



# King of Jokers (King #3)

**Author:** VyK Peters

**Category:** Sport

**Description:** When a rekindled bond, treasured memories, and undeniable chemistry unite, can they heal the missed chances of yesterday?

As the sun awakens their sleepy beachside town, Jack Grant, a talented and charming Australian footballer, returns home with hopes of escaping the weight of remorse after a turbulent season. Hoping to heal, rest, and rediscover himself in the place that has always brought him peace, the last thing he expects is to ignite the embers of a long-buried connection with his childhood best friend – the one he's never been able to forget, no matter how far out of reach she's always seemed.

Winter Lennox has never ventured far from the picturesque town of Willow Bay, dedicating her days to writing and merely dreaming of a bigger life while secretly harbouring feelings for the one person who has never let her down. Not wanting to hold him back, she has watched from afar as he chased his dreams of glory, but now, as they share a hot, sultry summer together, the silent bond between them emerges, and she recognises this might be her final opportunity to discover what could be.

As spicy sparks fly, will The King of Jokers trust himself enough to realise that the best game plan is to take a chance and embrace what has always been within his reach?

**Total Pages (Source):** 18

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:47 am*

## Chapter One

“I ’m out,” I slurred, throwing my losing hand down onto the table and lifting the next shot glass to my lips. I was far too drunk to continue claiming every new hand was going to be the one where I won my money back.

“You were talking a big game before, y boy.” Cooper said, sliding another shot in front of me, six empties already sitting next to the fresh one. With Seb’s new bar closed for the evening, there was no one to clean our glasses which meant we were surrounded by a reminder of how much we had slammed.

“Loser on and off the field this week.” Jay added, enjoying my misery far too much.

“Can we keep the insults away from my team?” Andy asked while indicating to Seb that he wanted another card.

“When you play like you boys did last week, the gloves are off.” Cooper chipped.

“The gloves are always off with you.” Seb’s always serious face not even cracking in the slightest when Coop shoved him playfully.

“First time we haven’t made the finals in eight years.” Andy huffed, the pain still just as raw as it was last weekend when that final buzzer sounded and we were down eighteen points.

“First season I haven’t been on the field in eight years too. What a coincidence.” Jay quipped and I did my best not to flinch. He was laughing, but I still sensed the way

the room quietened the tiniest bit and how everyone suddenly avoided looking at me. After all, it was my fault he took early retirement last season and didn't I know it.

Jay had never once thrown anything back at me. In fact, the one time we did discuss it, he was adamant it was his time and it was the push he needed — but I felt it all the same. A mentor, a leader, an altruistic mother fucker to the core and despite his resolve that he had to finish for his health, every bloke sitting around this table knew it was brought forward to save my dumbarse from a tainted career.

What was a ridiculously stupid decision to dabble in recreational drugs on a night out at Seb's club, Nexus, turned into a media shit storm when someone used my status and position on the Hearts Football Team as an opportunity and leaked it to the media within the hour. I'd been hauled in for a please fucking explain at two in the morning, still pretty trashed on drinks and reckless decisions. I was barely able to tie my shoelaces let alone interpret the mess I was walking into and if it wasn't for Jay I would have copped it all. The evidence was there and while the images were grainy and the public couldn't be certain it was me, assumptions would be made. But Jay had met with his medical team only two days prior after another nasty head knock and they gave him the ultimatum – your health or your career. Officially he was told he could finish the season before hanging up his boots but ever the impulsive martyr, he formulated a plan which saw him labelled as the Hearts drug mule and me as an innocent bystander. Retiring effective immediately, he pleased his medical team and family but unfairly took the blame for what the media labelled as 'Cocaine-Gate', thankfully with no impact to his retirement payout.

“Yeah, and it was also the first year the boys could shower without worrying someone would take off with their gear. Right, o?” I knew Andy was trying to reel me back in, to remind me there were no hard feelings, but the guilt was heavy and I was reminded of it often. An unspoken, ever-present shadow I wore as a second skin.

“Losing your kit is a rite of passage,” Jay said, nudging me with his elbow, “Ask this

prick.”

Everyone laughed and with the shots comfortably swimming through my veins, the guilt eased a little with Jay’s quip, and I chuckled too, recounting a time he had not only taken my gear but cleared the entire changeroom of anything resembling clothing.

“I had to cover myself with a bloody Hearts scarf.” I laughed and Jay threw an arm around my shoulder rubbing his knuckles across my head.

“You were my favourite to get because your face turns as pink as a fucking pig.” I rolled my eyes, wishing like hell I hadn’t gotten that little gem from my old man.

My phone vibrated in my pocket and I reached for it while the boys finished the round. Swiping open the message from my mum I sighed louder than I realised when Andy questioned who had pissed me off.

“Mum and Dad think they’re renovation gurus so their guest house is out of action. I was planning on heading home for the break but maybe not.” I knew despite Mum’s attempt at euphemising, the place would be a demolition site. Any time they decided to DIY something, it ended up taking six months longer than necessary and cost them double what it would have if they’d just paid professionals. But, as retirees with nothing else to do, it made them happy and kept them out of my hair.

“Doesn’t your wife have a place of her own? Stay with her.” Andy said, referring to my long-term friend and not even remotely close to being my wife, Winter.

Visions of soft dark hair and almond shaped eyes watching me as if I walked on water drifted through my murky thoughts.

“When did you get married and why weren’t we invited?” Seb asked knowing full

well the boys were only geeing me up.

“He wishes they were married. Winter is the one who got away, isn’t she, y?” Jay ruffled my hair and I swatted his hand away which only made his smirk turn into a laugh.

“Shut the fuck up, would ya?” I retorted. I did not need them to know how deep that one hit because I would never hear the end of it. As it was, he only knew about her because he heard us on the phone pretty regularly, but she was Winter . My beautifully brilliant, but very much taken best - friend . She was kind, familiar and undoubtedly the smartest woman I had ever known, making me laugh more than all of these dickheads combined, but she was in a relationship and had never been interested in anything more than what we always were. Friends.

“When do you head home?” Andy asked, throwing his cards down and taking his own losers shot.

“Meant to be tomorrow...” I shrugged, wondering if maybe I should call Winter for a place to crash. We’d stayed together plenty of times before so it wouldn’t be out of character. I was in desperate need of a break from the city and it had been a few years since I’d had the time to actually get back home. With the season ending a month earlier than anticipated, it was the perfect opportunity to spend time with my folks, decompress away from the hustle of all that came with being part of the Hearts and spend some time with Win before the new season started and I would be back on the training paddock for another gruelling year.

I could tolerate whatever dipshit she was dating for a couple of months, surely. Kai or Kyle or whatever his name was would understand we were just friends. And if he didn’t, what the fuck did I care? She was never one to hold back with me, if there was an issue she would say so.

I pushed back from the table indicating I was going to the bathroom, but before I'd even closed the door I was calling her number, my face already breaking into a smile in anticipation of hearing her voice.

“This better be important, J-Man, because the enemies are just about to become lovers and it is about to get steamy up in here.” Her voice was honey, oozing through my body and softening any aches and pains. It was the most comforting, consistent sound in the world – so matter of fact and unfiltered when she was with me.

“Hey, Win.” I drawled, the shots well and truly loosening the chords. “Ooooh, tell me about these lovers.”

“So, he is her boss and is arrogant, but sexy as all hell, obviously. She's his assistant and has been in love with him forevvverrrrr.” Holding the phone between my shoulder and ear, I washed my hands and leant back against the basin, smiling at the way she elongated the words.

“And she put her whole life on hold for him, doing whatever he asked, whenever he asked. Including travelling halfway across the world to secure a business deal he had been working on for years which then meant she missed her nephew's first birthday party. I mean, he did threaten to fire her if she didn't, but still.”

“He sounds like a dick.”

“We prefer the term morally-grey, thank you. Anyway, she never told him any of this, obviously.”

“Obviously.” I repeated with a sarcastic lilt to my reply.

“I'm ignoring your mockery because get this – son overhears her getting chewed out from her mum–”

“His name is son?” I interjected, my smirk turning into a full-blown smile.

“Mmmhmmm.” She answered as if I shouldn’t be concerned that she named her main character a strikingly similar name to my own. And made him a jerk.

“Anywayyyyyy, like I said, he threatens to fire her, so of course she agreed because, urgh hello, she is in love with him. And then her mum calls her and totally berates her for missing the birthday party and he overhears this and realises how freaking amazing she is and always has been and sacrifices his chances at securing the deal to take her home immediately. On his private jet, obviously.”

“Obviously.” I interjected again, my smile still firmly cemented as she sucked in a much needed breath after that spiel.

“And now they are on the flight back to New York, where she lives, and he is standing outside the door to the bathroom which she has just opened and he is looking at her like he wants to eat her having realised she is the one woman who has always been there for him, always been his biggest advocate, and she is staring up at him,” her voice dipped to a whisper and I turned the volume of my phone up, desperate not to miss a word, “Internally freaking out because she wants nothing more than for him to devour her. And then the hostess interrupts so he yells at the unknowing attendant to go away because they’re about to join the mile high club, obviously.”

I knew it was my turn to repeat the word, confirm with an exaggerated reply that obviously he was going to fuck her on the plane, but my mouth was dry and there was something new happening in other areas of my body which shouldn’t be when talking to my friend .

“You hate it, don’t you? On a scale of one to throw the typewriter in the ocean, how bad is it?”

“That thing would survive a tsunami so it wouldn’t make a difference,” I joked.

“Don’t you dare criticise my beautiful magic maker. She brings me so much joy and helps me escape.”

Clearing my throat, I stood up straight and ran a hand through my hair.

“I think I’m going to need you to read me the next chapter.” I said, hoping my voice didn’t betray just how much I wanted that.

“You’re a grub.” She laughed and the melodic familiarity of that sound reaffirmed my decision. Home was exactly what I needed for the next few months and it would be even better with her there. “Buuuut, as soon as it is finished I will definitely need you to read it. I’ve never written an S-E-X scene before so it could be terrible.”

I barked a laugh at how a highly-educated twenty-six year old could not bring herself to say the word sex or any other word alluding to anything remotely erotic out loud. Thanks to her very embarrassing faux pas as an awkward fourteen year old when my father asked for help with his crosswords and she confidently screamed strum dick instead of drum stick. Both my parents and hers thought it was the funniest thing in the world, and I did my best not to join in when her cheeks flamed and after gaping at the room for a good fifteen seconds, she fled down to the beach where it took me two hours to convince her no one would care.

Which for a horny fourteen year old boy – was a lie. I cared. A lot.

Strum dick . Classic.

It was also the last time I ever heard her say anything even remotely close to sexual and I was forbidden from mentioning the incident again.



“I’ve missed you, Win.” The smile was evident in my words and I could hear her own in her reply.

“I always miss you, . Now when are you coming to visit me?”

“About that. I actually called because I have a favour to ask.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:47 am*

### Chapter Two

It was when the reverberation of the cicadas was loud enough to break through the closed car windows that I knew I was almost home. The smell of salt was stronger and if I paused and listened, no matter where you were, you could hear the crack of the ocean close by.

The small beachside town of Willow Bay was a quiet little slice of heaven and was often missed by those desperate to flee down the lengthy east-coast highway on their way to somewhere busier, louder and more exciting.

For the most part it was nothing special, boasting of only a few thousand locals, predictability and peace. But it was exactly what I needed for the next eight weeks. The team was always given six weeks recuperation after finals but considering we didn't even make them this year, the coach sent everyone packing with an extra two weeks of leave and a threat to come back with a new attitude or don't come back at all. The Sydney Hearts were always one of the top four teams and honestly, winning had become so common that we really just weren't sure what to do when we didn't. Some of the boys had played the back half of the season with niggling injuries and strains so they at least had excuses for the slight decrease in their pace or lower than average tackle count – but me, my body was in the best condition it had ever been – it was my focus which wasn't where it should be.

Lowering the volume of the radio, I pulled down the sun visor, blocking the setting sun from my line of sight as I pulled into the familiar long driveway which I had walked countless times as a child. Mum and Dad had lived in the same house, with the same pot-hole ridden driveway for longer than I'd been alive but the letterbox was

always new. Today, it was a makeshift post which housed a large wooden spoon.

I rolled my eyes, knowing it would be Dad's way of lightening the sour mood he predicted I was bringing with me. Not as bad as last year, when after hearing about my indiscretion, he erected a mailbox in the form of a bong and sent me a photo when I never quite made it home. Winter had also sent me a picture, which I was certain she forced Mum into taking, as she exaggeratedly pretended to be smoking from it with the mail from the day clearly stuffed into the ridiculously large cone piece. It was the first time I'd been able to laugh about the situation at all and even the memory tugged at the edges of my mouth.

If she hadn't looked so pleased with herself, I may not have found it funny at all, but it wasn't often she sent me photos of herself so it could only be remembered with fondness. She'd also delighted in the fact Dad thought cocaine and marijuana were the same thing and had turned to her for guidance on what exactly was needed. Clearly, she didn't correct him, which was probably for the best. The humiliation of your family knowing, as a professional athlete, I stupidly chose to partake in drug use was enough. Getting caught the first and only time – ten times worse especially when you were bound to end up as a headline in all media outlets.

“You don't think using the team colours was overkill.” I huffed, slamming the car door and walking the uneven pathway to the steps. Of course he was in the rocking chair on the verandah, the daily crossword firmly in his grip. It was the Grant calling card for dinner being near completion.

Mum would be in the kitchen, Garfield apron tied around her waist and Dad as far away as possible – ideal for the both of them. The cooking gene didn't seem to compute with the male genetics in our family which was why we never dared complain about anything prepared for us. If we were within reach, Mum might seek assistance and it was a sure way to get lectured for your inability to do anything to her standards – which were unfairly high given she was the best cook in the entire

Bay.

According to Dad anyway who would say anything to ensure his stomach was always full.

“Considering Winter suggested a premiership cup with Talons’ colours I think you’re getting off easy.” He replied, chuckling.

“Of course she did.” Probably the only other team she knew and it was purely because they were the other team who showed interest in scouting me just before I was drafted to the Hearts.

Reaching for the paper and the pen I read the last clue he was working on. Living with a cruciverbalist, I’d been privy to thousands of clues and it was funny how quickly it became almost habitual. It was oddly annoying that an empty crossword called to me like it did to him, but unlike my father, I could leave one unfinished.

He could not.

“Clue is Tyrant – six letters starting with aitch.”

I waited, hoping he would answer so I didn’t need to hear him complain when I got the answer before he did.

“Himmler?”

“Well Grandma didn’t name you Dean because you’d be head of the university. Himmler has seven letters.” I said, tapping him over the head with the paper.

“Well, what’s the answer, Einstein?”

“Hitler, unless there’s some prick called Huggsy I’ve never heard of.” Dad snatched the crossword out of my grasp and I laughed heading for the front door.

“Bloody genius you are.” He spouted, both annoyed I finished his daily treat but equally proud.

“You’re welcome. Mum in the kitchen?”

“You want to talk about the game last week now you’ve had time to recover?”

I didn’t need to respond. He was shit stirring and welcoming me home in his own way. We’d already unpacked it a few days after I processed and they told me to come home to lick my wounds – only to renege on the offer of accommodation the day before I arrived. Again, no surprise. There was never any order or structure to the things they did, yet ironically, I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Hey, Ma.” I engulfed her in a hug, having to bend a fair way down these days, the floral smell of her hairspray as comforting as it always had been.

“Hope you’re hungry.” She gestured towards the bench which displayed enough food to feed the entire Hearts team. Twice over.

“Christ, Ma, you have the whole town coming over?” I joked.

“Nope, just us, but I told Winter you’d bring some leftovers over to her place when you leave because her meetings were running late tonight. Works too hard, that one.” She commented, holding my chin and rubbing her thumb lovingly across the light stubble I usually didn’t have.

“I’m happy you’re home. We’ve missed you,” she smiled before turning back. “But I know someone who has missed you more.”

I went to wash my hands before dinner feeling a strange warmth at the idea that I would be spending the next two months here, with no obligations, alongside the one person I never needed to pretend with.

### Chapter Three

If only people read the fine print on their paperwork, I wouldn't need to spend what felt like eighteen hours every day answering questions about the insurance policy they selected.

No, your policy does not come with free car hire.

I appreciate the accident was no fault of your own, however, as per the Terms and Conditions, this is an additional option of which you selected not to include.

Yes, Ma'am, I understand this is a difficult time for you. No, Ma'am, you are unable to add this now, however, I can provide you with the names and numbers of local rental companies – and it was at this point I was usually called a number of not so friendly terms before being met with the end of call tone.

It wasn't as if I didn't agree with them. Despite working for one of the largest insurers in the country, I thought they were all greedy, manipulative worms, who rely on a very creative set of Terms and Conditions to be their safety net in any and every situation. A safety net I was paid a pretty pathetic sum to spruik and justify multiple times a day. Where I could find a loophole, I would, but it was rare. But I couldn't deny the job allowed flexibility, which was why I stayed.

Finishing my final lap, I pushed my hair back from my face and rested my arms on the paved edge of the pool. The stone was still warm from the oppressive heat of a balmy day, despite the sun having set an hour ago, only now it was bearable to lean against. Being able to work from anywhere with a stable internet was convenient, and

that included the next couple of months here at Mum and Dad's while they rode their tandem bike around the country. Working from home had its benefits and escaping the blistering heat with a quick dip was another one.

I never understood their joy in riding the darn thing but it gave me their house, and gorgeous pool most summers which was not something I would complain about. The extra income from renting my place out while enjoying the nostalgia of all things I missed was also nice.

Jet's, On My Mind was blasting through my portable speaker perfectly accompanying my swim tonight because my favourite person was going to be here soon. And I could hardly wait.

It had been over a year since I last saw Jack in person. An entire year of missing the way his smile lit up his entire face as well as my own. Twelve whole months since I'd seen those dimples that reminded me of the twelve year old boy who laughed until he cried when he tried to cartwheel and split his pants. Three hundred and sixty five days since I'd been able to completely relax, because six years ago when he left the Bay with a tiny little bag and a very big dream, he unknowingly took half of my soul with him.

Until then we were inseparable.

He was the other half of me and I always felt slightly off when he wasn't close.

Because Jack was not only my best-friend but the only man I had ever trusted and the only person I'd ever loved. It had morphed over the years from childish infatuation to teenage lust to heartbreaking – wanting what you can't have – love and it had been there before I even knew the term for it.

My feelings for Jack, while hidden, had always been different.



He grounded me in a way no one else could or ever would. While I tolerated many people in my world, Jack was the only one I truly wanted there.

Jack Grant with his smooth skin the colour of toffee and his ungodly smell.

Cologne and perfume often irritated me in a suffocating kind of way because they were unnecessary. I never understood the need to coat yourself in additional scents when you could be less intrusive to those around you by simply showering.

Contrastingly, I seemed to follow Jack's trail like a bloodhound desperate for its next kill. When he was nearby it was all I could do not to spend all day glued to his side which proved difficult given he was unaware of my level of obsession with him.

I found it tough to articulate, even to myself, and it was part of the reason I began writing when I finished school. To voice my feelings through characters. Because how did you tell someone who had only ever looked at you as his friend, that he was your equilibrium.

It had been just over six weeks ago after I ended what was an abysmally disappointing physical arrangement with an ex-colleague, that my frustrations this time displayed themselves in a drastic hair change and a nose piercing. Neither of which I regretted.

Nor did I second guess my decision to tell Kyle I was no longer interested in having mediocre sex in his car once a month. But it was the main reason why I ended things, which haunted my nights. The same reason no relationship had ever worked for me – because my heart was never in it. How could it be when it was in Sydney with someone else.

Ascending the stairs and reaching for my towel, I dried my face and shook out my freshly cut hair. It was so much easier to manage since I'd chopped it to just below

my shoulders. It was a spontaneous decision, which should have been the first indication something wasn't quite right, given I usually spent weeks overthinking before doing anything so drastic.

Shaking my hair again, I replied to a couple of messages before turning the music off. Jack would be here soon which meant I needed to shower and put any inappropriate thoughts back in their lockbox. I could spend my days with him and live through my characters at night – the very best of both worlds.

Loading the speaker, towel and my Frank Green water bottle into my arms, I turned towards the house and froze before dropping every item I just collected with a squeal.

Jack was leaning against the glass fence which lined the perimeter of the pool area, one leg crossed over the other, his arms folded across his chest, his hat slung backwards. When I began running towards him his face broke into his classic boyish smile, dimples large, and he opened his arms just in time to catch me as I launched myself into him.

“Hey,” he breathed, his chest shaking at my over the top greeting.

My arms were wrapped so firmly around his neck, my eyes full of tears.

“Jack, Jack, Jacky – you’re here.” I said with a snuffle.

“Do you greet all your friends like this?” He asked, mischief in his tone.

Loosening my grip, he released his own and I sank back to the floor, only then remembering I was in my very revealing, very wet bikini I reserved for swimming on my own.

“Oh my god!” Racing back to where my towel lay discarded in a heap I covered

myself. “Sugar. I forgot I was wet. And now you’re wet,” I said, walking back over to where he was standing and patting his damp shirt.

Holy pectorals. When did Jack become such a beast?

“I’m just so happy to have you here.” I added honestly, ignoring how much I wanted to see that chest.

He smiled softly, bringing his hand up to touch the ends of my hair. “This looks good. You look different since the last time we video called.”

There was an underlying emotion to his words and he looked at me funny before tapping the side of my nose gently.

“New hair and a nose ring. Who are you and what have you done with my girl, ?”

Ugh. He spoke like that with ease, totally unaware of the things those words did to my lonely, unrequitedly desperate heart.

“Do you like it?” I asked nervously. While I would pretend I didn’t need his approval, deep down he was the only one I wanted to impress.

