different kind of boss.

He knew that if morale was high, then his workers would work harder to keep their positions.

He had very little turnover on his crews, which saved money in the long run.

Cheers rang out through the mile-long worksite. Machinery was shut down and tools were set aside. A parade of heavy work boots kicked up a nice little dust storm as everyone headed toward the picnic tables. Theo whirled past me. "You comin'?" he asked and didn't wait for a response.

I was standing back, like a wallflower at a school dance, waiting for the most beautiful girl in class to walk in.

And she did not disappoint. Shay's smile was bright white as she spoke to some of the

workers in line.

She said something that produced a bout of laughter.

She glanced around the picnic area, and stupidly, I hoped that she was looking for me.

When her face finally turned my direction, her gaze landed directly on me.

She stared at me for a second and then tilted her head toward the pizza.

I headed across feeling like a cocky asshole knowing that she had been looking for me.

The line was shorter by the time I reached the table area.

Workers walked around with plates overflowing with greasy pizza slices.

Shay stepped out of her place in line and walked to the back to stand with me.

This morning there was a distinct sadness in her pretty face, but now she looked brighter, happier.

While all the other big smiles around us had to do with pizza, something told me that wasn't the source of Shay's good mood.

"Did you have a good morning?" I asked.

The string of star tattoos curled and straightened as she bowed her head once. "I got a lot done, and it's turning out to be a great day." There was more to that statement, but we were in the midst of my loud, sweaty coworkers, so I didn't ask her to elaborate.

Shay picked up one slice of pepperoni pizza, and I piled three slices on my paper plate.

We each grabbed a cold can of soda. We hadn't verbally made plans to eat together.

I stayed back as she headed toward the trailer.

She stopped halfway and, again, used that adorable head tilt to invite me along.

I glanced back. Dad always ate with the crew on pizza days, and they always swarmed around him like he was the popular kid in the lunch quad.

I followed Shay inside, and we set our lunches down on the small table. "Thanks for inviting me into the executive dining room," I said as I pulled out a chair.

"Well, we'll allow it this one time, but let's not make a habit of it.

" She popped open her orange soda and took a sip.

"Hmm, it's been a long time since I drank one of these.

Used to always buy them out of the vending machine in high school.

Good stuff." She took another sip. "I think they got the artificial flavoring just right.

" It was so nice to see her enjoying herself.

At the start of the day, she looked miserable, and she wasn't the kind of person who should ever have to suffer misery.

Something told me she'd seen plenty of it with that asshole she was married to.

I took a bite of pizza and ended up with one of those impossible strings of cheese that dangled between my mouth and the paper plate. I was fucking smooth, that was for damn sure.

Shay giggled as I struggled to break myself free from the cheese tether. It ended up on my chin and from there, I worked it into my mouth ... after an embarrassing few seconds.

"And this is why I have a rule—no pizza on a first date." I popped open my soda, deciding I couldn't get into too much trouble with my drink.

"Something tells me any girl on a date with you would be too starry eyed to notice that you had a piece of cheese dangling from your mouth.

" She pointed to her own chin to let me know that my humiliation continued.

I reached up and discovered a piece of mozzarella still clinging to my beard stubble.

"I knew I should have shaved this morning. I may be too traumatized by that last bite to take another."

Shay laughed. "Dreamy and funny. Self-deprecating isn't a bad quality either.

" Her long lashes dropped, and she turned the can around in her hand.

"Better than arrogance." She turned the can again but didn't take a sip.

"He's leaving tomorrow morning," she said quietly.

"For his next job. I thought he'd be here all weekend, but he's leaving in the morning.

He has an extra stop in Salt Lake City."

I waited, not entirely sure if that was a good or bad thing. I assumed it was good or, at least, that was what I hoped for.

She turned to me. "That's why I'm having such a great day."

"Shay," I started.

She shook her head. "No, I'm not looking for pity. I don't do pity when I'm in my other life, the one where he's on the road and I'm a single woman, independent and happy."

"Why don't you leave him?" I knew it was an asinine question the second it came out of my mouth.

She stared down at her half-eaten pizza.

"If I had a dollar for every time someone asked me that, and it's a fair question.

There's no easy or reasonable response. At first, I didn't because I was sure things would get better.

I thought he was going through too much stress from work, and he was having a bad year.

Then it was a few bad years and then I realized I'd gotten myself into a terrible marriage.

The only thing that kept me going was the fact that he was gone for more than half of it.

I settled for that half-life when I realized Tate wasn't going to let me go easily.

I tried a few times, and he came after me.

I settled into my half existence and that became the easiest solution.

When he's out of town, I don't think about him.

I don't think about that shitty half of my life. I just live."

"Come live with me," I blurted. "Shit, can I make a bigger fool of myself today?"

I meant come out ... to a party. Tomorrow night.

My cousin Stella and her roommates have this cool, funky place right on the beach, and they're throwing a party.

It'll be casual. Music, snacks, beer." She didn't look too keen on the idea.

I held up a hand. "Sorry, I'm being pushy.

No biggie. I just thought since you were free—after he leaves in the morning, anyway.

" I took a big bite of pizza deciding my best bet was to shovel food in my mouth so no more stupid shit came out.

"It sounds fun but—" She shook her head. "I haven't been to a party in ... I won't say how long because it makes me sound like the most pathetic person in the world. It sounds lovely, Fin, and I appreciate the invite, but—I don't know."

"Wait." I walked over to Dad's desk and ripped a piece of notepaper off the pad and grabbed a pen. "I'll write down the address." I paused and looked up from the notepaper. "Will you have a car?"

"Yes, Tate will be in his truck."

I slapped the address down on the table. "Just if you want. No pressure. I'll understand if you don't make it."

She folded the paper and put it in her pocket. "Again, I appreciate the invite, but me and parties and well—people—I've lost my ability to socialize." She sighed. "I really am pathetic."

"You're anything but pathetic. You're—" I paused and rolled up my eyes.

"Nope, don't know what the opposite would be because as my sister likes to point out 'books catch fire in my hands.

" I reached up and wiped a crumb off her small chin.

My finger lingered far longer than necessary.

When she didn't pull away, I let it stay even longer until I finally willed myself to lower my hand from her face.

The door opened, and I straightened abruptly, guiltily. Nothing had happened, but that wouldn't be how my dad saw it.

"Fin, I wondered where you got off to." Dad stopped at the table and smiled at Shay. "Enjoying the pizza?"

"Yes, thanks. It was just what I needed to get me through the rest of the afternoon. Which reminds me, I've got some calls to make. Thanks for keeping me company at lunch, Fin."

Dad's brow arched slightly. "Yes, thanks for that, Fin." Sarcasm dripped off his words.

I stood up and grinned smugly at him. "It was my pleasure."

"I'll bet," Dad said as I slid past him to leave.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:57 am

TWELVE

SHAY

I doubted that cell phone and social media inventors realized what a great service they'd done for women in my unfortunate position.

Like so many people, Tate had a cell phone addiction.

He spent most of his free time scrolling through social media and porn and whatever else he had saved on his phone.

When he wasn't being a vicious pig to me, watching television or driving his truck, he was staring at that thing as if looking away might turn him to stone.

I'd gotten home from work Friday evening and found him asleep with his phone in his hand.

It was paused on some beautiful influencer who was standing in front of a waterfall in a wet T-shirt.

Another wife might have been mad, but I wanted nothing more than for him to get lost in his social media world of fake boobs and plumped up lips.

When he was focused on that world, I faded seamlessly into the background.

I was an invisible entity, and you couldn't shout or throw a cup at an invisible entity.

Tate woke long enough to down six beers and two fast-food burritos before falling asleep on the couch.

I stood there and watched him, slack-jawed and snoring and wondered how the hell I ever fell for the man in the first place.

Everything about him repelled me. Fretting about him waking and climbing into bed caused me a rough night of sleep.

But the morning light came. His phone alarm went off out in the front room, and I knew the day was going to be just fine.

He bellowed for me to start coffee and breakfast, which I obediently did as he took a long shower.

I was so thrilled he was leaving, I hummed show tunes while I put together two sandwiches for him to take along.

An hour later, he rolled down the street in his noisy rig.

I was sure I'd be hearing from the neighbors or the landlord soon, but for today, I put those worries aside.

He was gone, and I was back in my other life.

Colt paid every other Friday, and my first week happened to end on the second Friday.

It was so nice to see money deposited in my otherwise drought-ridden account.

Tate gave me enough to pay bills and buy food, but there was never extra.

There'd be enough today to buy a few plants at the nursery and a new coral pink lipstick I'd been eyeing at the store.

But first, I had something to do, something I hadn't done for a long time and something that I missed so badly just thinking about it made me ache.

Up until now, I hadn't bothered because all it did was remind me of my days before Tate, but I had two new people in my life, Griffin and Annie, and meeting them had made me realize that I'd let far too much of myself disappear.

Tate had spent the last few years erasing me, and it was time to bring back Shay.

I did a quick pirouette on the way down the hallway, but my sneakers and the narrow passage made it less than perfect.

My ballet teacher, Miss Augustin, would have clucked her tongue loudly and told me I looked like a clumsy octopus.

I walked across the small, creaky floor to the dresser and opened the top drawer.

I reached to the back, and my fingers landed on the soft satin.

The bright pink slippers popped out from their dark corner and seemed to be saying, "where the heck have you been?"

" They'd been my favorite practice slippers.

I had a pair of pointe shoes too, the special ones I wore for recitals, the ones that allowed me to hop up on the tips of my toes, a feat that took me a good six months and lots of turned ankles and sore toes to learn.

I wasn't fooling myself. I was out of shape and clumsy and my trusty slippers would probably be groaning in shame and protest by the time I finished dancing, but that was fine.

There was no one to watch or judge or tell me that I looked like a clumsy octopus.

No one to tell me that ballet was a waste of time and money.

Tate had told me exactly that just days after the wedding when I told him I was going to continue dancing.

He told me there was no way he was financing something as stupid as dance.

It was like having my heart ripped straight from my chest—something that happened at least once a week in my marriage.

Our furniture was scarce. Nice new sofas and chairs were never in our budget. It took some grunting and growling, but I managed to pull the couch back from the center of the room. I moved aside the coffee table. The old wood floor was just smooth enough for a few good dance moves.

I sat down on the couch and pulled off my sneakers and socks.

I picked up the satin slippers. Pink ribbons hung loosely around my wrist. I hugged the slippers to me and held them a moment.

That all too familiar tightening of the throat caused me to slump back and close my eyes.

This wasn't a panic attack. This was something else.

It was me trying to reconnect with the person I lost, the person who used to fly through the dance studio on pink slippers as if she had wings.

"Okay, Pinki, let's get moving." My mom came up with the nickname because after I got my first pair of slippers, I only wanted to wear pink.

The slippers felt foreign at first, but as I tied up the ribbons, memories of sitting on the bench in Miss Augustin's dance studio, tying up the same ribbons, came back to me.

I was so happy back then. Not a care in the world.

I badly just wanted to take off into a series of pirouettes and arabesques, but I needed to stretch first. I moved around to the back of the couch for some hamstring and quad stretches and a few warm-up moves.

It was all coming back to me. I hadn't lost it.

That part of my life hadn't been erased, only put away in storage.

I grabbed my phone off the coffee table, turned on some music and, in seconds, I was Pinki again.

My slippers barely grazed the floor as I danced and twirled and flew.

I'd forgotten the freedom dance had given me but I'd found it again.

Ballet was now going to become a permanent part of my half-life.

* * *

It was a beautiful autumn afternoon, and the dancing had made me hungry and sore.

It would take a while to get the muscle back.

After a satisfying lunch of grilled cheese and freshly squeezed lemonade, I baked some pumpkin spice muffins.

I wasn't in charge of anyone's dinner but my own, and a few warm muffins sounded way better than anything.

I'd managed to get in a bath to soak my sore muscles, then I spent thirty minutes painting my toenails, a task that I always found hard but satisfying.

I could never open a nail polish bottle when Tate was in the house.

He'd yell about the smell and stomp around as if I'd greatly offended him by trying to put a little color on my nails.

All in all, it had been a fabulous start to my latest half-life.

Tate had mumbled something about being on the road for two weeks.

It was entirely possible he'd spend half that time with other women.

They could have him. I'd been avoiding sex with Tate for a year and had been quite successful.

The few times he'd caught me at a vulnerable time or managed to ply me with enough alcohol to submit to him, I lay there like an emotionless robot, his AI wife, and he complained and called me a frigid bitch.

I was fine with that title. More than fine.

I'd earned it. I occasionally worried that I would never enjoy sex again, but I decided as long as I had my half-life where I could dance, paint my nails freely, soak in a tub for an hour undisturbed and eat sugary muffins for dinner, I was fine without physical contact.

The sun had started to set. Days were getting shorter and shorter.

I pulled on a sweater and carried a muffin outside to the back stoop.

Down the street, someone had started playing music, and the steady stream of cars turning the corner signaled they were having a party.

I'd thought about Griffin's invite to the party more than once but quickly talked myself out of even considering it.

It would be a group of strangers, and my social skills had fallen down to just the basics, hello and good morning and the occasional nice to see you.

My few chats with Griffin had been the most social contact I'd had in months.

I had to admit, I'd enjoyed those chats immensely.

I'd felt instantly comfortable with Griffin.

The music and voices grew louder. I went back inside, my belly full with pumpkin spice.

I sat on the couch and had to move because I could smell Tate's sweat left behind on the cushion.

It was my half-life, and I wanted no reminders of the other bitter half.

I flipped through a few million possibilities on streaming, but nothing caught my attention.

I turned off the television and stared at the dark screen.

I could see my reflection in the gray contours.

I looked happy, relaxed ... and bored. Griffin's invite popped back into my head.

What if I went for just an hour? Mostly to see him, of course.

Then it occurred to me that a man like Griffin would be surrounded by women at a party.

What if I showed up, and he had no time for me at all?

I supposed I could handle that. If nothing else, my rotten marriage had trained me in the art of never being disappointed because disappointment was a permanent fixture in my life.

Before I could talk myself out of the party and into another muffin, I got up and headed into the bedroom.

A cute autumn outfit might give me the courage to head to a party with a group of strangers.

The bottoms were easy. Jeans. They were all I had for cool temperatures.

I tried on a few sweaters and settled on a dark green turtleneck.

I pulled on my boots and stared at myself in the mirror.

Trying on multiple sweaters had sent my short hair into a static electricity frenzy.

I raked my fingers through my hair to tamp down the static and propped up some of the spikes.

I blew out a frustrated puff of air. Who was I kidding?

A party, a friggin' party? What would I say?

Would people look at me and somehow know about my other life?

One advantage of moving to a new town was leaving behind the sympathetic frowns and looks of pity.

Griffin had figured it out fast but then he'd had a big clue handed to him when Tate barged into the office like the world's meanest testosterone-amped bull.

I reached for the bottom of the sweater, ready to take it off and switch over to comfy pajamas, but something stopped me.

I wanted to see Griffin. If my earlier fret came true and he didn't have time for me because he was surrounded by other women, then at least I'd get this urge to be near him out of my system.

It was probably exactly what I needed given the fact that I'd been thinking about the boss's son far too much.

It was a stupid and convoluted string of reasoning, but that was how I left it in my mind.

I was going to show up so I could see Griffin in his natural element, with all his friends and, no doubt, a bevy of pretty admirers and then I'd stop having romantic and, admittedly, erotic daydreams about the man.

THIRTEEN

GRIFFIN

It was only seven but the party was already cranking as Theo and I pulled up to Stella's beach house.

Although, to call it a house was a stretch.

It was a century-old, three-bedroom cottage that had hardly been touched in all those years.

At the moment, Stella's roommates were two women who played rugby in their spare time.

Lonny was a woman with an impressive shoulder span and a mess of tattoos on her neck and chest. Her partner, Rina, was half her size, and her only tattoo was a peach tree on her shoulder.

She'd grown up on a peach farm in the south.

She was also an incredible skateboarder.

She'd set up a nice course of rails and ramps on a patch of cement next to the cottage.

I could hear skaters already taking advantage of it, and I was sure Crusoe and Cormac were there with their boards.

"Whooee, I think I just saw Candy. I thought she was still in Hawaii.

" Theo clapped once. "This night just got way better.

" Theo flew out of the truck and hurried inside to find Candy.

They'd dated on and off for a year and eventually became sex buddies when Candy said she was too busy with her modeling career to commit.

Theo liked that plan just fine since he was not exactly a commitment kind of person either.

None of us were. Or at least that was what we thought until Jaxon met his match—Bridget Walsh.

The two of them pulled up behind us on Jaxon's motorcycle.

"Fin!" Bridget waved, tossed the helmet to Jaxon and ran toward me for a hug.

"So good to see you," she said loudly, then leaned in for a second hug and whispered into my ear.

"No fucking way I'm letting him put that roof on.

" She pulled back and was smiling again.

"How have you been?" She glanced around. "Did you come alone?"

"If he showed up with a date there'd be a lot of sad faces sitting around the firepit." Jaxon tapped my shoulder a lot harder than necessary. "Did you give that roof some thought?"

My eyes darted over to Bridget. She winked at me and waved toward Stella. "Oh, there's LaLa. I'll see if she needs help with the snacks."

"I think that if Bridget is going to pay someone to fix that roof, then you should take her up on that. Honestly, Jax, I don't want to do it."

Jaxon huffed. It meant he was going to be grumpy, at least to me, the rest of the night.

I could live with that. He walked ahead, his shoulders tense, so I took a turn toward the skaters.

A group of six people, my two cousins included, had their own loud music playing as they took turns on the ramps.

Cormac was just grinding across a rail as I reached them.

"Fin, come sit here." Tawny and Robyn were sitting on the short wall between the skaters and the beach. They were both wearing scarves and drinking red, fruity cocktails. Jaxon and I had gone to school with them, and they were inseparable as friends. That hadn't changed. I took a seat next to them.

Tawny had pale amber eyes that always reminded me of a cat. She leaned down and peered over at me. "And what has the town heartthrob been up to? Breaking hearts, I assume."

"Nope. I've mellowed out a lot in the breaking hearts routine. Just working and trying to save money to get my own place."

"Aw, you gonna leave us like Jax?" Crusoe came up and sat down next to me.

"Theo and I will have to get more roommates."

We can't afford that place on our own. Maybe Mac will finally cut the apron strings and move out.

" We all stopped to watch Cormac hit the quarter pipe.

He landed and the board squirted out from under him. He hit the cement with a thud.

"Or maybe we should leave him tied to the apron," Crusoe added. We all laughed.

Cormac pushed to his feet and rubbed his tailbone. "Real nice," he said to us.

"Actually, we weren't laughing at you epically eating shit," Crusoe said. "But it did have to do with you epically eating shit."

"Ahh, don't make fun of him," Tawny said. She'd always had a soft spot for Theo's little brother. "He's so damn cute. Do you need some ice, honey? Or how about just some all-around nurse attention?"

Cormac pushed the thick hair out of his eyes. "You know, now that you mention it, some nurse attention might not be too bad."

"Oh brother, could you two be dorkier?" Robyn said.

Tawny jumped off the wall, walked over to Cormac and gave him a long kiss. I looked over at Robyn. "Funny, from this vantage point, it looked like he fell on his ass." We all had another laugh as Tawny took Cormac's hand and led him into the house.

