
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LYLA SAGE
SOUL SEARCHING
A SWEETWATER PEAK NOVEL

Praise for *Soul Searching*

“Lyla Sage enters the world of paranormal storytelling with an absolute knockout. Cozy, compelling, and clever, *Soul Searching* is a tender love story that lights up the shadows. I can’t wait to visit Sweetwater Peak again.”

—BK Borison, *New York Times* bestselling author of *First-Time Caller*

“*Soul Searching* is a masterpiece. It’s a book that reaches into your heart and heals parts of you that you didn’t know needed healing. Lyla Sage continues to raise the bar with every book she writes.”

—Hannah Bonam-Young, *USA Today* bestselling author

“*Soul Searching* is my new favorite ghost story. I fell immediately in love with black cat Collins and certified Sweet Boy, Brady, along with the entire town of Sweetwater Peak. Lyla’s writing is singularly atmospheric, and *Soul Searching* is the perfect blend of spooky and cozy. I’m already chomping at the bit for the rest of this series. Lyla Sage is the queen of flirty banter!”

—Rosie Danan, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Fan Service*

“Charming, steamy, and wonderfully romantic…Lyla Sage delivers an endearing small-town romance layered with the perfect dose of supernatural elements to make this story unique, fresh, and unforgettable.”

—Devney Perry, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Juniper Hill*

“Lyla Sage excels at creating places you want to visit, and she does it by crafting characters you want to see those places with. Sweetwater Peak is a town where life and death meet, where nothing ever changes, and yet somehow everyone who visits it ends up changed. No one demonstrates this contradiction more than Brady and Collins, the nuanced and lovable stars of *Soul Searching*. These two lonely souls find comfort in each other as they deal with ghosts both literal and metaphorical, and their romance is as tender as it is hot. *Soul Searching* is spooky, sweet, and sexy, and I absolutely adored it!”

—*USA Today* bestselling author Sarah Hawley

BY LYLA SAGE

Done and Dusted

Swift and Saddled

Lost and Lassoed

Wild and Wrangled

Soul Searching

SOUL SEARCHING

A Sweetwater Peak Novel

Lyla Sage



The Dial Press
New York

The Dial Press
An imprint of Random House
A division of Penguin Random House LLC
1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019
randomhousebooks.com
penguinrandomhouse.com

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This book contains an excerpt from the forthcoming book *Free Falling* by Lyla Sage. This excerpt has been set for this edition only and may not reflect the final content of the forthcoming edition.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
Names: Sage, Lyla author
Title: Soul searching / Lyla Sage.
Description: New York, NY: The Dial Press, 2025. | Series: Sweetwater Peak novel
Identifiers: LCCN 2025024396 (print) | LCCN 2025024397 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593977774 trade paperback; acid free-paper | ISBN 9780593977781 ebook
Subjects: LCGFT: Romance fiction | Paranormal fiction | Novels | Fiction
Classification: LCC PS3619.A384 S68 2025 (print) | LCC PS3619.A384 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20250606
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2025024396
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2025024397

Ebook ISBN 9780593977781

BOOK TEAM: Production editor: Cindy Berman • Managing editor: Rebecca Berlant Production manager: Erin Korenko • Copy editor: Amy J. Schneider

Book design by Sara Bereta, adapted for ebook by Vincent Mancuso

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland. https://eu-

contact.penguin.ie.

ep_prh_7.3a_153157671_c0_r0

Contents

Dedication
Epigraph

Chapter 1: Collins
Chapter 2: Brady
Chapter 3: Collins
Chapter 4: Brady
Chapter 5: Collins
Chapter 6: Brady
Chapter 7: Collins
Chapter 8: Collins
Chapter 9: Brady
Chapter 10: Collins
Chapter 11: Brady
Chapter 12: Collins
Chapter 13: Brady
Chapter 14: Collins
Chapter 15: Brady
Chapter 16: Collins
Chapter 17: Brady
Chapter 18: Collins
Chapter 19: Collins
Chapter 20: Brady
Chapter 21: Collins
Chapter 22: Brady
Chapter 23: Collins

Chapter 24: Brady
Chapter 25: Collins
Chapter 26: Brady
Chapter 27: Brady
Chapter 28: Brady
Chapter 29: Collins
Chapter 30: Collins
Chapter 31: Collins
Chapter 32: Brady
Chapter 33: Collins
Chapter 34: Collins
Chapter 35: Brady
Epilogue Collins

Acknowledgments
Dial Delights Extras
Welcome to Sweetwater Peak: The Playlist
Excerpt from Free Falling
About the Author

For those who aren’t sure what they’re searching for. You’ll know it when you find it.

I knew nothing but shadows and I thought them to be real.
—OSCAR WILDE, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

1
COLLINS



There were three things that I could see out of my car's windshield, and all of them were ominous: a sharp and jagged mountain range with one point taller than all of the rest, a gray sky with clouds that were undoubtedly full of rain, and a plume of black smoke that was a little too close for comfort.

How close? Coming out of the hood of my car close.

"C'mon, girl," I whisper hopefully—giving my 2002 Camry a couple of slaps on the dash for good measure. My car was nowhere near the weirdest thing I'd spoken to. "Forty more miles. That's it. You can do forty more miles." Never mind that the forty more miles were steep, skinny, winding switchbacks that only had one destination: Sweetwater Peak, Wyoming.

Nestled in the shadow of the tallest peak in the Elk Spine mountain range, Sweetwater Peak was quiet, quirky, and quaint. It was also the last place I wanted to be.

As if my car could read my mind, she started to shake and sputter. Well, that's not a good sign. "I get it," I said. I didn't really take great care of this car—I didn't even remember the last time I drove it. For the past three years, it had been covered by a tarp in a storage unit in Meadowlark—about two hours south of Sweetwater Peak—which I got to by hitching a ride with a nice couple who were on my flight from Portland to Jackson. They were going to some guest ranch in the area for a week.

I liked having the freedom of having my car where I could get to it if I needed to…without coming all the way home, though. So a storage unit was a good solution.

Now that my car sounded and felt like it was going to give out at any moment, though, I regretted not taking my twin sister up on her offer to pick me up from the airport today.

But I needed some time to mentally prepare to see Clarke and my parents. I love my family—really, I do. I'm just a firm believer in the whole "distance makes the heart grow fonder" thing. I've never loved my family more than when I wasn't living in the same town as them. Boundaries worked a hell of a lot better when there were thousands of miles between us.

I sighed loudly but not loud enough that I couldn't hear the rattle that was unmistakably coming from my engine as the car started to slow—even though my foot was still firmly on the gas pedal. *Shit.*

At this point, I didn't have a choice but to pull as far as I could onto the soft shoulder of the road. It wasn't wide enough to fit a whole car, but if I went any farther, the Camry and I would be barrel-rolling down the mountain.

I got out of the car and slammed the door a little harder than I needed to before walking to the front of the hood. I knew a little bit about cars—like how to check my oil and change my own tire, but I didn't even know where to start with the black smoke situation.

"Maybe this is a sign," I muttered to no one in particular. If I had any company of the, um, specter variety, they hadn't made themselves known yet, but it was only a matter of time as I got closer to Sweetwater Peak. "Maybe I should just hop in the car, throw it in neutral, and coast back down the mountain."

Thunder boomed around me, and I felt its reverberation in my chest—like I was right next to the speakers at a concert.

I took a deep breath before I popped the hood and was promptly enveloped in the smoke. My lungs burned as it wrapped around me, and I started to cough as I stepped back and tried to fan it away.

I wasn't clear of it until I was ten feet in front of my car, and even then, I spent an embarrassing amount of time with my hands on my knees

hacking. “Can’t”—*cough*—“catch”—*hack*—“a fucking”—*cough*—“break. Can you, Collins?”

I pulled my phone out of my back pocket and looked at the top right corner. No service. Of course. There was a pocket of cellphone service in Sweetwater Peak, but it didn’t extend very far outward. The last hour of the drive was a dead zone.

There was a string of texts from Clarke on my screen—the last one was delivered an hour and a half ago.

LARS: Remember how you said you were going to be here before noon?
LARS: Weird that it’s almost five, and you’re still not here.
LARS: You’re not even here yet, and you’re already giving me premature gray hair.
LARS: Seriously, Collins. Where are you?

Well, there was no use in trying to text her back when I knew that text wouldn’t go anywhere until I was inside the town limits. I should’ve called her while I was driving—told her where I was, so she knew that she should come rescue me when something inevitably went wrong, and I wasn’t home when I said I was going to be.

Clarke was always saving me.

Something cold and wet hit my nose, and then my arm, and then the top of my head. Thunder clapped again, and like that was all the rain needed, it started to pour.

I didn’t make for the shelter of my car right away. Instead, I stood there with my eyes on the engine and let the rain soak me all the way through.

I’d already resigned myself to sleeping in my car as soon as the smoke started pouring out of the engine, so there was no need to rush into it. Tomorrow morning, someone would have to drive down from Sweetwater Peak for some reason. There was only one way in and one way out. They’d spot me, and then I’d be on my way home again. This was just a little hiccup.

I moved the bar that kept my hood up out of the way, and then I let the hood slam shut. I checked that the emergency brake was pulled all the way

up before I crawled into my back seat—the pepper spray from my center console clutched in my grip—just in case.

Believe it or not, this is how I would prefer to be welcomed home. I loved a sunny day as much as the next person, but when I came to Sweetwater Peak, I always felt like I needed to do it under the cover of something—a storm like this was perfect. I hoped it lasted through tomorrow—then no one would be outside when I rolled through town or when I pulled my suitcases out of my trunk and dragged them to wherever Clarke had arranged for me to stay.

It probably would've been easier to stay with her or my parents—especially considering all of them thought I was coming home to help out with the family business. My parents owned Toades Antiques—the only antique store in Sweetwater Peak. They also owned the building that Toades, and several other local businesses, were in. Earlier this year, a developer came sniffing around and has been trying to get my parents to sell it all.

I don't love Sweetwater Peak the way Clarke does, but I love the idea of my family's livelihood being leveled and replaced by a gas station or a parking lot even less.

I'm also like…super out of money. I haven't had a photography job in over a year—not since the incident. I'd been skating by on savings and the firm belief that things would work out. Unfortunately, they didn't.

So here I am, with about $340, a junker of a car, and a bag of beef jerky to my name—running home to Mom and Dad. They just don't know I'm running home. They think I'm selflessly coming to help, that I've got some time off and want to spend it in Sweetwater Peak.

And I'm going to let them believe that. Actually, I'm going to do everything I can to make sure they believe that.

I let my eyelids flutter closed as I listened to the rain hit my car. It was loud enough that it was easy to focus on. My mind didn't wander, which was good because I knew exactly where it would wander to—*Why aren't they talking to me?*

I shook that out of my head. Not now.

Instead, I tried to count the raindrops and the thunderclaps and the flashes of lightning that lightened the space behind my eyelids every once in a while. I was nearly ready to doze off when I heard a noise outside my

car. I sank lower into the seat as I tried to look out the window to see if I could see anything, but there was too much rain and it was mostly dark. I didn't get spooked very easily, but I had some sense of self-preservation, so when I felt my heartbeat move to my ears, I clutched at my pepper spray a little tighter.

I wrapped my fingers around the window crank and rolled it down a little to see if that helped my visibility as I moved the mechanism on the top of my pepper spray to "shoot," with my other hand—knowing it would only work if its target was a living, breathing thing.

Breathe, Collins. It's just this town playing tricks on your mind already.

The window was open wide enough that I felt the rain hitting me and then I saw it—a face. I didn't have time to think before I let the pepper spray rip with a scream.

I knew it met its target when the face in front of me was covered with hands and let out a scream of its own. "Fuck!" it yelled. It sounded masculine; the pepper spray had been a good call.

"Oh my god, are you okay?" Another voice—this one feminine and… familiar.

I rolled my window down more and took in the sight in front of me. A man—a very tall man—on the ground with his hands over his eyes. And a woman who looked a lot like what I saw in the mirror every day.

"Clarke?" I called out to the woman behind him.

"Fucking hell, Collins," she said as she crouched down. "Do you have a water bottle in there?"

Oh shit. Did I just pepper-spray Clarke's boyfriend again or something? She hadn't said anything about a boyfriend.

I grabbed a plastic water bottle out of the cupholder and scrambled out of the car. I kneeled on the other side of the man. "Open your eyes," I said to him. "We have to flush it out."

"No thanks, I'm good here," he said, and I almost laughed.

"Brady," Clarke said. "I'm really sorry my sister pepper-sprayed you, but believe it or not, this isn't the first time this has happened. We're pros."

"I don't know if I can open my eyes," he said with a groan.

"Yes, you can, you big baby," I said without thinking, and Clarke shot me a withering look.

The man—Brady—moved his hands off his eyes and looked up at me. His dark hair stuck to his forehead, and water moved down his face. I couldn't see what color his eyes were in the dark—light. Maybe green or blue, but I could see that I'd done a number on them.

"Collins Cartwright," Clarke said. "Meet Brady Cooper."

Brady Cooper. That was familiar. Wait…was this the upholsterer? The one Clarke got me a temporary gig with? The one who said I could stay in his extra room?

I'd just maced the man that kept me from couch surfing at my sister's or sleeping in our childhood bedroom at my parents.

"Charmed," I said, and then poured the water into his eyes without warning.

2
BRADY



My eyes felt like someone had poured molten glass into them. I did my best to keep them open as Clarke drove my truck back to Sweetwater Peak. She had called me in a tornado of worry a few hours ago when her sister—Collins—hadn't made it home yet. She was worried she was broken down on the side of the road somewhere, and it turned out she was right.

Normally, I wouldn't really go out of my way to drive through a torrential downpour for someone I didn't know, but Clarke and her family had been good to me since I moved to Sweetwater Peak. And, honestly, I'd heard enough about Collins that my curiosity was piqued. *Was* being the keyword there.

Now that I was fighting the urge to dig my eyeballs out of their sockets because that would be less painful, my curiosity was sufficiently squashed—I just wanted out of this truck.

Clarke was behind the wheel of my two-door Chevy pickup, and her sister was in the passenger seat, which meant that I was sandwiched between the two of them on the bench seat.

It also meant that I was stuck in the middle of their argument.

"Seriously, Collins," Clarke said. "People break down on that road all the time. You should've called before your service dropped."

"I forgot," Collins said. Her voice was defensive.

Clarke scoffed. “I can’t believe you were just going to sleep in your car. Did you really think that none of us would be worried enough to come look for you?”

“What else was I supposed to do? Walk forty miles to Sweetwater in the rain?”

“No,” Clarke huffed. “You were supposed to know better in the first place.”

“I do know better,” Collins said. “I just decided not to execute on that knowledge.”

“Grow up,” Clarke sighed.

“Get a grip,” Collins shot back.

God, if my head didn’t already feel like it was going to explode, these two would really be giving me a killer migraine. I only had brothers, and right now, I was pretty grateful for that.

“Mom made lunch,” Clarke said, not missing a beat. “And then dinner while we were waiting for you.”

I felt Collins shrug. We were entirely too close together, and I was very aware of every touchpoint. “I love leftovers,” she said, and a smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. Their argument was like an Olympic table tennis match—both of them flinging their words back at each other before the other had a chance to think.

“And we’ve talked about the pepper-spray thing,” Clarke said, moving on. “You said that you weren’t going to shoot first and ask questions later anymore—not after last time.”

Last time?

“Okay, well, what would you do if some random man’s face showed up in your car window on a dark and stormy night? On Wyoming’s emptiest road?”

“You were coming *home,* Olly. You literally know every single person that would be on that road.”

“Not everyone,” Collins said, and I could feel her looking at me. *Good point.* “Safety first.”

Clarke let out an exasperated sigh and then went quiet. Thank god.

“I missed you, you idiot,” Clarke said after a few beats.

“I missed you, too,” Collins grumbled. “And I’m really sorry for pepper-spraying you,” she said to me. I would’ve looked at her, but it hurt

to move my eyes. She sounded mostly sincere.

"It's fine," I muttered.

"She's normally more behaved than this, Brady," Clarke said apologetically.

"I'm not, actually."

"Shut *up*, Collins. I'm trying to make sure you still have a place to stay, dumbass." Right. I'd agreed to let Clarke's sister stay in the spare half of my apartment. In lieu of rent, she was supposed to help me with some business stuff. Apparently, Collins didn't like to stay with her family and liked to stay busy—according to her sister.

To me, it sounded like she needed a place to stay and a job, and didn't want her family to know about it, but that was none of my business.

I had my own shit going on. I didn't need to worry about anyone else's.

"He was going to find out sooner or later that you've fed him a bunch of bullshit," Collins said, and then stuck her hand in front of me, like she was trying to get me to shake it. "Collins Cartwright," she said. "Fuckup extraordinaire and indiscriminate pepper-sprayer."

I wasn't going to take her hand anyway, but I didn't have a chance to even try because the truck swerved, and my body crashed into Collins. I instinctively put my arm in front of her as Clarke tried to regain control of the truck as it hydroplaned. I felt us fishtail for a few seconds before we straightened out.

"Shit," Clarke said as the truck came to a stop. "Sorry."

I turned my face to Collins. My vision wasn't great, but her hazel eyes were wide as she looked up at me. "You okay?" I asked.

"Y-yeah," she breathed, and I felt it on my face. I watched her look down at my arm, which was still caging her in. "Thank you."

I nodded, but I didn't look away.

"Everyone all right?" Clarke asked.

Her voice sounded far away, but Collins's was close when she said, "All good."

"Twenty minutes to home," Clarke said as I moved my arm and scooted back to my spot in the middle. My thigh was touching Collins's thigh, but for some reason, I didn't move it. I felt her tense when Clarke said "home."

When the truck started moving again, I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the seat—counting down the minutes until I was out of

this truck.

3
COLLINS



I felt the other end of the couch cave a little bit as my sister sat down. “Made you breakfast,” Clarke said cheerfully.

I groaned.

“It’s like the middle of the night,” I said as I pulled the blanket she gave me last night over my face.

“It’s seven-thirty,” she said.

“Yeah, exactly,” I huffed. “I entered my REM cycle like twenty minutes ago.”

After last night’s debacle, Clarke and I thought it would be a good idea to give Brady a little more space before I invaded it. I did pepper-spray him, after all. So Clarke drove his truck back to his place, and we dropped it and him off there. His apartment was above his upholstery shop on Main Street—just a few minutes’ walk from Toades. My dad usually kept his truck in the back lot behind the shop since he was gone a lot of the time, which in this case was lucky for Clarke and me.

She drove us back to her house—a small two-bedroom Craftsman that was right outside the main part of town. Close enough that she walked when the weather was nice, but far enough that she didn’t feel too in the middle of things.

As if there were things to feel in the middle of in Sweetwater Peak.

“Seriously, Olly,” Clarke said as she pulled the blanket off me. “It’s Monday morning, and Brady is expecting you at nine.”

No time wasted, I guess.

“I don’t have any clothes,” I said. “Everything is still in my car.”

“I have clothes. And Dad went down to tow your car up.”

“Do I have to?” I whined.

“Yes,” Clarke said immediately. “Brady is nice. And you’re the one who wanted something to do while you’re here and didn’t want to stay with me.”

“You don’t want me to stay with you either,” I said, and gave my twin a pointed look.

She laughed lightly. “You’re right. I’ve picked up enough of your dirty clothes to last a lifetime.”

“You love me,” I said.

“Which is why I made you breakfast and picked out an outfit for you—sans color.”

“Fine,” I said. “But you have to tell me everything you know about Brady while I’m eating and getting ready.”

“I already told you most of it,” she said. “I wouldn’t let you live with just anyone.” I knew he hadn’t been in Sweetwater that long—maybe a year. He was an upholsterer here, but Clarke said he had a city job before that. Most people here didn’t take to outsiders very well, but Clarke said Brady fit in pretty seamlessly. He wasn’t overly social, but he didn’t cause any trouble. It sounded like the town sometimes forgot he existed, which stirred up some light green jealousy in my chest. I used to dream that I’d be able to stay away for long enough that by the time I came back no one would turn their head at the other Cartwright girl—that they would think there was just one of us, and it was Clarke. The good one.