“I’m not sure ‘like’ is the right word.” He answered, tilting his head assessingly, and suddenly I felt clammy. Of course he didn’t like it. I was nothing like any of the girls he had ever dated given I enjoyed carbs more than any of the other food groups and wasn’t as polished as a trophy. Nope, Lennox was curvy, with two pimples courtesy of hormones on my chin and some extra layering on my thighs courtesy of a love for all things fried.

“You just look...different.” He sounded uncertain which was uncharacteristic of him, and did interesting things to my tummy.

Pushing the loose strands behind my ear, I openly studied his face. His complexion had always been deliciously golden and with the short dark stubble he somehow looked older. Wiser. And as handsome as I'd ever seen. Under my scrutiny his brows scrunched, his dark eyes narrowing.

“What?” He asked, his gaze darting over my own.

Putting my things on the floor, I placed my hands on his shoulders and looked him directly in the eyes – suddenly serious.

“Do you trust me?”

“Obviously.” He answered without hesitation.

I watched the way his teeth grazed his lower lip as he spoke, the way his throat dipped when he visibly swallowed.

“Good.” I answered before I moved my hands up to his face and pressed my lips against his own.

He stilled, entirely stiff other than his mouth which was unbelievably soft.

His lips opened ever so slightly in an invitation and with a little trepidation, I explored his mouth with my tongue. Apprehensively, in case I was overstepping and he pushed me away but instead, feather light, he met me with his own. I took the smallest of breaths, nearly moaning when the frosted notes of my Jack engulfed me before snapping back to reality and pulling away.

The soft sound of our lips parting was overshadowed by the intensity of our mingled breaths. Mindful of being half-naked and careful not to press myself against him, I took a step back and again studied him as he appeared shell-shocked. His face

unreadable, his lips wet from our shared moment.

The first time I was ever impulsive with him and it was now.

Here. Like this. Oh my god. I just kissed Jack.

I was internally freaking out both in excitement and fear. And honestly, I was awash with need.

Bending down, I reached for my towel, using the two seconds to regroup.

When I stood back up his brows were raised questioningly. In a performance I would likely tell my grandchildren about, I masked my imminent freak out and giggled.

“That was exactly what I needed.” I said as a matter of explanation before linking his arm and trying to guide him to the house but he was glued to the spot.

He cleared his throat before speaking, “Care to elaborate, Win?” He said, slowly following my lead to walk towards the house.

“Well, Jackson and Summer just had their first kiss but I was struggling with the description. It felt as though it lacked the realism I was imagining. That helped though. Thanks.”

He halted which yanked my arm still linked through his, causing me to also stop.

“You kissed me for your book?”

“Correct. But you kinda kissed me back, soldier.” I retorted with feigned nonchalance. At this point, I could have been nominated for an Oscar with the level of acting I was exuding.

“Hardly,” he replied with an ease which based on his impossibly large eyes, was also most definitely forced.

“You definitely did, but it’s okay. It really helped.”

Helped by making every single one of my dreams come true and waking a part of me which had been asleep for a long time.

Even underneath the shadow of night, his dark eyes lit a fire deep in my belly, reminding me while my heart was full, other parts of my body were going to struggle over the next couple of months with wanting what they couldn’t have. Especially after the way the softest touch of his lips against my own sent a mating call to my entire reproductive system.

“Let’s go have a drink.” I said, trying desperately to keep the mood light.

He didn’t need to like my new look, he didn’t need to kiss me back, he didn’t even need to understand. He just needed to escort me inside before I ran upstairs and grabbed whatever I could to ease the throb which was pulsing like a steady drumbeat between my legs.

### Chapter Four

I 'm going to need a fair amount of lube to survive this fucking summer , I thought as I snuck a glance down at my noticeably awake cock twitching against my zipper like a caged animal before following Winter in the kitchen hoping I could sneak away while she showered to give myself some relief.

What in the fuckery was that?

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:47 am*

### Chapter Five

“This is surprisingly good.” I said, squinting at the orange bottle of liqueur which I was almost positive Mum acquired before I was born.

Jack took another sip before licking his lips, “It’s not great, but I’ve tasted worse. It’s strong as shit though, what’s it called?”

Reading the back of the bottle I hiccuped before answering.

“SO strong. My feet feel numb. The label is faded so I’m not actually sure,” I shrugged, finishing the rest of my glass. “But I like it,” I giggled while trying to wiggle my toes.

“Tell me more about this book you’re writing.”

I rolled my head to face him and sighed. “I mean I told you the premise last night.” Flashbacks of the feel of his lips against my own caused my cheeks to warm and judging by the lazy smile which split his face, he noticed.

“You also used me for research purposes so I think I’ve earned the right to more details.”

“Fine,” I acquiesced. “Where was I up to?” I said more to myself than him as I looked up towards the ceiling desperately trying to wade through the alcoholic fog and activate my memory. “Oh, yep. So they’re on the plane and they’re about to kiss...”



Closing my eyes I pictured my characters.

Jackson and Summer.

He was impressively broad. Confident and self-assured. Caring towards those he loved.

Summer was less confident, focused and loyal.

“And?” Jack said, pausing the scene playing in my mind.

“And nothing. I’m struggling! How do I write about love and passion and…” Leaning closer to him I whispered, “S-E-X, if I’m not currently having any.”

Jack began coughing, holding up a hand to indicate he was okay and I pondered if I was perhaps making him uncomfortable. We’d discussed most things. He knew when I had my period, the fact I could only wear bras without underwire and that I folded my toilet paper. Three times to be exact. But we did not discuss intimacy. It was a topic which we seemed to subconsciously agree was better left unsaid.

I’d seen photos of him online with numerous women. I’d been friends with some of his exes in school. But I wasn’t a sadist and asking questions was only going to cause unnecessary feelings of jealousy. Or those of the murderous kind – who can be sure.

“What about Kyle?” He spoke his name as if it left a bad taste in his mouth and I feigned mock horror with a dramatic hand to my chest.

“Oh, yes. Kyle. I could definitely write about the way he picked me up once a month, took me to his favourite lookout, and aggressively rubbed himself against me for what felt like three days before he finally decided it was enough foreplay. Then I was guaranteed at least fifty seconds of an awkwardly positioned car–” I flung my hand in

his direction so I didn't need to say or spell the word, "Before he finished and told me how much he loved watching me C-U-M. Which was funny given he had never actually seen it."

Throwing his head back Jack howled, pausing after a solid minute only to acknowledge my words. "You're right. You can't use that story. Especially when you can't even say the words cum and sex."

"Shut up." I whacked him on the arm playfully, feeling my cheeks flush again. I was never embarrassed around Jack and it wasn't a weird new quirk that it made me uncomfortable to say words like that out loud, I'd just never really needed to use them around him.

Hearing him say them aloud was something else entirely and I wanted to watch the words wrap around his mouth as he spoke.

"I didn't realise you'd broken up?" Jack's tone was softer and I could sense he was being cautious incase this was a sore point.

"Broken up is a stretch. We were never in a relationship. I don't know, it's a small town. It was meant to be mutualistic but it was anything but," I admitted with a scowl. "Hence why I am finding myself with writer's block when it comes to the c-o-c-k."

"Read me what you have."

"What? No." Nope. Absolutely not. I couldn't even say these words out loud let alone read him my work.

"I can help you." He stated plainly, his smile back in place. "Or at least I probably can with the c-o-c-k stuff." He said with a wink.

Grabbing the pillow next to me I held it over my face and groaned. Partially to hide the colour I knew my cheeks would be and also to have the tiniest moment to myself before I looked back at him.

What was I worried about? This was Jack Grant. The same boy, who on my twelfth birthday, walked the shore of Willow's Beach with me for three hours until I found twelve perfect shells. One for each year I had been alive. The same boy who picked the tomato off every burger because he knew I hated the feeling on my tongue. The same man who after playing his first game for the Sydney Hearts, waited on the sideline until I could walk down what felt like two thousand steps and squeeze through a sea of adoring fans, just so I could congratulate him.

He was my best-friend. And a sexy, experienced man in his own right which meant, as much as I didn't want to admit it, he probably could help me.

"Okay. But you can't laugh." Standing, I reached for the lounge to balance myself. "I'm going to need more of this orange stuff though. Make us another round while I grab my draft."

"You sure you want another one?" He asked playfully as I lost my footing up the steps.

"Definitely." I called before heading to my room for my smutty notes.

When I returned, Jack had two freshly made drinks in hand and a bowl of crisps sitting on the lounge between us.

"You read my mind." Sitting back in the same space as before, I flipped the pages until I turned to the scene which had been only a quarter complete for two weeks, and grabbed a handful of crisps.

“So,” I said around crunches, “They’re in the plane and it’s tense.”

“He’s her boss and is loaded right? And she is his assistant?” He clarified and I nodded around another mouthful of salty deliciousness.

“Describe her to me. I need to picture it all so I can get the juices flowing.” He cracked his knuckles for emphasis and I laughed.

“Summer is...” I trailed off, pondering whether I just told him she looked like me, or if that would freak him out and sabotage his ability to help. And God knew I needed some.

“She’s unique. She’s confident and funny, but only around those she is familiar with and obviously that extends to her boss. She works really hard and takes her job seriously.” I pursed my lips, picturing my fierce female lead. She was everything I wanted to be and more.

“What does she look like?” He prodded before taking another sip of his drink. His eyes were glazed, this bat shit liquor from the 1960s working its way through both of us.

“She kinda looks like me, I guess.” I admitted with a chuckle.

“Obviously.” Jack replied exaggeratedly and I laughed. God he was so easy to be around. Moving the bowl of chips to the floor, I brought one leg up onto the lounge and turned to face him entirely.

“Okay, so they’re in the plane and he has just had this mind blowing epiphany that he is in love with her. And we all know he is used to getting whatever he wants whenever he wants, but she makes him a little nervous,” I was speaking quickly, but I couldn’t bring myself to slow down. I loved this book and these characters more than

any of the others I'd ever written.

“Oh, and just before they boarded the flight, Summer decided this was the last trip she would be taking with him because she was tired. Tired of loving someone who saw her as nothing more than a colleague.”

Jack hadn't moved. His attention focused on every word I was saying and it gave me a boost of confidence. Maybe this story was good. Imposter syndrome – you can kindly piss right off because this was set to be a New York Bestseller.

Breaking eye contact I took a deep breath and began reading.

“A bone deep exhaustion settled into the air, wrapping me up and covering me whole. He was never going to see me. Eternally waiting for him to do just that had beaten me down and I was tired. Drying my face I pushed my feelings down for what would be a few more hours on this blasted plane and flattened my clothing. You can do this, Summer.

I slid the lock across and was startled when the door opened to Jackson standing less than a foot away, a look I'd never seen painting his face.

‘Where is everyone?’ I whispered, referring to the two female cabin crew who were always within a few metres in case he needed something. Or someone.

Never me though.

He looked haunted, the cabin now dark with only limited lighting coming from the small safety bulbs lining the floor.

‘Jackson, are you okay?’ He stepped closer to me, studying me in an entirely new way. Curiosity marred his features and my chest began to rise and fall a little quicker

when he raised his hand and softly brushed the pad of his thumb across my cheek. What was happening?

‘I’ve been blind.’ He uttered. His words danced across my skin, a deep need settling in my stomach.”

I stopped, nothing but a blank page beyond that sentence because I couldn’t get past this moment. I wanted him to take her in his arms and devour her while the world continued to move below them. But I couldn’t find the words for the feeling of euphoria I would likely never experience.

“What happens next?” Jack’s voice was an octave deeper than it had been, bringing me back into my parents living room and away from the confines of an aeroplane flying across the Atlantic at night. I felt a bead of sweat fall down my back.

Was it just me or did it suddenly get hot in here? I stood hastily, needing to move.

Fanning myself with the pages I was holding I glanced down at him, his gaze still focused on me.

“What happens next, Win?” He repeated with urgency. “Don’t leave me hanging here.”

I turned the page towards him signalling there was nothing written.

“This is where I’m up to. I know what happens next but I’m struggling to put it into words.”

“No wonder you read so much,” he huffed. “I have a semi just from listening and nothing even happened.”

I barked a laugh doing everything within my power not to look for myself because Jack's friend would never want to see his pleasure. She would tell him how gross he is and avoid discussing such intimate things with him. She would never imagine said pleasure while she sat at her typewriter late at night thinking of how Summer and Jackson would lose themselves in each other.

"If you can't write it, at least tell me what happens next so I have something to think about later." He poked me in the arm, his wolfish grin back and I shook my head. He had absolutely no idea what he did to me which meant I was in the running to be nominated in the 2025 Academy Awards for best actress.

I walked back and forth across the carpet feeling jittery. It was definitely hot in here even with the air set to an almost arctic temperature but I think it was more to do with the charged thoughts swirling through the space like electricity. Maybe I was ovulating or something.

"But I can't describe it."

Jack stood, taking my hands in his.

"Relax your fists. Don't focus on how to say it for your readers, just say it for me."

"Urgh," I groaned exaggeratedly, averting my gaze because in my drunk fuelled haze I was certainly misreading a look of heat in his eyes.

"Show me what you got, Lennox." He quipped and the lighthearted familiarity was enough to calm me. He dropped my now relaxed hands and I drew in a deep breath. He was my personal valium.

"Okay, so, Jackson would take a step toward her until their bodies were almost touching." I began and Jack moved in close bringing my sentence to life. I felt my

eyes widen, my spine snap straight.

Heat. Inferno. Shiiiiiiiiiiiit.

“Close your eyes and keep talking.” Clammy. Him this close was making me clammy.

Don’t overthink things or it will get weird, I told myself, desperate to ignore the sudden flutter in my chest.

I followed his instruction, shuttling myself 40,000 feet above the ground, into a dimly lit cabin, the rumbling of the engines taking over my senses and clearing my mind.

“Summer is frozen. Her eyes flickering between his own. Her chest rising and falling rapidly, a direct result of his spicy leather scent blanketing her. He would bridge the gap between them and pull her into him with a firm palm against her lower back. Steadying her when the plane jumped with turbulence.”

The breath left my lungs when I was firmly pulled into Jack, my palms flying up to land on his chest.

Farkkk.

“Keep going, Win.” His words were tantalisingly close and I pushed all thoughts of reality away before I burst into flames.

Jackson and Summer.

Jackson and Summer.

Jackson and Summer.



“She would be able to feel his arousal, thick and heavy against her. It would send a bolt of need to her core, a dull pulse picking up its rhythm at the filthy thoughts flicking through her mind.

“The taste of his skin, the feel of his hands on her thighs. Images of him finally seeing her for who she really was – a woman. And taking her right there on the flight because he could no longer stop himself. He needed to be inside her, to feel the warmth of her wrapped around him.”

Jack gripping me a little firmer caused my eyes to shoot open, his equally as wide before he took a hasty step back.

“Fuck,” he laughed. “Sorry.” He looked down and I followed the movement, a very noticeable bulge in his pants.

“Oh my god. Did I do that?” I slapped a hand across my mouth, my astonishment threatening to escape with a string of more unnecessary questions.

How on god’s forsaken earth did I have some part in causing that reaction from him . The notoriously sexy footballer who spent his days with the best of female kind, according to the gossip sites I abashedly stalked on the regular.

And in my parent’s living room to add to the peculiarity of it all. I felt like running and turning every family photo around, terrified someone was somehow watching and judging me.

The inept prude who couldn’t write a sexy scene accosted her friend resulting in a boner.

“Argh –,” he lifted his hat and ran a hand through his hair.

Was he nervous? Because of me? And his...

“What the heck?” I asked, pointing at what I was certain was an impressive third member who had entered the scene.

“I have no excuse,” he raised his palms towards the sky as if he too was befuddled. “Although I haven’t been laid in a while and this orange shit is deadly.” He added, reaching for the liqueur and squinting as if he could suddenly read the faded label any better than I could.

“Mr. I am out every night with a new woman isn’t getting any — since when?” This was new information and while I was playing coy I was starving for details.

“A while,” he shrugged. “But that’s a conversation for another day. Tonight is about you and working out how we can solve this little problem you’re having.”

“Nice deflection, Jack-O-Lantern.”

“Thanks,” he grinned. “You seem like you’re doing just fine given my reaction.” He grimaced again, glancing down towards his crotch.

Wait... so it was me. Or my words? The sultry scene I was creating? Being pressed against me?

All of the above?

“Well tonight was different. It’s not usually like that,” I whined.

“So what was it about tonight that made it easier? We need to replicate that.” He shrugged as if it were no big deal.

Hesitating, I bit my lip and narrowed my eyes at him, while I thought about how best to articulate what I wanted to say.

You. You were the difference, you big, dumb, sexual oaf.

You and your reassuring aura and the way you make me feel safe.

It could also maybe, most definitely have something to do with the gargantuan crush I've always had on you.

"You're nervous," he glanced down to my hand where I was speedily twirling my infinity ring. A ring he bought me for my sixteenth birthday because he said our friendship would last forever – like the strength of double infinity. While it didn't make sense to me at the time, it was the sweetest gesture anyone had ever done for me and I'd worn it everyday since. It was years later he admitted he chose this particular one as the sales lady had informed him her daughter also had one and used it when she was anxious. He was forever doing things like this as if it were the most simple act in the world to bring me something he knew would help me remain calm.

I crossed my arms to stop myself fidgeting and immediately began biting the inside of my cheek instead.

"Spit it out."

"Fine," I huffed. "I think you might be able to help," I said before I lost my courage. "Because I already feel like I can write this scene now." God, this was so unbelievably embarrassing. What if this idea was a result of the fictitious worlds I was spending most of my free time delving in as I researched for my own romance novel.

What if he said no or worse, laughed in my face. What if he was repulsed, I mean I

was nothing like any of the women he partied with in Sydney.

I was a small town, neurotic, set in her ways, kind of girl.

I could tell you how many Weetbix he ate as a kid and the colour of his favourite bike. I could tell you his birthday, his star sign and his favourite constellation but I couldn't tell you the most intimate details of him – something I am sure many strangers had been lucky enough to experience.

And I was desperate to know. Even if it was only for a minute, I ached to be pulled into the fold where I knew everything about him, including what brought him the most pleasure and what he looked like when he lost all control.

“Always happy to help. Just tell me how.” He was cocky and it was apparent he thought he knew what I needed, when really, he could never have guessed what I was about to ask. The forbidden thoughts alone were enough to send a buzz through my bloodstream.

“Well, given no one knows me better than you and there is absolutely no one I trust more, I have an idea. And it may be outlandish and entirely unexpected – actually most definitely unexpected – and it's kind of awkward so you can definitely say no and we can forget I said anything.”

“Go on.” He said, folding his arms across his chest.

“That little,” I swirled my finger indicating whatever the heck just happened between us, “Well whatever that was – helped. Definitely helped. And we both know how limited my experience is with this stuff given the clientele I've shared company with.”

“You mean the people you've slept with?”

“Yes, Jack. Those people. Anyway – you are far more experienced than I am and I need inspiration.”

“You’re talking in circles. How exactly can I help?”

“I’m thinking, asking actually, I’m asking – wait I can’t look at you when I say this,” I turned around, feeling much braver now that I couldn’t see his face. “I’m asking if you would help me with the spicy scenes in my book. Be an intimate muse, if you will. It could work both ways and obviously we would have rules because the last thing I would want is to do anything to jeopardise our friendship, but maybe you could use that experience of yours to show me what passion really is. So I can actually write about it.” I blew out a long breath before anxiously biting my thumb nail. If he turned me down, I was going to laugh hysterically and tell him I was only joking, then run to my room for the next two months and avoid him at all costs.

The silence was deafening and my fingers immediately reached for my ring.

When he still didn’t answer after what felt like an eternity, I spun around to face him and noticed his hands now firmly placed in front of the bulge.

“Forget I said anything.” I snapped, desperate to rewind an hour and go back to before shit got murky. This was what I feared most. His refusal. His rejection. His pity for Robot- who never had friends.

“No.” He said with a shake of his head.

“No?” My cheeks flamed but I stood firm. This was not the end of the world. I could definitely blame the super intense alcohol and clear my memories of everything I’d said and done.

“No, I won’t forget,” his adamance startled me. “But I need time to think. We can

talk in the morning.” He stated, leaning over to give me a swift kiss on the cheek before turning and leaving without so much as a goodnight, let alone waiting for my reply.

What in the fudge cakes .

Pressing my head against the closed door of my bedroom I mouthed a lengthy expletive whilst simultaneously banging my palm against my forehead.

I kissed him. I actually kissed him. And then I asked him to be my muse. My real-life experimental sex doll.

For fuck sake, , what were you thinking?

He drove six hours down the – admittedly very gorgeous coastline – to escape the pressures of whatever it was to play professional football, which included constantly being surrounded by people with no concept of his personal space – only to be in Willow Bay for approximately three seconds before I too did the same.

I mean, I hadn’t lied to him. I really was struggling with bringing home the desperation and angst of the characters.

Some things came naturally. The anticipation, the longing, the unrequited, invisible ache embedded within every moment. Those things which seemed minute to him but meant everything to me. That I could write about. Hell, I could publish an entire series about a lonely woman who has always wanted more but was too scared to grab life by the reins.

But the impassioned, kiss me as if I am your oxygen in an ocean of lust scene, I’m a little rusty. Of the few relationships I’d been in, none of them were anywhere near inspired.

In fact, on more than one occasion I would be glad to endure some form of traumatic head injury to ensure I never had to relive those instances again.

How did you describe something you hadn't quite experienced? It was a very real issue, but did I have to offer myself up to him on a silver platter when he looked at me like his sister. Shit.

My body's response to having him that close to me was anything but familial. The pressure of his hand against my lower back was enough to weaken my knees, my back arching as my chest became desperate to mould itself to him. My skin tingled and I knew if I looked down my shirt, my nipples would have been hard.