"Fin, we heard you were here." Olivia and Rachel came around the corner. "We've been waiting for you." Rachel looked down from under a long curtain of brown bangs. "Where's your drink? What would you like? I'm going back inside for a refill."

She lifted her cup.

Crusoe cleared his throat loudly. "Uh, what about me. I'm here too."

Olivia laughed as she sat down next to him and dropped her arm around his shoulder. "How could we forget the hottest, most adorable Stone on the beach?"

"I'm all right with the hottest label, but my mom likes to call me adorable, so let's stick with hottest, yeah?"

Rachel pointed at me, still waiting for my drink order. "I'll be in soon to get a drink," I told her. She strolled off.

"Hey, there's your sister," Olivia said. "I haven't seen Jules in months. God, she's gorgeous. I'm so jealous of that long blonde hair. Hey, Jules," she called and waved.

Jules spotted us and headed our direction. She was wearing a long black coat. I grabbed the end of it. "Hey, Dracula, nice of you to wear your cape tonight."

Crusoe laughed.

Jules yanked the fabric from my hand. "God, you're such a fashion lump. This coat is warm and stylish." She twirled the long end around once.

"I love it," Olivia said. "Oh my god, Jules, have you been following the Banana Bandana saga?"

Jules' eyes practically popped from her face in excitement. "Can you believe that Toby just called an Uber and left Roxi alone with the van in the middle of Zion? What a jerk."

"Was this the guy who was messing around with the park ranger?" I asked. I remembered vaguely hearing about the whole drama while Jules made pancakes.

Crusoe looked over at me. "Are you following any of this convo, or are they speaking a different language?"

Jules rolled her eyes at Crusoe and motioned for him to move down the wall, so she could sit with Olivia and exchange opinions on the whole thing. I was sure Toby's reputation was going to suffer greatly in the exchange.

Crusoe moved closer to me then prodded me with an elbow. "New hot girl alert," he said. "Never seen her before."

I looked toward the house. Shay was standing with her hands in her pockets, her thin shoulders lifted in a shy shrug. She was wearing big gold hoop earrings, and her short hair stood up and away from her beautiful face.

"You came," I said.

"Figures," Crusoe grumbled behind me as I walked in Shay's direction.

"You came," I repeated. I'd completely written off the possibility.

"I went back and forth about it a dozen times and then I finally said, what the heck?

In fact, today has been a steady stream of 'what the hecks.

' And I haven't felt this good in a long time.

I even pulled out my—" She stopped. "You don't need to hear the boring details of my day, but it's been a good one, and I thought I'd keep the streak going. "

"I'm glad you did. Drink?" I asked.

"Yes, please." I didn't hesitate to take her hand.

I led her through the screen door. The tiny front room was packed with people.

Jaxon was in the center of it all telling some story that had everyone laughing.

He took the time to scowl my direction as I passed through with Shay in tow.

Stella was in the kitchen with another group.

She was blending up fruity drinks, and the whole place smelled like fruit punch.

Stella spotted me. "Fin, there you are. Want to try my Hawaiian punch and rum concoction? Guaranteed to give you a buzz and make your lips red." She smiled at Shay. "Welcome. I'm Stella, this guy's favorite cousin. Wait, you're the woman from the pier."

Shay stepped past me to introduce herself. "That's me, and I have learned my lesson about eating scones on the pier. I'm Shay."

"You're working for Colt," Stella said and then looked slyly my direction.

I ignored the sly look. "I'm going to skip the fruit punch drink and have a beer." I looked at Shay. "How about you?"

"You know, I had a very bad experience once with fruit punch at my friend's birthday party. I learned the hard way that hot dogs, strawberry cake and fruit punch are not always a good combo. I'll stick with a beer."

Stella walked over to an ice chest and dug out two beers. "There are snacks in the front room, but you may have to elbow my brother out of the way. He tends to take over the snack table."

"Yeah, he's not talking to me," Fin said.

Stella licked fruit punch off her fingertip. "What's the grump's problem now?"

"He still wants me to help him put a roof on their house, and because I enjoy not being in the hospital with a broken neck, I still said no."

Stella sighed. "As stubborn as he is big." She smiled at Shay. "It's my mom's favorite saying, and since I had to share the womb with the guy, I heartily agree."

The music suddenly got louder. "I told you guys if it gets too loud the neighbors will call the cops," Stella yelled out to the front room.

It was turned slightly down. "I think they're getting the firepit going and"—Stella waved at a pile of marshmallows on the counter—"There was only one box of graham crackers and one box of chocolate bars.

I had each job parceled out, but everyone decided to just bring marshmallows, so if you want the entire s'more, you'd better have one soon. "

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:57 am

I looked at Shay. She nodded. "I don't remember the last time I had a s'more."

Stella clapped. "Then get yourselves set up. There are paper plates under the marshmallows."

Shay and I set crackers and chocolate bars on two plates and poked four plump marshmallows on two roasting sticks.

We headed toward the long stream of aromatic smoke curling up from the firepit.

A slight breeze was carrying it off toward the north along with a few red embers.

We sat on the south side of the pit to avoid the smoke.

Cut logs were arranged as benches in a circle around a pit made of cinderblocks and bricks.

Most everyone was inside or watching the skaters, so for the time being, Shay and I had the fire to ourselves.

She sat close to me, and I told myself it made sense because it was chilly out on the sand. "Your cousin is gorgeous," she said. "And was that your sister, Jules, sitting with you when I walked up? I recognized her from the pictures on the wall behind your dad's desk. She's incredible too."

"Yeah, that was Jules. And the guy next to me with shaggy, dark hair was my cousin and roommate, Crusoe."

"How many cousins and siblings?" she asked.

"Five cousins and Jules is my only sibling." We stuck the marshmallows into the flames. "I'm glad you came, Shay."

"Me too. I was about to settle into a long night of old movies and pumpkin muffins, but I decided to join the land of the living for a change. It's not something I do often." She said the last part so quietly I almost couldn't hear her over the crackling fire.

"Oh!" she gasped and pulled her fiery marshmallow free to blow out the flames.

"Do you want some new marshmallows? Seemed like there were a few extra."

She looked at me. "Uh, excuse me, but are you one of those steady and golden marshmallow types? I like them charred and gooey."

"Oh well, excuse me. My mistake." I pulled mine free to blow on it. "Guess I'm a charred marshmallow person too." We stared at the flames, watching as they lapped at our roasting sticks. "So, he's gone?" I asked.

She sighed quietly. "Supposed to be gone for two weeks. His schedule can change, so I don't count on it, but I never waste a moment thinking about him when he's away. It's as if he doesn't exist."

We each smashed two very charred marshmallows between crackers and chocolate and laughed about trying to eat them with dignity. They were a sticky, tasty mess.

Word got around that there was a limited amount of chocolate and graham crackers, so by the time we pushed the last sticky bits into our mouths, more people had joined us at the firepit with their roasting sticks.

I realized then, I wasn't in the party mood.

I was in the mood to get to know Shay better.

I was sure there were plenty of layers underneath the beautiful exterior, and I wanted to know all of them.

"Interested in a walk on the beach?" I asked.

"Absolutely."

It was a cool night but not so harsh as to require a coat. "Glad I opted for my thickest sweater," she said.

"Is it too cold?" I asked.

"No, it's refreshing. I love it. And those thin wispy clouds in that dark sky—" She looked over at me as we made our way across the sand toward the water.

"It's a perfect night for a walk on the beach.

" She winced and reached back to rub her hamstring.

"I'm going to regret my morning when I wake up tomorrow. "

"Your morning? Did you go for a run?"

She shook her head and stared out at the water. I already had her perfect profile memorized, the turned-up nose, the full lips and small chin, the dimple on her cheek.

"I pulled out my ballet slippers. I hadn't put them on for—" Her face dropped, and she

kicked up some of the sand as she walked. "Not for a very long time."

"Ballet slippers?" I turned toward her and took some side steps. "So, you're telling me I'm out strolling the beach with a real live ballerina. Oh man, that is hot."

She laughed.

"No, seriously. Had a few not-safe-for-sharing dreams about being with a ballerina. Those costumes, the long legs and don't get me started on those dance moves."

"You're making fun of my dancing." Shay laughed and grabbed hold of my arm.

She didn't think twice about holding onto it, and I was glad.

After all, her fucker of a husband didn't exist right now, so we were just two people, enjoying each other's company.

At least I hoped that was the case. I was definitely enjoying having her by my side. Something felt really right about it.

"I'm not making fun. I seriously had a thing for ballerinas." I stopped and faced her. "Still do, apparently." Our gazes locked, and there was such a flurry of emotion in her expression, I regretted saying it. "Sorry. My mom always tells me I wear my feelings out loud. I guess she's right."

Shay reached up and touched my face. Instantly, I pressed my hand over hers to hold her palm against my cheek.

"You know, I think you're the reason I pulled on those slippers this morning.

I've been sort of plodding through my life, waiting for those moments when Tate was

on the road, and then shrinking back into whatever was left of me as a person when he was back home.

I was good." Her gaze sparkled. "Dancing, I mean.

" The moonlight was just enough for me to see the pink blush on her cheeks.

"It was something I lived for as a kid and teen.

But after we got married, Tate told me it was a stupid, expensive and boring hobby.

My dancing had always been a part of my soul, a part of who I was, but he managed to crumple it down into a meaningless hobby.

I jammed my slippers into my drawer and cried about it for days. "

I couldn't stop myself. I pulled her against me and held her in my arms. "If I had someone like you in my life, I'd cherish every fucking minute, Shay. Every inch of you, everything you do, every smile, every laugh, every frown—everything about you deserves to be worshipped."

She blushed again and rested her face against my shoulder. "You sure know how to make a woman melt into a puddle of butter."

"I'm serious, Shay. You need to know that."

She sniffled and wiped her eyes, then lifted her head from my shoulder. "I'm starting to see it, Fin. When I danced today—" her voice wavered. "I couldn't believe how much I missed it. It's almost as if I cut out part of my soul to give up dancing."

"Would you show me a few moves?"

Shay shook her head and turned away. "You're just being?—"

"No, really, I would love to see you dance."

"The sand is too soft." She looked down the stretch of smooth wet sand.

The water lapped gently at the shoreline.

"This is crazy." She held my arms as she took off her boots and socks.

"Colder than I thought," she laughed wildly, then took off.

She raced along the sand, her feet barely touching the ground.

She jumped high, her long, thin limbs swirling around her to invisible music.

And she looked happy. She belonged in the air, defying gravity at every turn, her body turning and moving so fluidly she was a blur of long legs and arms. She turned and headed back to me, her feet and body moving so fast and her leap so high it was almost impossible to believe she was merely human.

She stopped with a final twirl and landed in my arms.

Cheers and claps rang out from the beach house.

An audience had gathered to watch her. She covered her face, embarrassed at first, then she opened her arms, stuck out a long leg and bowed.

Her audience clapped louder. She hurried to me and hid her face against my chest. "I didn't know they were watching. "

"Uh, that was fucking incredible, so incredible you brought the whole damn party outside."

She hid her face again, and I took hold of her wrists and uncovered her face. She peered up at me. "Hey, ballerina, you were meant to fly. Anyone who tries to clip your wings doesn't deserve to be part of your life."

Shay's eyes were glassy as she gazed up at me. Her arm circled my neck, and she hopped up and pressed her lips against mine. My arms wrapped tightly around her for the kiss, the kiss I'd been thinking about since I first pulled her out from the flock of hungry birds.

FOURTEEN

SHAY

I 'd kissed him. I started it, and I didn't have one ounce of regret. I was ready to do it again. I was ready for him to take me to some quiet place, strip me naked and give me all the things I craved now that we'd kissed.

After the kiss, we fell awkwardly silent.

The kiss had started something, but it was something complicated.

We sat down on the dry sand and stared out at the relentless tide.

It never stopped. It rolled in continuously, and the ocean looked incredibly vast in the dark, as if you could sail off and never find land again.

"What about family?" Griffin asked. "Surely you have someone you can turn to, a place to go to get free of him."

"My mom died of lung cancer when I was seventeen.

She loved ballet, and she was there with me for every practice, every recital.

" I chuckled. "She was a real stage mom but less annoying than the ones you see on television.

She didn't tell me how sick she was until a few months before her death.

I didn't have time to prepare. I came home from school one day, and she was in bed and that was it. She never got back out."

"Lung cancer, that's rough. Was she a smoker?"

"No, my dad smoked—heavily. Three packs a day.

I don't remember him without a cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

He was a trucker too. That's how I met Tate.

He took Tate under his wing, so to speak.

Showed him the trucker life and Tate fell in love with life on the road.

My dad wasn't abusive, just uncaring. When he was home, he spent his time watching television or playing pool at the local bar.

Mom and I just moved around him, avoiding contact.

Having him home was not much different than him being on the road.

He died three years ago of a blood clot.

I felt bad that I never cried about his death, but he just wasn't worth the tears.

" I looked over at Griffin. His green eyes nearly glowed in the moonlight.

"So that's my long way of telling you, no, there's no one.

My grandparents were gone before I was old enough to know what a grandparent was.

My parents were both older when they had me. "

"Sorry about your mom. That must have been tough. Do you think if she'd?—"

"If she'd lived that I would have avoided this disastrous marriage?

" I dug my still bare feet back and forth in the sand.

It felt good. "I'm not sure. There was a time when I actually loved, well, maybe liked is a better word, Tate.

He was different during our first years together.

I'm not sure what happened. He sort of snapped, suddenly everything made him angry.

His temper got shorter. I asked him to talk to someone, but that only made him angrier. "

"Fin," a frantic voice said from behind. We both turned back. Jules' expression caused Griffin to jump instantly to his feet.

"What's wrong?"

I got to my feet.

"That creepy guy who Stella told to bug off just showed up with a few buddies, all on motorcycles, and none of them too friendly looking. You need to come."

The three of us ran back to the house. Griffin was ahead with his long, fast strides. Waves of tension rolled off of his broad shoulders as he headed across the sand. Jules pulled up next to me.

"You're an incredible dancer, by the way."

"Thanks."

We reached the scene out front of the beach house.

A massive guy who was unmistakably handsome like Griffin was standing with his giant arms crossed and his chin set defiantly.

He was flanked on one side by Crusoe and on the other by a tall, athletic looking guy with long, dark blond hair and a smaller guy with thick, dark brown hair and a short beard.

The family resemblance between all of them was undeniable.

Griffin slowed his pace and walked up to join his cousins. They were a formidable group, and they were staring down some formidable opponents, opponents who were now outnumbered and out muscled.

Adrenaline thrummed through me. There was no one more accustomed to seeing an outburst of angry testosterone than me, unfortunately.

I stayed close to Jules. She looked worried but not as worried as I would expect given that her family members were close to a heavy-fisted brawl.

Griffin's arrival seemed to have short-circuited the bravado on the opposite side of the invisible battle line.

The man standing out front pushed up his sleeves in agitation. "Told you, Stone, I just came to see Stella. Thought we might join the party."

"You're not getting anywhere near Stella," Jaxon said. His sister was still inside the house, and I was sure she had no intention of coming out. "She told you she wasn't interested. Now take that as a big no, and be on your way."

The guy moved a few steps closer, and every Stone moved closer too. The evening had been so lovely. I hated the idea of it ending with thrown fists and bloody noses.

I leaned my head toward Jules. "Are they really going to fight?"

"Only if the other side throws the first punch, which, unless they're suicidal, won't happen."

Her words eased some of the anxiety rising in my gut.

Griffin stepped closer. "Look, you guys are outnumbered, and even if there were twice as many of you, you'd still get your asses kicked.

Just ride off and spare yourself the shred of dignity you have left.

Stella isn't interested, and nothing you do here tonight will change that.

Seriously, bro, just go. It's over. This is over. "

A few silent minutes of hostile tension twisted the air around us. Then the guy shook his head. "Fuck all of you Stones." He turned away, and he and his friends got on their bikes and rode off.

I hadn't realized I'd released a big sigh until Jules put her arm around my shoulders

and gave me a squeeze.

"I thought it might end that way. I was worried.

Not going to lie. I've witnessed more than my share of fights and held an ice pack on Fin's face more times than I want to count, but those guys were no match for Fin and my cousins and they knew it.

I just hope Vincent leaves Stella alone. "

The temperature was dropping fast. The warm glow inside the house lured us that direction. We walked slowly, with our arms wrapped together. I couldn't believe how instantly I felt comfortable with Griffin and his family. "How long were they together?" I asked.

Jules chuckled. "That's the really stupid part. They only went out on two dates, and LaLa ended it right away. She knew he wasn't a match for her."

"Two dates. That makes him seem a bit off balance. I mean your cousin is gorgeous, and I have no doubt she's amazing in every way, but that still sounds fast."

"LaLa is the best. We're the only two girls in the family, so we're close.

I always followed her around when we were little, and she never told me to bug off.

She was protective of me, just like the boys are of both of us.

Her twin, Jaxon, you might have noticed the grizzly-sized Stone in the middle?—"

"He's hard to miss."

"He loses his shit when someone even looks wrong at his sister."

We reached the screen door. Stella was standing in the kitchen with a woman with shiny black hair and blue sapphire eyes.

Stella looked shaken by what'd happened.

Jules walked right over to give her a hug.

The two held each other a long time, and my heart ached to have a sister, a friend like they had.

The beautiful woman with black hair left them alone and walked over to meet me.

"Hello, I'm Bridget, Jaxon's girlfriend, and I wanted to say that your dance down on the sand, well, you are really talented. Are you part of the ballet group in Oceanview? If you're not, you should be. They do shows across the state."

"I'm Shay. I'm working for Colt Stone. I'm not part of any dance company at the moment, but I would love to get back into it."

Jules was filling a glass of water for her cousin. "You should try out," she said over her shoulder. She handed Stella the glass. "As much as we hate Oceanview on this side of the tracks, I have to admit their ballet group is fantastic."

I looked to Bridget for an explanation about the hating Oceanview remark.

Bridget had a million-dollar smile to go with the rest of her.

"Oceanview is where the snooty people live, people like my dad, but he's living in much reduced circumstances after an unfortunate business venture.

Instead of a ten thousand square foot mansion, he's living in a measly five-thousand.

But really, their dance company is great, and they'd be thrilled to find someone like you. "

"Not too sure. I haven't danced in a few years."

"Then you need to try Miss Pearl's School of Ballet.

It's a few miles inland. I used to take lessons from Miss Pearl when I was young," Jules said.

"Fin had a huge crush on Miss Pearl. She's one of those women ...

how do I describe it? She's like the human form of cotton candy.

Light and airy and pretty. She once danced for the New York Ballet, but an injury shortened her career. "

Jaxon came in to see how Stella was. She hugged him and then smacked him and said something about not wanting to be lectured. They stood together in the kitchen nibbling marshmallows and sipping beers.

"Fin did confess to me that he had a thing for ballerinas," I said. "I thought he was just teasing."

Jules shook her head. "Nope. He'd come with my mom to watch rehearsal. I mean seriously, can you imagine him sitting through ballet rehearsal because of his interest in classical music and dance?"

"That is so cute," Bridget said.