I also knew that Clarke was being serious. She wouldn’t let me live with just anyone. If Brady was vetted by her, he was already leaps and bounds above every roommate I’d ever had. I shuddered a little when I thought about the one with the sugar gliders.

“And no flying rodents,” Clarke said, reading my mind. We did that.

“Okay, so why did he move to Sweetwater Peak?” People didn’t really move here—they either existed here forever or they left. The latter was rare.

Clarke shrugged. “Said he wanted a fresh start.”

“And are you two…?”

Clarke pulled a face. “God, no, Collins. You know it is possible to be friends with someone without sleeping with them, right?”

“What about without thinking about sleeping with them?”

“Yes,” Clarke said, annoyed. “And you better not do either of those things either. He’s *nice*.”

“No hookups in Sweetwater,” I said. “You know my rule.”

“Right.” Clarke shook her head. “God forbid anything keeps you here.”

I smooched the top of her head as I stood. If I followed Clarke down the conversational path she was leading me, it would undoubtedly end in a fight. It always did. “You’re the only thing that could do that, Lars. What’s for breakfast?” I didn’t feel like arguing with her right now.

“Fruit—I’ve got peaches coming out of my ass, I swear—yogurt, scrambled eggs, and toast.”

“Ew, I don’t want your ass peaches,” I said, and Clarke rolled her eyes. We weren’t technically identical twins, but we looked like we could be. We had the same upturned nose and hazel eyes hooded by thick, dark eyebrows. Clarke kept her dark brown hair natural, but I preferred to dye mine darker—not all the way black, but as close as I could get. Hers was also long—down to her elbows, while I kept mine cropped at my collarbones.

I looked around her house as I walked from the living room couch to the kitchen. We had similar taste when it came to home décor, as we were both heavily influenced by growing up in an antique shop. We liked things that were old—things that came with a story, and we liked a lot of it all at once. Clarke had a place to keep all her stuff, though. I didn’t.

“Where’s Pearl?” I asked. Pearl was Clarke’s pride and joy. She was a ten-year-old mastiff that Clarke rescued a few years ago. Pearl was massive and lazy and perfect. I didn’t see her when we came in last night because she was probably already asleep in Clarke’s bed—not a great guard dog.

“Outside,” Clarke said as she followed behind me. “I installed a dog door a few months ago, so she comes and goes from the backyard as she pleases during the day while I’m gone.”

I grabbed two plates off the shelf next to the sink and handed one back to Clarke. She took it and dished up some food before trading me for the empty plate I was holding.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a small orb near Clarke’s front door. *And so it begins.* At least we were starting small. Ghosts had always appeared to us in a few different ways—small orbs and big ones. Sometimes they were more human-esque but still blurry; sometimes they

were shaky and glitched like a hologram, and sometimes they were totally invisible, which meant I felt them instead of saw them. That didn't happen very often, but when it did, it could be unnerving—like feeling for a light switch in the darkness. And even though you think you know where it is, you can't quite get your finger on it.

Clarke and I were the only people that I knew who could do what we did, but movies and TV shows made me believe that there were more people out there who could do or see at least a version of the same thing. Even though a lot of things in film and media weren't true to my experience with ghosts, the way they looked and appeared had a decent number of common denominators.

Clarke must've seen my eyes flash because she said: "She's quiet. Doesn't really talk and doesn't like to be noticed, which works for me."

I almost told my sister then about how the thing—our parents would call it a gift—that we shared wasn't working for me anymore, how I was worried that I'd lost it forever and that I'd never recover.

How I felt like, for the past year, I'd been floating away from myself.

But I didn't.

Instead, I swallowed and asked: "Do you know her name?"

Clarke shook her head. The spirit realm had way less rules than you'd think, but Clarke liked rules, so she made her own. And one of those was that she never talked to ghosts first. She waited for them to approach her.

Over the past year, I wondered more than once if Clarke would notice if her abilities went away. To me, it felt like she spent so much time ignoring them and turning down the volume so low that she probably wouldn't notice if the mute button got pushed. I could tune things out if I really wanted to, but I generally didn't. If I did, I preferred to keep things at a low buzz—like white noise. It kept me comfortable—no matter where I was. Now that it was silent, everything was just…a void, and I had nothing to fill it with.

"She's probably a Hofstadt—the family that I bought the house from. She lingers around here every once in a while, but not too often."

I nodded, letting the conversation end there. We sat at the kitchen counter and ate our breakfast together. Pearl came through the dog door at one point and lay at the feet of our stools.

“Do you want to swing by the shop on the way to Brady’s?” Clarke asked. “Mom and Dad are probably already there.”

I gave her a look, and she rolled her eyes. I don’t think she would ever pass up an opportunity to spend time with our parents, but we went through life differently. Clarke marched—feet on the ground with a clear direction—and I…floated, I guess.

“Dinner, then,” she said—more to herself than me. Dex and Joanie Cartwright are the two best people on the planet—living or dead. Followed closely by Boone Ryder and then Clarke Cartwright. And I love them. Sometimes, though, my parents are just…a lot.

They’re bright and bold and vivacious, and they think Clarke and I hung the moon. And maybe for them, we did. But the rope I used to hang it was weak and frayed and nearly ready to snap—which meant that very soon, I’d be dropping the moon directly on their heads.

And then they’d push it off and go, “That’s okay, peanut, you didn’t mean to.” That’s what they call both Clarke and me—peanut—because there’s usually two of them in a shell. Just like us.

Even when I do shit like this—when I avoid them for long periods of time or when I don’t return their calls or texts until Clarke steps in, they don’t get mad or upset. They just say, “Collins has always done things her own way,” and they never hold it against me.

Anyway, the point is that my parents are great and, most of the time, I don’t measure up. Or I lie to make all of us think that I do.

There was a point in time where I didn’t have to lie—when the jobs were rolling in, when *the* photo story was published in *Blue Sky Geographic* and then went worldwide. The national photography award, and all the slightly smaller ones that came after it.

But that was a well that ran dry over a year ago. They didn’t know about that, though. As far as they knew, everything was fucking peachy.

I watched Clarke douse her eggs in hot sauce before she pushed the bottle over to me to do the same. I scooped some eggs onto my toast, took a bite, and let it go quiet.

—

The outfit Clarke picked out was surprisingly good, despite our different taste. She liked a lot of color—powder blue, light green, some deep reds every now and then. Red looked great with her features. I generally wore a lot of black or brown—a product of my profession, I guess. Darker colors let me fade into the background, like camouflage. It helped me move stealthily through life while holding my camera—capturing places and moments as they were meant to be seen—naturally, not staged. So I felt totally comfortable in Clarke's black trousers and sleeveless mock-neck top.

The Doors filled the cab of my dad's truck as Clarke drove us into town. It was still drizzling a little, but nothing compared to yesterday.

Out the passenger-side window, Sweetwater Peak looked the same way it always did—rain or shine, winter or summer, fall or spring: mostly quaint, but if you stared too long, a little…eerie. I don't think anyone would notice it at first look—that half the charming storefronts were abandoned, that the pavilion in the town square was in disrepair, or how the west corner of town never totally came out of the shadows because of its position underneath the mountain.

Sweetwater Peak is a town built on chipped paint and cigarette butts and things that go bump in the night. It's also fluffy white clouds and saltwater taffy and mountain breezes.

And I love it.

I also hate it. It's complicated. It's simple. I don't really know how to explain it. It's just…Sweetwater Peak.

Clarke brought the truck to a stop in front of what I assumed was Brady's. It was a two-story storefront. The second story was an apartment. I'd known it existed but had never been in it before. That was about to change.

"Do you want me to come in with you?" Clarke asked without cutting the engine—a sign that she wanted to come in with me as much as I wanted her to, which was not at all.

I lolled my head to the side to look at her. "I'll survive," I said. "Do you think his eyes are still fucked?"

"Probably," Clarke said with a laugh. When we were juniors in high school, Clarke tried to sneak a boy—Brendan Ridgeway—in through the basement window. They had their wires crossed about the time he was supposed to show up, and I was still watching television in the basement. I

heard the window creak open, and when I looked up and saw half of someone's body through it—not a faded, ghost body but a living, substantial one—I freaked. Live humans were way scarier than dead ones—at least as far as ghosts went. I haven't had any experience with zombies—the other variety of dead human.

My dad had gotten both of us pepper spray for each of our keychains for the car we shared. Mine was in my backpack right next to me, so, just like last night, I sprayed first and asked questions later.

Whoops.

"I never learn." I shrugged.

"I'll come by at lunch—bring you some of Mom's leftovers from yesterday," Clarke said. "And we'll probably have dinner at the shop tonight."

Shop dinners—a Cartwright family classic.

"Sounds good." I took a deep breath and pushed the passenger door open. "Thank you, Clarke. I love you." For better or worse, my sister was my other half. She was my rock, even if I wasn't hers. Maybe I was her wind—something that blew in and out as it pleased and made messes. But every once in a while, maybe I pushed something in the right direction. Or perhaps that was just wishful thinking.

Clarke reached across the bench seat and squeezed my hand for a second before I got out. I didn't have a doubt in my mind that Clarke knew something was off with me. We were like that.

"Love you."

When Clarke pulled away, I looked at my watch—the same skinny silver vintage one I'd been wearing since I was sixteen. Eight-fifty-five. Of course my sister would get me here five minutes early. I, however, preferred to be right on time.

I thought about walking around the block—twice, probably—but decided not to. Thinking about it got me to eight-fifty-six, at least.

I couldn't see through the windows on Brady's shop with the way the sun was shining on them, but *Coop's Upholstery* was painted on both of them in large, vintage letters. Cute.

The paint around the windows, on the other hand, was chipped and flaky. The sealant at the edges was blistered and cracked, and the actual

glass was the slightest bit warped—probably from years of extreme weather.

This storefront used to be a bait and fly shop, but that was way before I was born. It has also been a saddle shop and a travel agent—that one didn't last very long. The last time I had been home, it was abandoned—like half of the street was. The things that stood the test of time were the saltwater taffy place, a cobbler, a few places to eat, two other bait shops, a mercantile, and a tailor. An upholstery shop would probably work here—I didn't know for sure, though. I had to go inside first.

I looked down at my watch again. Eight-fifty-nine.

Well, now felt like as good a time as any. I reached out and pulled the door open. Before I even stepped over the threshold, I could smell leather and new fabric.

The space was open. There were a lot of workbenches near the back with piles of fabric on them and both a love seat and a couch elevated on platforms. It looked like both of them were still in process. It was bright, too—the light from the windows reached all the way to the back of the store.

"Hey." I heard a man's voice coming from my left. Brady was coming down the stairs that I assumed went to the apartment. "Right on time." He looked different in the day, but that was probably just because I could actually *see* him. His hair was dark. It was longer than I thought, too—tucked behind his ears. He looked like he spent a lot of time in the sun.

I was right about his eyes, though. They were light. Blue. And red—irritated, still. That tugged at my sternum a little. I felt…guilty, kind of. I am no stranger to guilt, so it's easily identifiable, but I was a stranger to feeling bad for a man—men in general, honestly. Especially for something I did to them. Normally, I wouldn't think twice about it.

Brady is good-looking. And I don't mean that in any sort of way. Just that he's good-looking enough for me to notice. I fought the urge to straighten my necklace or my shirt or untuck my hair from behind my ears. It's not like I cared if he thought I was good-looking too.

"Good morning," I said, and reached my hand out—trying to remember professional courtesy or whatever. This was my boss, after all. "I'm, um, really sorry again, about last night."

Brady visibly flinched, and I felt the guilt tug at me again. “Don’t worry about it,” he said, and then took my hand in a firm handshake. I could feel the calluses on his palms.

“Um, are your eyes okay?” Why did it feel like I was blushing? I didn’t blush. I wasn’t a blusher.

“Fine,” he said, and gave me a tilted smile. Well, shit. Apparently, I was a blusher. “Flushed ’em good, consulted Dr. Google, and all is well.”

“I’ve never been very good at first impressions,” I said. I realized I was still shaking his hand. It was too late to pull it back without it being weird, but continuing to shake it was also weird. I decided the lesser of the two evils was to just let this roll on. “But I think that one might take the cake.”

Brady huffed a laugh. “Well, we can try again. Brady Cooper,” he said with that same tilted smile. “Nice to meet you.”

“Collins Cartwright.” I smiled back against my better judgment.

“Fuckup extraordinaire,” he responded. His eyes were probably pretty when they weren’t tomato red. “I remember.”

I nodded, and decided now was a good time to pull my hand out of his. When I did, Brady looked down like he didn’t realize they were still linked, but he recovered quickly and slipped his hand back into the pocket of his jeans.

“So, you ready to get started?” he asked.

4
BRADY



It wasn’t creepy to stare at her if she was lurking outside my shop like a weirdo. I didn’t get a chance to look at her last night, but now I know she probably would’ve blinded me either way. I don’t know which one I would’ve preferred.

Every time I heard about her so far, I imagined she looked like Clarke because they were twins, but Collins was entirely her own. Her dark hair was cropped pretty short, and she had it tucked behind her ears. Both of her arms were covered in tattoos—all black ink, but not one big piece. They seemed totally random. I didn’t even know her, and I knew they were perfect for her. Her skin was pale—especially for it being August—and her face was just…striking. I can’t think of another word for it.

She looked like trouble. And she looked nervous. I expected her to come in when she looked at her watch—it was almost nine, but she didn’t. She just stood out there and stared at the windows for a few minutes. I watched her eyes track all around the big windows that took up nearly the entirety of the storefront. At one point, her stare got caught on one of the corners, and I wondered what she was looking at.

When Collins checked her watch for the third time, I watched her expression shift—it was like a mask went up. Her posture shifted. She lifted her chin a little more and rolled her shoulders down and back. She went from nervous to confident in less than a second. I quickly went up a few

stairs as she pulled the door open. I didn't want her to know I was just staring at her through the window.

After a few seconds, I went back down the stairs again—super casual—and when I saw her inside the shop, I remembered that this woman wasn't just going to be working at my shop, she'd be living here, too.

The apartment above my shop wasn't tiny, but it also wasn't big. It was somewhere in the middle of the cramped-versus-cozy spectrum. Before I knew Collins—well, I didn't know her, so before I saw her, I guess—the size of the apartment felt like it would be fine. Now, I wasn't so sure. Part of me was realistic enough to realize that judging her based on her appearance, or worrying about what it would be like to live with her just because I thought she was pretty, was fairly lizard-brained. I refused to let the lizard brain win.

Plus, why would a woman like *that* be interested in a guy like me?

—

"So this is where I keep client contacts and orders and stuff," I said, opening and closing the top drawer of the filing cabinet. "And below that, supplies and purchasing orders, and supplies tracking." She'd been here for a couple of hours, and I spent most of it showing her around. Her job title was assistant, which meant that I was going to ask her to do all the things I didn't want to do—like answer the phone. I hate answering the phone.

"Ever heard of a computer?" Collins asked. Her arms were folded across her chest, and I kept getting distracted by her tattoos—trying to figure out what all of them were. So far, I'd puzzled out a dagger and a scorpion—two for two on sharp, deadly objects.

I smiled. "I used to be a software engineer, so yeah," I said. "Just have had enough of them to last a lifetime."

"Fancy," Collins said with a nod. "Why did you come to Sweetwater Peak?" she asked.

"A fresh start," I said with a shrug.

"Did you get your heart broken?" she asked immediately, and I looked at her in disbelief.

"How could you possibly know that?" I asked. "You've known me for two hours."

“More like twelve hours,” she said. “And people usually say they need fresh starts when they get their heart broken in one of the million ways you can get your heart broken.

“So what was it? A significant other? Did someone die? Did the software engineer version of you die and the upholsterer is what rose from the ashes?”

A huff escaped me. “Jesus,” I said, and rubbed at the back of my neck.

“My money is on a significant other,” Collins said, looking me up and down.

She was right, but I didn’t talk about Jackie. Not today. Not ever if I could help it. I liked my odds. “What makes you say that?”

“The long hair and the stubble,” she said. Maybe she could see things I couldn’t—if she got all of that from looking at me.

Because she was right that I used to keep my hair short and my face clean-shaven, but I didn’t want to admit that.

So I just went back to talking about supplies. “In the mornings, I’d like to have a kind of progress report on projects—where we’re at in the process, if things need to be ordered, or pickup and delivery notes.”

“Got it,” Collins said. “Also, your nonanswer is an answer, by the way.”

“Noted,” I said. “I have an extra laptop that I bought for the shop. I just never use it, but if you want to transfer everything, I’ll get it set up down here.”

“Can I ask how you went from big-time software engineer to small-town upholsterer?”

“You can ask,” I sighed. “No guarantees I’ll answer.”

Collins stared at me, her question hanging out there waiting for me.

I thought about it for a second. I thought I could get away with answering that specific question without having to dive into anything else.

“My granddad was an upholsterer,” I said. “He taught me a lot when I was younger.”

“Did you stick with it?” Collins asked.

I shook my head. “I picked it back up a few years ago. I was itching for something to do with my hands.”

“All the coding wasn’t enough?”

She had no idea.

“No, the coding wasn’t enough.”

“So how did you go from ‘my granddad taught me’ to ‘I’m good enough for this to be my job now’?”

“YouTube,” I said, and Collins grinned up at me like she was delighted and amused by my answer. “A-and a few local classes,” I stuttered. “And practice.”

“An unstoppable trio. You made the right choice, though. Upholstery is way hotter than software engineering,” she said as she looked around the shop.

If I’d been drinking water, I would’ve choked on it. I felt the tips of my ears heat. I was grateful for the longer hair, so hopefully Collins couldn’t see. She didn’t seem fazed. She just kept talking, and I kept thinking about how she inadvertently called me hot and how that one word had effortlessly reduced me to a fumbling teenager.

“Upholstery also fits in here,” she said. “This road is basically a one-stop shop for all kinds of repairs with you, the cobbler, and the tailor.”

“That’s been my experience so far.” I nodded. “I’ve honestly been busier than I thought I would.”

Collins made eye contact with me again, and I noticed that her eyelashes weren’t coated with black, but with a dark burgundy color. It made her hazel eyes look lighter. “U-um,” I stuttered again. “So back to anything you might need down here.”

“We can see how this week goes,” she said. “I’m not like an organizational genius or anything, and I’m usually pretty good at operating within the specs provided.” Her eyes flitted to something behind me, and I instinctively looked over my shoulder.

There was nothing there.

“So,” she said. “This desk is mine?”

“Yeah,” I said, swiping a couple of papers off it. “It was left here from one of the previous businesses. I don’t really use it—except to stack things—but I thought it would be nice to have someone near the front of the store just in case people come in.”

“Do people come in often?” From her tone of voice, I figured she already knew the answer to that.

I shook my head. “Not really. But they do call a lot.”

“I’m sure,” she said. “So is a lot of your business just people who want to facelift their furniture?”

“About three-quarters,” I responded. “The other stuff comes from your family, usually.”

“My family?”

“Yeah, that’s how I met them. They source a lot of antique furniture—which you probably know—and I usually reupholster the stuff that has soft surfaces. I’ve got a whole Gothic Revival set from them that I’m chipping away at right now.”

I watched Collins’s eyes look behind me again. *What* was she looking at? “Oh,” she said. “Cool. I feel like they used to just sell that stuff as is.”

I nodded. “It started with a piece that was really torn up—a footstool with a cushion on top. Easy, turned out great—and after that, Dex thought it was a good partnership.”

“It is.” Collins nodded. “So the YouTube upholsterer has a good thing going on.”

“You’re forgetting the granddad part,” I said. “That’s the important part.”

“Were you close with him?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I spent more time with him when I was younger than I did with anyone else.” I didn’t usually talk so damn much, but it felt easier than usual for me. Collins was attentive. I didn’t know if she was being that way on purpose or if it was part of the mask that she put on before she came in here, but it was a good skill.

“That’s cool,” she said with a soft smile. “I have someone like that, too. So do you want to take me through the projects you currently have and what’s in the pipeline?”

“Uh, yeah. That’s a good idea,” I agreed.