How long had I dreamed of one day having someone ignite those feelings in me? How long had I wished someone would listen to my words and create a passion I could only imagine? How long had it been Jack's face I saw when I created these characters or touched myself in the depths of the night when no one was around? And now I was teetering on an unfamiliar line desperate to take the leap but terrified of the consequences.

Landing heavily into the chair in front of my typewriter I pushed the carriage back to its original position and stretched my fingers. My parents constantly offered to buy me a laptop but there was something nostalgic about filtering my fictional thoughts through something unplugged. The precision and beauty in watching the ink of my mind hit the paper in real time sung to my neurotic heart.

Getting ready to start I tapped the keys lightly and mentally took myself back downstairs. I could spend the next hour berating myself or I could use the inundation of inspiring thoughts to my advantage. Allow the tingles from his touch to light the flame needed to finish this scene.

Tomorrow was a new day and no doubt we would laugh about the hilarity of it all

over breakfast before forgetting it ever happened.

Well, I would try to forget... maybe.

But deep down I knew there would be no erasing the memory of his mouth against mine. Or the hardness of his body moulding perfectly against my own, sending an eruption of goosebumps across my skin. The feel of where his palm rested against my lower back, burning my skin and sending my pulse soaring.

Re-reading the last line I wrote, I channelled the tormenting pleasure of earlier and stretched my hands out against the cool metal before my fingers began flying across the keys.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:47 am*

### Chapter Six

The water cascaded down my body as I repeatedly splashed handfuls against my face in a desperate attempt to rid myself of the unadulterated need pumping through me.

Unexpected and most definitely problematic need.

Tonight was not the homecoming I was expecting.

I thought I would come home to the predictably familiar routine which seemed to follow Win and I like a shadow. The initial excitement, followed by the verbal diarrhoea while we recapped anything and everything we'd missed as we shared an easy meal. What I was not expecting was to arrive and see Winter in the pool in the tiniest bikini I'd ever seen. I wasn't expecting to enjoy watching her in a way I hadn't ever done before and I was most definitely not expecting her to launch herself at me, those fucking tits consuming my vision, before kissing me.

Kissing me.

The most enlightening part of all – I fucking loved it.

The faint flicker which crept to life as I stood by the pool spread, each quick glance feeding the flame, until I stood mere centimetres from her as she recounted her ideas for a story which grew in her mind. By then, the fire was roaring with confidence and the sparks were sending unbidden messages to areas which now were making themselves known.

Taking my angry cock in my hand I began stroking to a plethora of new images.

The sight of that body gliding through the pool so effortlessly.

The beads of water dripping down her back and over her black bikini, showcasing a fucking wet dream.

That arse – entirely visible courtesy of her high-cut swimwear.

Her smile when she eventually turned and saw me.

The way her tits felt, warm and wet against my chest.

The innocence in her voice – do you trust me? – and the way the slightest touch of her lips against my own sent a current through my body like never before.

I'd wanted to thread my hands in her hair, tilt her head back and fuck her mouth with my tongue. Trail a finger down her throat and over her succulent chest.

At the mere thought of my hand against her bare skin, my pumping increased, the pleasure sizzling under my skin and my balls tightened when I imagined those plush lips around my cock. Somehow I was certain that mouth would suck me perfectly. Those tits would feel flawless – the perfect size for my hands.

I envisioned sliding her bikini top off, her nipples hardening under both my gaze and the breezy night air.

Smearing the pre-cum around my length, I stroked myself harder when I pictured taking one of her nipples in my mouth. The sound of my name leaving her throat in a breathy sigh when I used the other hand to slip below her thong and reach for her bud, the warmth of her swollen cunt beyond ready.

That's it, baby, spread those thighs so I can see how wet you are for me.

She would do as I asked because she always had, but never like this. Never like the filthy thoughts I was enjoying more than I could ever admit.

What I wouldn't give to see her swollen lips after emptying my cock of all it had to offer.

Fuck.

I couldn't stop the groan when my pleasure shot out of me with the finishing thought of how much I'd love to see her glistening pussy laid bare before me.

Fucking hell.

It was not a new phenomenon that Winter Lennox was hot. You'd have to be a complete fool not to notice, and most people did – although her lack of reciprocation meant they would turn on her fairly quickly. But never me. Although the pull was something I had always known but never needed to acknowledge.

She was my friend.

The one who was always there, in my corner, through the good times and the bad. The first person I called because she was the only one who could tell me to pull my head from my arse without offending me. Because she knew me better than most. It didn't matter how many months went by between visits, when we were together, it was easy and there was no need to pretend or be something everyone wanted or expected.

When everything turned to shit last season, she was the first person I called because she would be the one who would settle me. And she had – with a few home truths and

a whole lot of love.

There were no expectations or pressures with her.

I was and she was Winter. And it was exactly as it should be.

But something shifted tonight and there were feelings long ago buried which were now vying for the surface.

Washing away the evidence of those salacious thoughts, I turned the shower off and reached for my towel – I was still fairly drunk which was weird considering I didn't have that many drinks.

Maybe it was just Debbie's orange magical liquor making me fantasise impossible things. I'd have to get Win to ask her mum where she got it because it was definitely potent if it was causing my mind to wander the way it had.

My quick getaway was a dick move. I could picture her pacing in her room, viciously seeking a calming texture, possibly freaking out over my Usain Bolt style departure. Which was incredibly selfish of me. Because, while I didn't stick around to clarify exactly what she meant, I was fairly certain I knew what she was implying. Subtlety was never a strength of hers and even when she floundered, I could read her like a bolded and underlined headline. Because she was suggesting a friends with benefits style agreement. A mutual deal which would help her with her writing and as a red-blooded single male, be more than beneficial for me too. Hence, I was actually considering saying yes. We were adults now. Gone was the ridiculously hormone driven teenager who found any excuse to swim with her in the hopes of seeing her in her swimwear. Things were different and it would keep the holiday interesting, right?

I shook my head trying to get my mind out of the gutter, I needed hydrating before I went to bed or I would be waking with a hangover and that was not what I wanted on

my first day out in Willow Bay.

I paused at the closed door of Winter's childhood bedroom. The beaded seashell curtain she'd begged her parents for on her tenth birthday, still hanging and probably still just as annoying. The rhythmic clatter of keys from inside the room broke the silence of the night and my face split into a smirk. The heavy metallic taps were the exact opposite to her previous assertions of writer's block, and it was with a smug confidence that I headed to the kitchen for a drink and something to eat.

Maybe there was merit to creating these scenes with her. Our friendship had withstood many storms. A friendship forged in trust and tested by the complexities that the years brought with them. And it was as sturdy as ever.

The mechanical slide and click of the carriage resetting was evidence that our little role play appeared to have helped her. Ultimately, I knew as well as she did, if she asked something from me, I would do it. I couldn't say no to her – I never had been able to. And maybe, selfishly, I pondered if this was just another hill to climb and I needed to fuck whatever this was out of my system so we could move back to being the platonic friends that we were.

Her earlier words uncoiled like ribbons, taunting me to agree.

Help me with the spicy scenes — we would have rules — use that experience of yours to show me what passion really is.

The soundtrack of her voice accompanied by images floating around my mind like leaves in the wind. Innocent eyes begging for my help. Hungry, slightly parted lips, her demeanour tense, clearly affected when I moved into her space. A space I had entered hundreds of times before but never with a proprietary hand on her back and an unspoken intention in the alignment of our bodies.

Even after a drink, I fought the urge to take another shower to re-live everything I couldn't forget.

And when I finally did drift off to sleep, it was to visions of just how different this summer could be.

The sun was high in the sky when I eventually woke from a fitful sleep. The few hours I did manage consisted of a patchwork of uneasy dreams showcasing a deep brunette goddess with dark eyes and a full and generous body. A figure I could paint from memory alone, although now with far more skin and new angles – areas a younger me dodged at all costs. There was no avoidance last night though, because Winter refused to be ignored with her wet body and devastating mouth.

The smell of a cooked breakfast awakened my stomach and I didn't bother reaching for a shirt, instead padding into the kitchen in my sweats with my hat thrown on backwards just to cover the state of my hair. I was not prepared for the smorgasbord of food scattered on the bench and table. My girl was still a morning person it seemed. Flashbacks to a scrawny twelve year old with braces waking me up at nearly lunchtime, desperate for someone to hit the beach with, while I fought for just another hour of sleep.

“Hey.” I greeted on a yawn which indicated, regardless of my fractured rest, I was still not a morning person.

Winter was already dressed for the day, her orange swimmers visible under a white kaftan and I speedily averted my gaze knowing lingering would result in nothing good.

“I couldn't decide. Hence the food massacre, which also means we need to hit the store today.” She replied with a flick of her hand to the numerous dishes which evidenced this.

“You have too much energy.”

“Coffee is over there,” she said, pointing to the machine, before flipping the eggs onto two plates.

“I heard you writing last night.” Turning to lean against the bench, I watched her finish plating the food.

“I think I wrote for three hours straight. Do you know how long it’s been since that has happened?” She asked incredulously. “Forever.”

I took a sip from my mug to hide my self-satisfied smirk.

She glanced over at me for the first time and if I wasn’t watching her, I might have missed the way her eyes raked over my bare chest. Was this a new thing too or was I now just more aware of her after last night?

“When did you get that?” She asked, pointing to the tattooed compass I had on the right-hand side of my chest.

Taking a seat at the table I reached for the salt and pepper.

“Last season, I think. Haven’t you seen it before?” I asked already knowing she hadn’t.

“-a-doodle, this is the first time you’ve been home in two years and the last time I came to Sydney it was friggin’ freezing. We definitely weren’t swimming.” She bit into her toast, humming her enjoyment.

I nodded. It had been a rough couple of years and after the media shitstorm surrounding us after Andy’s brother and I were seen taking drugs, I’d kept a very low

profile. Including avoiding coming back to Willow Bay to the faces of my parents who had likely fielded questions from the entire town.

But never because of Winter. She'd been in her car and at my doorstep the next day. A warm shoulder of comfort and the first to offer me a verbal berating with the unembellished delivery only she could bring.

Well here come the consequences of your actions, Jumping – and through a tornado of feelings swirling between responsibility and regret, she made me smile and I knew it would be okay.

“I got it just after you left last time actually. Thought I'd shown you.” I swallowed my lie with a mouthful of toast. I'd never been intentionally evasive with Win and despite the revelations of last night this secret had to stay. The ramifications of the truth too much at any time, let alone over breakfast on my very first day here.

She eyed me suspiciously, ripping a piece of her bacon and stared at me, likely until I cracked. She had a habit of opening me up like a long-awaited birthday gift but this time there was no cracking. Buried it must stay.

“What?”

“We need to finish our conversation from last night.” You'd think I would be used to her pragmatic manner, but the juice I was sipping lodged in my throat and I choked like an absolute buffoon.

I reached for a serviette and wiped my mouth, doing my best to organise my thoughts. Although I was glad she didn't press me on the tattoo, I was unbelievably torn. Torn between what I wanted, what I thought was best and what certain parts of me really wanted.



“What do you mean?” I asked before my laughter quickly followed at the narrowing of her eyes. “Okay. Okay, I know what you meant. I didn’t answer because I need more details.”

Her thumb moved to her ring – the twirling a sure sign she was anxious about the things she was about to say. I was keen to hear whatever these rules were because heck if I knew the right way to do this without fracturing our current unshakable bond. And if I knew anything about the woman sitting across from me, it was that she loved nothing more than a good set of rules.

“I have a lot of thoughts and rules, obviously.”

“Obviously.” I grinned at what was becoming a new little taunt between us. Something else which was ours alone.

“Last night I wrote more than I’ve written in weeks. Weeks ,” she emphasised. “Which tells me you are the cure for my writer’s block. I don’t ask lightly, . I know this could get weird – I mean, I’m asking you to cross every line we have in our friendship and I may sound confident but really, I’m terrified.” She paused, visibly swallowing and I couldn’t have spoken if I wanted to, because she was nervous. The flickering of her uncertain eyes and chewing the inside of her cheek was evidence of this and I felt everything she said.

“But this book is really important to me and I’m trying to write about relentless fervour and an intense, unstoppable heat between these characters and I’ve never even come close to feeling that.” She ran her hands through her hair, tucking both sides behind her ears. “Maybe I can’t feel those things. Maybe I’m defective. Who knows. But if I am going to be comfortable enough to try with anyone, it will be you. So, I’m thinking. You’re here for eight weeks. And in that time, I’m proposing ,” she said with purposeful articulation, “That we come to some kind of an arrangement.”

She stood flicking her hands up and down her body. “You can use me for anything you like –” she stopped, cupping a hand around her mouth she lowered her voice, “S-E-X-ually. But in return, I want you to give me all of the moves Grant has to offer. I need the angst. I need to see what it takes to make my toes curl, if it’s possible. Show me what all of these women feel in the movies and the books I read. Show me what it’s like to enjoy my body with someone else. So I can maybe bring it to life for Summer and son.” She paused, finally looking at me, and I was frozen. Well every part of me other than my dick which couldn’t have remained still even if it tried after hearing that .

“Then, after the eight weeks, I will hopefully have a successful romance novel and you will have had a fun holiday...with benefits.” She finished with a shrug as if the offer she just put down on the table was the simplest thing in the world and the most normal conversation for us to have over breakfast on my first morning back in the Bay.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:47 am*

### Chapter Seven

His assessing gaze was penetrating as I stood awkwardly waiting for him to say something. Anything .

“You better respond right now because I don’t know much about desire and love but I do know you don’t leave someone hanging after they’ve practically begged you to use them. And not just to drive you to the shops or something but-but in those kind of ways.”

“You’ve made it sound so romantic. How could I refuse?” When my mouth fell open at the unexpected retort, his resulting grin could have melted the panties off a nun.

His obvious ploy to tip the scales in his favour with sarcasm worked and I sighed openly in irritation.

“Okay, let’s say I agreed,” he said before hastily adding, “I too would have rules.”

“God, you saying rules is a turn on,” I joked, “Name them.” I tacked on with false bravado. If I wasn’t holding my toast I would be finger fidgeting like nobody’s business and as it was, he knew all my calling cards which meant I needed to play it cool.

“I guess I can be your sexual inspiration,” he said with air quotations around his final words, “The real-life sex-god behind your fictional male character.” He laughed and I couldn’t help but smirk. If you didn’t know him as well as I did, you would fall for the suave exterior he portrayed to the world. It was the same cool front he was

serving right now, but he wasn't as calm as he was trying to be. Like me, there was a tense undercurrent to the intentional movements of his body. He was off-kilter and I felt giddy at the thought that I could do this to him.

His tone softened when he next spoke causing me to give him my undivided attention, fidget-toast forgotten. "But I won't do anything to risk what we have. You mean too much to me and I'm not sure I could live with myself if I did something to ruin our friendship. I just can't, Win," he paused, appearing uncertain. "Which means, we need a safe word. If I overstep, you use it."

"A safe word? Christ. Why would we need a safe word?" I was genuinely baffled. "I've never even come close to doing anything which could possibly require a safe word. I mean, maybe I could get onboard with a little spanking but I'm not sure I'm your whips and chains kind of gal." I added with candid honesty.

Jack's husky laughter immediately parked the trajectory my thoughts were taking.

"You've been dabbling into your dark romance again, haven't you?" His chair was loud against the floorboards as he stood and walked over to stand next to me.

I lifted my head to meet his gaze, my usual wit or quick retort uncharacteristically lost when I met his dark eyes.

"If this is going to work, we need to make sure we are on the same page at all times. And if we aren't, we use the safe word. That doesn't mean I will be spanking you though, unless you want me to." He said with a wink, again chuckling, and I felt my cheeks flush crimson.

Would I want that?

I was asking for anticipation and lust not the red room of pain. Maybe I wasn't

equipped for all he had to offer. I'd definitely portrayed a false confidence over the years, perhaps alluding to a far more active social life to compensate for what I was certain he was doing in his free time. But the truth was I was the icicle everyone claimed me to be and no matter how many times I tried to defrost myself enough to enjoy someone different, I couldn't.

I wasn't totally naïve though. Just inexperienced.

"Fine. What about infinity?"

"Done. Now what are your rules?"

I sat up straighter. This was the part I could manage because I'd spent hours after I finished a hefty chunk of writing, deliberating and knew exactly how it needed to work.

"One," I said, raising my finger into the air, "You are here for a break and I've missed you so much. I want our days to be as they were going to be. I want to spend time with my friend . If I'm constantly anticipating you about to do something, I won't be able to enjoy our time together and I don't get enough of you as it is. So night time is for inspiration but our days are normal. Two," I added another finger to the one already pointed upwards, "I'm not asking for you to just strip me naked and F-U-C-K me. It doesn't even need to be S-E-X. I mean, whatever happens happens, right? I'm just saying there are no parameters or expectations, you know?" I chewed the inside of my cheek at the way his pupils dilated over my final statement. It appeared this affected him as much as it did me.

"Anything else?" He asked after clearing his throat.

"Right. Yes. Three — no weird feelings. We love each other already so that's obvious but if either of us feel anything else, anything new, we need to be honest

because it will get messy. And messy is never something I want with you.”

Reaching for the jam he smeared some on his thumb before swiping it across my bottom lip. The pad of his thumb easily moved across my mouth as the rest of his hand cupped my chin. “Maybe messy is exactly what you need.” He’d moved in close, his breath a whisper on my skin.

When his throat bobbed, I sucked in a breath.

Suddenly, I was acutely aware of Jack Grant and what this was going to entail.

“And you’re sure? Like really sure, because I don’t want things to get awkward.” There was no hiding the way my chest was visibly rising and falling, from his touch or proximity – I couldn’t be sure.

“What could be awkward about doing things to you that I’ve only ever dreamed of?” The pulse in my neck started pounding, his words like warm syrup and I shivered. “Shit, this is going to be so fun.” He said, snapping me out of wherever the heck my mind had gone and back to a man who was clearly incredibly proud of himself for my blatant reaction.

“You can do the dishes. I’m going for a shower.” I said, needing some space before I scrapped my earlier assertions and begged for something I should not be begging for.

“Whatever you need, Win.” The boastful tease was clear in his words.

Maybe he was too good at this, I pondered as I raced upstairs in need of a cold shower, my body suddenly far too warm.

“It hasn’t changed, has it?” Jack said, his arm resting on the open window of my car as we headed for the store.

“The Bay? Never. You know how touchy people are around here. They despise change more than anything.” The sensation of the warm air was playful as my hand rolled through the wind, riding the invisible currents as I drove. I was also one of those people who hated change and it was partially why I never left. I was terrified of the unknown but he was fated for bigger things and always had been.

“Do you miss it when you’re away?”

“Sometimes. During the season not as much because I don’t actually get a lot of down time. But when we have a bye and most of the boys head home for the weekend...” He paused, watching the ocean as we skated down the adjacent road into town. It was only a fifteen minute drive from home and the view was beautiful, probably even more so when you didn’t see it everyday.

“It gets lonely sometimes, I suppose.”

I moved over to let another car pass.

“You know you can go just a little faster,” he said with a smile.

“The speed limit is there for a reason, Jacksby. What’s the rush?”

“You haven’t changed in all the years I’ve known you.” He said and I tapped the steering wheel, wondering if that was a good or bad thing. I’d never really fit in as a teenager. Other than Jack, I’d never had girlfriends or people who voluntarily wanted to spend time with me. Rather, I was more of a target for people in school. Someone to belittle or huff snide comments at as I passed. Cyborg , Robot Bitch and the Frosty Snowbitch some of the more docile terms. And consequently, I was a loner, preferring to spend most of my time in the library or with those I trusted wholeheartedly to avoid having to face it all.

Needing a change of subject, the focus away from me before I wallowed in those memories, I took an easy out.

“I remember the day you were drafted. You couldn’t pack your bags quick enough. Jackie gon’ be a football star ,” I sang loudly and off-key, remembering waiting for the news all day. He knew if he got a contract it would come with a call in the early evening, but we waited by that phone from lunchtime onwards. When he finally got the nod, Dean, Sharon, his older sister Darcy and I had swarmed him, unable to control our excitement.

“You always were destined for more.” I said wistfully because it was the truth. He was too big for Willow Bay and the success he had seen with the Hearts exemplified that.

“Remember how nervous I was when Andy and Coach knocked on the door to give me my jersey? I thought I was going to shit myself and you had no idea who either of them were and threw me shady looks when no one was looking because you were entirely miffed by my nerves.”

“They’re just people, Jack.” I repeated the same thing I’d said to him when I thought he wasn’t going to be able to even open the front door to let them in.

“It was a good day. There really is no place like home though,” he smiled, looking over at me. “When are you moving to Sydney with me?” He asked before singing just as loudly as I had, “ Well then, there , we oughta run off to the city ...” and I laughed at his rendition of the John Mellencamp classic. Our song. We threw those lyrics in whenever we could but now, it seemed more realistic.

“Could you actually imagine me living in a big city like that? I would hyperventilate entering a cafe.”



“Of course I could. I’ve seen you push yourself out of your comfort zone so many times. You just doubt yourself. Although, I’m not sure Mike and Deb would like that too much.”

“Mum and Dad are hardly home these days anyway. Wait until I show you their latest pictures. They just got to Western Australia and you’d think they’d arrived in Las Vegas with their level of excitement.”

“How does Mason feel about them being there?” He asked, referring to my older brother who moved to the other side of the country because Willow Bay made him and his partner, Ethan feel claustrophobic. I was certain it was to avoid the meddling of our parents, but that was never something he would admit lest he hurt their feelings.

I laughed knowingly. “He is happy they will meet the baby once she is born, but he won’t let them stay at the house so I’m sure he will be happy once they leave too.”

“They mean well though.” Jack said, always looking for the positive.

“They do and that’s the only reason Mase is able to keep his cool. It’s the unsolicited advice which kills them. You know they told Ethan that he would need to have their cat rehoused in case it sucked the breath right out of the baby.” I flicked a side eye at Jack, my feelings around this old wives tale written all over my face.