"It was funny as heck. Anyway, my ballet career was shortened by a complete and utter lack of talent. I half expected Fin to pull on a pair of tights and sign up for class himself."

"I heard my name," Griffin said as he stepped into the kitchen. He glanced at all of us, me the longest. "What did I miss?"

"Jules was just telling Gidge and Shay about your embarrassing crush on Miss Pearl, the ballet teacher, and how you pulled on tights and joined the class," Jaxon said.

Jules picked up a marshmallow from the counter and threw it at Jaxon. "I did say almost . You always add your own Jax spin to shit to make it sound worse," Jules said.

Griffin shook his head at all of them and took my hand. "Want to get out of here?"

I hesitated for only a second. "Sure. It was nice meeting all of you," I said as Griffin hurried me out.

"You too and good luck with your ballet," Bridget called to me.

"Where are we going?" I asked him as he pulled me through the crowd gathered in the front room.

"The Shack and, trust me, it's way worse than it sounds, but I've got a box of microwave popcorn in the cupboard, and while the house is mostly a crumbling pile of wood, the television is top quality. Thought we could binge-watch something stupid and meaningless and revisit that whole kiss thing."

I held his hand tightly. "No girl would turn down that offer. Buttered popcorn, right?"

"Of course, what kind of a heathen do you take me for?"

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:57 am

FIFTEEN

GRIFFIN

We reached the Shack, and suddenly, I was more embarrassed than usual about its overall shabbiness.

I was sure the left side of the house had started tilting, and the way the old house creaked and groaned with every step made me think it wouldn't be long before the whole damn thing collapsed.

But for now, Theo and Crusoe were still out for the night, and I had the house to myself.

I'd take that as a win, sinking foundation and all.

Shay's car drove up behind the truck. I waved her around, and she parked and got out.

She stood in the weed-choked front yard and stared up at the house.

"Are there ghosts?" she asked and turned to me.

"I'm going to be disappointed if you say no because a house like this really has earned one or two ghosts. "

"Crusoe is sure he keeps seeing this woman with wild black hair and a hollow-eyed stare standing at the top of the stairs, but then my cousin likes to party ... a lot, so I

don't take him too seriously."

I took her hand. It was amazing how quickly we'd attached ourselves together tonight.

I found myself wanting to know everything about her.

Her ballet talent was a huge surprise. She'd been living this shadowed life under an angry tyrant, but it seemed she'd decided to find a way out from under his control.

I wanted to be on the other side to help her find that freedom.

"Let's see if we can drum up some ghosts. Maybe the buttered popcorn will wake them from their restless sleep." I took her hand and led her to the front steps. Even the steps were starting to lean to the left. "We could always watch a horror flick to make up for the absence of ghosts."

"Oh hell no. Horror movies scare the shit out of me."

I smiled at her. "So, horror movies scare you, but seeing an actual ghost intrigues you. Watch the second step," I warned, and she hopped easily over it.

"Seeing an actual ghost would be a big deal, and we could take photos and post them and become internet sensations and get millions of followers," she reasoned.

"And then people would accuse us of faking the photos. AI is going to make it impossible for anyone to ever prove they've seen a real ghost." We stepped inside, and the house greeted us with a loud groan.

Shay grabbed my arm. "I take it back. I don't want to see a real ghost. Just stay in your cubby or corner or attic, please."

"Are you into following all the influencers like Jules? My sister graduated first in her class in high school, but she can get pulled into social media drama very easily. Like this Bandana Banana woman who apparently lives in a van."

Shay laughed. "I think it's Banana Bandana, and I assure you the van is a nice prop.

With the money she makes, she probably owns a mansion on each coast. Never held any interest for me.

My hus—" She cleared her throat as if saying the word was painful.

"Tate has a social media obsession, but only if it includes beautiful women.

I keep hoping he'll find someone else, but I think other women are smarter than me.

They can see through the slightly rugged good looks to the asshole in the center. "

I tugged her hand to pull her around to face me. "You are smart and beautiful and you can fly without wings, and he's a fucking pile of dog shit. Remember that."

Shay wrapped her arms around my neck, and I pulled her against me. Her body pressed hungrily against mine, and my cock reacted instantly. She smiled sweetly as she felt my erection. "I can't believe I'm here right now," she said quietly.

"In my haunted house, you mean? Or here with me, wrapped in my arms and me wanting you so fucking badly I can hardly take a decent breath?"

"Yes ... the second one." She pressed her mouth against mine. Our kisses became so intense, I had to brace her against the wall to keep us upright. My tongue swept over her lips and she made a throaty, appreciative sound that made my pulse race.

Our mouths parted for a second. "I'm never going to have enough of you," I muttered before slamming my mouth down over hers.

I pushed my hands under her sweater and smoothed my palms over her back until I reached her bra.

The urgent kisses stopped for a second. I looked at her as my fingers toyed with the clasps on the bra.

Shay nodded. "Yes, yes, I want to be naked in your arms. I've been dreaming about being naked in your arms."

"Seems like we were having the same fucking dream," I growled. I took her hand and led her to the stairs. "Watch number three and number six," I warned as she climbed them.

She laughed. "How the hell do you guys survive living here?" She paused. "Is that six or am I standing on six?" Her brows raised in alarm.

"You're on five, and with the way you walk, as if you have tiny wings on your feet, you're probably all right even on six." She hopped over it just in case. I stepped fully on it, and the step rocked from side to side. Her brows raised in surprise. "I like to live dangerously," I said.

I led her to my room and was instantly embarrassed about the clutter I'd left behind.

I pushed a pile of dirty clothes off to the side.

"I'm a pig. There, now you know something about me too.

You're an incredible dancer who can defy gravity and grab the undivided attention of

a group of drunk, high partygoers and I'm a slob.

Not sure if that makes us even, but it's all I've got. "

She tucked herself against me. I was getting pretty fucking used to it already, having her long, lithe body in my arms. "I saw you tonight, protecting your cousin and standing with your family.

You were pretty damn impressive, and if I hadn't been scared shitless that a fight would break out, I would have jumped your damn bones right then and there in front of everyone.

" She smiled. "Nah, not really. But sometimes it's fun to pretend that I have a wild streak. "

"Well, let's stop pretending, shall we?" I lifted her sweater off and tossed it aside.

"Now about this fucking amazing black bra.

" I kissed her as I unfastened the bra. My mouth was still plastered to hers as I tossed aside the bra.

I pulled back to look at her. Her nipples hardened as I gazed admiringly at her tits.

She instinctively lifted her hands to cover them up. "Not my best feature."

I took hold of her hands and held them out to her sides so I could gaze at her.

"You are the whole fucking package, baby.

The whole fucking package and then some.

" I pressed my mouth against the trail of stars on her neck.

"Been wanting to do this since the first time I noticed these tiny fucking stars on this long neck. "

Shay's head lulled back, and she moaned sweetly as I unbuttoned her jeans and kissed her neck and throat and shoulders. I pulled my mouth from her long enough to push her jeans down. Her silky panties went too. She held my shoulders and stepped out of her boots and pants. She shivered.

"Are you cold?" I asked.

"That too," she said shyly.

I swept her up into my arms. Her long legs dangled nervously as I carried her to the bed. "Hey, ballerina, you can say no at any time. Got it?"

Shay nodded. "I'm on the pill but?—"

"I've got protection."

She grew quiet, and I worried I'd taken this too fast, too far.

I placed her down on the bed and stayed standing.

Her naked body stretched out in front of me was the hottest fucking thing I'd ever seen, and every inch of me reacted, but I didn't want to blow it.

She had enough shit to deal with, and this was only going to make her life more complicated.

"Shay, I don't?—"

She reached up for my hand. "I want this. I need to know what I've been missing. Please, Fin. It doesn't need to be more than this, but I want it. I want you. All of you."

I stripped naked.

Shay bit her lip as she reached for my cock. "Like I said, I need to know what I've been missing." She wrapped her fingers around my erection, and a groan rolled up from my chest.

I took hold of her wrist and removed her hand.

"I'm so fucking hard right now, baby. I want to last, and that's not going to be easy with you in my arms." I grabbed a condom and rolled it on.

The bed squeaked as I leaned down over her.

I stayed up on my arms and kissed her on the mouth before moving down to her breasts.

My erection brushed along her thigh, and every muscle in my body tightened as I worked to keep control.

I moved my tongue in circles around her taut nipples.

Shay reached up and pushed her fingers through my hair as she held my face closer to her breasts.

I kissed and nibbled at her erect nipples.

She mewled in pleasure and arched her back to push them harder against my mouth.

I moved my hand down, letting my fingers trail over her flat belly until they reached the mound of her pussy.

She gasped softly, tensing for a second and then relaxing as I moved my fingers through the hot wetness that had pooled in her pussy. I stroked her clit as I kissed her body. "Oh, Fin, I can't. I want you ... now," she said, breathlessly.

I lowered myself over her and kissed her mouth again.

I reached down to her ass and pulled her hips higher.

She wrapped her legs around my waist, lifting her hot, sweet pussy to meet me.

I gazed down into her dark brown eyes as I pushed into her.

Her eyes floated shut as her pussy swallowed my cock.

For a few quiet moments we stayed like that, our bodies connected erotically.

The quiet in the room surrounded us, cloaked us.

My body surged with energy, but I held back to look down at her.

"You belong here, with me," I said. I began to pump into her, slowly at first. I didn't want it to end, but I was so hard, I knew it was going to take all my strength to hold back.

My hand pushed her ass higher to meet my thrusts.

She tangled her long arms and legs around me, holding me tightly as if she worried I might run off. But there was no chance of that.

I pumped into her faster and harder. Neither of us were going to last. I couldn't stop, and she gripped me tightly with her long legs.

"Oh Fin, yes, harder, please."

I slammed into her so hard the bed smacked the wall behind us. She gripped me even tighter, and her fingers dug into my shoulders. "Yes!" she cried out and her body shivered beneath me as her pussy clamped tightly around me.

"Fuuck," I growled as I dropped over the edge of an intense fucking orgasm. Not wanting to crush her, I collapsed down to the side and pulled her over with me. She snuggled against me, purring softly.

"I now know what I've been missing, and I want to cry." She lifted her face to mine. "I've missed so damn much."

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:57 am

SIXTEEN

SHAY

G riffin wore an adorable grin as he carried the bowl of popcorn down to the television room.

The sweet boyish smile was completely out of tune with the incredible, somewhat menacing, underwear-clad physique beneath it, but I found the contrast perfect.

It was hard to find any imperfections with the man.

I pulled the shirt he'd lent me down over my knees to stave off the chill in the basement air.

"Popped without one burnt kernel," he stated as he held the bowl up victoriously.

"Given how many of those silly little bags I've burned to an absolute stinkin' crisp, I salute you and your talent for popping perfection.

" I patted the couch cushion next to me.

"I'm impressed with this room." Various monitors were mounted on the wall opposite the couch and an array of gaming consoles and controllers lined a set of chrome shelves beneath the screens.

The entire room had been painted dark blue, and canned lights dotted the low ceiling.

Being a basement, the only real light coming through was down the stairwell.

With the cellar door shut, the room could easily be darkened to a theater-like atmosphere.

The truly unique piece of décor was a vending machine in an alcove behind the couch and three massive recliners.

It was filled with snacks, and there was a small refrigerator next to it that I was sure held the usual sodas and beers required for any decent man cave.

"I find it hilarious and, yet, so predictable that a bunch of men breezed right past the chipped paint, peeling wallpaper and broken windows on the first two floors, but they made sure to buy a sweet decorative carpet for the area in front of their gaming systems."

"That's not decorative so much as it's there to cover the very black mildew stain we found when we pulled up the linoleum down here.

" Griffin handed me the bowl of popcorn, hopped up from the couch and walked over to a small closet.

He pulled out a blue blanket and returned to the couch.

I lifted the bowl while he tucked the blanket in around us.

"A blanket? In a man cave?" I asked. "In case one of the gamers gets a chill while sending his Orcs into battle?"

"Hey, it gets pretty damn cold down here, and you can't move that controller well if your thumb is numb. And while we're on the subject, Theo and Cru are the gamers. I

hop on every once in a while, but I lose interest fast."

I leaned against him and pulled the blanket higher on my lap. "So, what does hold Griffin Stone's interest? Other than the occasional ballet teacher."

Griffin shook his head. "I can always count on my cousins and sister to humiliate me.

It brings them such joy. But Miss Pearl did have a great smile and the longest damn legs.

Almost as long as yours." He pushed his hand under the blanket and ran it down my thigh.

His touch instantly set off a chain reaction through my body that ended up right smack center in the middle of my pussy.

He knew he'd caused my body to stir and smiled proudly about it.

He dragged his hand up the inside of my thigh. I held down his hand when it reached my crotch. I'd pulled panties on, but that was all I wore beneath the cotton T-shirt.

"Something tells me we aren't going to get to enjoy much of this perfectly popped popcorn," he said, his voice husky with need.

His hand was still tucked against my pussy as he leaned down to set the bowl on the ground.

"And to think it had butter and everything," he growled as he spun toward me, grabbed me by the waist and lifted me up to straddle his lap.

I yanked off the shirt and shivered instantly as the brisk air in the basement cooled

my skin.

Every other inch of me was on fire. The sex we'd had upstairs in his room was so incredible, so fucking memorable compared to anything else I'd experienced.

Aside from a heavy petting session with my prom date, Tate had been my only true lover.

He was clumsy and selfish. Now that I'd seen how fantastic sex could be, it confirmed that Tate was wholly unfit as a lover just like he was unfit to be a husband.

Griffin's green eyes glazed with desire as he pushed his boxer briefs down, allowing his rigid cock to spring free. Every inch of him was breathtakingly impressive . His fingers probed my pussy, taking special care with my clit. He didn't have to work too hard because I was already wet and ready.

"Oh Fin, this isn't real. This can't be real.

" It felt as if I'd dropped into an entirely new life.

This wasn't just my wonderful half-life, this was something altogether more fulfilling.

I hadn't realized how badly I lacked knowing what true intimacy felt like.

Griffin pushed aside my panties and then grabbed both hips to move me over him.

"I want to feel all of you this time." I held my breath and felt my heart break in my chest as I slid down over him.

He filled me to my core. I wanted to keep him there, with me, for the rest of my life.

I moved up and down over him and held his face against my chest, my fingers tangling in his thick hair. His strong hands circled my ass, and he teased me with his thumb, dipping it in and out of the tight hole as I came down over him. We moved in unison, meeting each other's body with urgency.

I dropped my head back and cried out in pleasure. Griffin took hold of my hips and held me firmly over him as he continued to pump inside of me. My body pulsed with ecstasy as he pushed deeper.

"Fuuck," he growled. His body went rigid beneath me as he came.

I collapsed down over him, and his strong arms went around me. We stayed like that until the cool air in the basement caused me to shiver.

"Gets chilly down here," Griffin said. "In winter, I've come down here and found Crusoe wearing his ski parka, beanie and three layers of sweats just so he can play video games without freezing to death."

I grabbed the shirt and pulled it on, and we both tucked down under the blanket. I scooted so close to him I was half on his lap. "It's a good thing you put off the same heat as a mama polar bear," I said with a giggle.

"Uh, it's papa bear to you, and just how would you know about a mama polar bear's heat?" He leaned forward and grabbed the bowl of popcorn.

"I just assume since they live on the ice that mama bear must put out an extraordinary amount of body heat."

"I guess that theory makes sense."

We settled back and nibbled the popcorn. Neither of us seemed inclined to watch

television. It was nice just sitting together in the quiet room, under a blanket, me luxuriating in his body heat and both of us eating salty, greasy popcorn.

"I'm not convinced that the butter on this popcorn has any actual resemblance to butter," I said.

Griffin chuckled. "You sure are coming up with a lot of scientific theories about the universe this evening."

"Am I? Hmm, must be the great sex. It's opened up all my thought processes."

Griffin reached under the T-shirt and left his hand on my upper thigh. My body reacted instantly to his touch. "So, the sex was great, eh?"

I turned slightly toward him and smiled. "Someone is fishing for a compliment. Well, let me espouse another theory of the universe. I'm not too surprised that someone like you knows your way around a woman's body, and yes, it was amazing."

"Not sure if that theory is a compliment or a diss, but I'm going to take it as a compliment." He leaned over and kissed me lightly on the lips. "Hmm, salty. And I agree, it was fucking incredible."

The front door opened, and two loud voices dribbled through the house and down the stairs to the basement. "I should get home," I said. I moved to get out from under the cover, but Griffin took hold of my hand.

I looked back at him. He was so hot, he stole my breath for a second.

"Stay with me, ballerina. Stay the night."

I smiled and loosened my hand from his grip. "Not quite ready for that, Fin."

He nodded. "Right. You're right. I'm sorry."

Theo and Crusoe were in the kitchen. There was a clamor of pots and pans.

"Shit, they're going to destroy the kitchen with a big middle of the night feast," Griffin said. "Clowns. I live with clowns."

I got dressed, and Griffin put on a pair of jeans. A shirtless Griffin was a wonder to behold. He walked me out to the front stoop. "Hey, let's exchange numbers." He took out his phone. "That way you can let me know that you got home safely."

I hesitated, and he took it as a rejection. He looked instantly hurt.

"It's just that Tate occasionally looks at my phone."

His brows lifted. "Shit. That's not right, Shay."

"Nothing about the man is right. I know, I'll put in a woman's name and tell him I met a friend if he asks. Greta. You'll now be known as Greta."

"Does it have to be Greta? Can't I be a Sophia or Kylie?"

I laughed. "I was sticking with the Gr names." We punched in each other's numbers

"Since we're using fake names, you are now Ballerina," he said.

"Not that Tate will ever get near my phone," he added before pulling me into his arms. "Text me when you get home, and Shay, I'm all in on this."

I don't want you to think that, well, you know, the comment about me knowing my way around a woman's body—with you, I'm all in. "

My chest felt tight as I gazed at him. "I need to find a way out of this on my own. This is my problem but I'm glad. You'll have to be patient with me though. I'm still stuck in that other half-life too, and it's not an easy one to walk away from."

"Why not? Just stay with me. We could get a place?—"

I pressed my fingers against his mouth and shook my head fervently. "That's not what I want. Not now." Again, I saw hurt in his expression. "Don't you see? If I break free from Tate, I need to be me for a while."

My words didn't erase the hurt but he nodded. "Yeah, I get it. But I'm here if you need me."

I kissed him, and he tightened his arms around me. The front door opened. "Oops, hey Fin, where is the hot sauce? We're making eggs." Theo nodded at me. "If anyone is interested."

"Fuck off, Theo," Griffin said.

"Yep, fucking off right now. Does that mean you don't know where the hot sauce is?"

"Theo," Griffin growled.

"Yep. Nice to see you again, Shay." The door shut.

"I better get going. Dancing, socializing, good sex ... I think I'll sleep well tonight," I inched away from him, but it wasn't easy.

"Good sex? I thought it was great sex," he said.

I hopped back up to the top step and kissed him again. "It was amazing."

"Hey, what are you up to tomorrow? On your day off?" Griffin asked as I reached the yard.

"Not sure."

"Wanna hang out?" he asked.