“I’m going to blame the fact that I don’t have a notebook and pen on the fact that all of my belongings are in my car, which is probably still on the side of the road, and we’re both going to pretend that I would have brought one anyway—even though I probably wouldn’t have.” Collins smiled at me. She had a dimple on one side of her face that you could lose a dime in. “So do you have a pen and paper? Or a pencil and paper?”

“U-uh,” I stammered, momentarily…dazzled, I guess? Embarrassing. “Yeah.” I reached for one of the desk drawers and pulled out a notepad and a construction pencil. I’d have to remember to get some actual pens in here.

Collins took them from me. “Should we go back there?” She nodded back toward my workspace.

“Right,” I said, and gestured for her to go ahead of me. “After you.”

—

After that, the day went by quickly. Clarke stopped by for lunch—brought enough for me, too, which was nice. She brought everything from Collins’s car, even though the car was still on the side of the road. Apparently, Dex’s tow rope snapped when he started to pull away from the car.

“Do you want to take your stuff up?” I asked around four. Collins was going through a stack of papers she’d pulled from the filing cabinet. She’d been at that while I had finished placing some piping on a chair. She mumbled to herself a lot, and she was very…expressive when she did it—almost like she was talking to someone else.

Or at least *thought* she was talking to someone else.

Collins looked up from the papers. She had a silver ring on one side of her nose, and a small, silver stud on the other. She had a silver watch, too, which she glanced at.

“Working hard or hardly working?” she asked me with an arched brow.

“I like a bare-minimum day every once in a while,” I said.

“You’re talking to a girl whose entire life is held together by bare minimums,” she said. I didn’t know that much about Collins. The way everyone talked about her, I almost didn’t expect her to be real. Everyone—including her family—talked about her like they were never going to see her again. Her parents talked about her work and her accomplishments like they were memorializing her. And Clarke…Clarke talked about her like Collins left her behind—like she’d been forgotten.

“I find that hard to believe,” I said. “Don’t you have like eighty national photography awards?” I knew she had at least one.

Collins stiffened and busied herself with the papers again. “I’d love to take my stuff up. Thank you,” she said after a few beats.

I put down my mallet and started walking toward the stairs. I heard Collins’s footsteps follow. “I don’t know if you already know this, but the stairs lead to a pretty long hallway and then there are two separate entrances to the apartment.”

“Because it used to be two units, right?” she asked as we walked up the stairs.

“Right,” I said. “Now it kind of looks like a college dorm.”

“I never went to college, but I’ll take your word for it,” she said behind me.

“So, you have your own bedroom and bathroom, but when whoever combined it did their thing, they did it by taking down the wall between the kitchens and living rooms—which were back to back—and then making one giant one. Well, not really giant. Everything up here is pretty small.”

“I’m not really a big cook, so hopefully I won’t disturb you too much.”

“Oh, I don’t mind at all. Might be nice to not be so alone up here all the time,” I said as we made our way down the dark hallway to her door. I’d tried a few times to install new lights in here, but they always burned out within a few hours. Old electric, I guess.

Collins mumbled something that I couldn’t quite make out, but I did catch “never” and “alone” somewhere in there.

“So this is you.” I nodded toward the door we were coming up to. It was marked as 2B in rusted metal letters. Mine was 1B. I pulled the key out of my back pocket and handed it to her. “You can do the honors.”

Collins stuck the key in the lock and twisted it. The key stopped turning before the door was all the way unlocked, so Collins gave the key a jiggle until the lock gave way and the door opened.

This apartment was the exact same as mine—just mirrored. You walked immediately into a small—and I do mean small—entryway, and the bedroom was a few steps in on the right. It had light hardwood floors that were beat to hell and a large radiator that had been painted white for no reason.

“The bathroom is an en suite,” I said. The hallway to the kitchen was on the left. “That goes to the kitchen. I have to warn you, the tile they chose when it was redone is kind of reminiscent of a hospital. It’s green, white, and checkered.”

Collins smiled, and her dimple appeared. “Hospitals don’t bother me,” she said. “This is great. Thank you so much. I’m, uh…happy to have my own space while I’m here.”

“No problem,” I said. “Thank you for being willing to help me out.”

She looked like she was about to say something else, but her eyes shot to the corner of her living room and narrowed. I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up, and I quickly turned around to see what she was looking at.

There was nothing there. Again.

"You good?" I asked her.

"Yeah, sorry," she said shaking her head. "I thought I heard something."

"You probably did," I said. "There are a lot of squeaks and creaks in this place. It's old."

"Like everything else in Sweetwater Peak," she said with a sigh. I couldn't tell if it was a good sigh or a bad one. "Old bones."

Something about that image sent a shiver down my spine. It was the way she said it—not the way people say *good bones* or whatever when they're doing a renovation. She said it like she was resigned to living inside a skeleton.

"Do you need help getting your stuff?" I asked, desperate for a subject change.

Collins shook her head. "No, I've got it," she said. Her tone was sharper than I'd heard it today. Did I do something wrong?

"Thank you again for letting me stay here." She wasn't looking at me, though. She was still looking in the corner. It didn't really feel like she was talking to me either.

"Yeah," I said. "I can help you get your car if you want. I don't think my tow rope will snap." It was pretty new—got it in the winter just in case I needed to get myself or anyone else out of the snow.

Collins shook her head. "It doesn't matter. It's just a car." Her voice sounded detached.

"But…" I trailed off as she just shrugged and walked back down the dark hallway. She swung wide before going down the stairs like she was going around someone.

What was up with this woman?

5
COLLINS



It didn’t take long for me to get my stuff up to the apartment. All I had was one large suitcase, a carry-on, and a small duffel. My entire life was easily condensed into three bags.

If I thought about that for long enough, it might make me sad. I liked things—objects that I collected like trinkets and clothes and things like that. I had brought a few with me—some matchboxes, pins, and postcards—but there used to be more. When I started to feel like I was getting attached to things, I would leave them behind when I bounced to another place. It used to make me feel good—like there was nothing that owned me, that I could drop everything, move on, and not look back. Lately, though, it was mostly a reminder that *I* didn’t really own anything, and I had nothing to look back on—just things to miss. I decided not to think about it.

Instead, I thought about the fact that somehow, I’d ended up in the one place in this entire town that was apparently nearly just as ghost-friendly as Toades.

In the last nine hours, I’d spotted seven ghosts. *Seven.* And it could’ve been more, but I was choosing to believe it was the light playing tricks on me.

I don’t remember a time when I couldn’t see them, so I assumed that it had been this way since birth for me. If there was ever a time I couldn’t hear them—besides now—I didn’t remember. Clarke says she always

remembers hearing them but didn’t start seeing them until she was six or seven.

Neither of us registered that we were seeing and talking to things that weren’t there until our parents brought it up. We were like the quintessential kid in a horror movie who gives everyone the creeps because they’re talking to nothing and somehow have befriended or been possessed by the Great Big Bad.

I was just friends with the ghosts, though. I’d never been possessed—that I knew of, at least.

Outside Sweetwater Peak, I usually just saw orbs or impressions of something that vaguely resembled a translucent human. It was partly up to them and partly how far away they were from their anchor point that determined the intensity of their appearance. *Anchor point* wasn’t an official term, but that’s what Clarke and I called it. It didn’t have to be where they died—just a place or a thing that was significant. That’s why there were a lot of ghosts in the antique shop—they were attached to furniture or knickknacks or throw blankets.

That was where I had first met Elda, the ghost anchored to the silver watch that I still wore every day. The watch had come to the shop before our fifteenth birthday. We got a lot of jewelry. Half of it ended up being costume jewelry, but every once in a while, we ended up with a special piece like the watch—an expensive piece.

It fell out of a vanity table that my mom was stripping the paint off of. She didn’t even notice it—I found it on the back porch of the shop a few days later. My mom polished it up and put it in the jewelry case, and I stared at it every day. Sometimes, if I was the only one there, I’d carefully take it out and put it on. It fit perfectly.

On my birthday, I noticed it was gone, and my heart fell. I thought that someone had swooped it out from under me, and I wished I’d hidden it. That night when I went to bed, a velvet jewelry box was on my pillow.

It’s lived on my wrist ever since.

Elda didn’t make herself explicitly known until later, but when she did, I saw her whenever I slept through my alarm—which was a lot. I’ve always been more of a night owl, so getting me out of bed to go to school was a challenge for everyone in the Cartwright household—including Elda, but

she persevered. She would sing off-key, slowly pull my comforter off me, or spill the glass of water next to my bed.

She didn't necessarily talk a lot, but she *did* a lot. She would shout if I didn't look both ways before crossing the street. Once, she told me to slow down when I was speeding down a back road. A deer darted out in front of me a few seconds later. If I hadn't slowed down, that deer and I would've become acquainted in a way that wouldn't have ended well for either of us.

Elda annoyed the hell out of me. Her antics didn't stop when I left Sweetwater Peak. She was always *there,* like a guardian…ghost, I guess. She reminded me to take the most well-lit way home, and would give me unsolicited input on dates I went on, and she even told me to call my parents every once in a while. I didn't usually follow through on that one.

Over the years, I learned bits and pieces about her life. The watch belonged to her daughter, who died before Elda did. Her chosen way of interacting with me made sense after I learned that.

From what Clarke and I observed throughout our lives, ghosts could pretty much show up however they wanted. It could be subtle or not. And unlike the movies, it didn't matter what they looked like when they died. Nearly every ghost who I knew or interacted with that died later in life usually chose to appear younger.

Also, there's this misperception that ghosts have some sort of unfinished business and that the reason they're hanging around is that they're not at peace or whatever. But that hasn't been the case for any of the ones I've interacted with. At least not from what they told me. Ever since I was a kid, I've talked to the ghosts. I enjoyed it. And most of them just wanted to hang out with their loved ones or be in a place they missed or explore something they never got to while they were alive.

They had far fewer rules than the living.

But eight months ago, their voices started to get muffled. Then, a few weeks later, I heard nothing at all. I could still see them, which in some ways was a relief, but it felt like torture: no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't communicate with them. I tried to talk to Elda, my most consistent companion, but I got nothing—not even when I took a scarier walk home or hopped on the back of some random guy's motorcycle, which was very Bella Swan of me, I know, but unfortunately, there were no hallucinations for Collins.

Just silence.

It had been almost a year since I'd seen her, and every day I looked down at my wrist and wished for her to stick her nose in my business one more time. There was a point during the last year that I didn't get out of bed for days; I hoped eventually she would at least come to wake me up, tell me to get dressed, but she never did. Not seeing her hurt enough that at one point, I took off the watch and intended to leave it behind at a coffee shop. I only made it a few blocks before I ran back to find it.

My life had never been so quiet, and I had never felt so alone.

But I didn't know what to do about it. So I just kept going and tried to ignore that it felt like an integral part of me—that used to feel like a symphony—had gone mute.

And now I was here.

In an apartment crawling with ghosts who couldn't—or wouldn't—talk to me. But that didn't mean they wouldn't annoy the hell out of me. Like the one who hid in the corner while Brady was here and kept giving me a creepy smile until she started laughing. At least, that was what it looked like. I couldn't hear her.

When he left, I told her that wasn't funny—not that she acknowledged me at all.

Other than that, though, it was a good day. Easy. The exact kind of day I needed before seeing my parents.

I walked toward Toades—careful to avoid the cracks that were basically canyons that littered the sidewalk along Main Street. The residents of Sweetwater Peak preferred a…slower-paced life, so at five-thirty, Main Street was a ghost town—no pun intended.

My parents' shop wasn't in a storefront like Brady's. It was in a house, one of the oldest structures in Sweetwater Peak. It was a white-and-brown farmhouse with two stories (and a basement and attic). The front porch had two rocking chairs and an assortment of herbs hanging from the railing. A wooden sign in the front yard read *Toades: Wyoming's Premier Antique Emporium.*

It looked just like it did when I left it, and that was comforting. Winds would rage, rain would pour, and the snow would pile up—businesses in Sweetwater Peak would come and go, some years would be bad and some would be good, but no matter what, Toades would survive.

Unless some asshole developer bought the block and tore the whole thing down.

A breeze made my mom's extensive collection of porch wind chimes do their thing as I walked up the steps and opened the front door.

Toades, like most other antique shops I'd been to, had a very distinct smell. But it wasn't musty or dank. It mostly smelled like lemon furniture polish and wax and just kind of…old. It was comforting and familiar.

I kind of wished I could bottle it to spray on my pillow at night. Maybe then I could get some sleep.

Toades was furnished like a house—but with multiples of everything and things shoved in every corner. Clarke was dusting off a credenza in the entryway when I walked in.

"Hey," she said. "How was your day after lunch?"

"Good," I said.

"Everything went okay with Brady?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's like working with a mannequin."

"I don't know quite what you mean by that, but I don't think it's very nice."

I shrugged. "He's just boring—not a lot of conversational flow," I said. Other than the stuff about his grandfather. "At least he's nice to look at."

"He'll loosen up a little once he gets to know you, I'm sure," Clarke said. "Maybe you intimidate him."

"Right," I said with an eye roll. "Also, that place is ghost fucking central."

Clarke tilted her head at the annoyance in my voice. "I know," she said. "That should be your heaven. I thought you'd be jazzed. If Brady is boring, at least you'll have other things to talk to."

I swallowed hard. "Right, yeah. You're right."

Clarke narrowed her eyes at me—either trying to read my mind or getting ready to ask a question I really didn't want to answer.

If there was anyone I could talk to about this, it was Clarke. She was the only other person who could understand, but she wouldn't. She'd probably tell me to enjoy the quiet. But I was saved by my mom making her way into the entry.

"I thought I heard the two of you," she said with a warm smile, and I immediately stepped toward her for a hug. Joanie Cartwright was beautiful.

About ten years ago, she decided to embrace her gray hair, and once it grew all the way out, she'd started using different temporary color conditioners on it every couple of weeks. Right now, it looked like it was covered in an icy blue. She always wore a duster of some sort, and today's was floral that leaned into deep purple and green tones with black tassels on the trim.

"Hi, Mom." I breathed her in. She always smelled like ambrette and coffee and whatever incense she was burning at home. I heard her bracelets clinking together as she rubbed her hands over my shoulders.

When my mom pulled back, she gently grabbed my chin in her hands. Her rings were cool against my skin. "Let me look at you," she said with a soft smile. I fluttered my eyelashes a few times. She studied my face for a second, then said, "Stunning. How's your heart?" It was never "How are you?" or "How are you feeling?" It was always "How's your heart?"

"Half full," I said. It was the most honest thing I'd said since I got here.

My mom looked at me thoughtfully. "Better than half empty," she said, and kissed my forehead. "Clarke, stop working. It's dinnertime."

The kitchen at Toades, though it was packed to the brim with antique décor and appliances that were for sale, was fully functional. My parents made a lot of baked goods in the oven to keep in the shop, and they cooked a lot of meals here, too. If they kept the sign up after normal hours—they closed at four-thirty—that meant anyone could come in for dinner and eat.

Tonight, though, the sign was flipped to *Closed*, so it was just us.

"Where's Dad?" I asked. My dad wasn't here all the time. He was a long-haul trucker, so he was gone for a couple of weeks at a time and then home for a week or so. Sometimes when I came home, I missed him if I didn't give any notice, but if I gave a warning, then he'd finagle his schedule to see me every time.

"Upstairs. Storm last night brought a leak in one of the rooms up there. He's patching it up," she said. "Dex!" she yelled to nowhere in particular—just hoping my dad would hear. "Collins is here!"

"Did you lose any merchandise?" I asked.

"Not too much," Joanie responded.

"Twelve hundred dollars' worth of merchandise," Clarke said. "Mom and I have different definitions of 'not too much.' "

"It'll be fine, baby," my mom said with a pat on Clarke's back as she walked over to the oven. "These things work out."

I could almost hear Clarke’s eyes rolling. Each of us took a seat at a barstool while my mom pulled a sheet pan out of the oven. I couldn’t tell what it was yet, though.

The stairs creaked loudly as my dad made his way down. A few seconds later, he appeared in the kitchen with a wide grin. He was wiping his hands with an old T-shirt that he threw over his shoulder as he made his way to Clarke and me. Nothing went to waste in our house—or Toades. Clothes were patched and mended until they couldn’t be and then my mom would find another use for them—usually rags, but sometimes she’d sew them together to make pouches or grocery bags.

My dad was usually clean-shaven but kept his hair long enough that he could pull it back into a small bun at the back of his head. Today, he was wearing a plain blue T-shirt, jeans, and a well-worn pair of hiking boots.

“Hi, peanut,” he said. His voice was gravelly from half a lifetime of cigarettes.

I wrapped my arms around his waist and squeezed tight. “Hey, Pop.” My dad always cupped the back of our heads when he hugged us. It made me feel so safe and protected—like nothing could get to me.

“How was your first day?” he asked as he pulled back and gave Clarke a kiss on the back of her head before moving to the other side of the counter. My mom put two plates of food in front of Clarke and me. Chicken roll-ups. My favorite. It was a classic Cartwright comfort dish. It was a mixture of chicken, cream cheese, and some sort of canned creamy soup—cream of chicken or cream of mushroom, usually—all wrapped up in the store-bought crescent dough that came in the tube and baked until golden brown.

I made them for someone I was seeing once, and they thought they sounded, looked, and tasted disgusting. And maybe they did, but I did not tolerate chicken roll-up slander.

The grocery store in Sweetwater Peak carried local, in-season produce from one of the only farms in town—Wilkes Farm—and a couple gardens, so in the winter, fresh produce was normally in shorter supply. I grew up with a lot of meals that depended on cans—whether it was store-bought or canned by my mom. My favorites were her canned peaches or cherry syrup.

My mom went to get a plate for herself and my dad, but he grabbed her hand, kissed the back of it, and motioned for her to sit down before he

grabbed a plate for both of them. “Drink orders?” Dex asked.

“Root beer,” Clarke and I said at the same time.

“I’ll stick with water, D,” my mom chimed in. My dad grabbed two cans of root beer and a Coke out of the blue vintage refrigerator. We had the same one at home, but it was olive green and scratched to hell.

“How was your first full day back home?” Mom asked, and then laughed a little. “Hopefully less eventful than the first night.”

I whipped my head to look at Clarke. “Big mouth!”

“You didn’t invoke the twin code.” She shrugged.

“I feel like that was a given!”

“That’s not how the twin code works, and you know it.” The twin code had a lot of rules that Clarke and I made up when we were tweens. Invoking the twin code in any situation meant that the other was sworn to secrecy. We made a contract and pricked our fingers and *literally* sealed it with blood (I think we were probably a little too into *The Vampire Diaries* and *Practical Magic* at the time).

“That situation had precedent that was covered by the twin code. It was legacied.”

“Not how it works,” Clarke said again.

“Well, I’d like to make an amendment.” I folded my arms.

“An amendment is pointless—they already kn—”

I raised my hand and cut her off. “I want an amendment to cover any future instances of pepper spray.”

“It’s under advisement,” she said, with another eye roll. She is so good at those. They’re always perfectly paced depending on the situation. Sometimes she did it slowly; other times, it was a quick flick. No matter what, though, it was always effective—either in shutting me up or pissing me off.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me—”

My dad clapped and said, “All right. Guns down, ladies. Dinnertime is no place for a shootout.”

I used my fork to cut off a piece of one of the roll-ups on my plate and chewed angrily. “Day was good,” I said after I swallowed. I felt better with my favorite food in my stomach.

“She thinks Brady is boring,” Clarke said, and I gave her another dirty look. I wanted to stab her in the hand with my fork.

“He’s a good kid,” my dad said. “Does good work.”

“None of that screams ‘not boring,’ ” I said. “And I agree that he’s probably a good person and does good work from what I can tell so far.”

“He is a little…one note,” my mom agreed. “But not in a bad way. I think he’s just still finding his footing here. I don’t really see him around town much unless he’s here. Maybe you working there will be good for him. You can show him around a bit.”

“Roommate bonding time.” My dad nodded.

“I think you are all overestimating my ability to make friends and also my own motivation to leave my house,” I said. Yeah, I wouldn’t be showing *anyone* around Sweetwater Peak. If I could help it, I’d only ever have to leave my room to go to work or to go to Boone’s, and if I was going anywhere else, I’d skulk under the cover of darkness.