“I can imagine Eth took that really well,” Jack retorted sarcastically.

“Mase said he chewed an ulcer into the inside of his cheek to stop himself from telling them to fuck off.”

Jack guffawed, slapping his thigh in the process. “How are they? I bet they’re excited to finally meet their daughter.”

“I have no idea. I’m actually the worst sister. I make no effort, which is understandable really given how busy my single life is,” I explained with a sarcastic wince. “But we keep each other updated on the important things. He sends me pictures of all things baby. Their house looks like a marshmallow threw up in it and honestly, it is my childhood dream.”

“Maybe you can send them those things you have hanging on your door.”

“Blasphemy. I will be keeping those forever. But I should definitely get her some of her own. Great idea.”

Ignoring his mockery I was already compiling a list of places I could find some. They were dual purpose. Girls loved them and my brother would hate them. Seemed like a no brainer. Inflicting irritation on your sibling was a rite of passage and it was something both Mason and I took very seriously, much to the distaste of our parents.

Mum and Dad had adopted us both at the same time and while Mase had some memories of the foster family he was with before he moved to the Bay, I did not. Which meant Mum, Dad, Mase and Willow Bay were all I ever remembered and unlike my older brother, I never had any inclination to find my biological family. I’d been one of the lucky ones who found my place with a loving family who raised me as their own. Fertility issues for Mum meant she couldn’t conceive and they’d been desperate for children which was why they wanted Mase and I. He didn’t find the transition as easy as I did and I loved him so much and was terrified of losing someone who finally felt like mine. So, in a desperate attempt to keep him out of trouble I would find new ways to gain his attention. Just not always in the most appropriate ways. This would now be something his soon-to-be born daughter would inherit and the anticipation was making me jittery, imagining the things I could do with a tiny little teammate. The possibilities were endless.

The local shops were small in stature but for the most part hosted everything we

needed. The shop fronts were weathered from the salty breeze, bearing names that were more often than not synonymous with the family who owned them – Christerson's Groceries, Billson's Bakery and Cafe, Dickies Bar and Grill . Each unique in storefront and stock although all slightly faded from the coastal sun. Inside, they were purposefully brimming with personality and the staff were notorious for their ability to host a conversation lasting far longer than you ever needed, which meant you had to shop with intent.

Jack came around to where I was hunting through my purse for my phone and stretched sluggishly. Holiday mode already activated. I tried my best not to stare at the sliver of skin he was unknowingly showing as he lifted his arms over his head. Or the dark strip of hair which dipped below his waist band.

“What do we need?” He asked, shuttling me back to the sweltering parking lot. He was also aware if we didn't have a set list, we would leave with thirty things we didn't need and potentially be seconded to help fix, build or move something. None of which I wanted to do when it was at least 35 degrees Celsius today.

“I feel like pizza for dinner so you get the meat toppings and I will get the rest. Do you think you can avoid making eye contact because people know you're back and will be vicious with their questions. Willow Bay is nothing if not lacking in tact.”

“Win, you know I can't be rude. I'm as soft as a soggy tissue.”

“If you are not at the counter when I am, Jacky-Pie, you're walking home and you'll be stuck with the vultures. Your choice. Now let's go.”

He looked partially terrified and I chuckled as we escaped the heaviness of the heat, pausing for the briefest moment while we greedily absorbed the chill inside the store. Pointing to the deli, I headed in the opposite direction, praying old lady Linda Christerson was busy and didn't spot Jack. If she got her claws into him, we were

going nowhere fast and he would be prodded with questions about the time he made the headlines for all the wrong reasons.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:47 am*

### Chapter Eight

It didn't take long for us to fall into a smooth routine of unplanned relaxation where coexisting with Winter came easily. Like a pair of puzzle pieces we naturally fit together. Her morning routine included two pieces of toast and a glass of orange juice whereas I slept later and when I padded into the kitchen ready for my morning run, there were always two bottles of water next to a banana in the fridge. While working, her voice carried through the house as I tied my laces – professional yet warm, weaving effortlessly into the air, turning the driest of conversation into something pleasant to overhear.

It was a comfort, that voice. A reminder of her ubiquitous presence, even when she wasn't in sight. Just like always.

Winter spent the days working, using her short breaks to squeeze in some writing, while I fell into a predictable pattern of morning free-form training and afternoons lazily lounging by the pool. Broken only by trips into town for groceries or a quick meal with my parents, I spent most of my time at the house. The days weren't remarkable in their events, but in the warmth of shared understanding, we fell into easy cohabitation. And while I knew in just over a month I would head back down the highway to the city, where the silent moments were far and few between, I couldn't think of another place I would rather be. Another person I would choose to spend my days with.

Our agreement from weeks ago however, had been left on the shelf, none of us mentioning nor initiating anything under the guise of research. Sometimes I forgot it was there but other times, the anticipation hung like a thick cloud, ready to burst at

the seams and drown us both. Initially I thought she changed her mind but now, more often than not, I noticed her writing was slower and I'd found her at her desk, gazing out the window rather than doing any real work on her manuscript.

When I wandered up to her room this afternoon, she was sat with her back to the open door, again focused on something off in the distance. The sun was nearly set although it was still disgustingly hot outside which made it the perfect balmy evening for what I had planned. She didn't hear me enter due to my stealthy matrix style approach around her annoying plastic curtain shells, or perhaps she was simply lost in the abyss of her thoughts. Her thumb rubbing aggressive circles over one of the shells she kept next to her desk lamp was her only movement. The room looked the same as it did when we were kids, her parents never needing the space for themselves so her bed was still encompassed with what she called a Princess Net and I called a Mosquito Thingy. Her desk was still neatly tucked under the windowsill and her bookshelf adjacent to her built-in wardrobe, absolutely no rhyme or reason to where any of her books were placed. It was the one element of her life where she didn't have a method and if I ever sought clarification she appeared entirely miffed by the question. Almost as if she wasn't aware of her somewhat neurotic tendencies in most other areas of her world.

"You good?" The sound of my voice startled her enough that she jumped.

"Christ on a cracker, you scared me." She answered, her hand slamming into her chest.

"You didn't even hear me come in. What's on your mind?" I asked, glancing down to the way she was still swiping her finger back and forth across the shell.

She huffed out a breath, clearly frustrated. "I'm stuck and it's starting to really pee me off." I gently took the shell from her hand, any abrasive ridges on the exterior long gone from her incessant fidgeting.

“Come on. I’ve made us a gangster cheese platter. Let’s swim, eat and drink more of that orange poison.”

“Gangster cheese platter?” She asked, her lips quivering with what was a smile threatening to spread.

I puffed my chest with pride. “I even went to the shop today and got some of that apricot cheese you like which tastes like feet.”

“You had me at gangster but consider me sold,” she answered as we headed downstairs. “Did Linda see you? She has been hounding me about you anytime I’m in there.”

I sighed. “She did. Took me an hour and a half to get what I wanted. I also had to fix a bloody shelf and install Solitaire on an antiquated brick I think she uses as a phone.”

Win laughed, her hand on her chest and I smiled in response. She had the type of laugh that lingered in the air, effortlessly comforting and I could never ignore its warmth when I heard it.

“The woman is relentless, honestly. She is still hell bent on Aiden and I getting married, completely unaware that he is an absolute tosser and I’d rather take an oath of celibacy.”

I ground my teeth at the thought of her ever sharing any kind of relationship with Linda’s son. He was the last person I would want her to marry and it wasn’t just because he had a secret gambling addiction which cost him and his family more than they would ever care to admit. He’d treated Win like garbage when we were younger, calling her insidious names and doing anything and everything to piss her off. I was nearly certain he was worse when I wasn’t around but she was fairly tight lipped

about those things. School hadn't been easy for her and other than the one time I actually witnessed it, she remained tight-lipped.

"She said he was hoping to catch me for a beer while I was home."

"I'm RSVPing no to that endeavour so do not even..." She trailed off, her face brightening as it landed on the flowers I'd put in the vase on the table. "Oh my god. These are beautiful." She looked over at me curiously, one brow raised. "What are they for?"

"You," I answered with a shrug.

She leant down, lifting one of the blooms to her nose and breathing in as her eyes closed for the briefest moment.

"Gorgeous." She said, rubbing her thumb across the petal just as I knew she would. She was the most tactile person and it wasn't abnormal for her to glide her hands across surfaces with deliberate intent, seeking textures to ground her when she felt uneasy. When she first came to Sydney and we ventured around places unfamiliar to her, she would reach for my shirt, so subtly you wouldn't know if you weren't wholly attuned to her mannerisms. With each stroke, her breathing would slow, her shoulders relaxing as she found peace.

Only now, the quiet conversation between touch and calm was different. The sun's fading embrace painted her face, softening every curve of her skin and the denim shorts she was wearing rode up her thighs, drawing my unwarranted attention.

Fuck. That's your friend, you prick .

Why was I suddenly romanticising her?



“Happy holidays.” I answered, forcing my gaze anywhere but on her.

She bounded over, throwing her arms around me for a quick hug.

“You’re the best. I don’t think I’ve ever taken three weeks leave and when I ended that final call, it was a good feeling. I’m going to put my swimmers on and eat myself into a cheese coma. Meet you by the pool.”

We were a few kilos of snacks in and enough citrus deathbrew to knock out a baby elephant when I worked up the courage to finally ask her how her novel was tracking.

“Terribleeee.” She elongated the word with a whine before dipping below the water and coming to sit on the step next to me.

I tried not to chuckle, but she was adorable when she sulked.

“How so?” I asked, the venomous liquor fuelling my bravery.

“So I was able to write a fair bit a couple of weeks ago, but I’m back in no man’s land. I’ve spent the last two days brainstorming synonyms for...” She pointed beneath the water towards her bikini bottom.

“For your lady cave?” Her laugh burst out unexpectedly at my choice of words and water splashed the side of my face as her hands slapped up over her mouth.

“Oh my god. That is foul. I love it,” she giggled.

“I’ve been told I’m quite the poet,” I retorted sarcastically. “What about sausage pocket?”

Her eyes widened and uncontrollable laughter bubbled out again. “You are way better

than I am. All I had so far was flower, muffin and cherry biscuit.”

“Cherry biscuit?” I asked incredulously before I threw my head back with a laugh. She was so unbelievably innocent and she had no idea.

“I’m really not good at this,” she sighed.

“I can see that.”

“What about clam coffin?” She suggested with an entirely serious face.

“He thrust his raging dick inside her clam coffin.” My balled fists were on my hips as if the superhero stance would somehow make the line any less vulgar. “Why is someone going there to die?”

“Valid. Oyster express?” She looked so genuine I guffawed with no shame and she pouted in response, my laugh cutting short when she bit her lip in concentration.

With the lethal drinks taking control of all movements I pushed off the step and moved through the water to stand in front of her, her legs parting subconsciously, the spot readily available for me to fill.

I studied her face, a hunger I couldn’t suppress rolling through me as I brushed a strand of hair from her face and wiped my mind of any rational thought.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:47 am*

### Chapter Nine

Catching the change in his gaze, I cleared my throat. “Wha-”

“Shhhhh,” he slid his thumb along my lip, silencing me. “Here’s a rule for you, when we are researching there are no questions – unless you are stopping me and you have a safe word for that.”

The feel of the stone pavers was rough under my fingers, my knuckles no doubt white from the pressure I had on the side of the pool, desperate to escape underwater but equally as desperate to stay.

He moved closer, the water rippling around us and his eyes dropped to follow the dance of the water as it momentarily pooled around my chest before streaming onward. My pulse took off in a sprint, just as it did the last time he looked at me with the same heat in his eyes.

“So tell me what happens next in your story. Once Jackson finally kisses Summer.” His request darted directly to my ovaries, my fallopian tubes no doubt high-fiving at the depth of his voice sending sonar flares to my awaiting eggs.

Well, this was new.

“I didn’t get much further than the kiss, but the new description in that is perfect,” I whispered, his face so close to mine that I could map the alluring gradient of his deep brown eyes as they darkened toward the pupil. His gaze tracked my face, lingering on my mouth and it was all I could do not to hyperventilate. I’d asked him for this, but

now I wanted it for reasons not at all related to Jackson and Summer.

But their inspiration – Jack and .

“And what was it like?”

His voice ran the full length of my spine as I tried to formulate a worthy description.

Like spending the summer with your best-friend. Like staying awake all night, talking about nothing and everything. Like your most comfortable sweater on the coldest of nights. Like pressing the final piece in a puzzle. Like someone you love finally coming home after a thousand nights away.

“Everything,” I breathed and it was the last thing I said before his lips were on me in a way they never had before.

His mouth was soft and warm, the lightest of kisses pressed to the edge of my mouth, his hands brushing wet strands of my hair from my face. I, on the other hand, was frozen, my hands still gripping the edge of the pool, my eyes closed. I could hear my own breaths, fast and shallow, my body coming alight when his lips pressed another kiss to the other side of my mouth.

He took his time, each touch of our bodies precise. The entire day reduced to this one singular moment. Every spot he tasted left sizzling under the memory of where he just was until he parted my lips with his own, slid his tongue into my mouth and lit up every corner of my being.

The vibrant burst of citrus sparked across his palette, tasting so much better than any of my drinks tonight. Like a switch, my hands left the safety of the edge and reached around his neck as if he was my life jacket in the darkest of oceans. The tenderness of his touch was deliberate, the awkwardness of intimacy with someone new nowhere in

sight because this was Jack. One of the only people I was my truest self around.

The water swirled around us, encouraged by the urgency of our movements as I pulled him in closer, the softest of moans escaping the confines of my throat when his bulge grazed my most sensitive part. Suddenly, in a collision of unspoken feelings, his gentle caress became needy, his touch urgent as his hands were everywhere, sending goosebumps across my skin.

His mouth parted from my own, teasing the skin of my neck, his heavy breathing all I could hear.

“Tell me to stop, Win.” His words pleading, while his hands played an unstoppable tune. And I didn’t want him to stop, because with a single kiss I felt alive and like an addict, I was suddenly hooked on the enigmatic affinity between us.

With stark realisation it hit me that I was only going to have this for a few short weeks. It was never meant to last, never meant to be real, only ever happening under the guise of research. In a few weeks, he would leave Willow Bay behind yet again, leaving me to live my mundane 9-5 life without him. I might never, ever again experience the electrifying newness that came alongside the quiet affection of being with someone you trust. Being with your best-friend in such a way.

Which meant I needed to trust my instincts to guide me. No past experiences compared to this so I needed to close off the warning bells of my heart and simply focus on the beat pulsating underneath my skin telling me this was exactly where I should be.

“Please don’t stop,” I begged and he pulled back, reading me for uncertainty or fear, none of which he would find. “I need to know what happens next,” I murmured and at my quiet vulnerability he flew back at me, reefing me towards him and up against the cool tiled wall of the pool. The chill against my back barely noticeable with the

inferno between our suddenly ravenous bodies.

If this was just research then I was ruined.

Destroyed.

Because it wasn't just perfect. It was inevitable. And when I succumbed to everything our mouths were fighting to have, it was wild.

My hands greedily mapped the width of his wide shoulders, his skin as smooth as you would expect, only the water around us made it so much more intense.

His hands gripped my arse, my legs wrapping around him and locking him in a snare to ensure he didn't move – didn't stop.

My skin tingled under his contact and when he again broke the kiss, I was panting with need. Dizzy on the friction of him rubbing himself against me perfectly. Even with two layers of clothing and surrounded by water, the sensitivity was blinding.

Good Lord.

I wanted to strip bare and offer myself to him.

The pulse between my legs only intensified when a low rumble emanated from his chest as his lips bit at the skin of my neck. His hands sliding up and down the outside of my thighs, gripping me in a fashion which allowed his very obvious need to move erotically against my own.

“Godddd,” I panted, the night sky dancing around us.

I was going to come if he didn't stop. The primal desire for him to continue grinding

against me was a craving – causing an ache only he could dissolve. The throbbing pang which started in my core was now everywhere.

“You’re making me feral, Win.” The husky edge to his voice summoned every cell of my body and it was all I could do not to purr in response. His hips undulated against me recklessly, our mouths wildly seeking each other out.

I was too far gone.

The friction of my swimwear rubbing against my swollen bud in the most delectable of ways.

The feel of how hard he was with every crushing thrust, the pressure sending me feverish.

I wanted to tell him to stop because things felt too fast. Too intense. Too much.

This was like nothing I’d ever experienced, nothing I could or would recover from.

But I couldn’t have stopped even if I tried.

I was so close to the edge that the faintest of breezes would send me free-falling.

I needed more of him.

On me, in me, everywhere.

As if attuned to my every whim he moved faster, his touch voracious, his tongue drawing patterns across my jaw.

Using the poolside as leverage to hold me in place, his hands tickled the sides of my

waist, moving higher. When his thumbs grazed the taut peaks of my nipples through my swimwear my gaze shot forward and into a face I'd never seen him wear. His swollen mouth parted, his glazed eyes full of lust – for me – and it was my undoing.

On a sound I wasn't sure I'd made in my entire life, I gripped his hair and shook against his body, his face buried into my neck as he growled so deep, the reverberation only intensified the firestorm between us and we rode our pleasure together, the surrounding water the only thing keeping us from falling.



### Chapter Ten

H oly fucking hell.

I was panting, an equally heavy-breathing Win still wrapped around me like a bow.

The kiss was expected. Planned even as per our agreement. Give her the sensations she requested.

What wasn't planned was the ferocity in which she would kiss me back. The response my body would have to her, suddenly awake as if it had been asleep for too long.

Equally as unexpected was the embarrassing yet heady realisation that I'd blown my load. Without the removal of any damn clothing like a virginal newbie.

And while I desperately wanted to hide forever, I needed to face her now we had very noticeably crossed a line.

“Soooo, that was different.” Had her voice always been so sultry?

With my hands still firmly on her thighs, I lent back, gauging how awkward or uncomfortable she was going to be. I would need to guard my own racing feelings and calm the tempest I created especially if she was about to freak out on me. Change was not an area of strength for Winter and this was most definitely a change – even if she did ask it of me.

“Good different?” I asked with a forced sarcasm, pretending I wasn't aware of my

hands still gripping her hips, her ankles still locked around me.

Her teeth found her bottom lip and the sight made my cock stir. He clearly had no care for the possibility of destroying over twenty years of friendship, ready as ever to take and I can't say I blamed him. I wanted to pull her lip from her teeth with my own and suck on it. Preferably with no clothing between us.

“Unexpectedly different.” She answered, before releasing her hold and dropping into the water in front of me.

Shit. I needed to fix this. Should I apologise, tell her we could forget it ever happened? Beg her to rewind and find another muse for her writing. The thought made my jaw tight but worse would be her regret of me. Of us.

When she resurfaced a few feet away I opened my mouth to get on the front foot, but she beat me to it. “I'll need you to do it again for me to really know though.” I felt my breath leave me in a whoosh and her playful smile engulfed me, reminding me I was both physically and emotionally at home with her regardless of anything that ever happened.

And with that reassurance and a matching grin, I followed her from the pool to our awaiting chairs and drinks.

I didn't miss the way she toyed with the edge of her towel, but the thought wasn't alarming. It was more a gesture of uncertainty rather than one of regret and I think we both just didn't know where to go from here.

“Sooooo,” she said, her intonation rising and falling.

She was all false bravado and while I wanted to lay back and enjoy her doing her best to keep her cool, I didn't want to push her too far. Her head would be scattered right

now and she would be itching to be alone, to retreat in her mind and come to terms with all the firsts from today. Whenever she experienced something fresh or overcame a task she'd spent time overthinking, there was a comedown for my Win and it included space for her to process her own thoughts before she could even consider anything else. Something I had always relied on in her – because there were no sporadic decisions. If she said something, I knew she truly meant it.

Tightening my towel around my still wet body, I lent down and gave her a peck on the cheek.

“You head in for the first shower. I'll clean up.” Her responding look of relief told me I read her perfectly and I couldn't say I didn't also need to unpack what had just happened on my own.

“Thanks, . Love ya,” she answered, with a kiss to her fingertips which then pressed against my cheek as she passed.

I was very clearly in over my head.

So deeply in over my head that I was at risk of losing my mind but already thinking of the next way I could touch her.

The hours I spent worrying about how today would pan out were wasted when Winter came bounding into the kitchen the next morning. Orange juice in one hand and phone held up in the other, she stood next to me so her parents could greet me.

Shirt off and hair a mess, a morning conversation with Mike and Deb was not on the agenda, especially when the sun had barely risen.

“Hey, Guys.”

“, how are you?” Mike greeted, the phone obscenely close to his face providing an unnecessary shot up his nose.

“Can’t complain over here, mate. How’s the bike?” I asked and was thanked with a suspicious elbow to the ribs, coincidentally out of range of the camera.

Winter moved out of shot and threw her hand in the air, clearly annoyed I’d initiated what I found out was at least a twenty minute monologue on how their tandem bicycle was travelling, but I wasn’t mad. It was an easy topic of conversation and meant I could prolong having to decipher where we were this morning after the intimacy of the night before.

There was no doubt the liqueur aided in my gusto to role play in the pool the previous evening but it wasn’t what pushed the accelerator through the floor. It was the taste of citrus lingering on her tongue, the feel of those lush thighs under my grip, the way my cock responded when our bodies met. Those were the reasons I hadn’t been able to stop after only a kiss.

In the sunshine of the morning though, the intimacy of our actions was exposed and while one of her rules included nothing happening throughout the day, it didn’t mean my mind wasn’t awash with images of what she would like in the same scenario, but with the sunlight casing her skin.

Deb’s voice pierced through my rumination asking about our plans for today. Apparently Mike’s part was over and I’d zoned out and missed it entirely.

“We aren’t sure yet,” Win answered, looking towards me for insight.