My heart fluttered. "Yes, I'd like that." I lifted my phone. "I'll let you know when I get home." I blew him a kiss, and the vision of him standing gorgeous and shirtless on the porch stuck with me long after I got in the car.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:57 am

SEVENTEEN

GRIFFIN

As expected, Crusoe and Theo left the kitchen looking as if a hurricane had blown through.

There was even egg on the kitchen window.

I fumbled around for a bowl and poured myself cereal only to discover they'd used all the milk.

I really needed my own place. I'd stupidly told Shay she should live with me like some silly little kid.

It made sense that if she broke free of the asshole she was married to, then she'd be looking for some independence and freedom.

It made sense, but that didn't make it any easier to swallow.

It would be harder to protect her and make sure the asshole didn't come near her again once she was out of his control.

That need to protect her had grown so intense I wasn't sure how to deal with it.

All I knew was I was going to do everything and anything to make sure that fucker never hurt her again.

I picked at the dry cereal and debated whether or not to text her. I was acting like a fucking lovesick teen. I'd never questioned shit like that before, but I didn't want to scare her off. It was the last thing I wanted, and the last thing she needed was some jerk texting her all the time.

I heard shuffling around upstairs. Theo was getting up to go out for a bike ride.

He was supposed to be training, but lately, his late-night partying was getting in the way of it, and it was showing in the competitions.

He hadn't won a race in several months. He needed to settle the fuck down, but it seemed he was heading in the opposite direction, away from settling down and closer to spinning out of control.

His heavy steps plodded down the squeaky stairs.

He was groaning the whole way down. He reached the kitchen.

A cloud cover was dimming the amount of sunlight streaming in through the small kitchen window, but he still squinted painfully.

His hair was bunched up like a bird's nest, and he looked as if one wrong move would make him puke.

"You got egg on the windows," I said as I picked up a piece of cereal.

Theo lifted his hand. "No, don't mention eggs. Don't even mention fucking chickens because those suckers are the ones to pop out the eggs." He headed straight to the kitchen sink, turned on the water and splashed it on his face.

"Thought you were training with the team today," I said.

"What are you my fucking personal secretary? I'm going. Just going to be late."

He sat down and stared at the empty coffeepot across the way. "Aren't you going to make some coffee?" he asked as he rubbed his temple.

"Nope. I was too disgusted with the state of the kitchen."

Theo thumped the table with his fist. His face scrunched up. "Shit, that was loud. Well, guess if there's no coffee, I'll go up and shower."

"Do whatever the hell you want."

"Fuck off, Fin, and I thought she was married." He grabbed the cereal box and shoved his hand into it. A cascade of cereal came out with his big fist.

"Yeah, well it's complicated." I looked up at him. "You going to tell me what's going on?" I asked.

"Don't know what you're talking about."

"Really? You don't think the partying is getting a little out of control for someone who prides himself on being a topnotch athlete? You're spiraling, bro, and you fucking know it."

"Are you a fucking psychologist now? I'm fine. Nothing to talk about."

Crusoe walked in right then. He'd fared a lot better after the long night but then I knew Crusoe. He usually cut himself off early, so he wouldn't feel like shit in the morning. Theo used to do the same.

"Lacey Michaels is getting married." Crusoe scratched his belly and looked around at

the kitchen. "Theo, you said the clean-up fairies would come in the middle of the night and take care of this shit."

I looked over at Theo. Crusoe had dropped a bomb and then moved right on to the mess in the kitchen, but it was the bomb that had caught my attention. Theo looked miserable, and in more ways than one.

"That's it, bro, isn't it?" I asked.

Theo shrugged. "What do I care? She left me without looking back, so I sure as hell ain't going to give a flying fuck about her getting married." Theo walked out.

Theo and Lacey Michaels had been a couple in high school.

They were one of those couples who everyone just assumed would end up married after graduation, but Lacey got accepted to an East Coast college, and that was the end of the relationship.

Theo was devastated and there was more to the story but he refused to talk about it.

One thing was certain, he'd never stopped loving her.

Crusoe moved some of the dirty dishes aside, so he could make a piece of toast.

"When did he hear?" I asked.

Crusoe looked up through a tangle of dark hair. He pushed it back, away from his eyes. "Hear what?"

"God, you're a fucking idiot."

"Oh, that thing about Lacey. We were at a race last month, and remember that guy, shit, can't remember his name, but we all called him Crane because he had that freakish long neck."

"Jimmy Roberts, yeah, what about him?"

"He used to live next door to Lacey's family, and her parents still live there."

Crane asked Theo if he'd heard that Lacey was marrying some rich doctor.

Theo looked as if someone had slammed him in the gut.

He came in fifth. I almost think Crane did it on purpose cuz he knew it was going to take Theo right out of the running. "

"How would Crane know that Theo still had a thing for Lacey? It's been years since he's even seen her."

Crusoe shrugged. "Don't know. Just thought that he did it on purpose. Even if he didn't, it fucked up Theo's ride."

"Well, that explains why he's partying so hard. You know, you could help him. You're both always out together."

Crusoe turned and looked at me as if I'd just asked him to cut off his own balls. "I'm not going to be a mother hen to my buddy. He's fine. Let him get it out of his system."

"Just last week he was bitching and groaning because one of his sponsorships was pulled. If he keeps coming in fifth, then he'll lose all of them. He's supposed to be out training today."

"Is he?" Crusoe grabbed the piece of toast, dropped it fast on the plate and waved his fingers to cool them. "Look, I'm not going to lecture him about his partying. I'll leave that to the two grannies of the bunch, you and Jaxon, but honestly, he'll get past this soon. It'll be fine."

"Yeah, if you say so." I got up from the table.

Crusoe leaned against the counter and chewed his toast. "Can you imagine?" he asked.

"Imagine what?"

"Having your balls in such a twist about some girl you dated in high school or having your balls in a twist about any chick at all?"

I thought about last night and my time with Shay. "Actually, I can."

Crusoe's eyes widened. "Yeah? That woman from work? Theo said she was married. But man, she could dance."

"Yep. I'm going out to get some decent coffee. Clean up this fucking mess."

"Yes, ma'am," Crusoe called back.

My phone rang when I reached my room. Ballerina came up on the screen. "Hey, Ballerina." I could feel my face break in half with a smile. I had it bad.

"This isn't something I've done in a long time.

" She giggled nervously. "Actually, I don't think I've ever done this, call a boy, that is, but I guess since I'm calling Greta I'm not really calling a boy.

And speaking of boys, oh boy, do I sound like a raving lunatic right now.

I was just wondering if you wanted to go?—"

"Yes, I do," I answered enthusiastically.

Shay laughed. "I haven't even said where yet. What if I was about to ask if you want to go to the landfill and watch garbage trucks dump their loads?"

"It'd still be a yes."

"Well, then, I was going to see if you wanted to get coffee. We'll leave the landfill idea for another day. I can pick you up. And there's another first for me. Asking a boy on a date and volunteering to pick him up. I'm kind of liking this new me."

"I'm liking all of you. I'll be ready in twenty minutes. Does that work?"

"It sure does. See you soon. Oh and Fin, thanks."

"Thanks for what?"

"Don't know. Just felt like I needed to say it. Be there in twenty."

EIGHTEEN

SHAY

I double checked my makeup. I'd decided to spruce up with a touch more mascara and lipstick than usual.

I rarely wore makeup because I was content just blending into my surroundings.

I preferred invisibility to being seen or admired.

I especially didn't want to be seen by my husband.

The more I could erase myself in front of him the better.

But with Griffin, I wanted to be seen. I wanted him to look.

A blush warmed my face as I thought about the way he'd looked at me standing naked in his bedroom.

His appreciative gaze felt like a warm caress, and I felt sexy for the first time since I could remember.

I'd gotten home late but still managed to wake up early.

I was dying to stretch and dance again. My muscles were tight and sore, but I knew the best thing for them was to do the whole damn thing again.

It would take some time, but if I kept up the practice, eventually my muscles would strengthen.

I already felt way better during this morning's practice.

I'd even looked up the dance school that Jules told me about.

There was an adult group that met every Wednesday and Saturday.

It would be a dream to get back to an instructor and to hang out with other dancers again, but I still had a huge, ugly obstacle in my way.

It wasn't going to be easy getting rid of that obstacle.

I was going to put my other life behind me for now.

This was the half-life I lived for, and I wouldn't let Tate cast any shadows over it.

He hadn't texted yesterday when he stopped for the night.

He did that less now, and I never texted him.

He could have stopped off in Area 51 and been abducted by aliens, for all I cared.

If only that would happen, then all my problems would be solved.

I got in the car for the drive toward the coast. A layer of clouds and thin, drizzly fog had moved in to make the day dreary, only nothing could dampen my spirits. I couldn't wait to see Griffin.

The fog got heavier the closer I got to the beach. The old house, the Shack, as they

called it, looked a little less stable and decidedly more decrepit standing in the milky fog. Griffin came out to the car.

"I'm not trying to be rude by not inviting you in, but it's too damn embarrassing in that house right now. Let me just say, my roommates are pigs, and there is egg on the kitchen window."

I realized I loved the way he smelled, a mix of soap and general manliness.

Tate wore a terrible smelling aftershave, or maybe my brain told me it smelled terrible because he was wearing it.

All I knew was whenever I passed another man somewhere in public wearing the same scent, I felt instantly nauseous.

It was a physical reaction triggered by a mental one.

Griffin leaned over and kissed me lightly on the lips. "Hmm, less salty but I like it. The kitchen was too gross to even consider starting a pot of coffee, so thank you for asking me out on a coffee date."

"Pleasure is all mine, Mr. Stone. Do you mind if we drive back toward my place? There's a great coffee shop right around the corner, and they make these very decadent blueberry muffins. Complete with crumble topping."

"I never say no to crumble topping."

I drove back the way I came. An awkward silence filled the space between us.

My mind had been racing all night and morning with questions like, what the hell am I doing starting up with a man when I haven't shed the snakeskin of a man I'm

married to?

It was an emotional explosion I didn't need right now, but I was already so taken with the man sitting next to me, I didn't want to let him go.

"What about at work?" I blurted in a clumsily loud voice. "I can't lose my job." Especially now when I was working on building my courage to leave Tate. I needed that job more than ever.

"I'll handle it," Griffin said.

"I think we need to keep this all undercover." I looked over at him. "I'm still married, and I don't want your dad to lose confidence in me. I don't want him to think that I'm just sitting around staring starry-eyed out the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of my favorite construction worker."

"See, now I wouldn't mind that at all, but I get your point.

I'd love to say we can keep it secret except there were a few people, family members, prominent family members, including my sister, who already saw us together last night and, unfortunately, secrets spread like wildfire in the Stone family.

And Jules and my mom are like sisters. They share everything, so I can guarantee my mom already knows the secret, which means Dad does too.

I'll talk to him. He'll probably chew my head off, but I can handle it. "

Griffin was working hard to smooth out my worry, but he only made it worse. "I shouldn't have gone to that party last night. What was I thinking? I was so glad to get this job and now I've risked everything."

"Hey, Shay, really, it will be all right. Dad thinks you're awesome. I'll talk to him. It'll be fine. I promise."

I nodded but wasn't entirely convinced. Or maybe I was having other doubts because I'd just jumped into something with both feet, something that was probably the last thing I needed. And I had no doubt that Griffin had the power to break my heart in two, another thing I didn't need.

"Maybe we should, maybe we should take a step back from this," I said.

"At least until I sort out my sordid married life.

I'm not sure I can handle this right now.

"The miserable, sniveling wimpy side of my personality, the one that Tate helped create was showing.

I wouldn't have to worry about taking a step back because surely Griffin would be running for the hills after this scene.

"Hey, ballerina, I don't have a single regret about any of this.

I'll wait for you to sort out your life if that's what you want.

I'm here if you need help with that, and at the same time, I'll stay clear so you can do things your way.

But if you don't want me to be part of your life, I get it.

It'll hurt like hell to walk away from this cuz I've already got it pretty solid in my heart and mind that I want to be with you, Shay. "

I dragged my eyes from the road and looked at him.

God, he was breathtaking, and he wanted to be a part of my life.

That seemed so fucking impossible. I barely wanted to be a part of my life, and I was stuck in the middle of it.

"I don't think I could survive heartbreak from someone like you. " I turned my focus back to the road.

"Not something you'll need to worry about. I won't break it."

I smiled weakly. "Jeez, that Stone confidence. They ought to bottle the stuff."

"It's true we are a cocky bunch of bastards, but—" He touched my arm.

"But I'm telling the truth, Shay. I'd never do anything to hurt you.

You've survived some bad shit, but if I've learned nothing else from my parents, you can come out of the bad shit.

You just need the right person on the other end to help you fly.

And since you already know how to fly without wings, I'll just be there to catch you in case you fall. "

I laughed. "You are quite the poet this morning, sir."

"And all without a drop of coffee. I'm rather proud of that little speech. Seriously, Shay, I'm here. Not going anywhere. That's all I'm going to say."

A lump formed in my throat. I'd felt so alone for so long it was hard for me to believe that someone else cared enough to support me. "Thanks, Fin." They were the only words I could choke out.

We reached the coffee shop. It was Sunday, and the line was out the door.

"Shoot, I hadn't taken into consideration the whole Sunday morning part of this date," I said.

I looked at him. "We could wait in that long line and then wait inside again for our coffee orders to come up and then wait around like a couple of dweebs hovering around the tables waiting for someone to get up so we can rush to grab their seats and then sit in the midst of the previous customers' muffin crumbs, or I could take you home and fix you a cup of coffee.

And I know for a fact there will be two empty chairs and I wiped the table clean this morning after my frozen waffle.

Sorry, that was a very long way of saying wanna just go to my house and drink my inferior coffee? "

Griffin blinked his long, black lashes at me. "Did you call me a dweeb?"

"No, I would never call a Stone a dweeb. I'd be the dweeb. You'd just be my table hunting partner." I laughed as I turned the car around. "I'm going to take that as a yes to my inferior coffee invite."

I pulled out of the packed parking lot and turned the corner to my road.

A moment of terror shot through me when I suddenly envisioned Tate coming home unexpectedly.

I was sure it wouldn't happen, but the notion of it sent enough adrenaline through me that I was still fretting over the possibility when I pulled into the empty driveway.

"It's not much," I said of the house. It was one of those plain, box-shaped houses with a composite roof and small aluminum windows around the front and back.

Griffin lifted a brow. "Uh, excuse me but did you fail to notice the box of rotting timber you just picked me up from?"

I'm just waiting for the county to come in and tell us all to get out before it folds in on itself.

My dad has a meltdown every time he comes by.

He's written some severe letters to the landlord, but the rent is cheap, and we're a bunch of messy assholes, so it suits us just fine. "

"Until it folds up and swallows you all," I noted as we climbed out of the car.

"Nah, it's fine. We just make sure to go easy on the bass whenever we're cranking tunes."

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:57 am

I laughed. "Well then, as long as you're taking precautions.

" I took hold of his arm. It was sort of an involuntary move.

I'd never been forward or flirty, or maybe I had been but Tate put an end to that.

Just like my dancing. I couldn't help myself with Griffin.

I just wanted to be close to him, to touch him and now that I had my arm around his, I realized I wanted his hands all over me again.

The adrenaline from my moment of terror was gone.

Now I had a different kind of energy surging through me.

I unlocked the door. A slight whiff of Tate's aftershave wafted up from the sofa as I led Griffin to the kitchen.

This time, the scent, didn't make me nauseous, just angry.

I'd let so much of my life pass by as I waited, cowering in the dark corners.

For a while, I was all right with cowering.

It meant not getting hurt, mentally or physically.

It meant not exposing myself to society, a place where I felt far more disappointments

than successes.

But my new job and the new person it'd brought into my life had made me realize I was missing a lot.

I reached the coffeemaker and opened the lid to add grounds.

I gasped as Griffin wrapped his arms around my waist and pressed his mouth to my neck.

Tate had made the same move just a few days earlier, and it had caused me to cut my finger.

When Tate touched me, I froze instantly.

For him, I was exactly what he liked to call me, a frigid bitch.

But Griffin's touch sent instant heat through my whole body.

I melted back against his chest as his mouth continued to run a trail of kisses down my neck.

"Shit, ballerina, you feel so right in my arms. Where the hell have you been?"

"Trapped," I said breathlessly.

"Well, I'm here to set you free." Coffee grounds spilled across the white counter as Griffin spun me around to face him.

I wrapped my arms around him as his mouth slammed over mine.

Last night, we made love. It was awkward and shy and unbelievably hot, but this was more. This was pure fucking passion.

Griffin had my shorts and panties around my ankles before I knew he'd unbuttoned them.

He grabbed my waist and lifted me up. I kicked my feet and shed my shorts and panties.

He turned me back toward the counter. I braced my hands against it.

The spilled coffee grounds pricked my palms as I gripped the counter to keep from collapsing.

My knees were like jelly as Griffin used his hands to spread my legs.

He knelt down behind me and nibbled my naked ass gently with his teeth.

His big hands smoothed up and down my naked thighs as his mouth moved down toward the apex between my thighs.

My legs wobbled, and I sucked in a sharp breath as the light stubble on his jaw grazed my skin.

His hand reached around to the front, and his fingers deftly massaged my clit.

He used his free hand to move my ass out farther.

My top half was practically laying on the counter.

I jutted my naked ass out more. I couldn't remember ever wanting to be fucked so

badly.

His tongue stroked me as his fingers played my pussy like a master musician played his instrument.

I was so close to the edge, I cried out.

"Please, Griffin. I don't want to come without you inside of me.

" My plea floated around the kitchen and mingled with his low groans.

Seconds later, I heard his jeans hit the kitchen floor.

The heat of his body surrounded me as he leaned over me. He teased my neck with a bite. "God, I fucking love these stars," he whispered, then he pushed his cock into me. My cry of pleasure echoed off the kitchen wall as he filled me with his massive erection.

He held my body in his hands as he slammed into me again and again.

I gripped the counter so hard, I half expected to leave fingerprints.

It took only seconds and my entire body was splitting with a mind-blowing orgasm.

Griffin had to hold me up, keep me on my feet.

The room spun around me as he thrust into me a few more times.

His grip tightened, and his body stiffened as he came.

He leaned down over me, his warmth comforting me in the cool kitchen, and his

scent making every inch of me stir again.

Our breathing slowed. Griffin straightened and gently turned me to face him.

I pushed a black strand of hair off his forehead as I peered up at him, my heart beating with an intensity I'd never felt before.

"Not sure I'll ever look at this kitchen or, for that matter, my coffeepot, the same again," I said. My voice was still hoarse, and my limbs trembled from the erotic experience.

Griffin had this one lopsided smile that would melt an iceberg. "Well, shall we do the same for the bedroom? We could stop in on that living room sofa first, so every time you sit on it, you can think of me."

I shook my head. "I rarely sit there because—" I shook it again. "One of the cushions has his ass imprinted on it."

Griffin nodded. "Definitely no couch then. Or we could put an imprint of our own and then let him try and figure out just what the fuck it is."

His last words swept the wind out of me. He hadn't meant to, of course, and I could see instant regret on his face.

Griffin reached for my hand. "Shit, shit, I'm sorry, Shay. You know—fuck—" He raked his fingers through his hair in frustration. "I'm an idiot."