“Collins, my love.” My mom’s tone was sympathetic. “You’ve never once been able to sit still.”

I sighed. Joanie had a point. I’d go crazy if all I did was work and live in that building—even if I told myself that was all I wanted to do. I was good at lying to myself, but I wasn’t *that* good. Skulking in the darkness was still an option, though.

“But being there shouldn’t be too boring for you,” Mom said. “I always feel a lot of activity when I go in there. Did you see anything today?”

Joanie wasn’t like Clarke and me, but she was…something. When we were growing up, she called it “sensitive.” It’s why she had a knack for antiques—she felt energies so clearly and never bought or collected anything for the shop or our house that she felt was tethered to anything negative. When she started noticing her twins looking at things that weren’t there, she thought we might be like her, but our thing turned out to be a little more…intense, obviously.

“Olly already said that the place is crawling.” Clarke nodded after she took a glug of her root beer.

I felt my shoulders sag a little but hoped I caught it before they fell too much.

“Hear anything good?” Dad asked.

“Not yet,” I said with a shake of my head. “But all in due time, I’m sure.”

My dad nodded. “Have you seen Earnest yet?” Earnest was a permanent Toades resident. His anchor object was a large record console from the fifties. It came to the shop when Clarke and I were probably seven or eight, and we loved it. To us, it felt like when you opened the top, you were opening up a mini concert. Earnest would sit with us while we listened to music, and sometimes he’d point to a record he wanted to hear. He got more talkative with time. We would run through the front door at Toades after school to tell him about our day. He would show us stuff in the shop we’d never seen before. We also taught him about the present. Our first lesson involved explaining and showing him what a Pop-Tart was. He was fascinated.

We got so attached that when someone wanted to buy the console, we threw a cataclysmic fit.

And it worked.

My parents didn’t sell the console. It was still the only way they played music at Toades. Earnest was the reason we knew we couldn’t just see ghosts but could hear and communicate with them too. He was why we knew that they weren’t tied to one form. When we were kids, Earnest was a kid, and when we were teenagers, he was a teenager.

Earnest died when he was twenty-one. He’d lived in Sweetwater Peak his whole life. He died on his way up to the Sweetwater River. Someone ran him and his Buick off the road and into a tree.

“Poor Little Fool” by Ricky Nelson was playing on his radio.

Earnest was our friend, and he was a constant for our whole family. He moved my dad’s tools and played little jokes, and he always found a way to alert my mom if she tried to leave while the coffeepot was still plugged in.

He was the reason that I liked talking to the ghosts—why I got attached to them and the stories they told me.

Not being able to talk to him would break my heart. I shook my head. “Not yet.”

“That’s surprising,” Mom said. “I’m sure he’ll make himself known soon.” I nodded but stayed quiet after that.

—

After dinner, I decided to walk home with the basket of fruit that Clarke gave me. She couldn't help but take care of me. It was equally annoying and endearing. I had expected her to bring up the developer—that was the whole reason I was here, after all. Well, at least, as far as she knew.

But I guess she wasn't ready to broach the subject. It was surprising, really. Clarke didn't really back down from a fight—even if that fight was with our parents.

Maybe she had her own shit going on, too.

The walk back to the apartment was less than ten minutes. It was unseasonably warm for this time of year at this elevation, so I couldn't see my breath as I walked. It was actually pretty concerning when I thought about the big picture of the planet, but it was nice for right now.

There were no cars on the road. There wasn't even any wind rustling through the trees. It was dead silent. I couldn't remember a time when the streetlights actually worked, so all I had to light my way was the moonlight. The shadows around me felt familiar, but I felt different. In the dark, the hollowness in my chest felt more pronounced—like if I tapped on my sternum, it would echo through the night.

God, why did I think coming back here would fix anything? I wasn't like the ghosts. I didn't have an anchor point that I could get closer to and feel more like myself. They could float with no consequences. I couldn't. They didn't need jobs or a place to live. They didn't get stuck.

I did.

I was.

I am.

I'd thought coming back here might help, but all it had done so far was remind me how loud and heavy the silence was.

When a howl cut through the silence of the night, I picked up my pace. The hair stood on the back of my neck as I walked down the alley that led to the back entrance of Coop's and the apartment.

Instead of going inside right away, I sat on the steps outside the back door. I brought my knees close to my chest and dropped my head to rest on them. I didn't want to be here—not in Sweetwater Peak and not in this apartment that only reminded me of exactly what I'd lost.

But I didn't want to be anywhere else either.

I didn’t want to explore the world anymore. I didn’t want to take pictures. I didn’t want to try and fix my life.

I didn’t want to *do* anything.

I wanted to exist in this dark void that I’d created for myself—where nothing could get to me. I felt a tear slide down my cheek, and then another.

There was another howl in the distance, and I lifted my head to look up at the full moon. Was I going to feel this way forever?

The door opened behind me, and light flooded from the opening.

“Oh,” Brady said, surprised. I turned my body halfway, so I could see him. He was carrying a black trash bag. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to…disturb you.”

“It’s fine,” I said, and scooted to one side so he could get around me. His steps were tentative as he did—like if he treaded too loudly or heavily, it might break me. It wasn’t out of the question.

I kept my gaze on the moon as Brady walked over to the dumpster and slung the trash in. When he started walking back toward the door, his steps slowed a little.

“A-are you…okay?” he asked.

I sniffled. “Yeah,” I said without looking his way. He didn’t say anything for a few seconds. I could feel him thinking, wondering what to do with me. I almost told him that it was okay—that no one knew what to do with me.

“C-can I get you anything?” I shook my head. “Do you want to go inside?” I shook my head again and heard Brady sigh.

I finally pulled my eyes off the moon, and more tears fell when I blinked. Brady was right in front of me, wearing a white T-shirt and a pair of dark sweatpants. “You must be cold,” I said, and he shrugged. The concern in his eyes was clear.

“Are you okay, Collins?” he asked again softly. I liked the way he said my name—the way it looked when it rolled off his lips.

“No,” I said this time. After all, I was clearly crying in the moonlight—there was no use in lying to him.

Brady bit the inside of his cheek—again, wondering what to do with me. *Leave me alone,* I thought. *I want to be alone.*

“Do you want company?” Brady asked.

“No, I really don’t,” I said—quicker and harsher than I meant to, which was evident in the way Brady’s eyes widened, just a little.

He nodded slowly, then walked up the three steps and through the back door without saying anything. It shut with a firm click—leaving me in the silence and the dark.

6
BRADY



If I'd learned anything over the past four days, it was that Collins was fucking nutty. I swear, she talked nonstop. But not to me…and seemingly not to *anyone*. She was constantly muttering while she was working, and at night, I swore I could hear her on the other end of the apartment getting into it with some imaginary fiend.

I first noticed after I found her on the back stairs a few days ago. I'd never seen anyone look so…defeated. I felt terrible leaving her there by herself, but she made it clear that she wanted to be alone. So I stayed up in my side of the apartment until I heard her come in—over an hour later.

"Oh my god," she said. "Leave me alone." I'd thought she was talking to me—that she somehow knew I was awake in my bedroom worried about her, but there was no way. She kept talking—telling something that she didn't want anything to do with it multiple times.

If I'd known how well noise carried in this place, maybe I would've kept the apartment to myself instead of saying yes to a somewhat moody roommate.

Yesterday, I thought I heard her on the phone while I was coming down the stairs. It sounded like some sort of argument; maybe she was in another bickering match with Clarke? But when I asked her if everything was all right, she looked at me like I was the crazy one. So then I said, "Your phone call sounded kind of intense," and she said, "What phone call?"

Nutty.

Now I could hear Collins's voice at the top of the stairwell. "If you're going to ignore me, you can at least stop staring at me all day, creep-ass bitch." Her footsteps started down the stairs but stopped. "I'm sorry," she sighed. "That was uncalled for."

She appeared at the bottom of the stairs a few seconds later. "Good morning," she said casually—like she hadn't just been cursing out nothing less than a minute ago.

"Morning," I said tentatively as I took her in.

Nutty…and pretty. Today, she was wearing a short black skirt, a plain black long-sleeve shirt, and a pair of black stompy boots. Only one of her legs was tattooed like her arms—a bunch of random patchwork tattoos. I quickly looked away from her when my gaze caught on another dagger that disappeared under the hem of her skirt.

Other than the talking to herself, the week with Collins had gone…fine. Aside from that first night, we hadn't run into each other much in the apartment—just a few times in the morning getting coffee, and she kept herself busy in the shop.

She'd done inventory of all of my supplies, set up an email inbox, created a project tracker, and made the front of the shop look presentable. I worked with my headphones on most of the day and whenever I took them out and looked around, it seemed like she'd done something new.

But I did catch myself looking at her more often than I wanted to. I chalked that up to the fact that she was always mumbling, though. It wasn't because I thought she was interesting or a knockout or anything like that. It was because her constant chatter annoyed the hell out of me.

Obviously.

But every once in a while, the image of her and her glassy eyes staring up at the moon would creep its way to the front of my brain, and I'd wonder what had happened to make her look so sad.

It wasn't like I couldn't understand, in some way. I wasn't really sad when I came here, but I was searching for something—something that I didn't quite yet know if I'd found. I guess I felt more longing than sadness. In my experience, longing kept me going and sadness kept me still, but they were two sides of the same coin.

I didn't know what she was going through, but I felt bad for her. The Collins that I found on the back stoop and the Collins that maced me

seemed like two different women, but both of them seemed comfortable alone in the dark.

A little while later, I heard the sound of her boots over what was playing in my ears—Bread's greatest hits. I took my headphones out and let the cord hang around my neck. "What's up?"

"Ms. Papadakis just called to make sure you were still good to deliver her new kitchen chairs today," Collins said. "I told her I had to check. And then she proceeded to go on and on about the work ethic of young people."

"Shit," I muttered. I'd finished reupholstering the cushions on her kitchen chairs a few weeks ago, but she'd been out of town, so they were still in the shop. "I forgot about that."

"So no?" Collins asked.

I shook my head. "No, I'll take them," I said. "Can you call her back and let her know I'll bring them this afternoon?"

Collins nodded. "Do you need any help?"

Honestly, no. There were eight chairs, and they were light. I could probably carry them into Ms. Papadakis's house two at a time, so imagine my surprise when I said, "Yeah, that would be great."

"Cool. Let me know when you're ready, we can venture up the hill."

Maybe it's because Collins physically didn't exist in Sweetwater Peak to me before now, but I kept forgetting that she knew this town—probably way better than I knew it.

"Let's go at one," I said. "It'll take us a while to get up there."

Collins gave me a mock salute, and I ignored how cute she looked doing it. "Right on, boss."

—

Collins put her hands on her hips when she met me by my truck. "Well, one of us is going to have to change," she said.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, confused.

"We're too matchy-matchy," she said, gesturing to my denim jacket, which I now noticed was nearly identical to the one she'd put on.

"Oh," I said. "I can change, one sec."

I went to walk past her, but she grabbed my arm. "Brady," she said, and I looked down at her. "It was a joke. You don't need to change." I didn't

move, even though we were close. Too close.

When she let go, the spot on my arm where her hand was felt cold. “We’ll tell Ms. Papadakis that this is the Coop’s uniform,” she said as she turned back to my truck. She opened the passenger door, but I reached over her shoulder and pushed it shut before grabbing the handle myself and pulling the door open.

“Well, that wasn’t boring,” she muttered before looking back at me and then hopping in the truck.

Boring? She thought I was boring? I guess I had been a little more reserved around her since she got here. I chalked it up to getting used to someone else in my space—especially when that someone seemed to have a lot going on. But every day I got more curious about her, and I really didn’t know if I wanted to be even *more* curious about Collins than I had been before I met her.

When I walked around the front of my truck, I saw Collins lean across the bench seat to pop my door open.

“Returning the favor,” she said with a sly smile when I got in the cab.

She screamed trouble.

“Thank you,” I said, and pulled out of the lot.

It had taken me about an hour to load up the dining chairs and secure them in my flatbed, because it took some Tetris-level finagling to get all eight to fit. I kept looking in my rearview mirror to make sure nothing back there was going awry.

“Are you against music in the car?” Collins asked from the other side of the cab as we drove along. Late August in Sweetwater Peak meant you could really get any type of weather—sunny and seventy-five only to be shortly followed by a winter storm wasn’t out of the question, but today was nice. Midsixties, sun, and fluffy-white clouds.

“I don’t mind listening to my own thoughts,” I said. “Plus, I don’t really notice. I always feel like there’s so much to take in while I’m driving around here.”

“I’d rather be alone with an open petri dish full of an airborne flesh-eating virus than listen to my own thoughts.” Collins sighed. “Good for you.”

I laughed. “They’re that bad, huh?”

She shrugged in my periphery. “I don’t know. There’re just…so many of them all the time.”

“Is that why you’re always talking to yourself?” I blurted out.

But before I could be embarrassed, Collins responded. “I don’t talk to —” she argued immediately but then stopped. “Yeah, um, that’s why I talk to myself all the time. Gotta put all this shit somewhere, you know. Might as well be out into the universe.”

“I didn’t mean to—” I started.

“It’s fine,” Collins said. I risked a glance over at her. She was smiling a little. “God, you must think I’m crazy.”

“Kind of,” I said truthfully. “But you think I’m boring.”

“You’re less boring today,” she said, not even trying to deny it. “The day is still young, though. You have time to revert.”

“Thanks,” I said sarcastically. “That makes me feel so much better.”

“Hey, I’m giving you a warning. Reversion to boring Brady is your choice.” A smile tugged at the corner of my mouth. “Also,” she said. “You were supposed to turn like half a mile ago.”

I hit the brake. “Shit.” I didn’t even notice I’d gone past the turn.

“You can turn around up here,” Collins said. “There’s a dirt road from way back in Sweetwater Peak 1.0 that would eventually bring us to her place…if you’re up for a little adventure.”

I raised a brow at her. “What the hell is Sweetwater Peak 1.0?”

“Like the first iteration of it,” she said, like it was obvious. “Where everyone either left or died and the whole place was uninhabited for like a decade?”

“That sounds fake.”

“How do you not know this?” she asked. “You literally live here—turnout is in like a hundred feet, by the way. On your right.”

I kept my eyes on the right side of the road and saw a heavily wooded dirt turnout. I slowed the truck down and pulled off the road. I looked ahead, but I couldn’t see more than a few hundred feet in front of me. The trees along it were dense. I’m sure I passed this road before, but I didn’t notice it until now.

“How far does this go?” I asked.

“Five-ish miles,” she said.

“Does it lead anywhere?”

“Somewhere forgotten,” Collins responded. Her voice was wistful.

Five miles on an unmaintained dirt road was way longer than five miles on a normal one.

I put the truck in reverse and backed out onto the road and took us back the way we came. I kept my eye on the left side of the road and kept my speed just above a crawl—I wouldn’t miss the turn to the Papadakises’ twice.

“Boring Brady strikes again,” Collins said quietly under her breath, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Yeah, yeah, all right. But I’m working. We’ve got a job to do.” Collins chuckled but nodded. “I do want to hear about the first Sweetwater Peak. I want to know more about this town, and you seem to know it all. Tell me something I might not know about Ms. Papadakis.”

Collins’s face went focused, and she sank her teeth into her bottom lip as she thought. My hands tightened on the steering wheel.

“Do you know how she got her money?” Collins asked, and I shook my head. “Her dad was one of the first people to invest in—get this—refrigerated trailers for semi-trucks in the sixties.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously,” she said. “That’s also why everyone in town loves her. Refrigeration for trucks was revolutionary in general, but obviously especially so for rural towns like this one. My dad drives for her company.”

Honestly, Ms. Papadakis scared the shit out of me. She was an intimidating old bird, but she wasn’t as scary as Boone Ryder.

Boone was an old, crotchety man who lived even higher on the peak than Ms. Papadakis. He had his own little haven where he ran his own power and water—totally off the grid. As far as I knew, he wasn’t like an apocalypse prepper or anything—he just preferred solitude. He didn’t come down from there very often, but he just happened to on one of my very first days in town.

I had rented the shop and the apartment site unseen, and since the Cartwrights were the owners of the building, they were the first people I met. But Boone was the second, because Clarke called him when I accidentally shattered the shop’s back-door window while I was carrying in some of my furniture supports.

When he rolled up in his black Chevy KC wearing a black cowboy hat, aviators, and a frown, it was clear to me that he was not a man to be messed with. The first words that Boone said to me were “city dipshit,” and they didn’t improve from there.

His voice was deep and rocky, and the fact that I couldn’t see his eyes because of his sunglasses unnerved me, and that feeling stuck around. If I ever saw him in town, I gave him a wide berth and so did nearly everyone else.

I saw the turn to the Papadakis house this time, and started driving up the steep hill. It was only a few hundred feet up, but the incline made it feel longer. The house was large, and the driveway actually led to the back of it. The front of it faced a mountain, but the back had a view.

“Do you want to go to the door while I unload? Let her know we’re here?” I said as I put the truck in park and cut the engine.

“I don’t think you want me to do that,” Collins said.

“Why not?”

“Ms. Papadakis does not like me,” Collins said. “Not even a little.”

“What did you do?” I asked.

A ghost of a smile appeared on her face. “Why do you assume I did something? Maybe it was her.”

“Did she steal your boyfriend or something?” I asked sarcastically.

“She does like a younger man.” Collins shrugged.

I raised an eyebrow at her. “So?” I said. “What happened?”

“I went to school with her nephew,” Collins said. “Emmett—totally awful little gremlin man. He snapped my bra strap once in the eighth grade. He was *that* kid.”

“I hate that kid,” I said. “So, what? Did you punch him or something?”

Collins shook her head. “No, but one day at lunch he got hit square in the nose with a baseball when he wasn’t looking.”

“So you were the one who nailed him?”

“Inconclusive.” Collins grinned. “I was the prime suspect—got pulled into the principal’s office and everything. Ms. Papadakis wailed about how I’d broken his perfect family nose, but no one saw me throw it.”

“Did you?”

“Not exactly,” Collins said. “I had some help.” Her voice trailed off, and she seemed to get lost in her thoughts for a moment before shaking herself

out of it. “Anyway. Emmett is her pride and joy—the heir to everything—and she wasn’t thrilled that no one got punished with the broken-nose thing. She has a special dirty look that’s reserved just for me.”

“That’s a long time to hold a grudge.”

“This town is held together by grudges—grudges and chewed-up gum, Brady. It’s part of our weird little ecosystem.” I was surprised that Collins included herself. So far, it seemed like she had wanted to keep herself separate from anything having to do with Sweetwater Peak.

“But she would’ve heard you on the phone,” I said.

“She thought I was Clarke,” Collins responded.

“How do you know?”

“Because I told her I was Clarke,” Collins said. “It’s easier to be her when dealing with this town sometimes.”

“She didn’t break anyone’s nose?”

Collins laughed lightly—a half laugh that made me wonder what the full one sounded like. “She wouldn’t dream of it. So I’ll start unloading, and you can go to the front door.”

“You’re sure?”

Collins nodded. “The chairs aren’t heavy. Let’s just hope she doesn’t hover when we have to take them inside.”

Both of us got out of the truck, and I got distracted by Collins and her stompy boots as she rounded to the truck bed and the way she flipped her hair out from behind her ears before she pulled the tailgate down.

The noise it made as it fell flat brought me back to earth, and I quickly made my way to the front door.

7
COLLINS



"Any big plans tonight?" Brady asked as I helped him clean up for the day. He had been working on a love seat and there were fabric scraps everywhere. "Your first Friday back in Sweetwater Peak."

"I think that just answered your question," I said. Friday nights in Sweetwater Peak weren't exactly hoppin'. And if I was going to do anything, I wanted to do it alone—if I could get Clarke to let me borrow her car. "What about you?"

Brady shook his head. The sleeves of his flannel were rolled up, so I could see the veins on his forearms.

Brady rubbed at the back of his neck. "I don't, um, really *do* much. I guess."