“My folks invited us over for dinner actually,” I said remembering the message I’d read after waking.

“Oh, how are Dean and Shaz?”

“They’re really good. Elbow deep in renovations. It’s a minefield over there.” I shook my head with a smile. Our parents had been best-friends longer than we had been alive and it was their inseparability which made Win and I as close as we were now, but it wasn’t what kept us.

“You’re on holidays now, love?” Deb asked Win who nodded.

“Sure am, thank goodness. Three whole weeks of relaxation with this guy.” She answered, laying her head on my shoulder like she’d done thousands of times before.

“, take her into town would you, she doesn’t get out enough.” I felt Win tense next to me but her face remained impassive, her mum none the wiser to the social pressure she placed on her.

“Now she is on holidays I have plenty of things planned, don’t you worry, Deb.” I winked and as expected she grinned, satisfied.

“Okay you two, we better let you go. Enjoy the heat, Dad said it’s meant to be a scorcher there today, make good use of that pool.”

“Oh, we are.” I answered matter of factly as Win waved at the phone before hanging up and swatting my arm. Flashes of cascading water, heavy panting and puffy lips flaring through my memories.

“You did not just say that.” She said, her cheeks a bright shade of red. A cute little tendency we both shared.

“Say what?” She didn’t buy my innocence for a second but the shake of her shoulders was enough to know we were good.

“I love my mother but can’t she just accept I prefer to stay home. She thinks it means there is something wrong with me.” She stated, the sudden pivot in conversation enough to distract my thoughts from wandering into dangerous territory again.

“Are they really your parents if they don’t piss you off at least once every time you speak?” I asked in an attempt to lighten her mood. Her mother’s lack of understanding of her social needs had always been a bit of a sore point and it seemed distance did nothing to curb that.

“I just wish they understood me better. Anyway, what time is dinner?”

“They said anytime after four is fine,” I answered with a shrug. “We should go down to the beach after, it’s been a few years since I’ve been down there at night.”

“Sounds like a plan. Want to come with me to my place this morning then, I need to grab the mail.”

“How’s the writing, sweet pea?” Mum asked Win and I buried my face in the paper I was reading, knowing if anyone noticed the way my cheeks flamed, I would have a please explain thrown at me before I could blink. While I’d tossed and turned after our tryst in the water, it didn’t seem my pool partner was having the same issues. The auditory embodiment of ideas broke the otherwise silent house late into the night, her sudden burst of authorial energy evident. Everytime I thought she had to be done, the sharp chime signalling the end of the line would erupt before the clickety clack of the keys again radiated through the wall. It seemed she was gaining the inspiration she desperately needed and while I was loving playing as her muse, it didn’t come without a little over-thinking on my part.

“Much better actually.” I avoided looking at her, knowing I would either laugh or give away the flush I could feel against my cheeks.

“, come out here would you?” Dad called, taking my attention away from the kitchen where Win was now providing Mum with a synopsis of her current story.

I put the paper down, joining Dad out the back at the barbeque where he was grilling the meat for dinner.

“You been training still?” He asked, understanding while it was my downtime, I wouldn’t sacrifice my fitness for anything.

“I’ve been getting a session in most days, plus a jog into town and back which will help with the time trial when I return.” I answered, recounting the odd jobs Linda had been having me work on each time she caught me anywhere near the store.

“How’s the head been?” After everything happened last season, I called to give them the truth before they woke to a fabricated version of events, admitting I’d messed around with cocaine. I’d also kept my promise to them that I wouldn’t do it again, learning a pretty tough lesson about the consequences of wasting the potential and opportunities afforded. For myself and others.

“S’okay. The guilt is heavy, you know. But not much I could have done differently.” Jay had spoken to the coaches and given his manager a press release before I even got to the clubhouse that night, taking full responsibility for the images and story which claimed an unnamed Hearts player had taken illicit drugs . Jay had been the one to tell me not to do it but a few drinks in and high on an immaturity driven invincibility, I didn’t listen.

While I escaped the scandal publicly unscathed, Jay retired effective immediately. Since then I’d found remorse a constant barrier which hindered my training, my performance on the field and my moods. It had taken a fair amount of time with the team psychs, who all knew the truth, and with Andy and Jay, to work through that. Working through the guilt culminated in an internal initiative which saw me

educating every new recruit on the pressures of professional football, the harsh realities of recreational drug use and the responsibilities which came alongside our roles.

“Five letter word, clue is blunder.”

I watched him turn the meat, my mind ticking over in contemplation.

“Lapse?” I offered and Dad tapped the tongs against the metal plate in applause.

“Correct. Now go tell your mother I’m five minutes away.” He said, as supportive as he was the night I first called.

It was only a short walk to the isolated area of beach near Mum and Dad’s and we headed down after a few rounds of Guess the Word or what it should really be called, Help Dad finish his fucking crossword , discarding our shoes where the grass met the sand.

It was still warm despite the blanket of stars lining the darkened sky, and we wandered to the water’s edge, watching as the water raced up the sand capturing our feet before cascading back down. Neither of us spoke, lost in our own thoughts as the waves broke, the acoustics of the water inviting a serenity only the ocean could provide.

“Do you still love your job?” Her question took me by surprise and I paused, actually thinking about my response before saying yes just because it was expected.

“Sometimes. I love playing footy still and I definitely love the club and the bonds I’ve formed with the boys.”

“But?”



“But, I’m not proud of some of my actions. The environment can become quite toxic if you aren’t surrounded by good people. Luckily, Andy is a great captain, because some other teams aren’t quite so contained.”

She folded her arms across her chest, the moonlight bouncing off the shells on her bracelet as she nodded in acknowledgement. Her skirt fluttered in the breeze, swaying softly against her sun-kissed legs. Legs which had held me in place only yesterday as I ground myself into her.

“Sometimes I think about quitting my job,” her voice was so soft, I took a step closer to prevent her confession from getting lost in the sound of the waves. “Hopping in the car and driving to a place where no one knows my name. Where people won’t struggle to understand me or pressure me to be someone I’m not because they’ve known me so long that they think they’re entitled to have an opinion on my life. Anything to avoid living another day doing exactly as I always have.”

Her fingers toyed with her ring, a heavy sigh leaving her before she spoke next.

“What if I never leave Willow Bay? If I’m too scared to take a chance and I end up as alone as old Linda Christerson? What if I’m single for the rest of my life? Oh god. I will take over the grocery store and it will turn into Lennox’s Luxuries.” The terrified expression on her face softened the sarcastic quip on my tongue, instead stepping behind her and pulling her up against my chest.

“You’ll never be alone because you’ll have me. I’ll come and work for you.” I answered, knowing it wasn’t what she meant. Leaving Willow Bay had been easy for me because I had fantasised about playing for the Hearts since I was a little kid. Sydney was where I always dreamed I would live. But I hadn’t thought about how hard leaving Win behind would be because as a naive teenager, I just assumed she would come too. We’d done everything together, so why wouldn’t she follow me? Our adventures were never meant to end like that.

It wasn't until I was older that I realised it came from a place of fear. Of uncertainty with anything new, especially places as busy and unpredictable as a big city. An innate anxiety she couldn't control which resulted in her remaining stagnant in the confines of predictability.

"For now." She answered, her hand reaching down to subtly hold the hem of my shirt and her head lolling back on my chest. The familiar hint of orange and strawberries cut through the air mixing with the sea salts of the night and bringing a warmth to my chest.

"Look up there," I said, pointing to a constellation in the sky. "Remember what it's called?"

"Alphard," she replied, before adding, "The brightest star in the Hydra Constellation." Her memory had always been a steel trap and I knew she would have the answer still firmly in her grasp after I told her one night a long time ago. A thirteen year old doing anything to impress his pretty friend. As teenagers our parents would have weekly dinners and with Darcy and Mason both holding part time jobs in town, we would use the nights to wander the beach, anything to avoid helping with the post-meal clean up. I loved star-gazing and she was always happy to listen to whatever new celestial fact I'd read about. It became a routine – each week brought forth an opportunity to tell her something new, impress her with my knowledge on the stars. Which at the time, I thought was the ultimate flex.

Back then I hadn't even considered if she would care, but her remembering warmed me all these years later.

Moving to stand in front of her, I admired the way the light from the moon illuminated the deep brown of her almond shaped eyes.

"We can't always see the stars, but they never leave us. Do you know the name of the

brightest star in my sky?” I asked, watching the way her eyes darted between my own, the way her chest rose and fell a little quicker as she shook her head.

“Winter.” I answered, before pressing my lips to hers for no reason other than it felt right.

### Chapter 11

A skinning Jack to help me was the riskiest yet best decision in my twenty-six years of living. The evidence of its success was in the word count of my current work in progress which seemed to increase exponentially whenever he even breathed in my direction. But, what I didn't anticipate was the threat to my heart which increased when he did things like kiss me as though I were his only source of oxygen.

This one was different from last night. Where last night was laced with a heat, which on my part was twenty years in the making, tonight was like molten poetry. Each flick of his tongue against my own, intentional, each whisper of his hands against my back, precise.

I'd asked for examples. To make me feel so I could create something I'd never experienced. But what I was getting was a demonstration from a maestro who was destined to play only for me. It was no wonder he turned heads wherever he went, when his touch was the only thing to clear my ever running mind. When he was on me like this, there was no space for fear or uncertainty. No room for over-thinking, he consumed every fibre of my being.

With the stars above and the waves below, he tasted and took from me as though I was the antivenom to loneliness. And unable to contain myself, I met his vitality with vigour, acutely aware of our expiration date. Desperate to take whatever I could, while I could.

I longed to feel his skin under my hands, trace his chest with my finger tips, drawing patterns of our favourite constellations on his body. My own body thrummed with

need, recharging and drawing on him as though he were my only source of life.

When my hands brushed his waist underneath his shirt, his response was electric, amplifying my need. I explored his back, nearly panting into his mouth at the way the definition of his muscles felt better than I ever could have imagined. The way he mapped my body by running his hands down my back and grabbing hold of my backside before pulling me into him.

The encouragement of how hard he was only incited me further as he walked me backwards up the beach, our mouths never parting until I reefed his shirt over his head, discarding it on the sand before throwing myself at him again.

As if I needed to track his entire being with my touch, my physical exploration of his chest only solidified everything I'd always thought.

He was flawless.

And Christ if he didn't smell like seductive leather. I wanted to coat myself in his scent like an uniced cake. Who needed oxygen anyway?

"I need to taste you." He said against my mouth and I felt my eyes widen in shock, my nipples so hard they throbbed. He reached for his shirt, shaking off the sand and laying it down carefully before he gestured for me to sit.

I obeyed instantly, drunk on the impending pleasure.

Dropping to his knees in front of me, he ran his hands up my legs which instinctively parted, his eyes coveting my body.

I leant back on my elbows, lifting my hips when he reached for my panties, easily gliding them down my legs. His eyes tracking the movement in the single most

seductive moment of my life.

I knew I was already wet, his tongue in my mouth enough to cause heat to pool between my legs and I tried to pull my skirt down a little, suddenly embarrassed.

“Don’t,” he snapped and when I caught his gaze, I moaned softly. The desire was unmistakable and I stopped, letting him have his fill, just as I’d dreamed of doing for longer than I cared to admit.

“You make me ache,” he grumbled, before descending beneath my skirt. He parted me with his fingers before I felt the lightest flicker of his tongue against my flesh, eliciting a shiver from the deepest part of my soul.

Holy fire of hell.

My legs fell all the way open, my arms no longer able to hold myself up when he brought my clit into his mouth and sucked, his fingers pressing at my entrance.

“Jack,” I moaned, my hips rising of their own accord needing more friction and as always he read me as if I were written just for him. He circled my opening with his finger before entering me as his tongue flicked across my bud. His other hand gliding up my stomach and reaching for my breast with a squeeze which made me spasm with need. I ripped the straps of my shirt down, freeing my chest from the confines of my bra as he paused to look up.

“Oh, fuck.” He huffed, his fingers still swirling inside me as he moved up my body to take my nipple between his teeth. My heart hammered as his tongue circled my chest, his caress broken only with declarations of how much he loved my taste, how perfect I was or how he couldn’t quite believe this was happening.

Me either .

Pressing another heated kiss to my mouth, he descended south – taunting me with languidly slow strokes while his finger moved in and out glacially.

He studied my body, repeating actions he sensed I liked, which at this point felt like every flick, touch or taste.

The animalistic groans he made when he dipped his tongue inside set my blood on fire, my ears ringing as he began pumping his hand in and out of me with renewed intensity.

I whimpered, my body writhing in the sand desperately, ravenous for the entirety of this man. Hooking his free hand around my hip, he yanked me down wolfishly as my body tingled with what I knew was imminent.

The curl of his finger inside me was my detonation, an explosion of senses as I erupted against his mouth, his name a call of pleasure out to the otherwise abandoned beach. The rumbling waves a backing track to the final act erupting just beyond its reach.

He encouraged my pleasure, lapping at my swollen pussy as I shook with the aftermath of what I would later realise was a fundamental moment of my life. The moment I realised the fall happened without my notice, like a shooting star disappearing before you've had the chance to really grasp the path it tracked across the night sky.

I'd fallen and it was hard, messy and unrequited.

I was in love with my best friend.

Docile comfortability came naturally when he was around. We laughed, shared our stories and fears – new and old – and basked in what was another chapter in our

friendship, albeit entirely new. We swam in the pool, wandered the beach for shells and gazed at the stars at night, talking until one of us could no longer hold their eyes open. We shared lunches with his parents, phone calls with mine – which included seeing my divine new niece, Amelia – and quick trips into town, but mostly, it was just the two of us – *sympatico* as we'd always found ourselves together.

The break was easy, freeing and wholesome.

My emotional infatuation with Jack was a no brainer, he was intelligent, empathetic, thoughtful and he understood me on a level no one else ever could.

I always knew he was my soul mate.

What was new though, was the level of physical attraction I felt. At every waking moment I wanted to taste him, have his face between my legs and ride his mouth until I came. Although frustratingly, for the past two weeks since the night on the beach, he'd kept our time together purely platonic.

I would head off to bed each night, hungry for a meal only he could provide. I would bring myself to release with memories of his touch, the explosion of cells when he pushed his fingers inside me and the rough glide of his tongue on flesh.

My writing stats had never been better and Your Assistant, as I'd recently coined my manuscript, was spicier than a jalapeno popper. Scenes I could never have imagined, practically wrote themselves to visions of Jack.

Yet, away from the typewriter, I felt flat. Petulant. Irrationally angry. And hiding the reason behind this irritability was getting more difficult. I was a stropky, horny teenager who wasn't getting her way although doing nothing to even try to rectify that because I couldn't even fathom where to begin.



Banging my hands against the keys, I sighed in frustration at the current scene I was writing — the standard third-act break up which was usually ironically loaded with unspoken declarations of love.

I needed a snack or a night-cap, something to distract me from my ever-hammering libido. Even my monthly visit from the dreaded Aunt Flo last week wasn't enough to dull my need. If anything, it increased my desire as if it were annoyed that I hadn't utilised the delectable human staying with me to bring forth an embryo. And now it had finished, I was acutely aware of what that meant — there were no reasons why we couldn't continue what we started.

What was I going to do when he went back home again? I brushed the thought aside as I ninja style snuck past my beaded door curtain, refusing to wallow in a pain which would be here soon enough. Pausing at Jack's closed door, I contemplated knocking and asking him to join me.

Instead quietly leaning my forehead against the closed door – metaphoric of how our entire lives played out. Always a partition, a boundary between us separating me from what I wanted most but was too afraid to reach. And now I'd tasted the forbidden fruit, it was the only thing I craved.

The soft mumblings of his voice cause my head to jolt, my ear pressed to the door quicker than I'd ever moved. Was he on the phone? Who was he talking to this late at night? Was there someone else? The thoughts sent heated waves of jealousy through my body, dissolving all the blood from my face, my palms growing clammy against the woodgrain.

Suddenly I was eavesdropping and breaching all forms of guest etiquette. My mother would be horrified.

I would judge myself for the grotesque invasion of privacy later when I wasn't trying

my hardest to decipher his murmurings as I held my breath, as if that would somehow enhance my hearing.

The sound was low, guttural almost and my ear flung from the door when I realised he wasn't murmuring on the phone.

He was moaning.

I squeezed my thighs together as my brain conjured exactly what he was doing to incur those sounds, my body responding instantly.

Before I'd thought better of it, I knocked lightly and opened the door without awaiting a response.

Apparently I lacked any respect for boundaries now too. My lascivious heart was going to Hell with the rest of the world who interrupted people in the act of self-pleasure. He shot upright in bed, the sheet covering his lower half in a suspiciously tented manner. The small amounts of moonlight peeking through the open curtain was enough to showcase he wasn't wearing a shirt. My eyes greedily charted his torso, over his tattoo I wanted to lick and the chest I wanted to trace.

"What's wrong?" He asked. His initial response, like always, for my wellbeing.

I walked towards the bed and he gripped the sheet with both hands, probably terrified I would discover what he was so obviously doing – as if it wasn't the reason I was standing in front of him, with incredibly wet panties and a throbbing sex which begged for satisfaction.

"Can I..." Oh my god. I couldn't say the words.

What was I thinking? What was I actually thinking?

“Can you what?” He prompted, his voice deep, the sheet still struggling to conceal the evidence of his arousal and I used that as the courage I needed.

“Can I?” I gestured towards the sheet, unable to articulate exactly what I meant and his eyes widened briefly in understanding.

When he didn’t respond I knew this was my last chance. He left in a week and while I knew he would walk away, back to the life he created for himself, I would remain stagnant in Willow Bay. I needed to take my chance or I would live with the constant what if.

With forced confidence, I reached for the bottom of my tank top with both hands, pausing only long enough for him to tell me to stop, before pulling it over my head and pushing my sleep shorts down to my ankles.

The blanket of darkness gave me the conviction to stand before him, entirely naked as his sharp intake of breath pierced the air. He still didn’t speak and I wasn’t sure what that meant until he pulled the sheet back in an invitation I was never going to refuse.

Slipping under the cool sheets next to him, I rolled onto my side mirroring the position he was now laying.

The cicadas split the night air, the open window allowing a cool breeze to enter making sleep achievable despite the sweltering days.

“Win, I have no control with you,” he whispered, his body frozen.

I hadn’t seen him scared before. He was always the bold one, providing me with the confidence I needed in any situation. But tonight, I knew I would need to step forward and lead. He was never going to cross the line we had been teetering since the night he arrived.

I just hoped that his fear wasn't because he didn't want this, but like me, because the sheer need coursing through our veins was petrifying.

Pushing all self-doubt aside, I raised the sheet and took in his equally naked form.

My mouth went dry at the ferocity of need I felt at seeing him in such a way.

Thicker than I ever imagined, he was breathtakingly hard, his arousal calling for me in a primal way.

I wanted him to stretch me, fill me and curb the ache only he could and with that thought, I slowly pushed up and flung a leg over him, straddling his hips, my mouth inches from his own.

"You know the safe word," I reminded him before my mouth was on his with the longing a fortnight without his touch and a lifetime of wanting it had elicited.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:47 am*

### Chapter 12

I was dreaming. There was no other explanation.

I was going to wake up with very sticky sheets and a raging boner after conjuring my wildest fantasies. Because the reality of Winter on top of me, her bare pussy sliding against my equally bare cock was too extraordinary to believe. Minutes ago I'd been aggressively close to cuming to the recollection of the taste of her on my tongue. The way she came undone, her pussy squeezing my fingers as she undulated with pleasure. And now, here she was, the redolent hints of strawberry, citrus and sea salt clouding the room.

Realising I was reciprocating in kiss only, frozen in fear and terrified I would burst the illusion, I ran my trembling hands up and down her back, groaning with the realisation that she really was here.

She was in my bed. On top of me in her most pure form.

She kissed my cheeks before nipping at my jawline and I gripped the sheets underneath me, an erogenous zone I hadn't before known unlocked. Her full body was warm against my own, the sight of fucking perfection as she moved down my chest, my eyes closing as I focused on the feel of her against my skin.

She paused, lightly outlining the shape of my tattoo, tenderly pressing her lips to each cardinal point before slowly making her way down my body.

The guttural growl from my chest was unstoppable when she took me in her hand, her

tongue darting out to lick the pre-cum leaking from my insatiable cock at the sight of her. The view of her lips parting around me was a detail which would be forever imprinted in my mind as she swallowed me deep.

A vision I'd created for years in various situations. Win sucking my dick behind a tree on the way home from school. Taking me in her mouth under water in her pool, or in the backseat of my car anytime we were in there together. Only now it was actually happening I'd given her no justice because the reality was so much better.

"You have no idea how fucking sexy you look right now." I told her, knowing there was nothing she loved more than affirmations. And providing them also sent a thrilling rush through me as her pupils dilated.

Her resulting groan as her other hand moved down between her legs was breathtaking and I pressed up onto my elbows, desperate to see her touching herself.

She lashed her tongue around my shaft, looking up at me often for reassurance or guidance, I wasn't sure. The sounds of her mouth sucking and taking were etched in my brain.

"Come here," I commanded before I ended this all too soon. Being around her gave me a perpetual state of blue balls and seeing her naked, in my bed, with my dick in her mouth meant I was teetering on the edge.

I moved aside, pointing to the sheets where I was just laying and watched as she sensually filled the space with her lithe movements. I wanted to make this last. To map her body before spending hours bringing it to life with colour, but there was no chance that was going to happen today.

Because I was about to have what I'd wanted since I first noticed Winter. Despite trying to ignore our molecular chemistry, I was about to bring to life every single one

of my hidden fantasies.

Reaching for the hand she'd had between her legs, I slowly sucked her arousal off each of her fingers. Savouring the taste of her skin and the hooded gaze of her eyes.

The most beautiful woman I'd ever known – the only woman who really knew me.