"No, it's all right. It's just I had a lightning quick panic attack when I came around the corner thinking about what would happen if Tate suddenly came home. Not that he'll be home," I added quickly.

"No, that's not it. I've never had to live like you have, in a house where you have to worry about everything you say or do.

" His dark lashes dropped. "My dad grew up with a monster.

He and his brothers were always on edge, always expecting the next violent outburst." Griffin leaned against the back of the couch.

I sensed talking about this had hit him harder than he expected.

He lifted his face. "He's got strap marks on his back.

They all have them. Battle scars are what they call them because growing up was a battle.

And while she doesn't talk about it much, my mom went through something like you're going through.

She ended up with a fucking creep who turned her life into a living hell.

That's all I know about it, but she ran from him and landed literally in my dad's arms." Some of the anguish had disappeared from his expression, and some shine came back to his eyes.

"They are fucking crazy about each other to the point where Jules and I have to walk out because it makes our teeth hurt listening to them sweet talk each other. "

"God, that must be so fucking nice. To have someone to love and someone to adore and have them return the love and adoration. Doesn't seem like too much to ask for."

Griffin reached for my hand and pulled me into his arms. "Not too much at all,

ballerina."

We kissed all the way to the bedroom and stopped only to congratulate ourselves for keeping our lips locked the whole way down the hallway.

Griffin lifted me into his arms and the kiss marathon continued as he carried me over to the bed.

He lowered me down on the mattress. None of Tate's things were visible.

I made sure to hide all of him when he was out of town.

Seeing his shirt or a pair of shoes would throw my whole half-life into disarray.

I'd become skilled at disappearing the man from existence just as he had done to me.

Only, now, I was on my way back. Every damn inch of me was waking up, and it was all because of the incredible hunk who had knelt next to me on the mattress.

Griffin stared down at my half naked body and decided it was time to shed the top and bra. He did the same and then he pulled me naked into his arms. His finger traced the stars that he'd grown so fond of, and he gazed at me in a way that brought tears to my eyes.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Just nice to be looked at, in the way you're looking at me. As if you see me. As if you know me. As if you understand me."

"Right this minute, I'm looking at a beautiful woman who needs to be treated like a goddess, and I plan to do exactly that, baby.

You deserve nothing less." His mouth pressed against mine.

I pressed my body against his, and felt that same urgency, the one that made me want to break into a million pieces with wanting him.

And once again, he made sure that didn't happen.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:57 am

NINETEEN

GRIFFIN

Theo stayed in bed with a sprained ankle.

He'd taken a huge jump on his bike and somewhere in the middle of the flight, he and the bike parted ways and he came down on his right ankle.

My cousin was a mess, mentally, and it was affecting every part of his life.

I wasn't sure how to help him, but I hoped he'd get out of the funk soon.

Like Crusoe, I was sure it had to do with news that Lacey Michaels was getting married.

Theo and Lacey hadn't seen each other in years, but deep down, the guy always hoped she'd come back to Trayton one day and they'd get back together.

I was sure she was the reason he never found a steady girlfriend.

Not sure what excuses the rest of us had, but with Theo, it was always Lacey.

I reached the worksite just as Dad was pulling in. "No Theo?" he asked as I got out of the truck.

"He sprained his ankle taking too big of a jump."

"Fuck. Now we're down a man. Guess it's good he didn't break it.

I'll give Slade a call. I think his work's been slow.

"Uncle Slade took people out on deep sea fishing trips, but bookings always slowed as we got closer to winter.

Fortunately, Aunt Britton and my mom were doing really well with their real estate business which helped fill in the gaps.

I started off toward the trailer with the lockers. "Fin." Dad's deep tone sounded serious, which matched perfectly with the expression on his face as I turned around. He didn't need to say a word. I knew the family gossip chain was strong. He'd already heard about Shay and me.

"I'm just, we're just—oh fuck it. I really like her, Dad, but she's got a very messed up personal life right now, so that's what she needs to focus on."

Dad dragged his fingers through his hair, and his jaw twitched slightly. "I asked you specifically not to get involved with her. I don't ask that much of you, Fin."

"It's fine. Don't worry. But don't tell me to stay away from her cuz that's not going to happen. And like I said, I had nothing to do with Katie's leaving. She made the whole thing up in her mind. I never did anything more than say hello in the morning and have a few chats at break."

"But this time?" Dad asked.

I didn't answer.

"Fucking hell, Fin. And she's married."

"Yeah, to a piece of shit. She's going to get free of him."

Dad crossed his arms and gave me his "dad" look. "So, you're going to get yourself tangled up in her mess?"

"Hmm, like you did with mom's mess? I know you don't give out a lot of details, but I do know from a conversation with Slade that you nearly died in the process of freeing Mom from that asshole she was with."

"Slade and his big fucking mouth. And that was different. That was Mom."

"Who you barely knew yet you threw yourself fully into protecting her. I'm going to do the same for Shay."

Dad waved his arm dismissively. "That was different. I was in love with your mom."

"Exactly," I said to his retreating back.

He stopped and looked back at me. His hard expression softened, and he seemed to comprehend what I was saying. "But you only just—" He stopped because he knew how hypocritical he'd sound if he continued.

"When was it, Dad?" I asked. "When did you know Mom was the one?"

He smiled to himself for a second. "The moment I saw her sitting wet and shivering and lost, like a stray kitten, on the boat. I'd only known her an hour, and I knew right then I would move hell and earth to keep her safe, to keep her with me."

"Well then, old man, you know exactly how I feel."

"I turned and walked away. I didn't look back, but something told me he stood there

for a few extra seconds with his chin on the ground.

Later he'd tell me it was just a fleeting thing, a crush, but I knew this was more.

I could feel it in my soul just like Dad had felt all those years back on their boat.

TWENTY

SHAY

My emotions were at a fever pitch. I'd started something with a man who I couldn't stop thinking about.

I could still feel Griffin touching me. My lips were so swollen from his kisses, I had to ice them just to put on lipstick.

This morning, I did three pirouettes through the living room before I could even stop my feet.

I still had so much to deal with, but now I had a reason to deal with all of it.

I'd been popped clear of the terrible dreary funk I'd been in for years, the funk that told me to just be happy when he's gone and deal with the rest one day at a time.

But I was done living a half-life. I wanted the whole thing.

Tate had gotten out of the habit of calling and texting while he was on the road.

He knew I didn't care where he was or what he was doing, and he didn't feel enough connection back home to bother.

He mentioned something about this being a two-week job, but I always gave myself a conservative estimate of his return, so I'd be ready for it and I could brace myself.

With any luck, he'd be gone the full two weeks.

I picked up my phone to glance at the news while I sipped my cup of coffee.

It seemed the internet and social media world were on fire with stories about the popular influencer who'd gone missing.

Roxi Carhill, better known to her fans, as the Banana Bandana because of her signature yellow bandana, had been recently left alone in Zion by her longtime partner, Toby Barron, and after losing contact with her for a few days, her family sent the rangers out to check on her.

They'd found her famous traveling van but no sign of Roxi.

I put the phone down. The tone of the article sounded grim as if the reporters were already getting the impression from authorities that they were expecting the worst. I had to admit, it didn't sound promising for Roxi, and she certainly wouldn't be the first famous woman to die tragically at the hands of her lover.

Either that or she was just creating a news sensation to stay relevant. It was hard to know.

I glanced at the time on my phone. I decided to get to work early to catch up on a few paperwork items before Colt added things to my to-do list. He kept me busy and I loved it.

Feeling productive was like a big high for me.

I'd been without work for a few months, and the despair I felt from being unemployed had dragged me lower than usual.

Tate hadn't brought up finding another job again, but then we'd hardly exchanged one word during his short time at home.

We'd grown entirely apart, and I couldn't wait to be completely free of the man.

A blue autumn sky blanketed the town. The coastal fog rarely reached inland, but the air was still chilly. I buttoned my coat and climbed into the car. My phone buzzed before I pulled out of the driveway. I smiled at the name Greta on the screen. One day soon I'd be switching it out for Griffin.

"Morning, ballerina, thought about you all night."

"Really? I've hardly given you any thought at all," I texted back.

"Ouch."

"My lips are so swollen, I look like a clown."

"You're welcome. See you soon, my beautiful clown."

I pulled onto the road, and, swollen or not, I couldn't tamp down the smile I was wearing.

When I got the job with Stone Construction, I was thrilled, but I never expected it to entirely change my life.

A notion was taking place solidly in my mind that I would ask Tate for a divorce when he got back from this latest job.

I had no idea how he'd react. It could go any direction with Tate.

It could be disastrous and frightening, or maybe, just maybe, he'd nod and say yes.

I knew that was probably a farfetched scenario, but Tate knew we were through.

It wouldn't be a big shock. He knew that I hated everything about him, and I was sure he felt the same way.

He'd kept me around as a home base caretaker, someone to do his laundry, cook his meals and take care of the house while he was away.

I was more a convenience than a wife, but I was done playing that role.

I turned the corner and drove past the cemetery.

I missed seeing Annie, so when I spotted her and her yellow roses walking into the cemetery, I pulled over and parked.

She had no idea I was behind her, and I stayed quiet for a moment while I waited for her to touch her daughter's gravestone and say a few words.

She arranged the roses in the vase next to the other roses.

There was a full bouquet sitting next to the grave marker.

I headed toward her, but she didn't hear me approach. Not wanting to startle her, I stopped a few plots over. "Annie," I said quietly.

She looked up. Her features were crinkled with grief, and I realized I knew very little about her daughter's death.

I'd been so absorbed in my own misery; I hadn't taken the time to dip into hers.

And she'd gone out of her way to impart tiny morsels of advice, not in a ham-handed way but subtly and with finesse because she knew too well what I was dealing with.

It took Annie a moment to figure out who I was. A smile broke free. "Shay, how are you? What on earth are you doing out here?"

I walked over and glanced down at the stone.

It took me a second to get over the shock of seeing the dates on the gravestone.

Nina was only twelve when she died. I'd settled in my mind that she'd died recently as an adult and that Annie had at least had a nice long time with her, but twelve short years was hard to fathom.

"I was on my way to work, and I saw you walking through the gates. I've got my car today so no bus. I miss talking to you."

Annie's trembling fingers reached out to take hold of my hand.

"I miss talking to you as well, my dear.

" She looked back down at the grave and the bright flowers.

"It's probably ridiculous that I've been coming here every morning for thirty years, but it helps me deal with the loss, the guilt, the regrets. "

"She was so young," I said. I felt tears prick my eyes. Poor Annie had grieved so long. Most of the graves had no flowers. Flowers and visits usually slowed down after a few years but Nina's grave had never gone without her favorite beautiful roses.

Annie held my hand and led me over to a stone bench just across the path from the

grave. "Let's sit. This cold weather is doing such a number on my knees," Annie said.

We sat down, and Annie spent a few moments buttoning up her coat.

"My Nina loved horses. Like so many young girls.

" Annie chuckled. "Her room was covered with posters, and every book on her shelf was about horses.

Twice a year, I took her to the local stables to ride, and she would be beaming sitting up in that saddle.

Her dream was to ride a beautiful horse in a parade.

" Annie patted my hand. "I don't want you to be late for work. "

"I left my house early, so I've got time."

"I waited too long." She said it so quietly that the words nearly got lost even in the eerie silence of the cemetery.

"It was always me. He'd always directed his temper at me.

I was always the target, and, stupidly, I thought, well, as long as he doesn't go after Nina, I can take what he's dishing out.

But Nina had reached that preteen stage—" Annie smiled thinking about it.

"That's when kids start to get opinions of their own.

I was in the kitchen, cowering from his hard fists.

He'd already smashed a hole in the cupboard above my head, and I was sure my face was next.

Somewhere in my cloud of terror, I heard the front door open and shut.

Nina had gotten home from school. She walked in on us and started screaming at her dad.

It all happened so fast." Annie paused to pull out a handkerchief.

It had tiny violets embroidered on it. She wiped her nose.

"He shoved her, and she flew back. She wasn't a big girl.

She used to get so mad because she was a preteen, but we still had to shop in the kid's section for her clothes.

She fell against the corner of the tile counter.

The whole scene is still as horrifyingly clear as it was that day.

She crumpled to the ground, and in seconds she was lying in a pool of blood.

The examiner said she died on impact. It was the first time I saw him look contrite, scared.

His face was gray as the police put on the cuffs.

I spent the next few days trying to find ways to take my own life, but, eventually, I used the months he was behind bars to pack up my life and leave.

" Annie looked over at me. "Don't wait too long. " She squeezed my hand.

I nodded. Her story had left me numb. It was a horror story that no one should ever have to endure and yet, after living with Tate all these years, I knew it was one that played out in reality far too often.

"I won't," I said. "I'm making a plan, and you helped inspire it."

She smiled softly and clutched her handkerchief tightly in her hand. We both sat and watched a gentle breeze push the roses back and forth. It looked as if they were swaying in unison to some silent tune, then I leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I'll see you later, Annie."

"Yes. Have a nice day."

"You too." I walked back to my car. It took me a few minutes to force myself to put the key in the ignition. As I drove off, I watched as Annie pushed off the bench and shuffled back to her daughter's grave.

TWENTY-ONE

GRIFFIN

I was on the scaffolding hanging drywall when I saw Shay's car coming up the drive to the lot.

I paused my task long enough to watch her get out of the car and walk across to the trailer.

I was stupidly happy when she stopped and looked toward the work area.

I waved and she spotted me. A white smile splashed across her face, and she waved back before heading inside.

It was only a wave, but it was enough to get me through until break time.

I had to play it cool and not show up constantly at the trailer, but it wasn't going to be easy.

Just seeing her reminded me of all the time we'd spent naked in each other's arms this weekend. Those were hard memories to tamp down.

"I told you I never touched her!" A yell came from the next building site.

Derek and John, two framers who always walked on site together with tools ready to go, had joined us last month.

They were good workers, but I knew Dad was still double checking their framing because of the occasional screwup.

Derek was waving a nail gun around as if accidentally shooting it would have no consequences.

His buddy, John, was holding a piece of drywall in front of him like a shield.

"C'mon, Derek, put the damn nail gun down. I'm telling you I never went near Rhonda. I know you like her, and I'm a better friend than that."

"Then why the hell did I just see her name come up on your phone?"

I hurried over, and Greg, the other foreman, joined from the opposite side.

"Put the nail gun down or turn in your hard hat and leave the site, Derek," I said as I reached the scene.

Derek seemed to be weighing his options or, at the very least, he was weighing how serious my threat was.

"Put it down now or leave," I repeated without pause.

Derek lowered the tool and shook his head. "You think someone is your friend and then they stab you in the fucking back." His face was red as his words shot out.

"You know what? Take a walk, Derek. See if you can cool off."

John, you switch with Adam on my team for now.

I think you two should work separately for the day, then you can clean up this

personal mess on your free time and preferably out of reach of deadly tools.

" I looked at John. "Head over there now and get started on the south wall. "

John put down the drywall and hurried away just like a friend who had indeed stabbed his buddy in the back by making a move on his girlfriend.

Derek yanked off his hard hat, threw it at a pile of lumber and marched away.

"Those two have been at it all morning," Greg said. "You might want to keep John with you. Something tells me a brisk walk isn't going to do all that much to cool Derek off."

The rest of the morning moved along without anyone waving around a nail gun.

John stayed with me, but he kept glancing around, apparently worried he might be blindsided by his buddy with the dangerous tool.

The two friends even managed a few civil words together as they headed over to the picnic tables with their lunch coolers.

It seemed they'd patched things up, which was one less thing for me to worry about.

Dad had a meeting at the developer's office, so he'd put me in charge while he was gone.

Aside from the scuffle between the two friends, the morning went smoothly but I was just as glad to see Dad's truck roll up to the site.

It meant I could focus on my own tasks. Which I was doing until I spotted Shay walking out of the trailer with her lunch bag.

She was wearing a light pink sweater that hugged her in all the right places.

I'd only seen her briefly in the morning when we waved to each other.

With Dad off site all morning, I hadn't had time for a visit, and I didn't need to give Dad any more reason to be disappointed with me.

I was sure if I stopped in to say hello, some grand fucking catastrophe would happen and then Dad would ask where the hell I was, and I was fairly sure that if I answered inside the office trailer that would give him the perfect opportunity to tell me I had to knock it off.

I just didn't see myself walking away from Shay.

I wasn't finished with my work yet, but at least part of our lunch breaks would overlap.

I returned to my task cutting plywood for a subfloor.

I had three pieces left. I'd finished two.

The ear protection and goggles had put me in my own quiet world, but as I turned to set aside the piece I'd cut, my gaze swept across to the lunch tables.

Shay jumped up from the bench as John and Derek wrestled with each other.

I yanked off my ear covers and goggles and ran toward the benches.

A few others had put down their tools and were heading toward the fight.

The few workers who'd been at the tables had gotten up and were yelling at the two to

cool it, but no one wanted to step into the hurricane of flailing fists.

Derek threw John on the ground, right at Shay's feet.

She screamed and backed up. Derek jumped on John just as I reached the benches.

The trailer door flew open, and Dad ran down the steps and toward us.

I grabbed Derek and yanked him back. His fists were still flying in every direction, and I had to bob and weave to avoid getting clobbered.

John took advantage of Derek being restrained and flew at both of us, but Dad snatched him back before he could throw a punch.

It took them both a good minute to cool down and realize the fight was over.

"What's this about?" Dad asked. He'd missed the prequel to the fight this morning, but Derek quickly filled him in.

"That asshole has been hooking up with my girl." Spittle mixed with blood flew from Derek's mouth.

"I told you, you're crazy! It never happened," John said.

"Right. Well, I took you two on based on recommendations from your references, and you should use those to find another job. I want both of you to turn in your equipment and clear out your lockers. I have a zero-tolerance policy for fighting on the jobsite."

John pointed at Derek. "You stupid idiot. Look what you've done."

"John, you go first to clear out your locker. I don't want the two of you in that small

space together," Dad said.

Derek pulled angrily out of my grasp and walked to his water flask on the table. Shay hurried back to the office. I followed her to make sure she was all right. She'd already slipped inside before I reached the trailer door.

I opened it, but she didn't turn around as she headed toward her desk.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Why the hell does it always have to be violence with men?" she said angrily.

I had no response because she wasn't wrong. I walked toward her. She held up her hand to stop me.

"I'm sorry, Fin. I just need some time. I'm shaken, yes, but I wasn't hurt. I just don't get it. I don't understand why everyone resorts to throwing fists." She leaned against the front edge of her desk, and her shoulders slumped. She covered her face, and her body shuddered. She was crying.

She'd told me to stop, but my feet shot forward. "Shay, hey, did they hurt you?"

She kept her face covered, and shook her head.

"No, I'm not hurt," she mumbled through sobs behind her hands.

I stood there helplessly, not sure how to soothe her.

It seemed I was totally out of my depth here.

Shay's life had broken her in so many ways, and I didn't have a clue how to put the

pieces back together.

Shay lowered her hands. Her eyes and nose were red, but the tears had stopped.

"My friend, Annie—I met her on the bus and she's—she knows about me, about my life because she lived through the same life, only with a different monster.

And she had a daughter—" The tears flowed again, and she fell forward into my arms. "It's too hard, sometimes," she said.