"Well, there really isn't much to do," I admitted. "But there's the bar and most of the restaurants are decent—all that farm-to-table goodness—or that one place that never has the same name but has the arcade and two bowling lanes."

Brady's mouth tilted up. "It's currently called Drama Mama's." I cringed. That was the worst one yet. "And, I don't know…I just haven't quite found my place here yet, I guess."

"I know what that feels like," I sighed.

"But you're from here," Brady said, confused.

I shrugged. "It can be a tough place to fit in, but I know all the places to hide—which I'm happy to share if that's what you're looking for." I didn't

think he was, though. Brady was the type of guy who seemed like he'd have an easy time here. He was a business owner, a seemingly genuinely nice guy, and a rare eligible bachelor.

I had always had a harder time. Growing up, I didn't always get it, but now it seems pretty obvious why the girl who preferred to talk to the dead over the living might have a challenging go at existing in a town as small as this one where tongues wag nonstop.

So I decided to find my own Sweetwater Peak, instead of trying to fit into everyone else's. There were places and people here—albeit mostly dead people—I loved and cherished and missed.

Speaking of dead people, I was doing my best to ignore the two orbs that had been hanging around my desk all day. One of them pushed a stack of papers off my desk, and I had to fight the urge not to chuck my stapler through them. If I did that, Brady would really think I was crazy.

He shook his head and cleared his throat, thankfully distracting me. "I don't think I need a hiding spot…not yet anyway," he said. "But I'm curious about how you found one in a town that's basically four square inches."

I thought about a few of my favorites: an abandoned church hidden away in the mountains, the secret river overlook, an old cellar in the woods behind the post office, Boone's farm, and the attic that I turned into my squatter darkroom when I got into film.

A desperation for solitude and a few undead pals to guide you, I thought. "Boredom" is what I said to Brady, though. "And the inability to sit still."

"I'm familiar with the affliction," he said. The way he was smiling at me while being genuinely engaged in our conversation made my knees weirdly shaky.

"Love seat looks good," I said, changing the subject and nodding toward the finished piece. It was a deep blue velvet that felt reminiscent of the night sky right after twilight and right before full darkness set in.

"Oh, thanks. It turned out okay." Brady rubbed at the back of his neck. "D-do you think you could snap a few pictures of it?" My heart dropped. "I want to be better about documenting projects—like a portfolio or whatever."

“No,” I said, cutting him off. Brady blinked a few times, and his shoulders dropped.

“Camera needs a new battery,” I lied. “And I have to order it, so…”

“Ah,” he said, nodding. “That will probably take a while.”

“I’m sorry,” I said honestly—both for lying to him and for letting him down. “But maybe the next love seat.” Probably not. “Why do they call it that?” I changed the subject again.

“Exactly what it sounds like,” he said. “Smaller couch, so, um, lovers can sit close together.” Why was I blushing at him saying “lovers”? How old was I, thirteen?

“Oh, right,” I said dumbly. “Seems pretty obvious.”

An awkward silence fell between us, and I looked down at my boots. The mention of photos threw me off my game. I was out of subject changes.

“So no plans tonight?” Brady asked after a minute. “You’re not doing anything with your family?”

“Unfortunately, Dex and Joanie have a standing Friday night date whenever he’s home, and they do not budge—not even for the prodigal daughter’s return,” I said with a small smile. Clarke and I could always count on having the house to ourselves on those Friday nights growing up.

“They don’t want a third wheel?” Brady joked.

“I promise you don’t want to be their third wheel,” I said, shaking my head. “They’re fucking gross.” I guess it was a good thing that my parents were so openly loving to each other, but growing up, Clarke and I did a lot of pretend gagging when they kissed.

Brady laughed. Ever since our ride to Ms. Papadakis’s he had been more chatty. Open. It was kinda cute.

That didn’t mean anything, by the way. It was just a fact. He was actually kind of dorky—in a mostly endearing way. He had literally quoted the first *Lord of the Rings* movie twice today.

“What about your fresh start?” I asked. “It’s gotta be more than sitting in your apartment,” I said gesturing upward. I almost said *haunted apartment* but thought better of it. But as if I had summoned them, one of the lingering orbs appeared behind Brady’s head. I narrowed my eyes when I noticed one of the jars of tacks on the shelf starting to move slowly.

Brady’s face fell for just a second, and I immediately regretted bringing up his fresh start. “Really fucking it up, I guess.” I think he was trying to be

nonchalant about it, but he sounded very chalant.

The jar was still scooting toward the edge of the shelf. *Don't do it, you cheeky bastard.* Right as the jar was about to go over the edge, and before I could think twice about it, I reached forward and fisted the collar of Brady's shirt, pulling him toward me, and away from the shelf.

Half a second later, I heard the glass jar shattering and tacks clattering across the floor.

"What the hell?" Brady said, turning his head. I still had hold of his shirt. I peeked around his shoulder to see the damage and looked around for the instigator, but they were nowhere to be found.

"How did that even…happen?"

"Uneven shelves?" I said hopefully, and he turned back to me. We were close. I thought I could feel his heartbeat.

He shook his head but didn't make an effort to move away from me. "That's been there for months," he said, and I didn't respond. I didn't know what to say, but I didn't think *This entire building is haunted, and the ghosts have it out for me* was the right thing to say.

"Weird," Brady muttered. "Thank you—for…getting me out of the way." I looked up at his blue eyes, and I felt like I was swimming in them, unable to tread water.

"N-no problem," I stuttered. I watched him look down at his chest, where my fist was still bunched in his shirt, and I immediately let go and took a step back.

Did I hear…laughter? Wishful thinking.

I suddenly felt uneasy about leaving Brady alone here tonight, and before I could think better of it, I asked, "Do you want to go somewhere tonight?"

"I thought you didn't have big plans," he said with a smile—recovering from the tack incident.

"I don't, but…maybe I have a small one," I said, and Brady raised an eyebrow at me. "Checking up on a hiding spot. If we had gone down that dirt road by Ms. Papadakis's yesterday, we would have come upon the old church."

"The Old Church is in town," Brady said, and I shook my head.

"Not the proper noun." There was another less old church down the road that had been converted to the local watering hole way before my

lifetime. It was literally called the Old Church. “There’s an abandoned one up the mountain.”

I could practically see Brady’s ears perking up. “Oh,” he said. “Yeah, that would be cool, actually.”

“You’re not afraid of ghosts, are you?”

Brady, who thought I was joking, chuckled and rolled his eyes a little. “Ghosts aren’t real, Collins.”

“Ah.” I nodded. “You’re one of those. Maybe they’ll spare you a haunting, then.”

“You actually think it’s haunted?” Brady folded his arms across his broad chest.

“I know it is,” I responded quickly. “But the bar is, too. This whole town is.” Brady arched a brow at me, and I shrugged. “You asked.”

“So we’re going to go to a haunted church while it’s getting dark?”

“We’ll take candles,” I said.

“Why not flashlights?”

“They don’t like harsh, artificial light like that.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“The ghosts, Brady,” I said, snapping my fingers a few times. “Keep up.”

Brady gave me the same look he’d given me a million times over the past few days—apprehensive but maybe…intrigued?

“I don’t even think I have candles?”

I rolled my eyes. “Not even one? What if you brought a guest home and wanted to set the mood?”

“With a singular candle? I think I’m better off setting the mood without a fire hazard,” he said.

“Boo,” I responded. “Don’t worry—I always have candles in my car.”

“Do I want to know why?” Brady asked sarcastically.

“None of your business,” I said, walking backward toward the stairs. “I need to change before we go. Meet back here in like thirty?”

Brady started toward the supply closet in search of the broom and dustpan and waved me off in agreement.

8
COLLINS



I ran up the stairs and pushed my front door open. It wasn't locked—don't tell Clarke.

I kicked off my Mary Janes and pulled off the black satin skirt I wore to work as soon as I was through the front door and left it where it fell.

I walked toward my bedroom—which took about three steps, but I didn't mind. I'd only been here for a couple of days, but I really liked this apartment. It was cozy and creaky in all the right ways. My only complaint was all the unexpected roommates I was stuck with.

My biggest suitcase was open on the floor, and I swiped a pair of baggy black jeans out of it. Just as I did, I saw a soft glow out of the corner of my eye.

Ugh. She's back.

"Did you need something?" I asked without turning toward the glow. She'd been around every day—this specific fucking ghost—every morning before I went to work and every evening when I came back up to the apartment. She seemed to prefer to appear in person form. I could make out her long hair and leather jacket but no other identifying features in her blurry, gauzy appearance. She would stare at me, but when I tried to talk to her, she would disappear.

Like clockwork, I watched the glow fade, and let out an annoyed sigh. If I had hoped that when I came back to Sweetwater Peak my abilities

would come back, too—going back to your roots and all that shit—it's clear these ghosts had other plans.

I pulled on the black jeans and grabbed my black hoodie I'd been sleeping in off the floor. When I bent down, I saw the black hard-shell carry-on bag that held all of my camera equipment. I hadn't unpacked it yet. I didn't know if I was going to—especially after I just lied to Brady about the battery. I wasn't a stranger to a little fib, but I was usually telling them to people that I didn't know or would never see again. What did I have to lose by telling some guy who was flirting with me at a bar that I was a champion water-skier named Alexandra?

The little lie I'd told Brady, though, was one I'd have to remember and keep up with, which already felt exhausting.

I stared down at the black bag again. X-ray vision wasn't part of my abilities, but I knew exactly how everything was arranged inside—my digital camera, my film camera, all my lenses, and a million spare batteries. I started taking pictures because I was desperate to hold on to moments after they were gone. Recently, there weren't any I wanted to keep, but there were plenty I wanted to be rid of.

I used my foot to push the bag back even farther.

Not today, emotional baggage. Not today.

When I pulled the hoodie over my head, I kept the hood on and pushed my hair back from my face. Suddenly, I felt the entire right side of my body go cold.

"Oh my god," I whined. "If none of you are going to talk to me, the least you could do is not walk *through* me." From what I could tell there were at least eight different spirits in Brady's building. I had visuals for four of them—the woman I saw daily, a teenager with a Metallica T-shirt, a twenty-something girl who looked like she was constantly chewing gum, and an older gentleman who sometimes had a cowboy hat on but always had a neckerchief. The other four preferred to be more…illusive. But each one had a different presence or vibe—like a fingerprint, each ghost had its own unique signature. Most of the time, it was a smell or a sound. Sometimes, like the one who'd just walked through me, it was a temperature change. Other ghosts preferred physical reminders of their presence like flickering lights, slamming doors, or knocking tack jars off shelves, apparently.

One time, I met a ghost in Alaska who loved to scream—scared the shit out of me the first time I heard it. Once she realized I could hear her, she did it more and more. I begged for her to shut up.

Now I wish I could hear her.

Just then, something—someone, rather, I'm sure—knocked the plastic water bottle I'd been reusing off the small nightstand next to my bed, and I heard the hard-shell suitcase I'd just pushed under my bed start sliding across the floor again. I stuck my foot under the bed to stop it. Absolutely not.

I had a feeling at least one of these ghosts was familiar with me, even though I didn't think I was familiar with them. But of all the things that got moved around my room since I got here, my photography gear seemed to shift the most.

It was really hard to suppress your emotions around your snuffed-out career when a bunch of ghosts kept forcing you into exposure therapy.

"Can you guys have some fucking decorum, please?" I said to no one in particular as I felt for a lighter in the pocket of my jeans—for the candles. My fingers felt the small rectangle through the denim, so I kept it where it was.

I didn't get a response, and a heavy sigh escaped my lungs without permission.

"Stupid ghosts," I muttered before making my way out to the kitchen. Surprisingly, I found it stocked with food. Unsurprisingly, I did not procure that food for myself.

Clarke couldn't help herself. At least she kept it simple: the wheat bread with all the seeds that I like, peanut butter, a jar of honey from Wilkes Farm, crunchy granola bars, and mini M&M's.

It was enough to hold me over until I could get to Boone's. No doubt he would have plenty of food waiting for me.

Music was coming from Brady's side of the apartment, and I found myself humming along to Blue Oyster Cult as I made a quick sandwich—peanut butter, honey, and a sprinkle of the mini M&M's—and cut it in half. Diagonally, obviously.

I checked my phone and saw that I had a text from Clarke.

LARS: What are you doing tonight? Do you want to hang out with Sadie and me?
LARS: I'll even ask if she's open to a horror movie if you're interested.

Sadie is Clarke's best friend. I have aggressively neutral feelings about Sadie, but Clarke loves her, so I love her, too—in my own way.

ME: Hanging out with Brady.
ME: So Sadie is saved! Tell her you're welcome!
LARS: That's…nice?

I could feel Clarke's curiosity (and vague judgment) through the phone.

ME: Yeah, we're going to summon the dead by having sex and me carving my name into his chest and pouring his blood into the soil.
LARS: You're a funny girl.
ME: I know.
ME: Chill. You know that's not even how that works anyway.
LARS: Okay, well, be nice. Be good. Or whatever.
ME: Back at ya, sister.

I slid my phone into the back pocket of my jeans and went back to my sustenance.

The dishes that Brady had were all old and mismatched. He told me they were here when he arrived—like almost everything in the apartment. It seemed like the only things he physically brought with him to Sweetwater Peak were clothes and the old motorcycle that was covered with a tarp behind his truck. Otherwise, he'd shipped all of his supplies—most of which belonged to his grandfather, I'd learned—so they were waiting for him.

I leaned against the kitchen counter and took a few more bites of my sandwich—the M&M's add the perfect crunch.

"Ready?" Brady's voice was close. I blinked a few times and realized I had no idea how long he'd been standing there.

I nodded and held out the plate with the other half of my sandwich on it. “Want?” I asked.

“Peanut butter?” he asked.

“And honey,” I said. He nodded and reached out to grab it. “And mini M&M’s.” Brady’s hand paused, and he raised a brow at me. I just shrugged, and he took the sandwich anyway.

He was wearing a navy blue hoodie—he had his hood up, too. But he was also wearing a dark green trucker hat, so he looked substantially less egg-like than I was sure I did.

I watched Brady take a tentative bite of his sandwich and chew slowly. He nodded a few times, and when he swallowed, I looked at him expectantly.

“Not bad,” he said. He smiled, and I noticed the wrinkles around his light blue eyes. They almost always looked like they were glowing. It was kind of…mesmerizing. And as someone who considered themself an expert on any type of glowing orb, that was a high compliment.

“Are you going to be warm enough?” he asked me.

His concern was…nice. “Clarke already mother-hens me enough, Brady,” I said with an eye roll. “I’m fine.”

“All right,” he said. “Should we go out your front door or mine?” I thought about how my entire wardrobe—undies and all—was strewn across my side of the apartment floor.

“Yours.”

—

“So do you really think this whole town is haunted?” Brady asked just as we made it to the dirt road that would take us down to the church. It wasn’t quite dark yet, but it was getting there. The Sweetwater Peak sky always flashed its most vibrant reds and oranges right before darkness fell—like a flame getting smothered.

I’ll admit that I did miss the sunsets while I was gone. And the stars—not an ounce of light pollution in this town.

“I already told you,” I said. “I know it is.” The dirt road wasn’t maintained at all—only flattened by the few that dared to drive on it, which

were probably teenagers and the two of us, so I was getting rightly jostled on Brady's bench seat.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"How do you not know?" I countered. "This place is creepy as hell," I said.

"Not in the daylight," Brady shrugged. "And that doesn't mean it's haunted."

I shook my head. If only this guy knew what was going down in his apartment on a daily basis.

"What about at night?" I asked.

"Everywhere is slightly creepier at night," he said simply. "That's just because it's dark and shadowy."

"But Sweetwater is dark and shadowy in the daytime," I said. "Have you never looked at the pavilion in the square?" I truly did not believe that anyone could come to this place and not feel like something was at least slightly *off*.

"It's just old." Brady shrugged.

"Your denial runs deep, Bradford," I sighed.

Brady huffed a laugh. "What did you just call me?"

"C'mon," I said. "Brady has to be short for something."

"So you went with Bradford? Of all things? Braden is right there."

"Is it short for Braden?" I asked.

Brady shook his head. "Nope. Brady is my full name."

"What's your nickname, then? If your full name is a nickname."

"Coop, usually. B, sometimes."

"Ah, I get the shop name now," I said.

"What about you?" he asked. "Collins is a hard one for a nickname."

"You're telling me," I grumbled. There were two things I wanted as a kid: glasses and a nickname. Why seven-year-old me wanted to be visually impaired? Who knows.

"Both Clarke and I were weirdly desperate for a nickname growing up. Everyone in our class had one, but nothing came along naturally for us. Like, there's not a shortened version of either of our names, and our last name is too long. But we came up with our own." Brady stayed quiet—listening and waiting for me to continue. "She calls me Olly, and I call her

Lars. We tried so hard to get them to catch on with our classmates, but they never did. We can't seem to break the habit, though."

"Olly, huh?"

"It sounds weird coming from anyone but Clarke now," I said. "You'll have to stick with Collins."

"Well, Collins," Brady started. "I'm going to need a little more convincing on this whole haunted thing."

"You've never wondered why your tack hammer is in a different place than you left it every morning?" I chose to use this example instead of the tack jar. I felt like talking about ghosts potentially causing bodily harm wasn't the best way to get him to believe me.

Brady looked over and made a face at me. "It's not," he said.

"It is." I nodded eagerly. "You always leave it on the table by the compressor, and it always ends up on the longer workbench."

"Always?" Brady asked. His voice sounded amused, maybe.

"Well, for the past five days at least," I said quickly.

"Maybe I put it on the longer workbench before you come down in the mornings," he said.

I shook my head. "Nope—you don't touch the tack hammer until after you've stared at whatever piece of furniture you're working on in deep contemplation for at least thirty minutes."

Brady scoffed. "So you've got boring Brady all figured out, then? In less than a week?"

I shrugged. "Do you move the tack hammer?" Brady pursed his lips. "That's what I thought," I said smugly.

Brady's truck dipped into a crevice in the road that was akin to the Grand Canyon, and both of us got rightfully jostled. "Jesus Christ," Brady said. "I don't even think this can be classified as a road." We hit another bump and if it weren't for my seatbelt, I would've gotten thrown directly into Brady's lap.

It was getting dark fast now, and the eeriness that lurked underneath the surface of Sweetwater Peak started to leak out of the shadows cast by the trees against the sky.

I loved it. This was another one of the parts I could admit I missed about this place—the way it went quiet when the sun went down.

“We’re close,” I said. “The trees are starting to clear up a little, see?” I pointed ahead of us, where the trees were positioned in what looked like a nearly perfect circle—just slightly off, like this whole town.

The church came into view a few minutes later. Its architecture didn’t really fit in with any specific style, but there were arched doors and remnants of stained-glass windows. At one point, it was painted a light blue, but now it was mostly brown as time had chipped away at it little by little—at least the parts that you could see. Vines and plants crawled up the walls and clung to the cracks.

If someone told me that this structure just…grew from the ground one day, I’d believe them. Honestly, I kind of liked thinking that it did: that it sprouted from the earth and would eventually return there if it was allowed to run its course. I hoped it was—too many things were anchored here.

There was a small stone courtyard in front of the church, and Brady brought his truck to a stop about ten feet before it. He let out a low whistle. “Damn,” he said. “This is…”

“Beautiful?” I asked. It was—to me anyway.

“Sure,” he said. “Let’s go with that.”

I scooped the shoebox holding two lanterns and a bunch of pillar candles that I had grabbed from my car off the floor, and pushed the passenger door open.

When I looked at Brady, he seemed kind of apprehensive. “Scared?” I asked with a grin, and he shot me a dirty look. I laughed. “C’mon, let’s go wake the dead.”

9
BRADY



The grin that Collins gave me before she got out of my truck was nothing short of maniacal. While we were driving, I could almost feel her energy increase as we got closer to this place—like this old-ass fucking church was charging her batteries.

My impression of Collins was different from what it was a few days ago. Yeah, she was confident and full of bravado, but she also seemed kind of…lost. In the moments when we weren't talking while working and she wasn't faced with having to think of a clever comeback to everything I said, she was quiet. Contemplative.

Maybe a little sad, too.