“I’m going to fuck you. And I want to take my time but I won’t be able to, not tonight – because you make me crazy, Win.” I admitted, moving on top of her and nearly drooling as her legs spread open for me.

I knew she was on birth control and had never slept with anyone unprotected. The same as she knew I never had because until recently we were the closest of friends and it was a topic we haphazardly discussed at some point. As I lined myself up with her slick entrance and pressed inside, I knew above all else, this didn’t feel cataclysmic just because she was my friend – it was because she was my everything.

She tipped her head to the side, watching me enter her for the very first time, the same way I couldn’t look anywhere else.

With each inch, her body tightened, bringing me home in an indescribable way and once I reached the hilt, our bodies were connected in every way possible. I looked deeply into her eyes, mentally photographing the pleasure and beauty of a naked and ready Winter in my bed. I catalogued the sight of her lavish tits rising and falling with her breaths, the deep red of her mouth, the curve and contours of her body aligned with mine.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” I said, our breath mingling as she bit at my lip. A confidence in her I’ve never seen before.

“I need you to move, . God, please, move.” She begged and I couldn’t have denied

her if someone was holding a gun to my head. The need to thrust into her innate, an organically raw coming together of two beings who were always destined to meet.

She scratched her nails down my back as I sucked on her neck, certain I would be leaving marks and not caring in the least. She felt fucking exquisite, her pussy hugging my cock so tight as if terrified to let go and it only intensified my speed.

Her little moans with every thrust sent me wild, my mouth kissing her in every place it could land. Marking her as mine.

“Your pussy was made for me, Win,” I said before taking her nipple in my mouth, my hips still slamming against hers. Her audible groans were the only cheer squad I’d ever need as she gripped at my back, her legs wrapping around me to bridge any gap between us.

“Tell me you’re mine.” I pleaded, not caring if it was only for tonight, but desperate to hear her say it all the same.

“I’m yours, ,” she said, her breaths heavy. “I’ve always been yours.” She added, the sincerity in her words sending me into the abyss as my balls tightened and I exploded inside her, causing her to detonate underneath me at the same time.

“Fuckkkkk,” I ground, ramming into her until we both rode our release to the very end.

I didn’t move, instead lapping at her, pushing the sweaty strands of hair from her forehead and memorising every tiny mark of her chest, the dark pink of her still taut nipples.

Her hands lazily ran up and down my back, as she occasionally twitched, her legs still locked around me. Maybe she didn’t want this to end either. Maybe it didn’t have to



end.

“Technically, it is still night for a few more hours,” she hummed. “Can I stay?” She asked, answering every prayer I’d ever sent skyward, my dick instantly hardening again in response.

I awoke the next morning alone. My stomach dropping before I saw a note on the pillow beside me telling me Winter had gone into town for breakfast supplies.

My body cracked as I slowly stood and stretched. The note was a reminder that last night did in fact happen and we’d crossed every line ever erected in the spirit of friendship. The sun was awake, which meant any thoughts of taking her again the second she walked in the house were off the table and I was disappointed to say the least.

Things had irrevocably been altered. Our plan to maintain our friendship remained the same, but the no feelings part, at least for me, was laughable. The last few weeks had been the ultimate test of willpower as I did everything I could not to claim her. After the night on the beach, hearing her moan my name, I realised there was no way I could go any further without admitting to myself this was everything I wanted.

I was leaving in less than a week and this time it would be with a severely heavy heart. Because as much as I had tried to lie to myself, last night cemented with the utmost clarity – there was no one else. There never had been. I fucking loved her and she had absolutely no idea.

She asked for passion – inspiration to stimulate ideas and motivate her fictitious worlds. I should have said no, knowing what it was going to do to me, to finally have what I’d longed for only to have to let her go. Again.

Reaching for my phone which I’d charged yesterday after a few days of leaving it off,

I noticed a sleuth of text messages from the boys. The last alerting me to an imminent influx of visitors to Willow Bay if I didn't send sign of life.

Don't you pricks have anything better to do than harass me?

I grinned around a yawn as I headed to shower before Win returned.

Another inundation of messages greeted me when I stepped out and I scanned them as I headed downstairs.

Jay

You've been MIA for four days, little J. You finally claimed that woman of yours?

Andy

He wouldn't have the balls.

Cooper

I need a picture.

Jay

Just scroll his socials, she's the star of his timeline.

Sebastian

You all talk too much shit.

Andy

Seb, Arns said to tell Marls her and Felicity are leaving now.

Sebastian

I'll drop her and Eva there and then head over to yours.

Jay

Coop, want me to swing by and grab you on the way?

Cooper

Yeah, cheers. y boy, Outback Aces misses ya. Enjoy the bed mate while you have her.

Jay

HAHAHA he wishes

Winter said you're a bunch of arseholes and I agree with her.

"What are you smirking at?" Winter's voice startled me from where she stood unpacking groceries at the bench. I ignored the magnetic pull urging me to walk over and give her a good morning kiss – the kitchen was awash with sunshine so the rules of our gospel were firmly in place.

Friendship only.

"Just the boys talking shit. I haven't charged my phone in a few days and it seems I've missed a bit."

The peach dress she wore clung to her body and I wondered if I lifted it over her hips what she'd be wearing underneath. The thought elicited a shiver down my spine and a stiffening in my pants.

I was in serious fucking trouble.

I listened while Winter recounted who she saw in town, the things she wanted to do today and how she couldn't wait to fly over to Perth as soon as possible and meet her new niece.

Her joy was written all over her face as she came and showed me the updated photos, her arm grazing my own. I tried to ignore how the sweet smell of strawberries conjured images of last night. Her on top of me, writhing with a pleasure I evoked. Her nails grazing my chest when she threw her head back in ecstasy.

Fuck.

This was Winter.

I needed to snap the fuck out of my one-sided, lust induced coma and get on with the day, just as she was.

### Chapter 13

With a final glance at the mirror, I grabbed my clutch and headed downstairs.

It was the first time I'd worn this dress, social outings requiring effort a rare commodity in Willow Bay, especially for a homebody like me, but even I knew I was selling it tonight. The tight black tube dress covered just enough while leaving much more on display than I usually dared and my heels were high.

The long days in the sun gave my skin the perfectly kissed bronzing I longed for during the colder months and the downtime away from the stresses of work had given the bags which usually lived rent free under my eyes, a chance to take a hike.

It was the perfect evening to head into town and one of the last Jack and I would share before he headed back to the city in a few days.

Watching him go was nothing new, the sorrow at his retreating car an all too familiar feeling. But the Bay had never felt as full as it had with him here this summer. Each time he departed, he took a little more of me. But this time, I was going to be giving more than I ever had before, and I wasn't sure if I would survive the aftermath. If there would be enough of me left to carry on without him.

Spotting him by the pool I paused, thankful for the closed doors preventing him from hearing my approaching heels on the wooden floors.

The beige chinos he had chosen were cuffed at the ankle, a slither of skin on display before his white shoes.

Why was that so attractive?

His black shirt was plain other than the printed grey star which sat atop his right chest. The sentiment of him packing the shirt I'd sent him for his birthday, sending a comforting squeeze around my heart. He was my star man after all.

Finally his matching black cap, the final piece of his outfit, cemented him as my kryptonite from head to toe.

We'd spent the previous night entwined in the sheets, losing ourselves in each other too many times to count, but those damn rules I created meant today was platonic. Something I found frustrating more often than not.

Sensing my presence he turned and shot me a quick grin, walking up the stairs and into the house. I was still standing in the same place and I did a little spin showing off my dress.

His eyes trailed from top to toe before slowly making their way back up to meet my own.

"Christ," he muttered and my brows pinched in confusion.

"Too much?"

"Never too much," he grumbled, reaching around me to swipe the keys off the kitchen bench. As we headed out to the car, I was certain I could hear him mumbling something about my heels and I grinned to myself. They were the right choice it seemed.

Anchor Tavern was the only place in Willow Bay which housed both decent food and a cocktail menu worth leaving the house for.

Following the waitress to our table, Jack was stopped by no less than four locals asking after his wellbeing or offering their tips for how the Hearts would travel next year. He was polite yet succinct, a practised smoothness to his responses which meant I never waited longer than necessary. Whether this polished efficiency was entirely for my benefit or his own, I couldn't be sure but knowing Jack it was likely the former. Anyone else would have exploited my suggestion of a friends with benefits arrangement but it wasn't in his constitution to take advantage of others. He was a decent man and had been for as long as I could remember.

He pulled out my chair, giving me the seat that was positioned facing the ocean, but also meant my back was to the majority of the diners. The strategic gesture seemingly innocuous to the untrained eye but never when it came to him. He knew it would otherwise suffocate and overwhelm me. The vibration of too many people in my space was one of the main reasons I preferred to stay home, but with only three more nights in his company, I did my best to make sure he chose our evening plans.

“You'll have the backstrap, right?” Lamb from the Tavern was his favourite and it wasn't a trip home if he didn't enjoy it at least once.

“Obviously,” he said and my eyes met his over my menu at the meaning the term now held. There was a seductive hint to the smirk which laced his face, illuminated by the flicker of candlelight coming from the table. It was dark outside, which meant we could easily slip into our role play but I was leaving the ball in his court. After I intruded on his me time last night, I needed him to know he wasn't pressured to do anything he wasn't comfortable with. Even though the thought of doing that again made me ache.

Grinning, I shook my head.

This was familiar, a territory I could easily navigate.

Dinner and conversation, banter and fun.

“I finished my book,” I said, my menu snapping closed.

“Congratulations. Did they end up fucking on his desk? Or was there any strum dicking ?” He asked, cheekily referencing my most embarrassing memory.

Slapping my hands to my face in horror I squeaked, “Jack! You know the rules!”

“Sorry, sorry,” he said with a laugh. “But did they fuck?”

“Shhhh,” I said, glancing over my shoulder to the thankfully empty tables surrounding us. “Yes. Twice.” I answered, feeling my cheeks flush.

“Knew it,” he said with a grin. “Bet he swiped the papers right off that desk before he fucked her with his tongue.”

Hearing him speak such filthy words sent a swarm of heat to my now burning core and I fidgeted. He watched every move knowingly, his eyes flicking down to my mouth when I rolled my teeth across my lip.

The waitress appeared and I took the opportunity to have a much needed sip of water before ordering and handing her the menus.

“It is going to be insufferable when you leave.” I said, tactically changing the subject before I combusted in my seat. “Who will look after me?” His small acts of service had been glaringly obvious. Only this morning I discovered three new shells placed on my writing table, each lined with a different texture as if he knew the others had lost all gradient. His noticings had never been so apparent and I was starting to discover, he watched me a lot more than I realised.



“If you came with me, I could look after you all the time.”

“ will never leave Willow Bay, will you?” The somewhat familiar voice over my shoulder startled me and I turned to find Aiden a little too close, a tumbler in his hand. By the glazed look of his eyes, it wasn’t his first and I ignored the way he looked at my chest rather than my face.

“Aiden,” Jack greeted, his voice taking on an edge it didn’t have before.

“Hot Shot. Heard you were back in town. Surprised I haven’t seen your face around here sooner. Plenty of bathrooms with the goods you like.” He spat and I tensed. What the hell was his problem?

“Although, I can see where you’ve been hiding. Can’t say I blame you.” He overtly looked me up and down again, his intentions disgustingly obvious.

Aiden was a notorious womaniser, although he had never tried anything with me, preferring to ridicule and humiliate me instead. His constant snickering and bully tactics were one of the reasons I found school so difficult, the degree of harassment much more prominent on the days Jack left early for training.

I’d never necessarily known him to be aggressive though.

“Did you need something?” Jack gritted, ignoring the blatant attempt to make us both uncomfortable.

“Only to ask Win when she is going to have a drink with me?” Aiden had never once asked me out or shown any interest in me. If only his mother could see him now she would have more of an understanding as to why anyone she attempted to match him with, ran for the hills.

Shooting Jack an, I have this face, I stood, turning to face Aiden.

My thumb spun my ring frantically but I pressed my shoulders back and raised my chin.

“I don’t drink –” I said, pausing as our waitress delivered our beverages, including the Anchor cocktail special which she placed in front of my seat, “With people I don’t trust.” I finished, watching as realisation dawned and he narrowed his eyes leaning into me.

“Relax Cyborg, I didn’t want to fuck you. Otherwise I already would have.” I stilled, the insult both expected but stinging all the same. I hadn’t been hit with the words since school, but the shame washed over me. Suddenly, I was thrust back to ninth grade, Aiden and his heinous friends surrounding me, their words like razors slicing my skin. I’d tried to ignore them, begged teachers to change classes, but nothing worked. They always found me. And before that day I never thought it would end. Until Jack unexpectedly arrived. They were always so strategic with their timing, knowing his training schedules perfectly to get me when I was alone. Only this day – he came back for me. And it ended in a suspension for Jack and a black eye for Aiden.

“Speak to her again and I will destroy you.” Jack’s voice from over my shoulder brought me back to the present. It was laced with fury and his hand snaked around to press firmly against my stomach, showing me I wasn’t alone, just like he did ten years ago.

Aiden followed the movement, laughing acidically. The stale scent of liquor oozed from his pores nearly making me gag. “She finally let you have the pussy you’ve pined after all these years, Grant. I’m sure she is as boring in the sack as you are on the field.” Returning his gaze to me he drawled, “Call me when he leaves you sad and alone again, I’ll give you a reboot.”

I felt Jack flinch and gripped his hand firmly, trying to keep him from losing his temper like he did the last time Aiden spoke to me like that in his presence.

Aiden scoffed before retreating and my shoulders relaxed a little. Jack was stiff behind me, unable to take his eyes from the man walking away from us and I tapped his hand softly.

I was okay, but when he didn't release me, I knew he wasn't.

"Give me a minute," he spat but I reached for him again.

"Jack, it's fine. Leave it." I pleaded but I knew he wouldn't. Knew he couldn't, the same as if the roles were reversed, I would do everything I could to protect him. He stalked towards the entrance, fists clenched and I fumbled grabbing our belongings and throwing a few notes next to our untouched drinks. I walked through the restaurant as quickly as I could in these damn heels, careful not to show any emotion as I heard the waitstaff talking about Aiden's card declining again. Guess he was still terrible with money as well as his manners. When I got out to the carpark, Jack stood with his back to me, his shoulders visibly rising and falling as Aiden's tyres screeched in protest before he sped out of the parking lot.

"Jack," I placed my hand on his shoulder and he swung around, his eyes immediately softening when he noticed me so close. "He has lost everything, let that be his consequence for tonight." I said, knowing his mother would definitely hear about this now he'd caused a scene so publicly.

"We're leaving," his words brokered no argument, not that I would have objected given the multiple sets of eyes I could feel boring into my back. Linking my fingers with his outstretched hand, I followed him toward our car.

Neither of us spoke on the drive back to my parents place. I was still rattled by the

childish insults I'd fought desperately to escape as well as knowing Jack felt compelled to fight for me again.

As he parked the car in the driveway, I tentatively reached over and turned his face towards my own. I leant over the console, tracing the top of his tattoo peaking from the collar of his shirt before moving up to smooth the crease between his brows.

"It's okay, Jack and the Beanstalk," I said softly. "I'm okay."

He studied me with a forlornness and my heart ached.

"Please don't let him take our time away from us," I pleaded and he seemed to make a decision at that very moment, unbuckling his belt before coming around to again take me by the hand.

When I clipped the lock on the front door, Jack stalked towards me. Each step deliberate, a fluidity to his movements as though the house should be grateful to have him here.

I licked my lips, suddenly aware of every single cell inside me awakening just before his hands were in my hair, his lips on mine. The turmoil raging inside him was present in every flick of his tongue as he kissed me with aching need.

He stroked my face, caging my cheeks with his warm hands and tilted my head back a little to deepen our kiss.

It was all I could do not to drop to my knees and beg him to stay with me forever. Because there was nothing fictitious about these moments, this kiss, or us. This was from a place of simplicity. A familiarity that can only be found when your heart is so tightly entwined with another you can sense their needs as strongly as your own.

And it was with a solo tear falling down my cheek that I used my body to tell him everything I would never dare to say.

With the press of my tongue against his own I whispered the unspoken words – I need you .

With the pressure of my hands against his back pulling him into me – I want you .

And when our bodies came together on the floor, on the stairs and eventually in my bed when we finally made it up there – I love you .

### Chapter 14

“B ut you can only have one. One. As in, singular.”

“Narrowing it down to just one seems fairly strict.” My brows creased as the multiple things I’d offered filtered through my mind.

“Oh, I apologise, ‘Miss I have rules for everything other than when we talk about our goals for the year’.” His chuckle from behind shook through me and I felt my lips curl, my fingers absently drawing patterns on his forearm laced around my stomach. If I turned to look out the window I would see the sun slowly peeking over the horizon, the start of another day. The unbidden signal for us to revert back to our non-sexual companionship. But I couldn’t bear the thought of leaving the warmth of this bed and spending each moment looking for ridiculous reasons to brush past him so my hand could accidentally graze his skin.

“Maybe it’s okay to break the rules this one time.” The words felt foreign leaving my mouth.

“Are you asking me or telling me?” He said incredulously, noting my unfamiliar lilt at even speaking such blasphemy. “Could you go the entire day without rules? A day where anything went and spontaneity was the word?”

I raised my chin so I could show him my scrunched face and his eyes lit up, excited by the prospect or what he thought I would say – I couldn’t be sure. Even thinking about a day where I didn’t have each minute at least tentatively mapped made my skin feel tingly, my hands reaching for the sheet draped over our bodies, my

fingertips rubbing circles on the edges.

“Absolutely,” I lied, my mouth pressing into a thin line.

Jack laughed loudly this time, sitting up as he began coughing from the sheer propensity of the unexpected intake of breath. I took the opportunity to leap out of bed and race into the bathroom, desperate for a second alone.

We fell asleep late last night and woke up coiled like a twisted chain. Even in sleep we reached for each other, subconsciously knowing our time was reaching its expiration date. Immediately commencing where we left off, he again brought me to climax with his tongue and teeth, eliciting an elixir of dual intoxication – pain and pleasure swirling until my vision blurred and I lost all control. I’d reciprocated with an eagerness I’d never experienced. With Jack, I found pleasure in the art of giving, and watching his face as he emptied himself down my throat was the single hottest moment of my life.

“There is no way you could go a day without mentioning the word rule, let alone actively choosing not to follow them.” I felt my lips tug at the mockery in his tone through the open doorway as I finished hastily brushing my teeth and returning to bed.

“I’m certain I can go all day without following a rule. In fact, I will not follow a single rule until you leave tomorrow night. Legalities aside – I will not break the law, even for you,” I huffed.

He raised his brow contemplatively, his mind ticking as his dimple popped with the cheekiness of his grin.

“Let’s make it interesting,” he said conspiratorially.

I raised a brow of my own waiting for an explanation I was confident would make me twitch. My eyes narrowed as I drew out my reply. “Okayyyyy.”

“You last until tomorrow night without following or mentioning rules and I will stay another week.”

“Done,” I agreed confidently, willing to do anything if that was on offer.

“Wait, silly. You haven’t heard the rest!” He held up his hand to stop me, my conviction instantly evaporating. “But if you mention rules or you refuse anything I suggest based on or because of them, then tomorrow night, you leave Willow Bay with me and come to the city – for an entire month.”

I felt the colour drain from my face, the immediate refusal on the tip of my tongue like a snake ready to strike the second I opened the cage.

I never took unplanned leave because the guidelines stated unless it was an emergency, your supervisor required three months notice.

I never even used sick days because working from home made pushing through much easier. There was no need to disrupt the company.

I followed rules because they were there for a reason. Hell, I created my own in situations where they didn’t already exist, because it meant circumstances were predictable and measures were controlled.

Two whole days without them with the consequence of failure an impromptu month in a big city was enough to make my gums itch. And the haughty manner in which Jack was shaking his head from side to side told me he had zero confidence in my ability to say yes let alone do it. He thought I would refuse because I was so damn predictable. Devoid of any form of flexibility or spontaneity.



Big black letters sprayed across my locker in high school – Robot Princess Bitch – resurfaced and the humiliation was as raw as the day I discovered the slur. The pain of being exactly what they all said I was, knew I was, as fresh as all those years ago.

“Deal.” I said, a sick sense of pleasure overshadowing the jitters at the way his eyes widened for a nanosecond before his big, confident smile returned, dimples on full display.

“Are you serious?” I couldn’t help but giggle at his incredulous tone. He was as excited as a child on Christmas morning.

“You underestimate me, Grant.”

He grabbed me by the waist, throwing me down onto the bed, the sun beaming through the windows, making it supremely obvious it was no longer night time.

“No rules means our arrangement has no more limits, right?”

“Mmmhmmmm,” I answered, the promise of chaos already making my skin prickle. But maybe in a good way.

“Excellent,” he said before speaking against my lips. “Because I am going to F-U-C-K you while the morning light sweeps across your face in the most beautiful of ways.”

I grinned against his mouth, opening to tease his tongue with my own, before gingerly wrapping my arms around his neck. Rules like this were definitely meant to be broken.

“Okay, so about that goal?” Jack was lathering sunscreen into my back and I rolled my eyes, thankful he couldn’t see my face.

“Urgh. I hoped you’d forgotten.”

“Here,” he handed me the sunscreen and moved to sit in front so I could return the favour.

I took my time listlessly gliding the cream over the contours of his back, both enjoying the task and determining which I would admit.

“My 2025 goal is to send my manuscript to a publishing house.”

He swung around, his face alight with pride. “Win, that’s awesome. Andy’s fiancée Arna works in the industry and apparently she reads constantly. Want me to ask her?”

“That would be good actually. I have no idea where to even start so if you wouldn’t mind.”

“She will probably use it as an opportunity to finally meet you. She was super pissed when she heard you’d come to stay and she hadn’t met you yet.”