"Too hard to understand why it has to be like this. "

I held her, but I didn't say a word. I couldn't. I was no saint when it came to throwing an angry fist, but I'd never throw one at a woman or child or anyone who didn't deserve it. At least not in my mind.

The trailer door opened, and Shay abruptly yanked out of my arms. She quickly wiped away any tears and sniffled a few times as she circled around to her chair. I glanced back and my gaze clashed with Dad's.

"Fin, I need you out there to make sure those two clear off without any more trouble." His words were short and clipped.

"Yep. Heading out right now." I looked over at Shay.

She was busy shuffling papers together into a pile.

"Are you all right?" I heard Dad ask as I walked out of the trailer.

I was going to hear from him later for sure.

That was fine. I wasn't backing down, and he was just going to have to deal with it.

Shay was fragile, and I'd taken on way more than I realized, but deep down, I knew she was worth fighting for in every sense of the word.

TWENTY-TWO

SHAY

I nibbled the grapes I brought along with my lunch.

I never got to finish my sandwich, and I was still hungry.

Colt had put on his tool belt to join the team since they were now down three men.

I was glad to have the office to myself.

I'd embarrassed myself with the minor meltdown earlier, but having two angry men literally wrestling at my feet during lunch break made me snap.

I'd been in a stunned state, a mix of sorrow and rage, all morning after hearing Annie's story.

Tate had had nothing to do with her terrible tragedy, but somehow, the whole thing made me hate my husband even more.

He was part of that group of monstrous people who intimidated and bullied and hurt others.

He was part of that group of people who had no remorse about being a horrible human.

He was part of that group of people who really had no right to walk the planet with the rest of us.

Annie's story and warnings had made me more determined than ever to get away from Tate.

I'd spent my coffee break researching local divorce lawyers, and I glanced around at rental listings in the area to see if there was any way I could afford a place on my own.

There were a few options with reasonable rents, but it meant living with a roommate.

I would never bring a stranger into my life.

At least not until I was sure Tate was gone for good.

I came with too much baggage, and it wouldn't be fair to a roommate.

Just like it wasn't fair to Griffin. Today, he'd learned that underneath the layers, I was a fucking emotional mess.

It was so easy to smile and enjoy life when Tate was gone, but the reality was his menacing presence was always there, waiting to wipe away all smiles and joy.

My phone buzzed with a news flash. I pulled out a few more grapes and nibbled them as I picked up the phone.

It was breaking news about Roxi Carhill, the influencer.

Her body had been found in shrubs just off the highway.

Police were focusing on her ex-boyfriend, Toby Barron.

I put down the phone. It was shocking to read and, at the same time, not the least bit surprising.

Toby had basically piggy-backed onto Roxi's fame.

She'd started out on her own, and their romance became a hot topic and earned them more followers.

And now, he'd been cast aside. He obviously couldn't handle the blow to his male ego, so he killed her.

It was a textbook case really, and I was sure it wouldn't be long before they arrested him.

For the rest of the day, I managed to dig into my work enough to push aside some of the emotional turmoil of the morning.

I wrote up purchase orders, paid vendors and made delivery scheduling calls.

I was proud at how quickly I'd learned the ropes of my new job.

That newfound confidence, that feeling that I was ready to meet my problems head-on and find my way out of my bottomless hole was starting to show in everything I did.

I'd even signed up for ballet classes with Jules' old teacher, Miss Pearl.

My determination to make my fulfilling and independent half-life a full-time life was growing each day.

As I stacked on new thoughts of how I'd accomplish this dream, one niggling thing kept poking at me.

I needed to talk to Griffin. I needed some space.

It'd be hard and heartbreaking, but for now, I needed to find my way to freedom alone.

I couldn't rely on someone else. It wasn't fair to him, and it wasn't the full win I dreamt of.

* * *

Colt and I were in the office finishing up paperwork as the men started heading toward the lockers.

"Shay, I just want to say you're doing a great job.

" He put down the papers he was holding and looked at me.

It was easy to see where Griffin got his incredible looks.

Colt was just as spectacular but with a little more wear and tear and some nice wisps of gray.

"I'll be honest, I know about you and Griffin and I'm—" He paused to find words but I filled them in for him.

"Griffin mentioned that the family didn't keep secrets from each other, so I figured you'd know.

By the way, I met your daughter, Jules, and all the cousins on Saturday night, and I'm so envious.

What a great group of people, and as far as this thing with Griffin and me—I'm not going to lie.

He is amazing and sweet and kind and all the things a woman could dream of.

" I decided to leave out the mind-blowing sex part and the protectiveness that had already melted my heart multiple times.

"I'm going to talk with Griffin today. I have some things in my personal life that need to be changed, drastically, and I don't want to pull Griffin through that sticky tar with me. "

Colt nodded. "I understand, and I'm sure Fin will, too. But anything we can do to help."

"Thanks. I think I'm going to try to handle it on my own, but it's nice knowing I've got a couple of Stones behind me if I need them."

"You sure do."

I finished up at my desk and gathered my things. "See you tomorrow, Colt."

"See you tomorrow, and sorry about that fight at lunch. Those guys are gone now."

I nodded and headed out the door. Griffin was just coming out of the locker trailer.

He was wearing the grit and sweat of the day on his face, and I marveled at how fucking good it made him look.

I wanted nothing more than to run to him, jump into his arms and beg him to take me home to his bed.

I could still feel his hands and mouth on me.

Giving that intimacy up was going to be really hard, but it was for the best. I needed my head clear for these next steps in my life.

I'd hoped to get to my car and drive off the site before seeing him.

I wasn't quite ready to talk to him, but seeing him now, looking so breathtaking and already so familiar, I knew I had to get "the talk" over with.

I was sure I'd regret it big time, but this head-spinning relationship was too much for me right now.

I needed feet firmly on the ground and my wits about me, so I could come out of this unscathed.

I hoped Griffin would stick around for me to come out the other side, but I wouldn't blame him if he didn't. It seemed, in a convoluted way, Tate had managed to wreck my life yet again.

"I'll walk you to your car," he said.

I smiled and we both walked silently to my car. I set my stuff on the passenger seat and turned toward him.

His eyes were like green jewels in the late afternoon sun. "Uh-oh, I see something coming my way, something that I'm not going to like."

"How the hell do you read me so well?" I asked.

"I have a big task in front of me. I need to cleave off a very disagreeable husband.

It will be hard and nerve-wracking, but it has to be done, for my sanity, for my safety and, mostly, for my happiness.

Being with you has shown me just how much I've been missing. "

"But having me in your life right now is the last thing you need." The hurt in his expression pushed against my chest.

I reached for his hand. To have such an incredible man take an interest in me was hard for me to believe.

"I just need to do this. I need to break free first, then I hope you'll be there to catch me, to hold me.

But I'll understand completely if you aren't. You're the first bright spot I've had in my life in years.

You and this job. But I need to erase all the dark smudges first. You've helped me see that I can't go on like this, just waiting for those days when Tate is out on the road.

I want a hundred percent life, a life where I'm not always waiting and worrying that soon my horrid husband will be home and everything will be turned upside down again. "

Griffin held my hand and tugged me a little closer, but he didn't take me into his arms. It was for the best because being in his arms always turned me into a hot, dizzy mess. "Hey, ballerina, I've already decided I need you in my life. I hope, someday,

you'll need me in yours too."

His words made my chest ache. I nodded and fought back tears. "Thanks for making this easy, Fin. I've been fretting over it, but now, I remember that this time I've picked a reasonable, sane man."

"I'd kiss you goodbye, but you know how we get when our mouths come together. Next thing we know, clothes are flying in every direction, and well, you know, you were there for the last few incidents."

I laughed and pressed my hand against the side of his face.

He reached up and held my palm there for a few moments.

I turned to climb in my car. He stood there and watched me drive off, and as hard as I tried to convince myself to look away, I glanced up in my rearview a few times and he was still watching me.

TWENTY-THREE

GRIFFIN

Theo hobbled into the kitchen in socks. He'd been off his foot all week. The swelling had gone way down, but he was still limping badly.

I dug my fork into the frozen dinner. "Thought you were supposed to use crutches to keep your weight entirely off it."

Theo yanked out a chair and plopped down hard.

He leaned forward and placed his forearms on the table.

"Well, Nurse Griffin, those crutches are fucking torture devices.

" He lifted one palm to show a blister. "They can replace just about every joint in the body with plastic and titanium, but no one in the whole big science and medical community has ever found a way to make crutches easier.

Those damn things still look like the same ones little Timmy was using in A Christmas Carol. "

I blinked at him as I finished a bite of the mashed potatoes that tasted nothing like potato. "Sorry I asked."

"So, Cru, Mac and I decided you've been moping around long enough. I don't know

exactly what it is that has your balls in a twist, though I'm sure it has to do with Shay. Not going to ask cuz it's none of my business."

I poured salt onto my food to see if I could boost the flavor. "Glad we're straight on that."

"We're going to the Lazy Daze tonight. It's Friday and Amy's hired a good band. Forgot their name, but LaLa said they're great."

I glanced down toward his foot. "You gonna tear up the dance floor?"

"Yep, and I'll use those crutches to keep people out of my way." He mimicked swinging around a crutch.

"How the hell do you have money for beer? You just used up half your sick leave with that bum ankle."

Theo sank back. "Well, that was a big fucking bah humbug. Thanks for reminding me I just used half my sick leave."

I shrugged. "It's what I'm here for—handing out bah-humbug nuggets. At least the sprained ankle has let you forget about your other woes for now."

"Don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"Theo hopped up so clumsily, the table moved."

I had to pull it back toward me, so I could reach my food.

Theo limped over to the refrigerator, and as his arm swung to propel him forward, his hand slapped a dirty glass onto the floor. It shattered into a hundred pieces.

"I can get you something. Come sit back down before you bring the whole fucking place down around us. And walk that way." I motioned away from the pile of glass. "You're just wearing socks."

"My god, you really are like a mother hen lately." Theo turned on one foot and limped back to the table. "Ouch, fuck. Just stepped on a glass shard." He plunked down hard enough at the table to make the chair creak. He held up his foot. The bottom of the sock was black with dirt. "Can you see it?"

"If you think I'm going anywhere near that sock, you're out of your mind." I got up to grab a broom and dustpan. I swept up the shards while Theo removed the sock and the glass from his foot.

"This is definitely not going to help my dance moves tonight," Theo said glumly. "Hey, get me a beer from the fridge while you're up."

I finished picking up the glass and pulled out two beers. Theo sighed dejectedly as I handed him the beer.

"What the fuck am I doing?" he asked. "Nothing in my life is going the way I planned. By now I should have been in a nice house by the beach with one room filled with trophies and a bank account flush from product endorsements and ..." He stopped.

"And married to Lacey," I finished for him.

Theo rubbed his hands over his face and then raked back his hair.

"There just isn't anyone else in the world for me.

I've dated so many women since she left, and every time I'm with someone else, I'm

either comparing them to Lacey and finding their faults because of it, or I'm wishing that they were Lacey.

Guess I'm heading to a monastery after I burn out on the mountain bike circuit.

I think that's what it's called. Is that the place where those guys with the funny bowl cuts walk around in brown robes mumbling religious stuff? "

I ignored his last question. "Seems to me if she's getting married, you've got to let it go. Let her go, bro. You'll find someone else."

Theo leaned back and laughed. "That's fucking rich coming from the guy who's been moping around here all week like a little kid whose bike got stolen because he's fallen heavy and hard for—wait for it—a married chick."

"That's different. Her marriage is shit. And I haven't been moping."

"Oh, trust me, buddy, you've been moping.

You've been dragging your sorry ass around this house wearing a big old frown, and you're fucking grumpy too.

A double whammy—a grumpy mope. But hey, I know how you feel.

Of course, you only just met Shay, and I've known Lacey since third grade.

Think I've been in love with her since then.

" Theo gulped some beer and smacked the can down hard.

"What a couple of losers, eh? Who'd have thought two women could bring down a

couple of Stones?

" He leaned forward. "What's going on with Shay? "

"Nothing. We both see each other at work, and all I can do is grit my teeth to keep from touching her or pulling her into my arms, but this was what she wanted.

She's got a big mess to deal with. The asshole isn't home right now, but when he gets back, she's going to tell him it's over.

I'm just worried that—I mean the guy is a total fuckface.

She wants to do this alone, but it's fucking hard to stay out on the sidelines and wait to see what happens. "

"That would be hard. Do you think she's in danger?"

I chugged back some beer. "Let's put it this way, Dad and I met him. He was in the trailer for maybe sixty seconds, and by the time he walked out with Shay, Dad and I were both ready to throw our fists into something. Namely, his face."

"Well, I pity the fool if he tries to hurt Shay. Here's to the asshole experiencing life on the other end of a Stone fist," Theo said. He lifted his can, and we smacked them together. "Now, what about a night out? At least come and eat some nachos. Mac will be there too."

"Yeah, I guess I could go for some nachos. There's not enough salt in the world to make this frozen dinner edible, and hanging out with you assholes is probably better than staring at some stupid shit on television." I got up and dumped my food in the trash.

"That's the spirit," Theo said. "I think. Hey, did you just call us all assholes?"

"Yeah, but you guys are the good kind of assholes."

"Right. Good to know."

TWENTY-FOUR

SHAY

A wind kicked up outside, and it whirled around the small rental house in a frenzy, blowing the overgrown oak tree branches hard enough that they scratched against the siding.

The fall weather went perfectly with the treat I'd made myself.

I'd bought some apple cider at the store and heated it with cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg.

The fragrance in the kitchen should have been bottled or, at the very least, turned into a holiday candle.

I'd danced for an hour, and my muscles had that good ache that came after a successful workout.

My tone and strength were coming back. I was signed up to start ballet lessons in two weeks, and I wanted to be sure I was ready.

An entire week had gone by, which meant I was a week closer to Tate's return.

I hadn't figured out exactly how to go about asking for a divorce.

Blurting it out plainly and with a burst of confidence seemed like my best option.

I'd been working on all of it—courage, confidence, resolve.

I needed to be free from Tate Kennedy forever.

I sat on the couch and pulled a throw blanket around me as I sipped cider.

The only thing missing from the moment of perfection was Griffin Stone.

We'd spent the workweek pretending that we were just a pair of coworkers.

I was in the office trailer, and he was mostly out on site.

We didn't have that many natural chances of running into each other, but when we did, like out at the break tables or walking out to our cars, it was obvious that both of us were dying to be together.

There was such a pull between us, you could almost see electric charges going back and forth whenever we stood together.

We kept our conversations light, mostly out of self-preservation.

If we started getting too heavy into a conversation, then emotions would run high, and there was too much danger of me falling right into those incredible arms. As much as I wanted to do just that, I knew that I needed to keep my head clear.

Something that was not possible around Griffin Stone.

With any luck, I'd be done with my terrible baggage soon, and Griffin and I could pick up where we left off.

And what a leave off it was. I couldn't stop thinking about being with him, physically

and emotionally.

And just thinking about him pushed me into a moment of vulnerability. I wanted nothing more than to be sitting with him right now, cuddled under the blanket and soaking in his body heat. I reached forward and grabbed my phone from the coffee table.

"Just thinking about how much I miss being in your arms." I hesitated at first but then sent off the text.

It was Friday night, so I was sure he was out.

What if he was out with a woman? I allowed myself that annoying question.

After all, I wasn't delusional. I had no doubt there were many women in Griffin's life.

And if he was out with someone, then that made perfect sense.

Why should he have to wait around for me while I dealt with my ugly problems?

I put the phone back down. It was stupid to expect a text back, and I felt silly for wearing my neediness right out there for him to see.

I was starting to work up a nice internal lecture for myself when the phone buzzed. I reached forward and picked it up.

"Trust me, ballerina, these arms are waiting for you to be back in them. What are you up to?"

"Just sitting drinking hot cider under a throw blanket like a proper little old lady," I wrote back.

"Sounds better than my night. Sitting in my aunt's bar eating nachos with my cousins and spending the whole time wishing I was with you."

I double tapped a heart emoji on his text and put the phone down before I sent myself into a sob session.

I rested back with the cider and closed my eyes to relax when an all too familiar noise made me sit up so fast, I spilled the cider.

The house vibrated, and the rumble outside churned up a wave of nausea.

"No," I cried. "I had another week." I got up and quickly moved the furniture back to its usual place. I'd kept the dance floor all week, but I was erasing it before the dark swirling shadow walked inside to obliterate my dreams.

The motor stopped, and the rattling windows quieted down.

I heard him fumbling with the back door lock, and a string of cuss words followed.

The door swung open, and the wind swooshed through the house, sending a stack of napkins all over the kitchen floor.

He always entered like a terrible, menacing storm.

His laundry bag landed with a thump on the kitchen floor.

"Why the fuck does it stink so much in this kitchen? " he bellowed. "That better be dinner."

I took a deep breath and walked out to the kitchen. Seeing him always obliterated all my energy, and I felt myself physically shrink down. My stomach churned around the

cider.

"I wasn't expecting you," I said. "I could make you some eggs." I hated hearing my voice. It was the other voice, the one I used when standing in the same room with him. It was weak and submissive and pathetic, but it was a hard habit to break.

"Eggs? Fuck, I just drove ten straight hours and you're offering eggs?"

"You could have texted that you were on your way back. You told me you'd be gone two weeks."

"Yeah, well one of the jobs fell through. I'm going to shower, and I sure hope there's something better than fucking eggs on that table when I get out."

I stepped well clear of his path. He was in an extra bad mood.

I thought I had another whole week to strengthen my plan, but that wasn't the case.

One part of my plan was already in place, make sure to catch him in a mellow mood.

Those moods were fewer and farther between every day, and my patience was growing thin.

Tonight, though, was out of the question.

He'd just entered like a category 5 tornado, and I was going to need to "take shelter" for the rest of the night.

I made Tate a grilled ham and cheese sandwich, and he sat to eat it without complaint and without a thank you but then I didn't expect one.

I was still reeling and trying to gather my composure after having my second week of freedom pulled out from under me.

I quickly cleaned the kitchen while he ate.

"We're moving," he said between bites.

I dropped the dishtowel on the counter. "What? We just got here."

"I don't like this place or this town, and like I said, I don't want you working at that construction company."

His abrupt decision and command had opened a door for me. A night of sleep should help his mood and give me the courage to let him know he could move to any damn town he wanted, but I wasn't going with him this time.

I wiped my hands off on the towel. "It's late. We can talk about this tomorrow."

His fist pounded the table hard. I shrieked and ducked, sure something would fly my way next. After a few seconds, I straightened from my defensive posture and looked over at him.

"Nothing to discuss," he said coldly. He got up from the table, grabbed a beer from the fridge and seconds later, the television turned on. With any luck, he'd fall asleep on the couch, and I wouldn't have to see or hear or smell him for the rest of the night.

I finished up in the kitchen. Tate had the news blasting on the television. It was an arrest scene with the large flashing chyron beneath announcing that Toby Barron had been arrested for the murder of Roxi Carhill.

"I'm going to bed," I said.

"Shhh!" Tate said as he waved a big hand at me.

I was glad he had something to occupy his time. Roxi was one of the many beautiful influencers who took up a lot of Tate's spare time, and now, it seemed, her murder would do the same. I headed into the bedroom and reached in my pocket for my phone.