That was why I said yes to coming out here tonight—because she seemed excited by it, not just on the surface, but really, truly excited. I was kind of shocked she invited me, and I said yes before I thought it all the way through. But she was right: my fresh start couldn't only consist of me working and sitting in my apartment. I couldn't hide from my new life.

Looking at the old church, I kind of regretted it. It looked…skeletal, almost. I didn't believe in ghosts or hauntings or whatever it was that Collins was going on about on the drive, but if I did, this place would definitely be haunted.

I got out of my truck and shut the door as Collins put both of her lanterns on the hood. She put a candle in each of them, then started digging around in the pockets of her jeans.

She was wearing this massive black hoodie with the hood up. When I first saw her in it, my thoughts went to “cute,” but then I shook those out. I couldn’t act on that. I mean, it was nice to know that those types of feelings still existed in me somewhere. But I wasn’t ready to act on…anything, really.

I watched her pull a red Bic lighter out of her pocket, along with a small white cylinder that looked like it got caught between her fingers.

“Oh hell yeah,” she said, taking the joint in her other hand and holding it up for further inspection. “Past me was looking out.” She slid it between her lips, and I looked away once I realized I was staring at her mouth.

I heard the click of her lighter, and when I turned back to her, the joint was still unlit between her lips, but the lanterns were aglow. Collins held one out to me, and I took it.

The crunch of leaves and branches under our feet as we walked toward the church ruins sounded vaguely like bones. Damn, this pretty girl was filling my head with some nonsense. Or maybe it was already the weed.

“So as far as we know,” Collins started as we were walking. “This church was built in the first iteration of Sweetwater Peak—probably early 1800s—before everyone disappeared.” The way she changed the tone of her voice to sound more ominous at the end of her sentence made me smile. She’d make a good guide for one of those ghost tour things. She was convincing.

“People don’t just disappear, Collins,” I said. “They leave or they die or they eat each other or whatever.”

“Of all people, I didn’t think you would go straight to cannibalism,” Collins said with a grin. “But I can confirm no one in Sweetwater Peak 1.0 was eating each other—or at least none of them have ever admitted it.”

“How can you confirm that?” I asked. “Also, how could they admit it when they’ve been dead for over two hundred years?”

“I have my sources, Brady.”

God, this woman was about to tell me she was psychic or something, wasn’t she? “Nutty,” I muttered under my breath.

Collins just laughed; she was practically glowing in the light of the lanterns.

The closer we got to the church, the more I was aware of my hair rising on the back of my neck and the way my spine felt like it couldn’t be straight

enough. I started looking over my shoulder—suddenly worried that something could come out of the trees at any moment.

“Scaredy cat,” Collins said with another laugh.

“It’s creepy out here, okay? Any normal person would be at least a little apprehensive while walking toward a church that looks like it was the scene of at least six exorcisms.”

“Seven,” Collins corrected.

Oh god.

I stared at her, and when she looked up at me, her eyes were gleaming.

I shook my head. When we got to the front steps of the church, Collins bounded up them gleefully before walking through the open side of the door.

“Don’t fall too far behind, Brady,” she called. “The ghosts will get you!”

“Very funny,” I called back, trying to sound calm, but I cautiously looked around before walking up the steps as quickly as I could—hoping she couldn’t hear the fact that I picked up the pace after her comment.

The open side of the church door wasn’t quite wide enough for me, so I had to turn to the side and squeeze my way through it. When I got inside and looked around, I didn’t see Collins, but her lantern was on one of the front pews giving off a faint orange glow.

I cautiously walked toward it. She couldn’t have gone far. The inside of the church was actually well-preserved—probably because it was mostly stone, except for the pews, the hardwood floors, and the pulpit. My cautious footsteps creaked over the floorboards. There was a ripped tapestry hanging at the front, but I couldn’t make out what it was—

“Boo!” Collins jumped out from behind me, and much to my dismay, I let out a high-pitched squeal.

“What the fuck, Collins?” I demanded, but she couldn’t answer. She was doubled over in laughter and gasping for air.

“You should’ve”—she sucked in some air between bouts of laughter—“seen your face. Oh my god.”

“Not funny,” I said, but I was fighting a smile. Her laugh was contagious. I was shocked at how much I enjoyed the sound—how much I didn’t want it to stop, even if it was at my own expense.

“So funny,” she said, still laughing. She reached out and grabbed my hand. I was too stunned to pull my hand away or think about the spark that ran up my forearm and started pulling me toward the glow.

The way I could feel the floor give slightly with my every step did not inspire confidence.

Collins sat on the pew next to her lantern, and I sat next to her—trying not to get too close—and set my lantern on the other side of my thigh.

“I think I like it in here,” I said. I felt like we were in an atrium, with the plants growing up the walls.

“You’ll like it more when you look up,” Collins said, and I followed her gaze to the ceiling—or at least, what was left of the ceiling. There were a few beams that cut through the view of the night sky, but other than that, it was all dark blue and glimmers.

“Holy shit,” I whispered. “This is…”

“Beautiful,” Collins finished. “It’s one of my favorite views in Sweetwater Peak.”

“I can see why,” I said. I felt like I could see the stars starting to appear as the sky got darker. The view was like a portal to another world. It also looked familiar, but I couldn’t think of why.

I heard the click of a lighter and the burning of paper. When I looked over at Collins, a small cloud of smoke came out of her mouth as she exhaled. She held the joint out to me, and I took it from her once again.

I thought about the fact that her mouth had just been wrapped around it as I inhaled. I felt everything about this moment in my lungs.

“So,” I said. “Tell me about this first iteration of Sweetwater Peak.”

“Did you research this place at all before you moved here?” she asked.

I shrugged. I did, but not the history of it. “Not really,” I said.

“Why’d you pick it?” Collins asked.

I let out an exhale. “Honestly, I saw this photo series of it in *Blue Sky Geographic*.” Collins looked away. “I remember seeing a picture of the town pavilion and the way the peak cast a shadow of it…just kind of… spoke to me.

“Now that I think about it,” I said. “I think there were pictures of this church, too.” Maybe that was why this view looked familiar. I’d seen it before—in another life.

Collins nodded. “I saw that, too.”

“Do you know who did the pictures?” I always told myself I’d remember the photographer because I looked at the photos so many times, but my mind has been in a bit of a blur since I got here. “I always wanted to buy some of them.”

“Nope.” Collins shook her head. “Anyway, back to the history of this here ghost town.

“So basically, Sweetwater Peak history is split into two parts: before the salt and after.”

“The salt?” I asked.

Collins nodded. “Sweetwater Peak has an insanely large salt cave underneath the peak. Once upon a time, you could go inside it—see all the stalactites and shit—but the ground around there isn’t stable anymore, and it’s also full of water from the Sweetwater River.”

“Why is it full of water?”

Collins grinned again. “So, as far as we know, Sweetwater Peak was founded and established at some point in 1843—at least that’s when the post office opened—but the official establishment isn’t noted by the U.S. government or in the town records until 1865.

“And you were too focused on cannibalism and disease to name one of the other things that has the ability to level a population.” I could feel Collins’s excitement building, and because of that, so was mine. Truthfully, I didn’t give a shit about what happened to the first iteration of Sweetwater Peak, but I did like hearing her talk about it. She was a good storyteller. “Natural disaster.”

“So what?” I said. “Was there a flood or something?”

Collins shook her head. “Earthquake. The Elk Spine mountain range is a fault line that dates back to way before Sweetwater Peak, but because of it, we’re really susceptible to earthquakes.

“The earthquake cracked the ground underneath the peak, right where the river is, and basically turned the Sweetwater River salty.” Collins held her hand out, and I passed her the joint.

I tilted my head at her. “Is that what the saltwater taffy is about?”

Collins nodded excitedly. “Our number one export,” she said. “If you go up to the Sweetwater River, you can see the change, especially if it’s a sunny day—fresh water until a certain point, and then once it passes the crack in the peak, the water takes on a more yellow hue.”

“What about the fish?” I asked. I’d only ever been to the main Sweetwater River lookout point, but I knew there were fish swimming through the whole thing. There were multiple fishing guides in town—I think Dex Cartwright even led fishing trips during the summer if I was remembering correctly.

Collins shrugged. “They’ve had over a hundred years to adapt to the salt water. Nature is kind of crazy like that—resilient.”

“How do you know all of this?” I asked.

Collins took another puff of the joint. “I have very reliable sources,” she said. “It should be in the town archives, but we don’t have an archivist, so the archives are just a bunch of piles in a cellar somewhere.” She sounded disappointed at that.

“Clarke told me you don’t like it here,” I said, and Collins arched a dark eyebrow at me.

“I don’t,” she responded.

I gave her a look. “For someone who doesn’t like it, you know an awful lot about this place.”

Collins slid a little farther down the pew and leaned backward, so her head was resting on the back of it. “Knowing and caring are two different things.”

“Really?” I asked as I did the same thing, so I could look at the stars. “I don’t think that’s true. At least, not in this case. I think knowing always comes with at least some sort of care.”

“Agree to disagree, then, Cooper.” We sat there in silence for a while, passing the joint back and forth until it was gone. My head got lighter, but my body felt heavier, and I suddenly became very aware that Collins and I were side by side—nearly touching. I would only have to move a little bit for my arm to brush hers.

I stayed where I was.

“It’s so quiet,” she said after a while—she sounded…sad? “Tell me a secret.”

I turned to look at Collins, and her eyes were already on me. “Not a fan of the quiet?” I asked.

“Not this kind of quiet. Not here,” she said.

I didn’t understand. “When has it ever been loud here? Out in the middle of the woods?”

Collins sighed—the type of sigh that made my chest ache for her, even though I didn't know this woman or what she was thinking. That sigh and the past five days I'd spent with her were enough for me to know that Collins had something going on—something that hurt.

"I gave my Nintendo Game Boy to a girl in fourth grade," I said, not wanting her to have to answer my question and wanting her to have some sort of distraction for some reason.

Collins huffed a laugh. "That's hardly a secret, Brady."

"I told my parents that it got stolen," I said, smiling. "And they made me like file a police report and all this shit. But really, I just gave it to Lauren Babbit because I thought she was cute, and I wanted her to like me."

"Did it work at least?"

"Not even a little bit," I said. "She had a crush on a fifth-grader, but she took the Game Boy with no hesitation."

"Honestly, good for her. But ouch for you," Collins responded.

"Right? But I never told my mom. To this day, they think my Game Boy was the victim of a crime. She brought it up at Christmas a few years ago."

Collins laughed. She had the most literal laugh I'd ever heard. I could hear every "ha."

"Do you have siblings?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Three older brothers. I'm the baby," I said.

"I'm technically the baby, too," Collins responded. "By like thirty seconds."

"I can see that, actually. Clarke gives off oldest-child energy."

"She really does. I sometimes used to wonder if there was only supposed to be one Cartwright kid—that Clarke was supposed to exist, and I wasn't. That our cells split by mistake, and I was stuck in her shadow," Collins whispered. "I wish I were more like her sometimes. Responsible. Steady. She's always been so sure of herself—of what she wanted to do and who she wanted to be."

"You seem sure of yourself, too," I said, and I meant it. She was authentic and genuine, but in a different way than her sister. Collins felt rougher around the edges.

"Sometimes I feel like I don't quite fit in with my family," she said. "But then again, I also don't think I fit in anywhere else, and they're where I fit best—even though it's not perfect."

“Why do you think that?”

“They’re all so…good, I guess.”

I nodded. “They are,” I agreed. I thought Collins was good, too, though. Whatever that meant.

Collins dragged her hand down her face. “It’s so annoying.” That made me laugh—she truly looked so put out that her family were good people.

“Your turn,” I said. “For a secret.” Silence fell in the church. The type of silence that felt heavy and made me wonder if even a falling tree could penetrate it. I thought about how far out of town we were—how secluded.

“I talk to ghosts. And they talk to me,” she whispered. “Or at least they used to.”

I laughed. “Are you sure that isn’t the weed talking?”

Collins smiled at me, and my eyes got stuck on her mouth for the second time tonight. “I’m serious,” she said. “There are at least three in the church right now and more outside. We walked past like a dozen to get in here. You felt them; I know you did.”

I thought about the way I felt like something was watching me. “I think that’s just like…the vibes of this place.”

“Vibes don’t just come out of nowhere,” she said. “They’re influenced and determined by something.”

“Ghosts?” I said sarcastically.

“Usually, yes,” Collins responded.

I sighed. For some reason, I felt compelled to throw this woman a bone. “So why aren’t they talking to you?”

“Excellent question,” Collins said. “I wish I knew.” Her voice was quiet. Maybe it was the darkness or maybe it was the fact that both of us were looking up at the Sweetwater Peak night sky or maybe it was how close we were, but the moment felt…vulnerable.

This whole ghost thing obviously meant something to her—even if I didn’t believe in any of it.

“When did it stop?”

Collins took a deep breath. “A little less than a year ago,” she said.

“Is that…significant?” I waited for a second, but Collins didn’t respond. “Ah.” I nodded. So it was significant.

“I just miss the voices,” she whispered. “I hate feeling so alone all the time.” I understood that. Loneliness was a hell of a mountain to climb.

Personally, I just kept telling myself that I enjoyed solitude. It was a good lie, but its effectiveness had recently started to wear thin.

“Can’t you get them back?” I asked. I wasn’t sure how the whole ghost thing worked, obviously.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’ve tried—tried cleansing my aura, meditation, hypnosis—I even went to a medium I found on the internet. She had great reviews. She was actually an animal medium, but I still gave it a go.”

“If you can talk to ghosts, wouldn’t you be a medium?”

“My abilities are different—at least from what I understand. Ghosts don’t come to me when I call. They exist parallel to me. They’re on the same plane. I can see them. I can feel them. They’re just as real to me as you are, and I’ve lived my entire life alongside them,” she said. “So I don’t really know what I am.”

“You don’t know anyone like you?”

Collins hesitated for a second. “Not really, and it’s not like it’s something easily researchable or whatever. Every Reddit thread says I have some sort of, like, block, but I don’t know what that means, and no one can tell me how to fix it.”

“Well, if Reddit can’t help…”

Collins sat up and gave me a glare. I tried not to smile. “Where else would you recommend I go searching for information? Just call up my general practitioner?” She stood up and started pacing back and forth in front of me.

“Point taken,” I said, holding my hands up in surrender. I sat up and watched her. I narrowed my eyes at the floor she was walking on, which seemed more pliable than it did when we walked in.

Collins’s dark eyes shot to the back corner of the church. “What are *you* looking at?” she said to no one—at least, no one that I could see when I turned to where she was staring.

Her eyes widened after a second. “Wait,” she said, “say that again.” She sounded desperate.

The floor creaked underneath her, and I instinctively stood and grabbed her hand. She took a heavy step toward the back of the church, and almost in slow motion, I watched the floor give out underneath her feet.

I fell to my knees and without thinking, I caught her with my arms under her shoulders. The look of pure fear on her face nearly did me in.

I pulled her onto the stable part of the floor that didn't now have a Collins-shaped hole in it. Her head fell onto my chest. I kept one of my arms wrapped tightly around her torso and moved the other hand to the back of her head. My heart raced against my rib cage, and I swore I could hear hers doing the same thing.

"Are you okay?" I breathed. I felt her nod against my chest. "What the fuck happened?"

Collins pushed back from my chest to look at me, and I brushed her hair out of her face. "Holy shit," she whispered. When she leaned back to look at the hole that appeared a few seconds ago, I held on to her tighter. I wanted her to be as far away from it as possible. "How did I not know this place had a basement?"

A stunned laugh bubbled out of me. "You just had a near-death experience in a church ruin, and that's what you're thinking about?" If that part of the floor went with the weight of a person on it, I didn't feel good about the rest of this place—so much for well-preserved.

"God." I shook my head. "You are something else."

"I wonder how we can get down there," she said, relaxing back into me. I felt her shaking a little. I squeezed her waist—trying to reassure myself that she was okay. The sound the floor made as it gave way underneath her played in my head over and over again. All it took was a split second for things to change. I didn't know how far the fall would've been, but I knew I wouldn't have ever forgiven myself if she got even a minor injury.

"We are not going down there, trouble," I said—my thoughts about Collins slipped out as a nickname. I mindlessly rubbed my hand up and down her back. "Not after that."

"Boring Brady," she muttered, but she didn't push back. I took a few deep breaths, trying to get my heart rate to slow down, and I noticed Collins breathing in time with me.

I replayed the past few minutes in my head—trying to remember what she was doing before the floor gave out. "What happened before you fell?" I asked—recalling her anger, her shock, and her determination to get to the back of the church.

“I—I heard something,” she said, as she looked up at me, eyes wide. “I heard them.”

10
COLLINS



I spent the whole night after Brady and I got home from the church pacing around my room. I wasn't getting a lot of sleep anyway—as evidenced by the dark circles that had become a permanent fixture under my eyes over the past six months. I couldn't remember the last time I got more than five hours, and that was a good night, but since I'd come home, I was getting even less than usual.

When we got back, I was kind of hoping that one of the ghosty inhabitants would be waiting for me—ready to talk and tell me that the entire spiritual realm was just playing a big ol' joke on me, and we were all going to start chatting again.

That didn't happen. There wasn't a ghost to be found in the apartment—which made me even more stir-crazy.

When I finally gave in to the fact that neither sleep nor ghosts were going to magically appear for me, I walked to Toades in the early-morning light and borrowed my dad's truck to go up to Boone's place. My visit was planned, but I don't think Boone ever would've expected me to be up and at 'em this early in the morning.

Boone would be pleased, though, except that getting to his place early meant that he wouldn't be able to complain about "waiting for my lazy ass," which he loved to do.

After the floor giving out and the subsequent falling situation, Brady was determined to get out of the church as quickly as possible. The town

fire marshal had nothing on him in those moments—grumbling about building codes and safety—which was even funnier considering we were in an *abandoned* church that hardly anyone knew about, let alone cared about. Me, on the other hand, I could've stayed there all night.

Wrapped in hot, strong, upholsterer arms was quite nice, actually. I don't think he realized how tightly he was holding me or how gently he moved my hair from my face or how he was stroking my back.

It had been a long time since I'd been like that with someone, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy it. We all need physical touch occasionally, and now I was good for a bit—and I didn't even have to fake-laugh at a stupid joke or carry on a conversation with someone I didn't like.

And I wasn't craving more of it—at all. I didn't have to fight the urge to curl up into his side or lay my head on his shoulder during the drive home.

Nope. None of that.

I tried my best to push every thought about Brady to the back of my head and replace them with the other memorable moment from last night.

"You," the ghost in the corner of the church had said when I asked him what he was looking at. I heard him—as clear as day, but then when I asked him to say it again, I was met with silence.

Instead, my world returned to its muffled state, and my only consolation prize was the upholsterer arms.

Which was honestly a decent prize. Shit, there he was again. *Get out of my head, Brady. It's full enough without you and your stupid arms.* My brain involuntarily started thinking up scenarios that could end up with me back in them—some more…appropriate than others.

"You need to get a grip, Collins Cartwright," I muttered as I drove.

I didn't have anyone to talk to, so I might as well talk to myself.

I turned up the dirt road that lead to Boone's property. He lived about thirty minutes outside of town, up the side of the peak. His dirt road was way more well-maintained than the one last night—as was every other dirt road in Sweetwater Peak, which was a lot. The only asphalt we had was on Main Street.

I was immediately greeted by one of Boone's many signs that led up to his house. This one said *Keep Out,* the next one *Turn Back Now,* and then *No Visitors Allowed.* They kept going as I got farther and farther down the road.

Boone had a small cow outfit, so the road up to his property had a few gates and cattle guards, but all of them were open for me. That meant I didn't have to get out of my car, push a gate open, close it, then get back in my car and keep driving until the next one. It was a small thing, but for Boone, it was one of the ways he showed that he cared—that he wanted me to visit.

Even though Boone was originally from Meadowlark, he'd been in Sweetwater Peak for nearly forty years. He was old and ornery and mean.

And I loved him dearly.

My parents—my mom especially—saw Boone's standoffish nature as a challenge.