“Why?” I was confused. No one ever wanted to meet me, especially anyone from Jack’s world. I was always the painful plus one he thrust into situations where everyone wished I wasn’t there.

I tapped his back indicating he was thoroughly protected from the UV and laid back on the poolside recliner.

“What do you mean why? Because you matter to me. I’m fairly certain she thought I made you up for a while until Andy confirmed he had in fact met you before.” He shook his head but I could see the warmth on his face. These were his friends and he cared about them. As much as it made me happy he wasn’t alone I couldn’t help the little bit of jealousy which crept in. Jealousy at the time and attention which used to

belong to me but was now spread with a circle of people I didn't even know.

"I know I always say no because I am a socially inept loser, but I would really like to meet your friends one day."

He walked to the edge of the pool and stretched. "There is nothing I want more than for you to meet them all. They would love you. Especially Arna, Marlee and Felicity. You would definitely need earplugs because they are loud as fuck, but you would love them." He dove into the water, surfacing at the edge near my feet. "Come on, get in."

"I can't," I said pressing the button on my phone so I could see the time. "It's only been eighteen minutes since we ate."

"So?"

"You have to wait thirty minutes after eating. That's the r—" I stopped, slapping a hand over my mouth and jumping up.

"That's what?" He asked teasingly.

"Argh, nothing. I just need – urgh nevermind." I added forcefully which made Jack laugh and splash water at me. God. These ingrained bullshit things were so natural to me. I needed to be more careful otherwise he was going to win and my life would become unplanned.

I dipped my toe in, testing the temperature. Maybe I could stand here testing the water for twelve more minutes.

"Just get in, would you?" He called with raised eyebrows.

“Fine,” I huffed, diving into the pool and surfacing next to him.

“What’s your goal?” I asked, realising he hadn’t told me his.

“To do a handstand for ten seconds.” He said, dipping below the water as his legs suddenly appeared. I laughed as not even two seconds later his feet collapsed as gravity brought him back to the surface.

“That was terrible. And it doesn’t count. Proper answer.”

“Hmmm. My goal for this year…” He paused, his lips pulling to one side in thought, “My goal is to forgive myself for a stupid mistake.”

The sincerity in his confession made my heart squeeze. Always my protector, it wasn’t often I saw him as anything close to vulnerable, but that incident changed him and it was so good to hear him set this goal.

“I think that’s perfect,” I responded sincerely. “We all make mistakes. It’s time you moved on, I’m sick of your whining.” I joked. “I have another goal. I want to come and see you play at least three times this year.”

He leapt towards me, gripping my hips and swirling me in the water.

“Now you’re talking dirty, Win. I would love that. I can even get you a private place to sit where it’s heaps quieter and away from my adoring fans. There are a lot of them.” I rolled my eyes and he moved in, pressing his wet mouth against my own tenderly.

“I love having no rules.” He grinned. “And I really would love to see you more. I hate that I’m leaving tomorrow.” The sudden reminder of how in just over twenty-four hours he would again escape this place, with my heart firmly packed in his luggage,

made me want to cry. But I was determined not to make it any harder for him. The last thing I needed was for him to realise just how much I wanted him to stay forever, our lines already so blurry.

“You only care because you’ll miss these two,” I said, flicking my eyes at my chest and back up to him.

“It’s true. I have grown fond of Autumn and Spring,” he said, reaching around and easily untying my swimming top.

“Oh my god.” I giggled trying desperately to grab the ties now floating somewhere behind me, while Jack did his best to pull it up and over my head. “You are so annoying, Jack-Off.” I bantered.

“Stop fighting, it will make it so much easier.” He protested, splashing around haphazardly before he eventually succeeded. He cupped my chest in his hands and my smile died when I looked into his heated gaze.

His thumbs slowly drew circles around my taut nipples and my lips parted with the sudden increase in my breathing. I was still a little sore from last night, but my body didn’t seem to care, a fervent hunger pooling in my stomach.

“Again?” I asked while simultaneously reaching for his swimming trunks, putting my hand inside to griphis thick cock. A vehement pulse beating in my swimming bottoms when his eyes closed and his own hand grazed below the water to reciprocate.

“Always.” He answered as I laggardly stroked him below the surface.

With our time coming to end, these stolen moments were only going to last another day and I would take whatever I could when it came to this man. Because tomorrow night, he was going to pull the trigger on my heart and I wasn’t sure if I would have

the strength to recover.

### Chapter Fifteen

We tiptoed around my leaving tonight, spending much of the day in silence. Swimming, lounging and then her hovering while I packed unceremoniously. Neither of us seemed to have any energy left to converse, simply basking in the final hours of being together. I didn't even have the heart to try and trick her into breaking a rule, the lingering sadness at my departure sapping all of the energy from the house.

We were heading to my parents soon for a final meal before I would drop her back home and hit the road. An ache in my chest everytime I thought about the long stretch of road only adding to the distance between us.

My phone rang from where it rested on my suitcase, piercing the quiet room and Win looked over at it too.

Jay.

"Since when did you video call?" I asked, ignoring the need for a greeting and leaning on the bench.

"Since this little menace," he turned the screen to show the face of his little sister, Violet, grinning back at me, "Needed to say hello to her favourite Hearts player." He rolled his eyes and I guffawed at his annoyance. Win stood to come and take a look at the screen, looking at me tenderly before she spotted the little brunette covering my phone.

"Hey, Violet. You giving your brother trouble again?"

Since retiring, Jay was spending even more time with the youngest of the family. Mostly as she was often giving his much older parents a fair amount of grief. But from the stories he told, she was a hilarious handful and exactly like him so he genuinely enjoyed her company.

“He is incredibly annoying, son.” I felt Winter stiffen beside me – son and Summer – the confirmation that those fictitious characters really were based on us warming me.

“son?” I asked Violet.

“This is her new thing. Adding a suffix to all names, regardless of whether it’s yours or not,” he informed me, making both Winter and I laugh.

“This is my friend, Winter,” I spoke to Violet, turning the phone so she could see the breathtaking woman who had my heart.

“Hi Violet.” Winter waved, a genuine smile creasing her face.

“Hello Winterson.” Violet replied seriously and Jay shook his head as Win and I again laughed. The kid was hilarious.

“When are you heading back?” Jay asked, reminding me of my imminent departure and Winter took it as her cue to move back to her seat in the corner of the room.

“Tonight, man. Having dinner with the folks first but I should be home by about Midnight if all goes well.”

If I don’t quit my job and refuse to leave.

“Can we go see son and Winterson tomorrow?” Violet asked and Jay said something I couldn’t quite understand.



“Next time she’s in town I will bring her over,” I said and she nodded happily. “I’ll give you a buzz tomorrow, Jay.”

“All sweet. Safe trip home, yeah? Tell Winterson we said bye.” He added with a humorous tone.

Disconnecting the call I reached for Winter’s hand and pulled her up before engulfing her in a hug.

“I’m going to miss ya, Win.” I said honestly, with a kiss to the top of her head.

“Me too, son.” She mumbled against my chest with a heavy sigh and I chuckled at her use of the name.

“Let’s go eat,” I said, before reaching for the suitcase with a final glance around the house which had brought each of my dreams to life.

“When are you back next?” Mum asked and I looked towards Win as if she might hold the answer.

“Not too sure. Maybe over Easter?”

“Oh, good. We should have the renovations finished by then.” Dad affirmed as we all continued to ignore the sawdust lining his hair after he had commenced yet another letterbox, adding further delays to his indoor restorations.

“Win is going to come help us next week, aren’t you, darling?” Mum said with a warm smile which Winter returned in her direction. I was glad she felt comfortable with my parents, especially when her own were on the other side of the country.

“Sure am. Although I’m not sure I will be much help.”

“Nonsense. You seem to do more of my crosswords than I do these days.”

“What?” I questioned the shock evident in the rising of my voice. “Since when?”

“What is it, Winnie, maybe the last six months or so? Finally discovered she has a knack for it.” He said with a pride he usually reserved for my older sister and I.

“Well, well. You’ve kept that little gem hidden.” I said jokingly to them both.

“I never see you anymore so I had to replace you with your parents. I’m not even sorry.” She said, quick as a whip and my parents both laughed.

“We like having her here. Darcy rarely calls now because she is so busy and you are always with the team. It’s nice to have someone else to chat to, especially while Mike and Deb are gone.” Mum added with sincerity.

“Oh, and what am I, chopped blooming liver?” Dad asked, appearing horrified.

“I love you, Dean, but I couldn’t give a shit about helping you do those crosswords. That’s all I’m saying.” And I chortled at the look of faux annoyance on Dad’s face. Mum was always able to keep him firmly in check.

When I glanced at Winter, she was staring at her plate, a small smile on her features and she remained that way for the rest of dinner. Engaging as needed, just enough so no one would suspect anything was amiss, but I knew what was bothering her. Because I felt it too. The foreboding of a goodbye neither of us was ready to say. She hadn’t broken a rule and I hadn’t tried to make her. Even the idea of me extending my trip was now gone. Why when it would only prolong the inevitable.

After a meal which would leave me fed for days, I joined Dad on the back patio while Mum sat with Winter on the lounges looking at photos of the tandem biking duo.

“You all packed?” Dad asked

“Yeah. Packed before we left. I can’t believe Summer is over, it’s gone so quick.”

“I bet. Time flies when you’re having fun.” I nodded before looking out over the ocean where only a month ago, I’d thrown caution to the wind and had my first taste of Winter.

I leant on the bannister before standing and stretching.

“Six letters. Clue: Having limits.” I groaned, not in the mood for a test.

“I don’t know, Dad, I’m tired.” I wasn’t tired at all. I was sad but I couldn’t tell him that without opening a can of worms I had no energy or time for.

“Humour your old man, would you?” He said.

I kicked a leaf along the ground while I thought about the clue. Six letters. Limits. Boundaries, fences, barricades. My thoughts bouncing through the possibilities.

“Finite,” I answered finally.

“Exactly, Son. Finite.” He slapped my back before turning back towards the oceanic view. “You’re twenty-six next year and absolutely annihilating it on the field. You’re a good kid, always looking after your family. But you’re missing the most important thing,” he said with a shrug. “Love.”

“I don’t need love,” I replied defiantly. “I’m twenty-six for God’s sake, plenty of time for that.”

“I don’t mean it’s missing from your life, , I mean you’re missing that it’s right in

front of you.” He gestured a thumb over his shoulder inside to where Mum was likely peppering Winter with one thousand questions about her parents and the bike, Mason, Ethan and baby Amelia. And I knew Win would be there with a smile on her face, answering every single one as if she had nothing better to do, because one of my favourite things about her was the time she gave to those she cared for.

“She only comes around here because of you. You know whenever she stops by, she asks to use the bathroom and every single time, she wanders through your old room. I don’t know what she does in there, your mum and I pretend we don’t notice, but each time she leaves that door is left open because she has gone in to be closer to you. I don’t know much about women, but I do know she has loved you as long as we’ve known her. And if you don’t tell her how you feel, she will eventually settle for someone less. Someone she doesn’t love just so she isn’t alone. Small town life isn’t always easy for someone like Win. She thinks it’s safer, but nothing is as scary as loneliness.”

I couldn’t breathe let alone respond, the words piercing my gut painfully.

Finite. Infinity . That was us.

It wasn’t her with someone else. But Win marrying, loving and touching someone else actually was a possibility I’d never considered with such finality. What would that do to me? Before this trip I could have squashed it down with everything else I refused to admit, but I wasn’t so sure now. Things had changed. Would confessing my feelings to her help or would it only make things worse? Make saying goodbye even harder?

“, love?” Mum said from behind a tremor in her words

“What’s wrong?” I asked, instantly on edge.

“I think I’ve upset Winter. She said she needed some air.”

“What? How?” I said, already walking through the house to the front door. Pausing with my hand on the door I turned back to Mum who looked guilty as shit. “What did you say?”

“I may have told her I was going to set you up with someone.”

“Mum!” I snapped. “Why the fuck would you say that?” I knew I had no right to be upset but things felt so unstable like the tiniest thing could splinter what we had.

“I thought I was helping. You two are as blind as bats. Someone needed to shake things up a little, but I didn’t want to upset her and –” Dad rubbed Mum’s arm reassuringly as I pushed the front door open. I would deal with those two meddling pests later.

For now I needed to find Winter.

I slowed to a walk when I spotted her standing where the tide met the sand. She was looking out at the waves, the subtle breeze causing her hair and the white dress she was wearing to swirl around her delicately. Sporadic drops of rain wetting the sand as she crossed her arms as the wind picked up a little.

There would be a storm tonight. Fitting.

“Hey,” I said cautiously, watching her quickly dry the tears resting on her cheeks.

“Sorry. Just got a bit hot in there.”

“Mum said she upset you.” I wanted her to explain. Confirm my suspicion so I could finally open the bottle and release the pressure sitting on my chest.

“Your mum is the best,” she said, still dabbing at her cheeks with the back of her hand. “It’s nothing. I’m just sad you’re going.” She tried to smile, but it was faint, her tears escaping as her lip trembled.

“Come with me.” I implored, pulling her into my arms. “Not because you broke a rule or I messed up and needed you, but because you want to. Because you can’t bear the thought of being away from me for a week, months, a year.” My plea was pathetic and entirely selfish knowing how difficult she would find navigating somewhere entirely new.

“My whole life is here, ,” she said softly, pulling back.

“What is so important in Willow Bay? Explain it to me because I don’t understand.” My voice was louder than I would like, the unspoken feelings just below the surface.

“Of course you don’t!” She screamed, the careful mask she had maintained all day gone. I’d never seen Win so worked up but I think I needed it. Needed to hear her, raw and unfiltered – all her darkest thoughts laid bare so I could share mine too.

“You’ve never understood, , because you are never here. You got out. You left. And I am so happy for you. Truly. I’ve always been your biggest fan, desperate for you to achieve your goals. But while you do that I am still here. I still see those arseholes who relentlessly made me feel different in the worst of ways. Only now, I don’t have anyone to share it with. Anyone to make up nicknames with, our own form of passive vengeance. Mason left too and Mum tells me all the time how lucky she is that I am close. She means well, but the guilt is stifling. So every time you leave, I’m still here, in this freaking prison and I will be stuck here forever. I will never leave because I am pathetic and stuck and TERRIFIED.” She was screaming loudly now matched only by the occasional bout of thunder and crash of the ocean. Her words assaulted me like a migraine on the brightest of days. The gut-wrenching honesty entwined with the volume of her voice, so uncharacteristically Win it was debilitating to see.

The pain and fear so clearly written on her face.

I knew she hated seeing me go but I selfishly had no idea of just what it was doing to her. How she felt trapped in this place rather than comforted.

“But you can leave, Win, that’s the thing.”

“You don’t get it, !”

“Stop telling me I don’t get it!” I spat back, the frustration so thick I could almost taste it. “Do you think it was easy for me to pack up and leave everything I’ve ever known. Everything I loved? Of course not. There were days, hell there still fucking are, where I am so home sick I have to force myself not to call my coach and resign. Because I am lonely in the city. I have amazing friends and teammates and coaches but I don’t have my family and I don’t have you. So stop telling me I don’t get it. You don’t think I worry about you being here. Being in the same place as those pieces of shit who tormented you?” I stepped towards her, lowering my voice and imploring every bit of hope I had left. “I’m sorry, Win. I’m sorry I didn’t know. I knew they were mongrels but honestly, I thought despite that, you loved it here. I didn’t realise it was suffocating you from the inside. But that feeling of entrapment is why I couldn’t stay. It is stifling. And I know the city scares you for so many reasons but it comes with space to breathe. I know it will be hard and your parents will nag you. Your mum will drop the biggest dump of guilt on you but only because she’ll miss you. And some days it will be difficult and maybe overwhelming, but one thing you will never feel is lonely. Because I will be right there with you.”

“I’m scared, ,” she whispered. “I’m scared of feelings I can’t explain. I can’t leave everything I know here only to follow you and watch you in a world I am not a part of. A world where I won’t belong. I’ve lived my entire life fitting nowhere. Always the weird, robotic friend who was in the periphery but belonged with no one.” Her words were like tiny pricks, piercing my skin with sadness.

“Feeling nothing with anyone other than...” With a flick of her wrist she cemented everything I’d only just realised.

The tears fell freely down her face now. “You never made me be anything different than I was. Never pushed me to be more social, more extroverted, more anything. You accepted me and supported me and loved me regardless. But that is not always enough, . This mess is my fault.” She threw her hands out, moving them back and forth between us. “I did this. I ruined us,” she cried. “And now you are leaving and honestly, I don’t think we can be friends anymore. I’m not sure I will survive you leaving over and over because there will be nothing left of me if you do. And I can’t come with you, because I can’t leave this place and we both know that.” Her hand flew over her mouth as a sob wracked her body and I reached for her but she stepped back with a palm pressed out towards me.

She wasn’t ready. Fuck, was I too late. Now I was actually brave enough to finally speak my truth, it was too late.

I’d been unintentionally stripping her bare all of these years. The times my visits were fleeting because staying longer reminded me of everything I wanted but could never have. Of a woman who had one million different nicknames for me, but used them only when we were alone. A woman who was only her true self when it was just the two of us.

Why hadn’t I noticed this before?

“Please,” she whispered. “I won’t be able - I can’t-” She stopped, her shoulders shaking with heavy emotion, her chin on her chest in defeat.

I respected her wishes and didn’t touch her, as desperate as I was to soothe the ache.

Instead, I took the smallest of steps towards her so she could hear my words over the



breaking of the waves and the sound of the rain which was gaining traction. I closed my eyes and whispered my secrets.

“Win, being your friend is all I ever wanted, all I ever needed...until I realised it wasn’t enough. Being your friend is a quiet thing. It feels like waiting for a sunrise that will never come, but still loving the night. It feels like the all encompassing comfort brought only from that very first stretch after a full night’s rest. It is unspoken but ubiquitous. It is reliable and comfortable. But at some point that changed and it became loud and messy and all-consuming. Everything you hate, really.” I said, placing the gentlest amount of pressure under her chin until she was looking at me through a sea of tears.

“I have loved hearing about your dreams and your goals, even when I know they’ll never include me the way I wish they would. And I am not sorry for anything we’ve done this summer or anything I’ve said. Because if I was sorry I had spent half my life loving you, I would say it. But Win, I can never be sorry.” Her brows creased, her eyes flickering between my own as she struggled to believe my words.

I ripped my shirt off and threw it onto the sand, pausing for a second as I watched it splash into the water. Tapping my tattoo with my left hand I looked down at the image which reminded me of her every single time I saw it, before glancing back up.

“I got this the day you left Sydney. I needed something on my skin to remind me of your certainty with every single second, minute, hour that passed. Because it was you who made me see the light again. It’s always been you, Winter. You’re my North Star, my compass, my home. You have always been the reason I came back. And I can’t keep leaving you behind because it is destroying me too. So, I am begging you. Please break the rules. Break them for me. Come home with me and we can work the rest out. Once my contract is up I’ll move back here or we can go somewhere else. Anywhere. I don’t care, as long as you are with me. Because I fucking love you, Winter. I loved you when you pretended Summer and son were not us in your fucking

story. I loved you when I played for the Collies and we were beaten by ninety points in the pouring rain and you stood on the sidelines the entire game. I loved you when we rode to school and you stood on my pegs, your hands locked to my shoulders out of pure fear.” She huffed a laugh at the memories. “And I loved you when you came to me the second I called when I felt as though my entire world was breaking. I’ve always fucking loved you, Winter, it’s just taken me a long time to realise it’s okay to say aloud.”

I heaved, the weight of the words finally spoken leaving me both intoxicatingly empty and fuelled. Each truth carrying itself on the breeze and floating out to the ocean and up to the stars – the same place we had spent hundreds of nights together.

If we woke up tomorrow, alone, at least we had spoken our truths.

Before I could worry about what she would say or do, she lunged for me, throwing her arms around my neck, her mouth hitting my own in a clash of lips and teeth, her tongue imploring entry to meet my own. With the emotion that can only come on a secluded beach, with the rain pouring down, I kissed her back.

My best-friend. My North Star. My everything .

Her hands were in my hair, shoving my hat off my head so she could tug the strands in a concoction of pleasure and pain. Reaching for the front of her dress, I ripped it open, the sound of buttons popping only adding to the intensity as I stripped it down her body with no care for where it landed. I needed to feel her, take her, claim her with all of the love I’d dared to keep hidden.

Every unspoken word we never shared. Every sordid, secret thought either of us had over the years was in the intensity and carnality of our movements.

She undid my shorts and I stepped out of them with a disbelieving laugh, my briefs

cast aside also. A quick glance both ways determined we were still alone as I took her mouth again, unlatching her bra as she stepped out of her own panties. There was no rush yet we were so hurried, achingly desperate for each other despite being together only a few hours earlier.

Our naked bodies writhing, the water from the sky making the sand below firmer, our bodies slipperier as I gently laid her down and moved above her, entering her already wet sex.

Fuck. Being inside her would never be anything less than perfect.

“You are beautiful,” I whispered against her lips.

She was the most angelic woman I’d ever seen and I’d gone far too long without telling her. I wasn’t going to censor my truths any longer. “Perfect. Everything.”

I punctuated each confession with a thrust of my hips and a kiss on her skin. “And you are mine.” I said louder, her fingernails digging into my back as her eyes rolled back with pleasure. She was panting loudly, her moans drifting over the sand and into the night air.

“God, don’t stop, , please don’t stop.” She begged and I hooked an arm under her thigh, hitting her with an angle which sent me a little deeper, pitched us so much closer.

“Mine, Winter. Do you hear me?”

She was nodding, unable to speak, but her easy acquiescence skyrocketed straight to my gut.