I froze in fear. I'd left it on the table.

Griffin came up as Greta, but the whole fake name trick was silly.

Our texts were not exactly banal like two acquaintances asking about the weekend.

We'd even come darn close to full on sexting a few times.

It was all we had since I'd put up the wall between us.

My heart was beating as I hurried back out. It just about jumped from my chest when I saw Tate reach forward and pick up my phone. I held my breath waiting for him to read the last few texts, but he didn't take his eyes off the screen. They were holding a press conference about the arrest.

"Ha!" Tate laughed. "Asshole deserves to go to jail for life." He tossed my phone at me without looking. I managed to catch it before it hit me or the floor.

"Why don't you stay up? We could watch a movie together," he suggested.

His tone was much lighter and that menacing scowl, the one that always warned me to stay out of reach, had vanished.

His whole demeanor had changed. It might have been the food or maybe just hearing

that one of his social media sweethearts was going to get her justice had brightened his mood.

"No, I'm tired. It was a long workweek."

"Shit, you're such a fucking bore." He leaned back on the couch.

"Well, go then. Don't let me keep you." With that, he turned up the television to an annoyingly loud volume knowing full well that there would be no way to sleep through it.

That was all right. It gave me time to think about exactly what I would say to him in the morning to let him know my little slice of hell had become too much for me.

TWENTY-FIVE

GRIFFIN

A n early morning knock was followed by my phone buzzing. The phone was closer than the front door. I sat up groggily, combed my hair back with my fingers and picked up my phone. It was Shay.

"I'm at the door."

"Be right down," I texted back.

I grabbed my jeans off the floor and headed down shirtless and barefoot.

Theo and Crusoe had both drank a lot the night before, and they were still in bed.

I reached the door and opened it. Heavy fog had covered the whole coast, and cold fingers of it came in with my visitor.

Shay was bundled in a sweater and jeans.

She shot inside without a greeting. "He's home.

He was supposed to be gone another week, but the fucker showed up last night at ten demanding to be fed.

" She paced the entry as she spoke. She twisted her hands together either to warm

them or from nerves or maybe a bit of both.

"I wasn't ready for him to be back. I had all this courage and bravado and the speeches, all the silly speeches I'd been practicing in my head and now that he's back, it's gone.

How am I going to do this, Fin? He came in last night like a maniac. 'No eggs! Don't want eggs!'"

I let her finish. When she finally paused, took a deep breath and said hello, I broke our big rule and walked straight over and pulled her into my arms. There were no tears. Only tension. Her entire body was wound tight, but she relaxed as my hand smoothed over her back.

"Shit, I've missed standing in your arms." Her words came out on a whispery sigh.

"This is where you belong, ballerina. Right here. In these arms."

She lifted her face, and I held my breath for a second, taking in the beauty in front of me.

I would have done anything to take away the pain I saw there.

Shay's lips pressed against mine, and that was it.

The whole fucking damn broke. In seconds, we were devouring each other, scrambling urgently to get closer.

We came up for air just long enough for me to grab her hand and lead her upstairs.

I closed my bedroom door and pulled her back into my arms. Our mouths slammed

together, and my hands grabbed eagerly at her sweater.

We parted only long enough for me to whip it off.

Still kissing, we shuffled as one hot, needy mess toward the bed.

She fell back on it with a giggle. I laughed and landed on top of her.

The frenzy, the fucking unstoppable passion, paused for a moment.

I leaned on one elbow and caressed the side of her face with my free hand.

"I'm here for you, for all of this. I know you wanted to get through this shit alone but fuck that. You've been alone long enough, Shay. He's dangerous. You shouldn't have to do this by yourself."

She curled her hand around the back of my head and pulled my mouth back down to hers for another long kiss. We scooted into the middle of the bed. I pulled off her shoes and jeans and dropped my pants on the floor. I stretched out on my side next to her.

"Every inch of you is so fucking hot." I dragged my fingertips down the skin between her breasts and down along her belly. She shivered as my hand got closer to her pussy. Her thighs parted in invitation.

I moved my hand down between her legs, and my fingers caressed her. "Hmm, hot and wet, ballerina. Guess you want this."

She half-giggled, half-moaned. "Been thinking of nothing else all week."

"That makes two of us." I rolled down over her, and she instantly wrapped her long

legs around me. She sucked in a deep breath as I slid into her. She lifted her ass off the mattress to meet my fast, hard thrusts. Her fingers dug into my shoulders as I pumped into her.

"Yes, Fin, fuck!" she cried out as her pussy tightened around my cock. It brought me right to climax.

I held her beneath me and stayed buried inside of her until our breathing and pulses finally cooled, like the air in the room. I rolled off to the side and brought her along. Shay nestled against me. Her breath warmed my skin.

"Sorry I came in here like a raving lunatic," she said softly.

"I'm not sorry. And like I said—we'll get through this. Emphasis on 'we.'"

It wasn't easy pulling ourselves out of bed, but after making love once more, we got dressed and headed down to the kitchen.

Crusoe was up feeding Rosco his dog food. "Big dummy refused to let me sleep late. Kids. Avoid 'em if you can." Crusoe sat down at the table behind a plate of toast. It was pooled with melted butter.

"Theo still in bed?" I asked.

"Nah, he went on a bike ride. Said if he sat around the house any longer with his bum ankle, he'd either go crazy or become so soft and fat, he'd start looking like a marshmallow.

I let him know it was too late to keep away the crazies and that he was actually starting to get a sort of snowman shape thing going. "

Shay chuckled as she sat at the table.

"You're always good for a confidence boost, Cru." I filled the coffee pot. "Toast?" I asked Shay.

"Sounds good but not quite so much butter," she said scrunching her nose toward Crusoe's plate.

Crusoe picked up the toast. The butter dripped onto his shirt as he took a bite. "Hmm, messy but very nourishing."

"Yes, butter has its own nutritional food group cuz it's nourishing." I grabbed two cups out of the cupboard.

Rosco finished his bowl of food, walked over and laid his head on Shay's lap. She stroked his ears. "Well, hello, I heard you weren't letting Dad sleep this morning."

"Nope and now he's gonna need a walk." Crusoe wiped his face, got up and whistled. The dog spun around and took off after him.

Shay and I sat at the table with coffee and toast. "I could make eggs," I said. "I think we have some."

She shook her head. "No, toast is fine." She took a few bites, then sighed. "What should I do?"

"Want me to tell him?" I asked.

"No, definitely not. And last night he said we were going to move again.

I have no idea what prompted it, but—I don't know.

Something is up with him, and I think that's what really has me off balance.

That and the fact that he showed up last night.

No warning, just came in demanding dinner.

Then he settled in front of the television, and I didn't have to interact with him much after that.

I'm lucky he's easily distracted by screens, like a six-year-old.

I know he followed that woman, the travel influencer who was murdered.

The news was covering the arrest of her partner.

Gee, who could have seen that coming, eh? "

I got up and grabbed the pot of coffee for refills. "Actually, they had to let him go. I saw the news alert as I got into bed last night. It turns out he was in the hospital for three days with some kind of gnarly food poisoning. Not a cool alibi but a pretty solid one."

"I'm surprised. My money would have definitely been on the boyfriend."

I reached over and took her hand. "Stay here while he's home."

Shay smiled. "Sounds dreamy but no, I'm going to go home and see what kind of mood he's in this morning.

He's very changeable. When the right time and mood present themselves, I'm going to tell him that I'm filing for divorce.

I can do this. I think I just needed some fortification, and I got that here. "

"Well anytime you need 'fortification' I'm your man. But seriously, Shay. I'm worried."

"I've made it this long with the asshole. I'll be fine. I've learned a lot of survival techniques living with Tate."

"Knowing that you have to use survival techniques doesn't make me feel any better."

"It'll be fine, Fin. I've got this. I'm actually hoping that after all this time, with the way things are between us, that he'll be relieved that it's over."

"I hope that's the case but keep your phone nearby. I'm just a call away."

TWENTY-SIX

SHAY

Being with Griffin had filled me with a renewed confidence and sense of purpose.

I needed to be free of Tate. As usual, he was leaned into the open hood of his truck as I pulled up to the house.

Telling him while he was distracted with the truck and outside where all the neighbors could see and hear might be the best time to tell him.

I worked on a quick and to the point speech as I walked up the driveway.

I was ten feet from the front of the truck when a wrench came flying out.

It whirled right past me and slammed the metal railing on the porch steps.

"Fucking piece of shit," Tate growled, still under the lifted hood. He glanced back and spotted me. "Where the fuck have you been? Had to make my own breakfast. Wash my laundry, would ya? It stinks." He dove back under the hood.

This was the wrong time. He was in a rotten mood, and it was better not to ask him for a divorce while he was waving tools around.

I trudged to the house already feeling defeated and far less confident than when I pulled up.

How the hell was I going to work up enough courage to face down a man who was always angry and menacing?

I started toying with the notion of a quick letter left behind as I fled in the middle of the night.

He'd chased me down both times I tried it before, but this time I had a place to hide.

Then I snapped back to reality. I'd be dragging Griffin and even his cousins into my bag of dirty laundry.

I thought back to something I'd said to Griffin.

Maybe, just maybe, Tate would be thrilled for this to be over.

There was no love, or even like, left between us.

In fact, the hatred circled around us like a dark storm whenever we were in the same room.

Why wouldn't he be just as happy to have this end?

It had been more than a year since I tried to leave, and things had only gotten colder between us.

I knew he was screwing a lot of women while he was out on the road.

He could easily get on with his life without me.

Those notions bolstered me. I turned around and headed back outside. Tate was still leaned into the truck. I stood behind him, but a good ten feet back, and felt a small

spark of panic. I closed my eyes and imagined myself wrapped in Griffin's arms. The anxiety subsided. I opened my eyes.

"I want a divorce," I blurted.

His arms stopped moving, and he was still inside the truck for a second. Then a disturbing laugh echoed through the engine compartment.

I forged ahead but was starting to feel nauseous. "We no longer love each other. We don't even like each other. We'll both be happier apart."

He finally emerged from under the hood. As he unfolded to his full, intimidating size, my heart raced. Tate stared at me, and I immediately went into survival mode, checking out my surroundings and my quickest escape route.

"Did you wash my laundry?" he asked, dryly.

"Not yet. I want a divorce."

"You're not leaving me," he said. "Now get in there and do the laundry, and there'd better be a decent lunch on the table when I get through here."

Tears pricked my eyes, and I raced into the house, feeling like a complete and utter failure.

I was going to need a better plan. Like an obedient child, I went into the laundry area.

His duffel was on the ground. I leaned back out of the odorous cloud as I opened the bag and dumped the contents on the ground.

Grease-stained jeans and shirts piled around my feet.

I stared down at the dirty clothes. Something caught my eye.

Something that didn't belong amidst the mostly dark clothes.

I leaned down and pulled on the corner. A yellow bandana pulled free of the laundry.

I held it up wondering if I was actually seeing it.

Tate never wore a bandana. The reality that was starting to take shape in my head was so jarring, so terrifying that I felt the earlier panic attack fire back up.

Tate was an awful person with a shredded soul, but was he capable of murder?

There were a few times when I feared for my life, but murder?

I held the bandana between just two fingers and took a picture of it. Tate's boots pounded up the front steps and adrenaline shot through my whole body. I glanced around nervously and stashed the bandana behind the box of detergent, then quickly shoved everything into the washer and turned it on.

"Lunch!" he shouted.

My hands trembled so badly I had to stick them in my pockets to calm them.

Everything was still racing around in my mind, and the possibility that I was living with a murderer crashed through my reasoning more than once.

It was too stunning to think about, too stunning to believe.

I needed to calm down and get out of my frenzied state to think everything through.

One thing was certain; I couldn't let on to Tate that something was up.

I wished now that I hadn't brought up the divorce yet.

I needed to go about the day without showing any emotion or fear or trepidation at all.

Tate had easily brushed aside the idea that I wanted to leave him.

I wouldn't bring it up again. I had much bigger possibilities to deal with.

I was running on a huge dose of adrenaline that was edged with fear.

At the same time, my mind tried to grapple with the idea that Tate was monstrous enough to kill someone, to extinguish a life.

There was no denying that his moods had grown grimmer and his temper shorter.

He was losing his human side more each day, and I rarely saw any glimpse of the young man I'd once fallen for.

"Sandwich?" I asked, working hard to hide the tremble in my voice.

"Do you have tuna?"

"Yes. Tuna salad all right?"

"Yeah, but put in extra mayo. You always skimp." He pulled out his phone, plunked down on a chair and began his usual scrolling. I breathed a sigh of relief, like always. That damn phone and the constant flow of distractions had probably saved me many times.

I opened the fridge and gathered all the things I needed for his sandwich.

I was thankful for the task. It helped clear away some of the earlier alarm, and I was able to get my thoughts in order.

I knew for a fact that he obsessively followed Roxi Carhill's travels.

It wasn't too surprising. She was beautiful, and like Tate, she traveled endlessly around the country.

Her body had been found near Zion. The last place she'd posted from when she broke up with Toby.

Toby had been cleared, which meant someone else, a random mad person, possibly, had killed her.

As I stirred the tuna salad, I thought about Tate's mood change the night before.

The news broke that Toby had been arrested for the murder.

Tate's foul mood, the one he'd carried inside with him, had disappeared.

Was it because he thought he'd just gotten away with murder?

He was in a bad mood again. Was that because Toby had a solid alibi?

Shit, it was too fucking insane to consider, but it was just one more thing that was nudging me toward a horrifying reality.

His latest job had taken him through Utah.

A major coincidence to be sure. But most of all, it was that damn yellow bandana, the signature piece of clothing Roxi was known for.

Her online persona was the Banana Bandana all because she wore that yellow piece of cloth around her neck.

Was it possible Tate had bought a yellow bandana solely because he was so fond of Roxi?

It seemed a plausible explanation but also pretty weird.

I finished making the sandwich and placed the plate down in front of Tate. His hand reached out and grabbed ahold of my wrist. His fingers tightened painfully. "None of this divorce bullshit. You got it?" The rage in his eyes as he looked up at me sent a cold shiver down my spine.

I nodded, and when he finally let go, I released the breath I'd been holding.

There were red marks circling my wrist. I hurried into the bedroom to gather myself and collect my thoughts.

I badly wanted to text Griffin and tell him what I'd found, but all of it seemed so outlandish.

How could the man I was married to be a killer?

I hated him with every fiber of my being, but moving him into the murderer category just sounded too wild.

I pulled out my phone. I hadn't paid attention to many details about Roxi's disappearance and death.

I scrolled through some news feed that showed photos of her abandoned van.

There were photos of her from her account where she was wearing a big, white smile and that damn yellow bandana.

I was sure she had dozens of them. Maybe that was it.

Maybe Tate had found a yellow bandana on his travels and thinking it was one that belonged to Roxi, he picked it up and put it in with his belongings.

He knew I'd be the one to dump out his duffel.

If he'd killed a woman, would he really leave behind such a key piece of evidence for his wife to find?

I was working hard to talk myself out of the possibility that Tate had killed Roxi. It was too much to bear.

I was lost in thought and glued to the article on my phone when the sound of the washing machine door slamming startled me.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Tate grumbled as he stomped around the house. His thunderous footsteps pounded down the hallway toward the bedroom. I quickly picked up my book, sat back on the bed and opened it to a page.

The door flew open. He looked like the fucking devil himself standing in the doorway with nostrils flared and eyes dark with rage. "You put everything in the wash?" he asked.

"Uh, yes, you asked me to wash your dirty clothes," I said calmly even though my insides were churning like bread dough in a mixer.

" All of it went in?" he asked. There was the slightest glimmer of suspicion in his eyes.

Did he know?

"Yes, I dumped it all in. Was there something I should have pulled out? I checked pockets, and they were empty." That was a lie, but I had to put on a good show.

"Whatever," he griped and walked away.

I stared at the empty doorway, the place where he'd just stood, and tried to catch my breath as I came to a shocking conclusion.

I picked up my phone. Suddenly, it felt necessary for me to at least let someone in the outside world know what I'd discovered.

It seemed that if you killed one person, it wouldn't be as hard to kill another.

Or maybe I was wrong about the first part.

Maybe it hadn't been hard for Tate at all.

He'd left abruptly for this job. That rarely happened.

He occasionally switched dates on his schedule because of weather or the receiving company needing a different delivery date, but this job came up out of the blue.

And he rarely left on a Saturday. Had he decided to find the newly single Roxi and make a play?

Had she turned him down flatly? That would be enough to send him into a rage.

This was all so frightening to think about.

I sent Griffin a photo of the bandana with a text. It wasn't something that you sent via text, but I didn't dare make a phone call with a madman in the house.

"I found this in Tate's duffel bag. He's never worn a yellow bandana.

" I left it at that. I didn't want to sound crazy or paranoid.

The whole idea still sounded so insane. But if something did happen to me, then Griffin would have some evidence on his phone.

In the meantime, I needed to do some digging and find out just what my monster of a husband had been up to on his last job .

TWENTY-SEVEN

GRIFFIN

Crusoe and Cormac had talked me into putting on a wetsuit and wading out into the icy Pacific for some surfing.

A storm at sea had brought in nice waves, and it had been a while since I sat on my board, so I finally said yes.

When my two cousins teamed up, they could be annoyingly persistent.

Aside from that, I was missing Shay and had nothing to do.

Sitting around all day thinking about her would have been worse.

Now that the asshole was back home, I couldn't stop worrying about her safety, which made for a stressful surf session.

I was out on the water, and my phone was back on the beach.

"This one's yours, Fin," Crusoe said as a swell rolled toward us. "Unless you came out here to just sit and look pretty in your rubber suit," he added.

I lowered myself down and started paddling. The swell rolled under me, and I pushed to my feet. The exhilaration of riding a good wave cleared my head for a second, but as I neared the shore, I made the decision to take the wave all the way in and check

my phone.

I hopped off, snatched up the board and headed to our pile of stuff on the beach. A drizzly fog had kept even the heartiest beachcombers off the sand, and we had the whole place to ourselves.

I glanced back toward the water. Cormac was straddling his board.

He had his arms stretched out in a "what the fuck?"

"gesture. Crusoe was riding a wave and somersaulted into the water before he got closer to shore.

His board popped up, and his dark head followed.

He let out a whistle that scared off two gulls floating nearby.

"You done already, old man?" he yelled. "We're just getting started!"

I waved him off and stuck my board in the sand.

I walked over to my jeans and took out my phone.

There was a text from Shay. My finger was wet.

I dried it off briskly and swiped open the text.

She'd sent a picture. I stared at it, unsure what I was looking at.

It was a yellow bandana, according to her text.

I read her words several times and then it hit me like a ton of falling fucking bricks.

I sat down in the sand and scrolled through the news to see if there had been any updates on the Roxi Carhill murder.

Her ex-boyfriend had a solid alibi, so it wasn't him.

"Can I call you?" I texted back.

A few minutes and a thousand racing heartbeats later she rang. "I'm fine. Sorry my text was so cryptic. I can't talk right now, but I'll get back to you. I promise." She was talking quietly, and I could hear a washer running in the background.

"I'll be waiting, but I can tell you, I'm ready to head over there right fucking now and take you out of that house."