Joanie Collins—yeah, I am my mom's maiden name namesake, and Clarke is my dad's mom's maiden namesake—met Boone for the first time at the hardware store shortly after he moved to Sweetwater Peak. She was in her early twenties. She had never known her father and had recently lost her mom, but things were starting to look up. She had just started dating my dad and had bought the house that would become Toades, and was buying new locks, supplies for squeaky door hinges, and a lot of furniture polish. She didn't have enough cash on her to cover the cost, and Boone slapped a twenty-dollar bill on the counter to cover the difference and told her to get out of his way.

Boone was a pistachio that Joanie was desperate to crack, and up until Clarke and I were born, she was unsuccessful.

Well, that's not entirely true. I think Boone had a soft spot for her and my dad because that was the only reason why he would've shown up to the hospital as soon as he heard that Joanie was in labor.

Boone was the closest thing Clarke and I had to a living grandparent, but he was more like a grumpy grand-uncle.

When I passed the last gate, I only had to drive a few hundred yards to get to Boone's headgate. It was made of logs, but there'd been a fire on his property about ten years ago that blackened the headgate and about fifty feet of fence on one side of it. The bull skull in the middle of the headgate post was hanging crooked and was missing one of its horns.

I slowed the truck down to a crawl. Boone had a lot of animals, and I knew my truck was about to get swarmed by whatever herd of misfits were currently living their best lives on his property.

Like clockwork, as I got closer to the house, four dogs and a pig started making their way toward the truck. I rolled my windows down so I could keep an eye on them as I parked.

I hopped out of the truck and immediately crouched to the ground so I could love on all of them. I recognized Lady, a three-legged black German shepherd; Tank, a very bulky and stout pit bull mix; and Chicken Soup—Chicken for short—the world's teeniest (and meanest) Chihuahua mix. I didn't recognize the brown-and-black spotted dog that I could only describe as "farm mutt," but I did notice it only had one ear.

The pig—whose name was just Pig—nuzzled into my shoulder as I distributed pets and loves to all of them. I heard Boone's flimsy screen door swing open and his boots move across the porch.

Boone was in his midseventies. His long hair was white and pulled into a ponytail at the back of his neck, and his white beard was looking a little scraggly—as usual. "It's almost seven," he said gruffly.

"That's early for me!" I called. "I thought you'd be pleased."

"And I thought you'd be on time for once," he said.

"I missed you, too," I said as I stood and started toward him. He had already made his way down the porch stairs, and I could see the regret in his eyes when he realized what I was getting ready to do: I threw my arms around him and held him tight in a hug.

"Do we have to do this every time?" Boone grumbled.

"Yes, we do," I said. "Hugs are healthy." That was rich coming from me. I'm not really a hugger, but Boone was an exception. "They're good for you—especially in your old age. This could be the thing that takes you from ninety-nine to a hundred—this moment right here."

"I'd rather get thrown off a cliff than live to be a hundred, and if it's all your fault because of your insistence on the damn hugs, I'm bringing you with me."

I laughed and breathed Boone in—pipe tobacco and leather conditioner. I would've come up here sooner, but Boone had been out of town for the past two weeks.

"How was Meadowlark?" I asked as I pulled back.

"Good," he said.

"You were there for a wedding?" I asked.

“Yeah, my niece.” Boone rubbed at the back of his neck. “Still can’t believe that stubborn little shit is old enough to get married.”

“Stubborn little shit?” I said back to him. “Oh, you two are definitely related.”

Boone grunted. “You should meet my baby brother.” Something about Boone referring to someone as his “baby brother” when I knew his brother was in his late sixties made me laugh. I guess no matter how old they got, Boone would always be the oldest.

“Is he stubborn too?” I asked.

“Not even a little bit.” Boone shook his head. “Don’t know where he came from.” I laughed again.

“So, new dog?” I asked.

Boone huffed. “Stupid dog jumped out of a truck on the road up to town.” When Boone says “stupid dog,” he actually means “this perfect baby angel of a dog”—it’s just his way. “Got left, so I picked him up and brought him home.”

“What’s his name?” I said, crouching to scratch the new pup’s head.

“Phillips Screwdriver,” Boone said, and my head whipped up.

“You cannot be serious,” I responded.

Boone shrugged. “I call him Phil for short.”

“Oh my god,” I muttered, and looked down at Phil. “You are very cute, though. So.” I looked back up at Boone. “What are we doing today?”

“Moving cattle,” he said. “Your boots are on the porch. Let’s get moving.”

—

Both Clarke and I learned to ride horses at Boone’s place. This was after we had attempted recreational volleyball when we were eight, which resulted in an incident that made it pretty clear to our parents that team sports weren’t going to be our thing.

Before we understood our abilities completely, the ghosts were pretty… protective of us. If I asked them to do something, they would do it—including moving the volleyball just a little farther every time Wyatt Burgess got close enough to pick it up. He tripped on an old net that was on the ground, and he got so tangled up in it that he had to be cut out. He

ended up with rope burns all over his arms and face. His friends told the coaches that Clarke and me pushed him into the net, just because we were the closest ones to him when it happened.

It didn't help that I would also say what I wanted the ghosts to do out loud, which freaked the other parents and kids out. Clarke tried to shield me and tell me not to talk to them while we were playing, but I couldn't listen.

Okay, so maybe Clarke was built for team sports, but we'd never know because she got ousted from all the kids' community activities with me. We were a package deal. I eventually learned a bit more finesse as time went on (which is how I got the ghost to break Emmett Papadakis's nose with a baseball six years later), and my parents talked Boone into teaching us to ride horses.

He grumbled about it the whole time, while also somehow being the most patient teacher known to man.

When Clarke and I turned sixteen and got a car to share, I spent a lot of time at Boone's place doing random things—helping him mend fences and move cattle and clean stalls. So did Clarke; they mostly worked on old cars and listened to vinyls.

We both loved it up here, away from town, where the only things that mattered were how the sky looked, if it was warm enough to go barefoot in the creek, or whether Boone had ice pops in his freezer (he always did, and he always denied that they were for us).

Boone also didn't have any regular ghosts—at least, not any human ones. Occasionally, though, we'd see a few old horses, dogs, or barn cats. They were anchored to Boone. They loved him. The man wasn't great with people, but he loved his animals. Before now, I would've come to Boone's for some peace from the voices or from the push and pull of the other side, but now I felt a different kind of peace here.

Here, it didn't matter if the ghosts were talking to me or not. Here, there weren't any reminders of the fact that I didn't feel like myself anymore.

"Where's your car?" Boone said in front of me. Today, he was on Forest, a beautiful palomino, and I was on Hunter, a red roan. Chicken was staring at me from his perch on Forest's back, behind Boone's saddle.

"Broke down," I said. "Just needs a new battery, though." I didn't know how cars worked, but that was what Clarke and my dad said.

"Have you ordered one?" Boone asked. I shook my head.

“Pretty shitty of you to not let anyone know when you were about to drop cellphone service,” Boone said.

“Oh my god,” I groaned. “Clarke got to you first—didn’t she? You already knew my car broke down.”

“I received a panicked phone call when you didn’t show up when you said you were going to,” he said. “Thought I might’ve heard from you.”

“She is so dramatic,” I grumbled.

“Maybe you gave her a reason to be,” Boone said. He had ended up in the middle of our twin spats more times than he probably ever cared for, but he was always fair to both of us, often sneaking in a little lesson along the way. I had no doubt that my lesson was coming.

I reached up to give Hunter a little neck rub as we approached the cattle we were going to move to another pasture today. I brought his reins to one side and pushed on the other side with the inside of my leg. I only rode at Boone’s, but the muscle memory stuck around. Lady followed me and Tank and Phil stayed with Boone.

“Looks like Phil already knows his job,” I said.

“Good dog on the ground is worth two in the saddle,” Boone said with a nod, even though Chicken had moved from the back of Forest to inside one of his saddlebags. I’d heard him say that a million times. His dogs were the reason he could manage this place on his own, and he did it for Sweetwater Peak. Boone’s cattle were the reason our grocery store had beef all year around, and most families bought from him directly.

He always said, “Cattle is the only thing I was ever taught. It was my only option. It’s the only thing I know how to do.”

And I didn’t know shit about cattle, but I thought Boone did it well.

Lady and I started to push the cattle in on our side while Boone and the other dogs rounded up the stragglers. Once we’d accomplished that, we just continued to herd them through an open gate and into a new pasture.

I liked doing this because I wasn’t good enough at it to be able to think about anything else. I had to focus on the task at hand. It was why I liked working at Brady’s, too. I didn’t know a single thing about organization or being an assistant, so it took more of my mental energy than something else would have—busy hands and a busy brain meant less time for thinking about everything else.

Boone let out a few whoops and clicks. I didn't know if he was talking to his horse or to his dogs, but all of them seemed to understand.

"Collins!" he called out. "You've got a loose end! Get over there!"

Well, shit. Apparently, my focus wasn't that great after all because I looked to my right and four cows were outside the herd and about to pass Hunter and me. I gave Hunter's middle a squeeze and rushed him toward the cows to close their corner. Lady barked behind me to help.

"Where's your head at, kid?" Boone called after the cows were back where they should be.

"I thought it was in the game," I called back, and Boone shook his head and continued to press his side of the cattle toward the open gate. Once the first few were through, it got easier because of the rest of the herd's natural instinct to follow.

It took a while, but we got the entire herd through, and I watched as Boone dismounted his horse to shut the gate—a little slower than the last time I'd seen him do it.

He took a deep breath before he put his foot in the stirrup to get back on. He should've used the fence as a mounting block. "You okay?" I asked. My hands were resting on the pommel of my saddle.

"It's this fucking knee," he said, motioning toward his right leg after he was in the saddle. "And this stupid shoulder." He moved his left arm in a circle.

"Maybe you should go to the doctor," I said, even though I knew he wouldn't.

" 'Maybe you should go to the doctor,' " Boone mimicked back.

"Hey, I'm supposed to be the immature one here," I said. "You're supposed to be old and wise and shit."

"You *are* the immature one here, Collins," Boone said with a pointed look in my direction. "You know better than to make the drive up to the Peak without telling anyone where you were at—especially when you know that a broken-down car in that dead zone means you're stuck until someone passes by, and not everyone who passes by is going to be looking to or willing to help you."

This was how Boone showed he cared. Tough love. I looked down at my hands, embarrassed that he was right. I knew better.

"I know," I said quietly.

“But I’m glad you at least had your pepper spray on you.”

Fucking Clarke. “Got him right in the eyes,” I said with a nod.

“That’s my girl,” Boone said.

After that, we rode back to Boone’s barn in silence, and I took in the world around me. At least from up here, Sweetwater Peak didn’t look so bad.

11
BRADY



Before today, I'd been purposefully avoiding the common spaces in the apartment since Collins moved in. But I felt like the whole falling-through-a-haunted-church's-floor made us friends. Well, maybe not all-the-way friends, but at least roommates who didn't have to avoid each other.

Okay, only one of us was doing the avoiding. I don't think Collins gave me a second thought, but I gave her a lot of thoughts.

Like right now, I was thinking about how fucking adorable she looked in her giant hoodie and how her laugh sounded and the fact that she seemed to be genuinely torn up about whatever this ghost thing was.

Did I think she was kind of insane? Yes, absolutely without a doubt. But I also respected that whatever was happening to her was real to her, and I wanted to help.

That's what I was thinking about when Collins came into the kitchen. She was wearing a pair of dark blue jeans, the same hoodie she was wearing last night, and a pair of…cowboy boots? That wasn't uncommon in Sweetwater Peak. Collins just didn't strike me as the cowgirl type.

But she was also covered from head to toe in dirt and smelled like livestock.

"Rough day at the rodeo?" I asked.

Her head whipped in my direction, eyes wide. She hadn't noticed me before I spoke. "Funny," she said with an eye roll. "And rodeo cowboys suck anyway."

“I’ll take your word for it,” I said. “Why do you smell like the county fair?”

“I was at Boone’s,” she said as she put a massive tote bag on the kitchen counter.

“Boone *Ryder*?” I asked, shocked. Boone was an ornery old motherfucker, and nothing about him told me that he’d enjoy any sort of company on his property. He probably sat on his porch with an iced tea and a shotgun.

“Last time I checked, Sweetwater Peak didn’t have any other Boones,” Collins said. She was pulling stuff out of the tote bag—mostly fruits and vegetables, it looked like. I walked over to her to get a closer look.

“I didn’t know he let people cross his property line,” I said.

“He doesn’t,” Collins said. “Just Clarke and me.” Boone didn’t have any family here. At least, not that I knew about. I wondered if the Cartwrights somehow filled that gap for him—if it was even a gap he wanted filled.

“And raid his garden, apparently,” I remarked, nodding to the growing pile of produce on the counter.

Collins shrugged. “He worries.”

I shook my head. “Again, you’re talking about Boone Ryder?”

“God, his perma-scowl really did a number on you, didn’t it?” Collins said with a laugh. “He’s all bark and no bite, Brady.” She paused for a second. “Well, maybe a little bite.”

“A little?” I scoffed. Other than the “city dipshit” thing, I don’t even think I’d ever heard Boone speak. He just grunted and glared—heavy on the glaring. It made me uneasy—both with and without his aviators.

“He would love how afraid you are of him,” Collins said.

“I’m not afraid of him,” I protested—even though I was kind of afraid of him. In like a manly way, obviously. It’s a healthy fear. A self-preservation thing, even.

Collins gave me a pointed look. One side of her mouth was twitching like she was trying not to smile. “Whatever you say.”

The conversation had reached its natural endpoint, but I wasn’t ready for that—wasn’t ready to spend the rest of my Saturday alone like I’d been doing for the past year. Collins didn’t know it, but she’d really struck a nerve last night with one little comment about my fresh start.

She had been right: I wanted to go places, do things, and meet people. I wanted to be part of something bigger and have a community—even if it was small—that I could lean on. I came here to have things and be someone I never had the chance to before, and so far, I was mostly letting the opportunities for all that go to waste.

"So," I said. "I've been thinking about your, um, ghost problem."

Collins looked up at me—amused. "Have you?"

I nodded. "And about how you heard something in the church."

"I didn't think you believed me," Collins said quietly—amusement gone. It was replaced by something different, something…softer. I had the urge to brush her hair behind her ear or put a hand on her shoulder—just touch her in some way, but I stifled it.

"I don't believe in ghosts," I said. "But I do believe…you, I guess."

Even though it was Saturday, I had gone down to the shop when I woke up to see if my tack hammer was where I left it yesterday. It wasn't. This time, it was on Collins's desk. Maybe she moved it to mess with me, but for some reason, I didn't think she did. With everything else that happened last night, the tack hammer was enough to make my unwavering belief that the paranormal didn't exist waver—just a little bit.

"Well, I suppose that's something," Collins sighed, and pulled another zucchini out of the bag.

"And honestly," I said. "This sounds like a pretty standard problem." Collins arched a dark brow at me, questioning. "Like in every book or movie in the history of ever, the hero or heroine has some sort of block that they have to overcome. This is yours. Honestly, it sounds like your basic journey to Mordor."

"Are you really using *Lord of the Rings* to explain my ghost problem?"

I felt my ears redden a little. I didn't know the longer hair would come in handy this often, but around Collins, I was deeply appreciative of Past Me's decision to let it flow. "Yeah," I said. "It feels like this is your quest."

"My quest?"

"Yeah, because sure, a quest is about the destination, which in your case would be getting your weirdo ghost-talking abilities back—that's your Mount Doom—but it's also about all the stuff you come in contact with and learn along the way," I said. "All that stuff makes the destroying of the ring at Mount Doom possible. You have to build up to it."

“You’re losing me,” Collins said.

“Like you can’t just go from the Shire to Mordor.” I withheld the joke about simply walking into Mordor. I didn’t want to lose her all the way. “You have to meet orcs and encounter dangerous landscapes, and struggle against the ring.”

“Oh my god,” Collins said. Her face was stretching into a grin. “You really are like a nerd, aren’t you? A big, giant, adorable nerd?”

I didn’t know if I was pleased or embarrassed that she thought I was adorable. “I like fantasy,” I responded. “And I think it applies here.”

Collins had finished taking everything out of the tote—zucchini, tomatoes, squash, peaches, and a bunch of other fruits and vegetables plus a pack of frozen ground beef and what looked like a handmade soap.

“Okay, then.” She nodded. “What do you think I need to do to get to my Mordor or Mount Doom or whatever.” I couldn’t tell if she was just indulging me, or if she actually believed me.

“Mount Doom is in Mordor,” I clarified for her. This next part was what I was thinking about all morning. “I think you need to reconnect with Sweetwater Peak,” I said.

Collins’s brow furrowed, and I kept talking.

“Last night, you spent most of the night telling me about this town. I don’t think you hate it as much as you say you do.” I didn’t think she hated it at all, honestly—not the place itself, anyway. Based on what I did know, I thought she just had a lot of knotted-up feelings about herself, her family, and maybe her life, and Sweetwater Peak contained all those things. “I don’t think it’s a coincidence that you were able to hear something while we were at the church afterward. I think Sweetwater Peak is your block, and the only way to unblock it is to learn to love it again, or at least respect it. It’s where your abilities started, right?”

“Yeah, I was born with them, Brady,” Collins said like it was obvious, and her stance had shifted to more defensive, closed off, with her arms crossed over her chest and her shoulders tensed. “And honestly…” She trailed off, but I waited for her to keep going. I didn’t try to fill the silence. I just kept my eyes on her.

I watched her chew the inside of her cheek for a few seconds, watched her eyes skirt around the room in a way that made me wonder what she was looking at.

“Honestly,” she said after a few beats. “I thought that coming back here would fix it, but it hasn’t—at least not in full. I only got one word last night.”

“I don’t think it’s enough to just come back here,” I said. “Anyone can do that. I think you’ve gotta put some work in—fight the Nazgul and shit.”

Collins breathed a laugh and shook her head. “Is that a movie reference or a book reference?”

“Both,” I said. “No matter what, there’re obstacles to overcome or whatever.”

“Hopefully the obstacles don’t include creepy shadow riders,” she said. “But I guess it’s not out of the question considering this place is built on shadows.”

“So you get it?” I asked.

“I’ve seen the movies.” Collins nodded. “You’ve kind of got a rugged-hero thing going on—in a more contemporary way.” Her eyes tracked down my form and then back up. I hoped she couldn’t see me swallow.

Was she flirting or just…talking? I realized that I was too out of practice to even try and flirt back if she was.

“Say thank you. Aragorn is hot.” I felt my eyes widen. It’s a damn good thing my hip was leaned against the counter, or I would’ve lost my balance. “So what do you propose?”

“I—I think we spend some time getting reacquainted with Sweetwater Peak.” I fumbled my way through the entire sentence—embarrassingly still stuck on the fact that she maybe thought I was good-looking.

Collins tilted her head. “We?”

“W-well, yeah,” I stammered, suddenly nervous. I lifted my hand to rub at the back of my neck. “It’s ‘reacquainted’ for you, I guess. Just ‘acquainted’ for me. I thought maybe I could tag along. You said I need to explore Sweetwater Peak more, and there’s no better way to do that than with, you know, someone who grew up here.”

“I don’t think scuttling around with me to my favorite places—which are mostly hideaways—is going to help with your street cred in this town, Brady.”

I shrugged. “Well, I need to get to know it somehow. And, um, I would appreciate it,” I said, looking down at my feet. “Having the chance to get out there more and not having to do it, you know, alone.”

I immediately regretted being so honest with her, but when I forced myself to make eye contact again, her hazel eyes had softened.

“I get it,” she said. “This town isn’t great with outsiders. It’s hard to be alone here.”

I swallowed hard and nodded.

“Okay, fine,” Collins sighed, and it rang through me like a victory bell. “So we gallivant around Sweetwater Peak, my abilities hopefully come back, and you get to know the place you ran away to without a second thought?”

“I didn’t run away,” I protested—even though I had. I was starting to think that Collins had some sort of emotional X-ray vision in addition to the ghost thing. She seemed to be able to read me as easily as a picture book.