“Fuck. This tight little cunt was made for me.” I would never tire of having this

woman underneath me, her hair splayed out, her tits bouncing with each meeting of our hips. Grabbing her hands, I held them above her head, cuffing her wrists with one hand and using the other to lift her hips. I pressed my forehead against her own, slick with rain or sweat I wasn't sure, as I invaded her, claiming her and showing her the intensity of my feelings with every smack of our skin.

"Oh, like that." She begged before her moans turned into a drawn out groan, her face scrunching as her body began to shake with pleasure. "Your cock feels so good."

"Oh, fuck," I groaned, hearing those dirty words from my clean-mouthed girl was my trigger as her pussy clenched and she squeezed every last drop of my cum until we were both gasping in satiated harmony.

I didn't move off her, my lips leaving no part of her face untouched. I couldn't bear to ask her what this meant, if this was her agreeing to come with me. The alternative was too painful to consider when we were still entwined as one.

"?" She said, her eyes filling with tears again, her voice hoarse. And without any other words I knew. I knew what she was about to say and I couldn't bear to hear it. Couldn't bear to face the prospect of leaving her so instead, I kissed her with every ounce of passion I could muster and at some point, she stopped crying and she kissed me back. Her explanation of why she couldn't follow me better left unsaid.

At some point late into the night we made it back to her house, some of our clothes lost to the beach where part of my heart would remain. I'd taken her again on the sand with less intensity. Our movements languid. Every touch driven by love. And again once we got back to the house – our bodies saying a goodbye we both knew was imminent. Because she wasn't going to leave Willow Bay and she didn't love me back.

There was no denying there were feelings there, but it wasn't enough to break the

barrier which she kept firmly around her heart.

I looked at her sleeping form and I knew I couldn't say the words. How did I say goodbye to the woman I loved, knowing she loved me, but not enough? And why wasn't I enough? The sadness was incomprehensible and only going to get worse – that I knew for sure.

And it was with those last thoughts and a soft kiss to her forehead that I slowly hopped out of bed and left.

### Chapter Sixteen

It was early when I woke, the morning sun warming my face through the blinds we didn't close, too lost in our desperation and emotions to do anything other than touch, taste and take.

I wiggled back, desperate to feel his body against my own, but was met with nothing but cold space. Rolling over I opened my eyes and found the bed was empty.

"Jacky?" I called on a stretch, wondering if maybe he had snuck off to use the bathroom but there was no answer.

Lazily, I peeled the sheets back and ducked into the ensuite, but he wasn't there. Suddenly awake, I ducked into the room where all of his things were, the room he took while he stayed here, but it hadn't been slept in.

A feeling of dread sent my heart rate pumping as I barrelled down the stairs and into a quiet kitchen. No sign that he had ever come back last night, even his shoes normally at the door, no longer there. Racing outside, the space where his car was parked, now lay vacant and it was with the weight of the knowledge that he truly was gone that I sank to the floor in a pool of sobs.

I knew it was coming.

I knew I was too weak to go with him and he had no choice but to leave.

Again. But why when it was my decision, my choice to stay here, did it suddenly feel

so suffocating. So oppressive.

Having him here was different this time in so many wonderful ways and the thought of going back to the mundanity of life was excruciating.

Why was I like this? Why couldn't I grab life by the handles and do what I wanted? Instead I was constantly weighed down by overthinking and paranoia. What if I knew no one other than Jack and I became a nuisance to him? What if his friends hated me, or worse, ridiculed me when he wasn't around. What if being somewhere new felt oddly discomfoting, like when you forget to wear your jewellery for a day? The ambiguity alone gave me a stomach ache.

But somehow, this was worse than all of those things. This was a full body ache which started in the centre of my chest, tiny cracks splintering across every inch of my skin.

Dragging myself from the porch after what felt like hours but was likely only a few minutes, I padded inside and headed for the stairs. Each step was laced with the sadness that came with knowing I had done this to myself.

Done this to us.

Me and my own need for control and expectedness. The comfort in knowing suddenly suffocating.

There was no cure for this kind of pain. No over the counter medication for the incorrigible emptiness his leaving had triggered.

I needed my bed.

A space where I wouldn't need to think about how alone I suddenly felt without the

chance to say goodbye.

Heading to the window to close the blinds I froze.

My name written in perfectly monochromatic script on a blank sheet of paper hung lifelessly from my typewriter. The subtle inconsistencies in the font, not from my own fingers, stared at me as I lunged for the paper.

Blood swarmed my ears as a vicious scream erupted from my throat.

Willow Bay had always been my home.

It was where I found my comfort and my predictability and gave me the space I thought I needed to be my pure self.

But it was never this place. It was him.

He was my home.

How could I have been so selfish?

Jack had spent his life doing everything within his power to support me. He protected me, fought for me and inspired me to be the best version of myself despite my idiosyncrasies which often meant he carried the load when any else was around.

And when he told me he loved me – really loved me – I didn't even have the guts to tell him I loved him too.

I'd once again let my fear and frustrating need for normality consume me.

Was I going to stay in Willow Bay forever? Would that make me happy? To marry a



local — probably someone who passed me in the corridor at school many times and never once gave me the time of day. Someone who stood beside my tormentors at one time or another. Would that be what made me feel safe?

The idea was laughable because I knew what made me feel those things and he was probably already hours away.

My parents had left me to travel the country yet I felt some insane need to remain for their return?

The epiphany bubbled out of me in self-deprecating laughter. How had I been so foolish? There was nowhere else I wanted to be but with him.

Because I loved him too.

Ripping the paper free from the platen, I grabbed a handful of fresh sheets, feeding them through before stretching my fingers. The need to organise my world tingled in the tips of my fingers as the veracious metallic cadence commenced. With each keystroke, everything I wanted to say but had been too scared to confront roared out of me.

The discordant lyrics of John Mellencamp's, Jack and Diane, ricocheted around my mind and I started to sing aloud, my typing providing an off-beat backing track. Like a time machine through my twenty-six years, I saw Jack and I in primary school, trading our fruit after we had each eaten half of whatever our parents packed for us. At his eighth birthday party, trying desperately to get the donut tied to the clothesline without using our hands. His sticky little face covered in cinnamon as we giggled until we frustratingly gave up and shovelled the treats into our mouths.

I saw him training as often as he could, the sweat pouring off him as he ran laps, bouncing, kicking and passing a ball while I sat on the sidelines with a stopwatch in

hand.

The look of pure joy on his face when his name was called, congratulating him on being signed by what was the best AFL team in Australia. A fact I didn't realise until later that night, when I spent hours researching everything there was to know about The Sydney Hearts.

His dimples when I reached him after his very first match, still covered in that oil he smeared on those lethal arms when he played, the scratch of his stubble against my cheek when he buried his face into my neck with excitement.

All of my happiest memories involved him and I realised with sudden clarity, that was something I'd never even told him.

Staring at the three full sheets of script, I removed the papers and read them aloud.

I knew what I needed to do – the thought alone making my heart race – but I would and I could. For him.

### Chapter Seventeen

“Mate, I love Powderfinger as much as the rest of the world, but if I have to listen to that song one more time...” Andy left the rest unspoken and I nodded, throwing my phone into my bag. It wasn’t his fault I was a miserable fucking bastard, nor the rest of the team.

I knew the first training session of the pre-season was supposed to be massive energy. The boys all stoked to be back for another year, desperate to be selected for the first match, living off the high of their break and renewed to get back into it.

But I was miserable, exhausted and angry.

Something most of the team weren’t used to in me.

Since leaving Willow Bay two days ago, I hadn’t heard from Winter.

Not even once.

I thought, hoped, when she woke and noticed I was gone, she would call me. Beg me to come back. Or even just send me a message to say hi. But I had no contact. And I didn’t have the emotional capacity to reach out after I’d stripped myself bare. All cards on the table, finally telling her how I felt, only for it not to be enough.

I wasn’t enough.

With that sobering thought, I threw what was left of my belongings into my locker

and headed for the bathrooms to regroup before we hit the paddock. I bypassed the main set, knowing it would be filled with raucous laughter, retellings of trips overseas plus stories from a couple of the newer boys getting married or engaged. Not wanting to dampen the mood anymore than I already was, I locked myself in the room which housed a shower and a sink.

Fuck knows what it was used for but it was lockable and gave me a few minutes on my own to splash water on my face and get my head clear. At least I had pre-season to focus on. A few months where I didn't have to think about the subtle hint of strawberry when I snuggled into the crook of her neck or the feel of her hips in my hands and her lips against my own.

Fuck .

Forcefully unlocking the door, I raced out and joined the boys on the field needing the distraction more than ever.

By the end of the session I felt a bit better. Mentally, I'd been able to find my rhythm, no room for thoughts anywhere other than on the next task I was assigned. Most of the time by Jay, who over the break had accepted an offer as Defensive Coach. When I first arrived and saw him with the coaching staff, I wasn't even the least bit surprised. His knowledge of the game was first-class and I was honoured to learn from him, even if he did push me harder than the rest today.

"You look trim," Jay said as a cold splash of water hit my back courtesy of the bottle in his hand.

"Thanks, Coach," I said with a smirk. The first time my lips had even felt like lifting in the last two days.

"Oooh. I like the sound of that." He mocked and my lips lifted a little higher.

“You good, man?” He moved in closer, standing in front of me so the sun was no longer in my eyes. Sitting on the ground, I undid my laces and took my boots off. Always the first thing I did after finishing a session. “Because you look like shit.”

“Honestly. No.”

“I’m not going to pry. But you know where my office is if you need to come chat to Coach Jay.” His words held his signature humour, but I knew the sentiment was sincere all the same.

“Thanks, Bro. I’ll be okay.”

When he didn’t reply I glanced up towards him but he was looking over my head.

“I think you might just be right,” he replied with a wink before walking around me, the sun suddenly blinding me again.

Turning to ask what he meant, I was stunned into silence when I saw Andy walking towards me with a very familiar companion. I thrust my hand up, blocking the sun and squinting to make sure I wasn’t seeing things but the way my pulse noticeably quickened told me it wasn’t a mirage.

Winter was here.

My Winter was in Sydney, walking towards me in the middle of the fucking ground with Andy, her hand holding his arm as if she needed help balancing.

What the fuck.

I shot up to my feet, wearing only my training shorts and a thick layer of sweat. My breathing was heavy. No longer from the intensity of our session, but the only person

I could currently see.

Her legs were highlighted by those fucking heels I loved so much, her denim skirt short, giving every fucker on the field a gorgeous view of something they had no business looking at.

Her shoulders were pushed back exuding confidence, but the closer she got to me, the more I knew it was all false bravado.

I could see the terror in her eyes and when she stopped less than a metre from me, I also noticed the sheets of paper she was holding were visibly shaking.

“Good luck,” Andy said to her and my eyes shot to him where he was wearing a shit-eating grin and wiggling his eyebrows at me. She thanked him as he stepped away yelling at the rest of my ogling teammates to hit the showers.

Her chest was rising and falling rapidly, a look of pure fear in her eyes. Taking a step forward she raised her hand, keeping me frozen.

“After you left,” she paused, taking a deep breath as if those words alone pained her, “I realised I never read you the Epilogue of son and Summer’s story.” She closed her eyes briefly, taking another deep breath.

Win was nervous in new places at the best of times, but this was different. She was terrified.

Opening her eyes, she lifted each foot one at a time. “Sorry, I didn’t really consider walking on grass in high heels. I’m sinking.” She admitted with a small smile.

“Anyway. Given you helped me so much in making sure my novel was perfect, I knew I had to read it to you. So here’s a little ditty ’bout son and Summer ...” She

didn't sing the lyrics, but I heard the tune all the same. It was our song after all.

I watched her, not wanting to interrupt in case she stopped, ran away or disappeared before my very eyes. Lifting the paper in front of her, she flashed me the smallest smile before she began to read.

Summer was frozen. Everything she thought she knew about the man before her, long forgotten. Her earlier assumptions challenged when he stood before her, declaring his love in an act she never could have envisioned.

The rain had splattered his skin, the backdrop of a tumultuous sea spread out behind him as he told her what she had always hoped, but never thought she would hear.

He loved her.

son loved Summer.

"You're my North Star," he'd said. The intensity of the memory alone reigniting a spark deep in her belly.

"I love you," he'd admitted.

And she'd stood there. Feeling every single thing he was brave enough to admit, but caged by insecurity and fear which prevented the same words leaving her own mouth.

Because more than anything, Summer was terrified of the unknown.

She paused to look up into my eyes as she dropped the papers and spoke from memory or heart or both.

And admitting she loved him too – and she did love him – scared her. Leaving

everything she had ever known was near debilitating because Summer knew nothing if not predictability.

But what scared her more than that, was losing .

“I’m sorry,” she said to him now as tears filled her eyes and her hand wiped across her face to catch them. Hoping the words, coming two days later, weren’t too late.

Winter mimicked Summer’s actions, wiping her own tears and I bit my lip to avoid correcting her calling him .

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I loved you too. Because I do. I always have. I thought I couldn’t ever leave Willow Bay. I thought I would miss the beauty of the sunrises over the beach where we spent so many mornings searching for shells. I thought I would miss the grassy roads which led into town – the same path we rode our bikes to and from school hundreds of times. I thought I would miss the nights spent searching for stars, our laughter so deep it ended with a stitch in my side. I thought I would miss the sounds of the cicadas at the beginning of November each year because it meant you were coming home. But it was none of those things I would miss. It was you, .

“You are in the concrete of every single one of my memories. It wasn’t Willow Bay that made me comfortable. It was you. And I will find those things wherever you are because I love you.”

She paused, a small smile on her face which was now covered with tears.

She was here. Regardless of all of the fear it would have evoked, she came.

Because she loved me too.

I stepped towards her, using the pads of my thumbs to swipe her cheeks clear of her



emotions.

“I didn’t know son and Summer lived in Willow Bay?” I said and she huffed a small laugh.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you every time I thought about it but I will tell you everyday for the rest of my life. If you’ll have me.”

My hands framed her face, lifting her chin slightly so I could stare into those gorgeous brown eyes. The same brown eyes I’d dreamed about for longer than I could remember.

“You came here. For me,” I whispered and she nodded. “Thank fucking god,” I added before taking her mouth with my own. She melted against me, her hands wrapping around my back tightly. And having her, like this, felt like finally coming home.

It wasn’t until the cheering of the boys got louder that I pulled my mouth from her own.

“Why do you taste like that lethal orange poison?”

“I needed some liquid courage,” she winced and I laughed to the sounds of more hollering. We turned to see the team all lined along the sideline, not having followed the orders of their captain, who was also watching with a troupe of females who I also recognised.

Oh for fuck sake. Did every person I’d ever met need to be here?

“Oh my god,” Winter said as Arna, Marlee, Eva and Felicity came walking towards us.

“Oh, not a chance,” I huffed, yanking Win by the hand and heading for the other side of the ground. There was no way she would be up to meeting those four, but more so, I needed to be alone with her.

“I can’t run in these heels,” she stammered and I made a quick decision, throwing her over my shoulder and increasing my pace to the sideline as she squealed in shock.

The cheers of the boys grew louder and I smiled, the ache which had been heavy on my chest for the last two days, suddenly disappearing.

She was here and she was mine.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:47 am*

### Epilogue

Andy

Arna said if you and Winter aren't at Grey Petal within the hour she is coming to your place and hauling arse.

She has also threatened me with a month of no sex if I don't convince you, so get your sorry fucking arses down here.

Ha. Blue balls never was your colour. Be there soon.

"We've been summoned," I spoke into her hair as she gave herself another once over in the ensuite mirror.

"Are you sure I look okay?" We hadn't left my place in a week and while I would be content to spend a year locked up with Win, my friends were relentless in their desperation to meet her.

"Win, you will be the most stunning woman in the entire city, let alone the bar. You are perfect." I answered truthfully. Her uncertainty was baffling given how naturally beautiful she was and always had been. Tonight, she wore a black dress which hugged her in all the best places and was tight enough that she chose not to wear underwear. Meaning we would be at Seb's new bar, but mentally, I would already be home with my face between her thighs.

"I love you," She said, for probably the fiftieth time today.

“Thank fucking god,” I replied with a kiss on her nose, the same thing I said on the day she came to Sydney. “And I love you more.”

“Okay, let’s leave because that look you’re wearing,” she pointed her finger towards my face, “Is only leading to one place.”

Her giggle bounced around the house as we half-jogged, half-wiggled our way to the front door, my hands greedily doing their best to get underneath her dress while she slapped my wandering hands with startled laughter.

“It really is a magical place in the city at night.” She said as we walked the final block to Sebastian’s Jazz and Whiskey Bar.

“I usually take an Uber,” I answered honestly. It was only a ten minute walk from my apartment but I often jumped in a ride or one of the boys swung by on their way. “But I’m glad you like it here.”

We hadn’t discussed what things would look like after her leave ended in three weeks. We were taking things slowly and enjoying this new chapter, day by day. I headed back into the club from tomorrow so she would have time on her own to decide if this really was the place for her, even for the short term. Of course, I was doing everything humanly possible to make sure that happened – the thought of her back in Willow Bay without me too much to bear now we’d finally been honest with each other and ourselves.

“I am worried about my waistline though. The pizza place next to your building will be the death of me.” She said and I wrapped an arm around her shoulder, grinning as she laced her fingers through my own.

“See, you have no choice. How can you leave a pizza place and your morning eggs, à la Grant.”

The disgust on her face evoked a belly laugh from deep within and I held my stomach.

“You have a breeding kink, sie. Fertilised is not how I want my eggs right now, thank you.” Her words only made me laugh harder.

“You are the best.” I answered honestly with a kiss to the top of her head.

“And you are a pest. But you’re my pest.” She quipped.

“Yes, I am. This is it.” I gestured to the door which led down a set of stairs. You might miss it if you weren’t actively looking or aware, and that was in line with Seb’s obfuscated character. A small square plaque sat at eye level with the words Grey Petal illuminated by the small lights above, the stairs margined with the same discrete lighting.

“This is really nice.” Win breathed, her voice immediately lowering as it did when we joined others. Never wanting to draw attention to herself, my girl was not one for social gatherings. “There aren’t many people here,” she observed.

“Nope. It’s a closed event.” I said. There were no secrets once Arna got wind of them and Andy had unknowingly opened a can of worms when he told her Winter hated crowds. It apparently resulted in a call to Marlee which ended with Sebastian closing his bar for the night so Winter wouldn’t feel anything but comfortable. A gesture which was both incredibly kind and an example of why I liked Arna and Marlee so much.

“You did this?” She asked, her feet frozen.

“Not me. These two.” I said quietly just before the women in question came over, clearly unable to wait.

“I’m so sorry, but we can’t wait any longer. I’m Marlee.” Marls said, leaning in to kiss a clearly befuddled Winter.

“And I’m Arna, Andy’s fiancé. We are so excited to finally meet you. Andy says speaks about you alllll the time but we all kinda thought you were made up and then we wanted to meet you but the caveman over here, ran away.” She said with a quick glance over to me. “Oh, hey .”

“I feel very welcomed,” I laughed as Marlee moved in to greet me.

“She is gorgeous.” She whispered before turning back to Win who was listening to Arna talk about how she and Andy met.

“Come and meet our other halves.” Marls said, walking over to where Sebastian was and sitting on his lap.

“Win, this is Sebastian. That’s Cooper and you know Jay and Andy. Guys, this is Winter.” Winter smiled at each in turn and before anyone else could speak, Arna was taking her and Marlee by the hand.

“Felicity and Eva are devastated they couldn’t be here tonight...” Marlee’s voice faded as they stole Winter for whatever conversation they were going to force her to have and I shook hands with each of the boys before retrieving the glass Cooper slid over to me.

“New one?” I asked, picking up the bottle in the middle of the table.

“Yeah. Too smoky for your captain, tell me what you think though.” He said, and I swirled the drink before having a sip.

It wasn’t bad but whiskey wasn’t really my thing. “Tastes the same as the other eight you’ve made me try.”

“You have no taste buds.” Coop quipped and the boys laughed.

“I’ll get you a beer.” Seb said and I nodded appreciatively.

“So you finally got the girl.” Jay stated, nodding his head in the direction the girls went.

“It appears so.”

“Reckon she will stay in Sydney?” Andy asked. He knew how much I wanted her here after he accosted me at the club the other day and practically forced me to tell him everything. Probably at the threat of harm from his fiancé.

“I really hope so.”

“I’m not sure those two will let her go.” He said as the trio of women returned each with a drink and matching surreptitious grins.

“What did they say?” I prodded, pulling Win onto my lap, already missing her in the few short minutes she was gone.

“Nothing you need to know, s.”

“Since when?”

“Since she became one of us, .” Arna said, ending any more questioning and Win turned to glance my way, a soft smile on her face and I kissed her on the temple.

“Love you,” I whispered against her cheek and she turned, grazing her lips against my own.

“Love you more.” She replied, before leaning back against me, tracing circles on my

pants as she listened to the conversation around the table.

I couldn't stop the smile tugging at my lips as I watched her seamlessly enter my world, her usual social hesitations visible only by the slight touch of her thumb grazing my own. With little effort, Arna and Marlee had her laughing, at my expense of course, but I could not have cared in the slightest. Because she was here. With me, as not only my friend, but my love.

There was no lighter feeling than falling in love with your best-friend. Regardless of time, space and distance the strength of our feelings was always going to bring us here.

I pressed a kiss to her cheek telling her I was going to grab us some water and gave her a light tap on those thighs I loved so much. It was with a comforting pull on the heart that I joined the boys at the bar where Seb was handing each of us a glass with the night's special.

I glanced back, making sure Win was still good and the reassuring smile she sent my way cemented every feeling I had ever had. While I wished I would have realised earlier that she was my gravitational force, it was the paths we took to get here which made our story so unique. And honestly, I would walk the same path and feel the same longing and anticipation for her over and over, because Winter Lennox was worth the wait.