"Shay!" Tate bellowed from somewhere in the house.

"Gotta go," she said briskly and ended the call.

I walked down to the water's edge. The cousins were straddling their boards and waiting for the next decent set. "I'm leaving. Cru, get a ride home from Mac. I've got to go see Officer Adams."

They both looked at each other and then Crusoe yelled back. "Did you say you're going to see Pugsley?" Pugsley was the unfortunate childhood nickname we'd saddled the local police officer with.

"Yeah, see you later." I peeled out of the wetsuit. The outside air was cold. I quickly pulled on my jeans and shirt and gathered up my board.

I got lucky and found Officer Adams at the station behind a desk. Trayton wasn't exactly a hub of criminal activity, especially with the summer season long behind us. He was surprised to see me walk in.

"Fin, hey, long time no see." He got up from the desk and met me at the counter. A sad looking fern in a gray pot was the only decorative thing in the place. "What's up?"

"This might seem random, but have you been following the influencer murder case?"

"The Roxi Carhill murder? Yeah, it's the only thing that comes up on my news feed.

I guess they went straight to the boyfriend, but he had an alibi.

When you put yourself out there like that, you know, those influencers are like celebrities.

She was a looker too. Probably had a few stalkers and obsessed fans just waiting for the right opportunity. "

"Right. About that." I pulled out my phone.

"My dad has a new office manager. Shay is amazing, but she is married to this total nightmare.

He's abusive. A real dick. He drives a big rig, so he leaves a lot and that has sort of been her salvation.

He also follows pretty influencers. Stares at his phone a lot, apparently. Another thing that helps her survive."

Adams shook his head. "Man, I love putting away assholes like that."

"Yep. Well, he got home early from a job, a week early, and Shay was dumping out his bag to do laundry, and this was in the clothes." I showed him the photo of the bandana. He read the text below it.

Adams looked at me. "Well, shit."

"Yeah. Shit."

"It doesn't necessarily mean anything. Maybe he decided to buy a bandana because sweat was getting in his eyes. Or maybe he found it at a roadside stop or maybe?—"

"Or maybe this asshole killed Roxi Carhill." My words took the color out of his face. Adams had to deal with the occasional brawl, something that usually involved a Stone, or nasty traffic accident, but I was sure he'd never chased down a killer.

Adams rubbed his chin in thought. "Not sure if it's enough to bring him in for questioning. I better call some of the higher-ups and see how to proceed with this. I know they've got a big team on the case. Send me the photo, and I'll get the ball rolling. Is his wife safe?"

"I wouldn't bet on that, but I'm going to find out."

"Fin, don't get yourself in trouble. Let the officials take care of this."

I stared back at him with a raised brow.

Adams shook his head. "Right. I'm talking to a Stone. You know, the name really works for you guys cuz sometimes it's like talking to a stone wall. Just don't get hurt or hurt anybody. And yes, as I said that I realized how stupid that sounded too."

I patted the countertop. "Thanks, Adams." I turned to leave.

"Hey, Fin, this woman, she's more than just an office manager, isn't she?"

"You're getting real good at this detective stuff, Adams. They ought to promote you."
That left him with a smile. I walked out to the truck and pulled out my phone. "I need an update, or I'm coming over there." I texted.

"He's out working on his truck right now, so I'm fine. I'll keep you posted."

"I'll be waiting."

TWENTY-EIGHT

SHAY

Tate was out at the truck, and I had a few minutes to grab and bag evidence.

I'd gone into full amateur detective mode.

If Tate killed Roxi, then I wanted to be the person to bring the bastard down.

He'd made my life hell for the past few years, and it would give me no small amount of pleasure to be the one to send him off to prison for the rest of his life.

I'd be free, and I'd also feel a nice bit of satisfaction knowing the rest of his days would be as miserable as mine had been.

He'd finally learn what it was like to be a prisoner, and I couldn't have wished it on a more deserving person.

I'd been checking my phone every few minutes to keep on top of any updates on the case.

No one else had been arrested yet. I was sure after they'd jumped so quickly on Toby, the police were stepping back and taking their time to make sure they didn't make another mistake.

It was one of those cases where every arrest, every piece of evidence, every turn in a

certain direction would be blasted across the internet, and it wouldn't look good for them to grab the wrong person twice.

Tate came inside. "I'm borrowing your car.

Need to get a part," he said. I heard him grab my keys off the hook and walk out.

I waited for him to drive off and then I put part two of my sleuth plan into place.

I pulled on a pair of knit gloves, so I wouldn't mess up any fingerprints or, worse, add mine to the mix.

I was already having exciting visions of police swarmed around his truck collecting forensic evidence.

The chill had burned off, and a nice fall day had popped out from the earlier clouds.

Tate's tools were strewn along the driveway, and the hood was still up.

I hurried across and hoisted myself up into the driver's side.

I scrunched up my nose at the smell. It was a Tate smell, his mix of aftershave and his occasional cigar and the foul odor that just naturally occurred around the man.

He kept his truck cab fairly neat. There were two candy bar wrappers sitting on the passenger seat, and a water thermos was jammed down next to the driver's seat.

I wasn't sure what I was looking for. I hoped something alarming and wonderfully criminal would jump out at me.

I twisted around and climbed into his sleeping quarters.

His blanket had been rolled up, and it sat on top of his pillow.

A silver gum wrapper glittered in the sunlight coming through the back window of the truck.

I picked it up and smelled it. Cinnamon.

It was Tate's favorite kind of gum. I set it back down where I found it.

The truck wobbled and the driver's door flew open. I nearly fell off the seat. "What the fuck are you doing?" Tate barked.

"Nothing. I just haven't sat up here in a long time. Remember when you used to take me on rides?" I worked hard and added in a little chuckle, but it came out like a frog's croak.

"Get out," he said in a deadly quiet tone.

My entire body started shaking. I pulled the gloves off and shoved them into my pocket, hoping he wouldn't notice. Climbing down from the seat took all my concentration. I missed the step twice and nearly fell. And Tate wouldn't do anything to stop that fall.

My feet reached the ground. My eyes darted around to see if there was an escape route, but Tate was right in front of me. He would have grabbed my arm if I dashed in either direction. I continued with the playing it cool act and forced a smile.

"I was going to make some cookies. Peanut butter?"

"Let's go to the house." His tone was cold and harsh.

He knew that I knew. At first my heart had been racing, pounding away in my chest, but now a weird, almost eerie calm, had overtaken me.

It was that good old survival mode kicking into gear.

Losing my head now wouldn't help anything, and unlike poor Roxi, I knew the killer.

In fact, I knew him well. I knew what triggered him.

I knew what placated him. I knew Tate Kennedy better than I ever wanted to.

Even now, with him acting oddly, I knew how to play it with him.

It was the way I kept myself from being harmed.

"I could make chocolate chip if you prefer. Just have to go to the store."

"I don't want any fucking cookies!" he yelled.

I looked at him. "All right. If there's anything you need, just let me know.

I'm making a list." I was countering every one of his terse, cold responses with an airy, everything-is-just-fine, retort.

It was a method I used often to knock him off stride.

It was hard to keep snapping at someone when they just smiled in response.

Although my smile probably looked as fake as it felt.

I headed to the kitchen. I planned to make my escape with the excuse that I was going

to the store.

My hands had stopped trembling, but it was still hard to focus.

I pulled out a pad of paper from the kitchen drawer and then stared at it, unsure of what to write down.

It was my pretend grocery list, but I couldn't come up with one item to add.

And then I smelled it—his vile aftershave, and I felt him behind me.

It was like an icy cold cloud hovering over me.

"Where's the bandana?" he asked with a menacing calm.

I closed my eyes and wondered just how much damage the pen in my hand could do. I turned around and was still wearing that fake smile. "What on earth are you talking about?" I added in what I considered to be a believable, airy laugh. "Since when do you wear bandanas?"

Tate's hand shot out, and he had hold of me before I could wipe that fake smile off. "Where the fuck is it? It was in the bag."

Trying to keep my cool with his beer-tainted breath splattering the air around me and with his hand digging farther into my flesh wasn't easy, but I knew too well that he fed off fear, off my fear.

"I didn't go through the clothes that carefully.

If there was a bandana, then it's somewhere in the wash. "

"Bullshit!" He dragged me by the arm. I stumbled along to keep up with his pace and avoid having him free my arm from the shoulder socket.

I could feel bruises forming under his fingers as they cut off circulation in my arm.

He shoved me into the laundry area. It was just a small service porch near the back door of the house, and the appliances took up most of the space.

His wet clothes had been dragged from the washer, and they were scattered all over the floor.

"Find it then." He pushed me, and I fell forward to my knees, landing on the wet clothes.

"What color is it?" I asked. My resolve to stay calm was fading fast.

"You know what color it is. You're not leaving this room until you hand it over."

My survival instincts were breaking down, and I was becoming that scared prey he loved to push around.

I temporarily lost my wits and stupidly glanced up toward the box of detergent.

I pulled my gaze away quickly but not fast enough.

Tate pushed me aside, and I fell against the wall.

He yanked down the box of laundry detergent.

Harsh smelling white crystals flew everywhere, including in my face and hair.

I spun around to try and quickly brush the soap from my face before it got into my eyes.

I peered up cautiously. Tate was clutching the yellow bandana, and the look on his face caused the breath to leave me. He reached down and jerked me to my feet. I shoved him before he could get a grip on me.

"Fucking murderer!" I screamed and ran for the door.

Tate grabbed the back of my shirt before I could escape. The collar choked me as he jerked me back and shoved me onto the couch. I backed up on the cushions as he stood over me. He pulled the bandana from both ends and twisted it to make it into a rope.

If this was it, if I was going out, then I was getting in some blows of my own.

"What's the matter, you giant piece of shit? Did she say no? Did Roxi laugh in your face when you came on to her? You didn't actually think she'd be interested in a lowlife like you?"

His jaw twitched.

"That's it, isn't it? You came on to her. You left here and thought you'd ride out to Zion and find her and let her know you were in love with her and she laughed. She probably told you to get the fuck away, and that hurt your big, overblown ego."

The expression on Tate's face made him look like a stranger, a dangerous stranger. He snapped the bandana taut between his hands and leaned down. I kicked my leg out. My newly restarted dance workouts were making me limber and strong again. My foot landed hard on his balls.

Tate doubled over in pain. "You bitch," he grunted.

I climbed over the back of the couch and raced for the door.

Rage filled, he lunged at me and snatched my shirt again.

He pulled me back off my feet, and I landed hard against him.

His hands circled my throat just as someone knocked loudly on the door.

"Shay?" I recognized Griffin's deep voice instantly.

"Fin!" I managed to get out before Tate dragged me away from the door.

"Shay?" The knocks grew louder and then a loud crash sent the front door off its hinges.

The doorjamb splintered into several big pieces.

Griffin didn't hesitate. He torpedoed straight toward us.

Tate tossed me aside like a piece of clothing.

I caught myself just inches from my head hitting the corner of the coffee table.

The whole terrifying moment reminded me of Annie's story.

It didn't always take a fist or strong pair of hands to cause someone's death.

I got up from my knees and spun around. Griffin's fist shot through the air and landed in the middle of Tate's stunned face.

Tate's nose flattened and blood sprayed everywhere as he stumbled back and landed against the wall.

He used that same wall to push off from.

Tate's face was smeared with blood, and his eyes nearly bulged from his face as he lunged at Griffin.

Griffin nailed him again with a punch to the stomach.

It was a blow that took Tate to his knees.

I couldn't believe how satisfying it was to see Tate suffer pain.

"Fin?" a nervous voice asked from the permanently open doorway.

A police officer with a clean-shaven, round face and crisp uniform was holding a piece of paper.

"I told you to wait, Stone." He looked over at Tate.

My brute of a husband was covered in his own blood and looked pale from the blow to his stomach and from the blow to his ego.

"Jesus, you did a number on him. I take it that's?—"

"That is Tate Kennedy," I spoke up. "My husband, and he killed Roxi Carhill." I pointed at the yellow bandana on the arm of the couch.

The officer straightened his posture, adjusted his gun belt and cleared his throat. "Tate Kennedy, I've got a warrant. There's a team waiting outside to search the

premises." More people showed up at the door.

"Fin, why don't you take Mrs. Kennedy outside while we do the search?

And we'll talk later about—" He motioned with his head toward Tate.

Tate sat back, defeated and looking far less threatening than I was used to.

It was like having my biggest, baddest childhood boogeyman reduced to dust. He was over.

We were over. The whole fucking nightmare was over, and it ended in a far more spectacular fashion than I could have ever imagined.

TWENTY-NINE

GRIFFIN

Shay and I sat on the tailgate of my truck watching as scores of officials went in and out of the house and Tate's truck.

The spectacle had brought all the neighbors out to their front yards too.

Dozens of plastic evidence bags were carried out to the trunk of a police car.

Adams said that he got the warrant with the information I'd given him.

He'd tracked down the plate on Kennedy's truck and then found that same truck on traffic cameras near where Roxi's body was found and at the right time for him to have committed the murder.

That evidence, along with the yellow bandana photo, gave him what he needed to convince a judge.

Adams stood on the front stoop of the house giving orders and talking to people who looked much higher up than him on the rank ladder.

"I think that young officer just made his career," Shay said. "Do you know him?"

"Sure do. Grew up with Mike. He always had that flaming red hair and those freckles, and he was kind of pudgy.

That mixed with the fact that his name was Adams earned him the nickname Pugsley.

He's a good guy. Got teased a lot in school but my cousins and I protected him whenever we could.

And it paid off. He always goes easy on us when we've done something stupid.

I went straight to him with your bandana photo.

"I looked at her. She had a glow around her, as if the permanent darkness in her life had lifted for good.

And she was drop-dead gorgeous in the afternoon sunlight.

Shay reached over and took hold of my wrist. She lifted it to get a better look at my hand. The knuckles were swollen and red. "I wonder if they'd let me in to get some ice for your hand."

"Nah, I'm fine."

She lifted my hand to her mouth and kissed the tender knuckles. "I haven't gotten a chance yet to say thank you."

"Hey, you saved yourself, as far as I'm concerned, with your clever detective moves. Very sexy, by the way—that whole killer catching thing."

"Well, the big fucking idiot left a rather key piece of evidence in his laundry. That'll teach him to do his own wash from now on." She sat up excitedly. "He's going to be in prison garb for the rest of his life. Do you think I'll have to testify at his trial?"

"Unless he just confesses, and it seems like they're gathering enough evidence to

make it clear he's not getting off."

"Darn. Well, if they call me, I can't wait to get inside that courtroom, staring straight at him as I let the jurors know what a fucking maniac he is.

" More bags were carried out of the house.

The next figure at the door was Kennedy.

His face was still bloody, and his nose was fat. His arms were cuffed behind him.

Shay gasped quietly as the reality hit. "What if Roxi wasn't the first? I knew he was an awful person, but I had no idea he'd actually kill someone. I feel bad for Roxi, and at the same time, I think she might have saved my life. If he had it in him, then I'm sure ..." Her voice trailed off.

I put my arm around her shoulders. "No need to dwell on that. You're free, baby, and that asshole is out of your life for good."

Shay stiffened as they walked Kennedy down the front steps. He managed to find Shay in the flurry of activity. She shivered once as his gaze landed on her.

"He's never going to get near you again," I said.

She stared back at him. "Nope, but I'm going to get near him once more." She hopped down from the tailgate. I followed. Shay put up her hand. "It's fine. He's cuffed." She smiled down at my two rock-solid fists. "Badass looks very good on you, by the way."

She turned back around and marched toward Kennedy. His jaw tightened as she neared him.

"You fucking asshole. You made my life a living hell.

I hated every second of being with you, and I hope you spend the rest of your life constantly having to duck behind corners and flinching anytime someone raises a hand in the air.

You murdered someone famous, so you're going to be well-known in that prison.

I'd wish you luck in there, but I certainly wouldn't mean it.

By the way, I'm dancing again. That's right.

You clipped my wings once, and now I've clipped yours. "

Shay turned around. Her straight posture crumpled as she ran straight into my arms and collapsed. I stared at the asshole over her head, and he gave me back a murderous look.

I led Shay back to the truck, and we climbed inside. Shay scooted next to me and held my arm as if she planned to never let it go. "That felt good," she said through sniffles.

"I'll bet. Let's get the fuck out of here, ballerina."

THIRTY

SHAY

"S hay, I can't tell you how glad I am to have you join the theater group. You'll be such a marvelous addition to the dancing cast." Miss Pearl had snow white hair and light blue eyes. She moved with such grace and ease, she had an almost ethereal quality about her.

"I'm the one who's thrilled. I've learned so much from you in these few months."

She waved and a pink blush covered her cheeks. "Oh please. You came with an abundance of skill and talent. All I did was help refine that."

Behind me, the door to the studio opened. Miss Pearl's smile spread out across her face. "Griffin, how nice to see you again."

Griffin joined us. I winked at him. After all, I knew all about his big-time crush on Miss Pearl. "Nice to see you again, Miss Pearl."

"Well, I'll let you two go. Remember, practice starts at 7 in the morning," Miss Pearl said. "Don't be late."

"I'll be here with slippers on," I replied.

Griffin and I walked out hand in hand. I was still finding it hard to believe how much my life had changed.

I had a full life now. No more half-life.

The divorce was nearly finalized, and Tate was on his way to prison for life.

And just like during my half-life moments, I'd easily let any trace of Tate go.

There were so few good memories that they got buried by the weight of the bad ones. I was moving forward from now on.

Griffin stopped me before I climbed into the truck. He pulled me into his arms.

I laughed. "I'm sweaty and, I daresay, stinky."

"Nope, ballerinas are never stinky. They are sugar and spice and everything nice." He kissed me. "Yep. That proves the sugar theory." His green gaze held mine. "Your place or mine?" he asked.

"Hmm, let's go to mine. Last time I was at your place, Crusoe and Theo were trying to skateboard down the stairs."

"Yeah, not one of their smarter plans. I think Crusoe is still icing his tailbone from that one. All right. Your place it is."

We got in the truck, and I scooted over to the middle seat. "Fin, I was thinking."

"Yeah?" He started the truck.

"Maybe I've had enough independence. I mean, I still want that, of course, but who says I can't have my cake and eat it too?"

And by cake, I mean you." I tapped my chin.

"Or would my independence be the cake? Hmm, that one is confusing.

Anyway, this is my long, clumsy way of asking if you want to move in with me. "

Griffin stared straight ahead at the road and didn't answer. I felt silly and rejected for asking. "Or not. I'm sure you want your independence too," I added briskly.

"Me? Nah. I was just wondering how fast I could get my shit packed and moved."

I laughed in relief. "I'll start making space in the closet and dresser for you. What about Theo and Crusoe? They'll be a roommate short."

"The rent is cheap. They'll be fine." Griffin looked over at me. "You're sure about this?"

I nodded. "Yes. I'm starting over, and this time I'm doing it right, Fin Stone. You've been what I needed from the start. Someone I can trust. Someone who'll protect me and not hurt me. Someone who?—"

"Someone who loves you so fucking much it makes him ache just thinking about you. That's you, ballerina."

I wrapped my arm around his and rested my head against his shoulder. "With you by my side, this ballerina is going to fly."