“I think you did, Brady,” Collins said. “Not to flog my own log here, but I’m observant. No one moves to a town that doesn’t even have a dot on most maps for fun. People don’t run toward Sweetwater Peak. They run away from something else.” I didn’t know what I liked less—Collins dishing a reckoning back to me or the fact that she was so dead-on about it. I’d never had such a fresh pair of eyes on me before.

“You came back,” I said, trying to shift the conversation away from myself.

“Who says I’m not running, too?” Her voice was more timid again. I instinctively took a step toward her—like I could protect her from whatever invisible force was causing her so much pain.

“Are you?”

“Takes one to know one, Brady.” Collins looked up at me. “But it sounds like we could both use a little soul searching.”

12
COLLINS



In general, there weren't really a lot of things that would shock me into stillness. But Brady standing in our kitchen, dripping wet, with a towel wrapped around his waist stopped me dead in my tracks on Sunday morning.

"Um" was all I could think to say.

Brady's eyes shot over to me. "Collins," he said nervously. "You're here."

"Am I not supposed to be?" I asked. "Did you put being naked on the nonexistent roommate calendar, and I missed it?"

"I'm not naked!" I watched his cheeks flush red. I noticed he was dripping with water *and* soap. The wet sheen on his skin was distracting. There was a smattering of dark hair on his chest. Looking at him, I finally understood what people meant when they described an abdomen as having panes.

"Under that towel you are."

"Yeah…well…you're naked under your clothes!" Now my cheeks were red. "But I'm not saying you're naked."

"Okay, point taken. No one is naked," I said. I'd never seen him this frazzled—not even when I pepper-sprayed him. "So…why are you not-naked in the kitchen?"

"My shower turned off," he said, frustrated.

“Is something going on with the water supply?” I asked. “It shouldn’t be cold enough for anything to like…really freeze yet or anything.”

Brady shook his head. “No, like, it turned off. The handle *turned* itself off, and it won’t turn back. It’s stuck.”

A gossamer figure appeared behind Brady. It disappeared just as quickly, but it looked like the chewing-gum girl. I would bet every cent in my bank account that Brady’s shower didn’t have a mind of its own.

He must’ve seen me look behind him, because he turned his neck. “No,” he said after a minute. “You’re going to tell me that it was a ghost, aren’t you?”

“I’m not going to tell you anything,” I said. “Especially because you still haven’t explained why you’re leaving wet footprints all over the kitchen.”

Brady huffed. “When I couldn’t turn the handle back, I remembered that there was another shower in here, but when I got out here, I also remembered that there was another person in here and that I couldn’t just waltz into her shower.” He faced me. I tracked a drip of water going from his chest to the middle line in his abdomen. “So now I’m here.”

“Got it,” I said. Why did my mouth feel dry? “Um, well, I’m about to go to my parents’, so the shower is all yours.” I pulled my gaze away from his form. What was wrong with me? I was no stranger to the occasional naked man in my house.

Both of us started moving at the same time, I felt something push at me—like wind blowing me forward. Brady stumbled, and not even the grip on the soles of my Docs could withstand one of the soapy puddles he’d made. I started going down. I thought I was done for until I felt a familiar set of arms wrap around my waist—stopping my fall.

“You’re making a habit of this, Collins,” Brady said. His voice was low at my ear. My hands were on his chest—skin on skin—and my body was nearly sealed to his. I risked a glance down and saw that the towel was still in place—thank god.

I think.

“S-sorry,” I stuttered.

“Maybe we need one of those *slippery when wet* signs out here,” Brady said. I think he was trying to keep it light, but his voice was strained.

A million dirty jokes popped into my head, but I restrained myself. I pushed lightly on his chest to right myself. Brady kept his hands on my waist—steadying me. When I was able to pull my body from his, I heard the distinct sound of the towel hitting the floor.

Several things happened at once. I slapped my hand over my eyes and stepped backward; Brady let out a squeak and bent to grab the towel, but he didn't seem to be able to get hold of it; and I did *not* peek through my fingers…on purpose, anyway.

"Collins!" Brady exclaimed when he saw my separated fingers.

"Sorry!" I brought them back together immediately, at the same time as I tripped over one of the kitchen chairs and landed on my ass—no hot naked man to save me this time. I rolled onto my stomach and started laughing.

"I'm leaving. I'm leaving," I said between wheezes as I started army-crawling back to my side of the apartment—to my door. The laughter made my body feel weak, so it was a slow-moving process.

"Oh my god," Brady groaned. He sounded mortified, which made me laugh harder. I was sure he was bright red from head to toe. I didn't need to check, but that didn't mean it wasn't tempting.

Damn.

—

The only company I had on the walk to my parents' house was the squawking of crows as their murder moved above Sweetwater Peak and the fog that came to rest on the tops of the sidewalks and roads. It was colder this morning than it'd been since I got here. I liked the way the air felt in my lungs—the way it cooled me down from the inside out after my encounter with Brady.

Talk about a sleeper build. Now I knew for sure that his arms were only part of a very, um, robust package.

There was no doubt in my mind that as soon as he started leaving his shop sanctuary more often, every woman in town—available or not—would be vying for his attention. I momentarily lamented my no-hookups-in-Sweetwater-Peak policy but quickly shook it off. Brady didn't seem like a hookup guy, anyway.

He seemed like more—the type of guy that would want and deserve more.

My parents lived in a house that looked completely different from Toades. It was built with dark wood and stone and tucked back behind trees that were so dense you wouldn't realize the house was there if you didn't know about it. But like Toades, it had an abundance of my mother's wind chimes, and a creaky step that led up to the front door.

The inside was all wood panels and shag carpeting that my parents never updated but did their best to meticulously maintain. It had two bedrooms—the primary one for my parents and one on the other side of the house for Clarke and me—and a halfway finished basement where Clarke and I spent a lot of our time growing up.

It smelled like incense, furniture polish, and stale coffee, which didn't sound like the most appealing combo, but to me, it was home. It always hit me harder as an adult, after I'd spent so much time away. Every time I came through the door, my inhales got deeper and more intentional.

Even though I had complicated feelings about coming home, I would never be able to deny how much I loved this old house.

"Collins, baby, is that you?" I heard my mom call. I made my way down the small, narrow hallway that led to the kitchen.

"Morning," I said in answer when I saw my mom. "Where are Dad and Clarke?"

"Your dad is packing," she said. That's right. He was headed out on another route tonight. "And I'm sure Clarke will be here soon."

Today my mom was canning—peaches, tomatoes, and plums. All from Boone's garden; he got half and my mom got half. They'd been doing this for years, and with winter around the corner, it was time for her to re-up her stores.

"How was your first week back?" my mom asked as I tied an apron around my waist. Joanie was no-nonsense in the kitchen—aprons were required and hair had to be pulled back. I was surprised she didn't make me wear a hairnet.

"Fine," I said. "Same old Sweetwater Peak." Even though it didn't feel like it—not all the way. I think it was because I'd never really had a friend here before, Clarke aside. And Brady was starting to feel like that—someone I liked talking to and spending time with, like a friend.

“Isn’t that comforting, though?” she asked. “That you can leave, come back, and everything is just as you left it?”

Clarke would agree with her, so would my dad, and there was probably even a tiny, microscopic part of me that could see their point. I understood that there was comfort in familiar things, but my other feelings always won out. The feelings that thought the air in Sweetwater Peak was stale and stagnant.

Here, it was almost like time didn’t exist. Everyone was weirdly dedicated to their landline. There was a doctor that still made house calls. The grocery store took cash or checks as payment. I’d put money on at least a third of the town not having an email address.

That was all part of the very long list of reasons why I left, even though as more time went on, I could see the appeal of not having email, but that wasn’t the point. The point was that I wanted forward movement, and I couldn’t get that here.

But now I had the void—the empty, dark space where my desire to *go* and *do* used to be. The void that sent me back here in search of something that I didn’t even know could be found. I was scared I had lost that part of me forever—that it had abandoned me and that eventually, the void would grow until it was all I knew, and I’d be stuck breathing stale air for the rest of my life.

I guess if time didn’t exist here, I wouldn’t realize how much of it had passed in which I didn’t feel like myself.

“Sure,” I said, even though I didn’t mean it.

“How’s Brady? The apartment? Everything?”

“It’s good,” I said. “He’s good.”

My mom breathed a laugh. “Sweetwater Peak never changes, and neither do you, my love.”

I gave her a look. “What do you mean?”

“I always have to pull everything out of you,” she said. “You’re a woman of few words—everything is always fine or good.”

“Because everything *is* actually fine or good,” I rebutted. I felt like both of those words had very broad definitions that nearly every situation in my life could fall under—at least, I could pretend.

“I’m sure it is,” Joanie said. “But I’d love it if you could give me a little more. It’s been so long since you’ve been home for more than a day or two.

We don’t get to talk like this all the time.”

I sighed. Joanie Cartwright, you subtle but master guilter. “I don’t know, Mom. I like the apartment. Brady is nice. I like working at his store.” And I did—too much, probably. It was easy work, and it kept me busy. I didn’t have time to think about my camera collecting dust under my bed or my ever-dwindling bank account. The proximity to the little gaggle of ghosts he had in there felt less than ideal, but Brady’s quest idea lit the smallest hope lantern in my chest. It wasn’t bright enough to push out the dark—not yet, but maybe it could be.

“Okay,” my mom said. “That’s good. I’m happy to hear that.” She handed me a potato peeler, so both of us could start peeling plums and peaches. “Your sister said you spent Friday night with Brady, too.”

“Mo-ther,” I whined. Joanie just laughed. She had a lovely laugh—light, like the wind chimes on the porch. I, unfortunately, inherited my dad’s laugh, which sounded like a whale mating call.

“What?” she said innocently. “You normally don’t make friends so quickly.”

“He’s my boss and my roommate,” I said. Even though she was right, I didn’t usually make friends quickly, or at all. I was naturally distrustful, which was both fortunate and unfortunate. It meant I didn’t feel like I had as many people as others did, but it also meant that I generally felt safe from harm at the hands of others. It came from a place of fear, not from a place of not wanting more.

“So you’re not friends?” she asked.

“I mean, I guess we are kind of becoming friends.” I shrugged. “But it’s only been a week.” Never mind that in that week, I’d spilled my deepest, darkest, and most personal secret to Brady. The secret that I didn’t even tell the other half of my soul and had no plans to.

“Does that mean you’ll have more for me when I see you next weekend?”

“Only one way to find out.” I gave her an annoyed look and went back to peeling peaches. She laughed and let the silence fall. Well, the silence between us. Music was coming from the old radio in the living room. Marty Robbins, it sounded like, but I couldn’t be all the way sure.

I couldn’t remember the last time I had seen my mother two weekends in a row—maybe over Christmas a few years ago?

Whenever I came home, I felt this weird pressure to be “good enough.” And it wasn’t because my parents ever made me feel like I wasn’t, but because they always made me feel like I was.

I wanted to be the version of me that they saw, and too often, I felt like I fell short. So it was easier to avoid the situation altogether.

I heard the door to my parents’ bedroom open. You had to go through the laundry room right behind the kitchen to get to it, so it took a second for my dad’s head to poke through.

“Hey, peanut,” he said with a smile. “How’s it going out here?”

“Like riding a bike,” I said as I peeled a plum and watched its skin drop into the scrap bowl. “Are you ready to go?”

Dex nodded. “All good. I’ll wait until your sister gets here, and then I’ll be off.”

“How long will you be gone?” I asked. It was one thing when I said goodbye to my dad when I was the one leaving, but when it was him, it tugged at me. I felt like I was seven years old again, looking out the front window, waiting for my dad to come home.

“Just a week or two,” he said. “Shorter route this time. Will you be here when I get back?”

I swallowed. “Yeah, I think so.” I felt the warmth of my dad’s smile all the way to my toes. He slung his arm over my shoulder and kissed the side of my head. My mom made her way under his other arm just as the front door opened.

“Clarke!” Dex called. “Get in here. We’re having a family moment.”

“What does that even mean?” Clarke called back as her footsteps approached the kitchen. “Oh,” she said when she saw the three of us.

“Get over here, loser,” I said. I was feeling uncharacteristically sentimental.

Clarke gave me a halfhearted dirty look before coming to join in our group-hug moment. My dad squeezed his arms around the three of us. “Yeah,” he murmured. “This is what it’s all about. This is the good stuff.”

His words triggered an unexpected lump in my throat that refused to be swallowed. When we pulled back from the hug, he gave my mom a kiss before putting a hand under both our chins. “Be good, you two.”

“I’ll walk you out,” my mom said. Dex winked at us before grabbing her hand and making their way toward the front door.

“He’s been doing that our entire lives, and I still hate watching him go,” Clarke sighed.

“Yeah,” I agreed—hoping that my sister didn’t hear the voice wobble. It was much easier to do the leaving than it was to watch someone go, even if you knew they were coming back soon.

The front door opened and closed, and when my mom returned her eyes were slightly glassy. It didn’t get easier for her either. “Clarke,” she said. “Apron.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The three of us fell into an easy rhythm of peeling and cutting, jarring and boiling until things were ready to seal. My mom always started with the classics—tomato sauce, spiced peaches and plums—before moving into more of a variety of options. Peach salsa, plum jam with cinnamon and nutmeg. All of the smells wafting around the kitchen shouldn’t go together, but they did. Clarke was quieter than usual. She was normally the pillar of every conversation. Every time I tried to make eye contact with her, she avoided me.

I picked a plum up and noticed that it was nearly spoiled, but when I went to throw it in the trash, Joanie stopped me.

“Uh-uh,” she said. “You know better.”

“It’s nearly rotten, Mom.”

“And you know those ones make the sweetest jam, my love,” she said, and put a hand on my cheek. “Still good.”

About an hour later, the rotary phone that was mounted on the wall behind the counter rang. My mom wiped her hands and quickly made her way over to swipe it off the hook. Clarke still had barely spoken to me.

“Hello?” she said. The thought of answering the phone without knowing who it was gave me hives. Her eyes scanned the kitchen, and she sighed. “Yes, it’s on the table,” she said. “No, I can bring it to you. The girls can finish up.” I looked at the kitchen table and saw my dad’s leather wallet sitting in the middle of it. “Love you, too.”

When she put the phone back on the hook, she said, “That was your father.”

“Yeah, we figured,” Clarke said. “Noticed he didn’t have his wallet when he got to the truck stop?”

My mom nodded. “Are you two okay cleaning up?” We were mostly done—the last set of jars was getting sealed.

“Yeah,” I said, and Joanie untied her apron and pulled it up over her head. “You should get going. We don’t want you driving home in the dark.”

My mom nodded. “Lock the door when you leave. Love you.”

“Love you,” Clarke and I said together.

As soon as the front door shut, Clarke pulled her hair out of the confines of its ponytail.

I let out a faux gasp. “Rule breaker.”

“Ponytails give me a headache. You know that,” she said. This was only the second time she’d spoken directly to me all day. “So how was your week? And weekend?” Clarke asked me before I could ask her the same question—small talk was good. Easy. “I didn’t hear anything from you aside from the few texts.”

I shrugged. “Fine.”

“Right,” Clarke scoffed, which threw me for a loop. “Always fine.”

For some reason, I felt like I was about to step on a mine, but I was deeply unprepared for that, so I changed the subject. “So…” I started. “We haven’t really had a chance to talk about it.”

“About what?”

“The developer offer,” I said. “That’s why you asked me to come back here—isn’t it?” I saw my sister stiffen.

“I’m taking care of it.”

“Okay. How can I help?”

Clarke sighed. “Do you even want to help, Olly?”

“What kind of question is that?” I asked. “Of course I want to help. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.” Half-truth.

“Really? Because the only times I’ve heard from you this week are when I reach out to you. It took you over a week to even bring this up.”

“I didn’t know I was being tested.” My voice volume rose slightly. “I was taking my cues from you. I thought you’d bring it up to Mom and Dad at dinner last week.”

“This is the problem,” Clarke said. “You expect me to do everything for you—to push all of the obstacles out of the way, so your walk is nice and easy.” I didn’t know what button of Clarke’s I’d pushed, but apparently it

was a bad one. “I do the work, and then you swoop in and pretend that it was a team effort.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Clarke shook her head. “I don’t know how to make you care about this—about the fact that our parents could sell their livelihood and my dream.”

“I *do* care.” I cared a lot. I wanted Toades to exist forever—even if I wasn’t always in Sweetwater Peak to see it. “Why are you so mad at me?” I didn’t get this blowup. All I did was ask a question. If she’d wanted to talk about it earlier, she should have talked about it earlier. I barely knew anything about the situation.

“I’m not mad at you,” Clarke said, even though she was very clearly mad.

“Could’ve fooled me,” I muttered. That set her off.

“I’m just sick of it, Olly,” Clarke yelled, stunning me. “I’m sick of being the one who has to hold everything together. I’m sick of being here on my own, and I’m sick of you floating around without a care in the world or any regard for how it affects the rest of us. We were worried sick last Sunday—”

“Oh my god. Let it go already!”

“—I’ve never minded taking care of you or looking out for you, but you never even said thank you! Then I drop you off at Brady’s, and I don’t hear anything about how you’re doing until I reach out to you. I swear, if I didn’t text you first, I’d never hear from you again.”

“That’s not true!” I protested.

“Yes it is!” Clarke whipped her apron over her head. “And it hurts. It wasn’t always this way. I don’t know what changed. It makes me feel like I’m not important to you. And I know something is going on—I know you’re hurting, and you won’t talk to me about it. You won’t talk to me about anything.”

“I am *fine*,” I spat. Both of us knew that wasn’t true, and Clarke’s digs had met their mark. Everything she said was true. Things were different—*I* was different. I didn’t want to be.

“Well, I’m not,” Clarke said. “And you’re too wrapped up in your own world to even care about it. I thought you’d come home, and we’d have a chance to lean on each other—that we could close this weird space that’s appeared between us and that I could help you through whatever’s got you

so…defeated, and you could support me with Mom and Dad, but you've barely given me the time of day."

I should've apologized then—told Clarke I was sorry for being so absent. Not just this week, but for the past year. I should've told her that the voices were quiet and that I missed them. I should've told her I needed her help, and that I wanted to help her—that my heart would shatter into a million pieces if anything happened to Toades. I should've asked her what was wrong.

I didn't do any of that.

Instead, I looked at my sister, took off my apron, and told her to clean up the mess herself.

The echo of me slamming the front door stayed with me even after I walked away.

13
BRADY



“Hey, man, thank you so much for doing this.” Leith Wilkes reached out to shake my hand.

“No problem,” I responded. I wasn’t planning to make a Sunday delivery, but after my literal naked run-in with Collins in the apartment this morning, I needed to get out of there. I thought that being away from the scene of the crime would make it easier not to think about her eyes scanning my entire body or how warm her skin felt when it was pressed against mine.

So far, it wasn’t working. It took effort to focus on talking to Leith. He’d inherited his family farm, Wilkes Farm—which was the only large farm in Sweetwater Peak—a few months before I moved here. Wilkes was the source for most of the produce in our grocery store, and in the summer, they hosted the farmer’s market.

His father had passed away a few years earlier, but his mom, Trudy, wasn’t ready to pass the farm on right away.

A few weeks ago, Leith got a new puppy and apparently, that puppy had mistaken Trudy’s favorite chair for a chew toy. Leith reached out to me to fix it, which I was happy to do. Positive word of mouth was always good for business.

Honestly though, even without the puppy, the chair needed a little love. It was showing its age—thinning fabric, broken springs inside, and deteriorating padding. I replaced everything and was even able to match the

original fabric, which took some strategic sourcing that Collins figured out. Dammit. There she was again. Go away, Collins.

Anyway, I steam-cleaned the parts that were still in good condition, shined up the wood legs, and it looked as good as new.

There was something special about making old things shine again instead of just getting something new. The materials, the aesthetic, and the history of an older item couldn't be replicated. Chairs like this one were meant to stand the test of time, as long as they were taken care of, and I liked being the person that was taking care of them—making sure that they stuck around as long as they could.

This train of thought sometimes led me to a place I didn't want to go—back to Jackie. The woman who liked all new things all the time. It wasn't a bad thing or any sort of character flaw, but it wasn't for me.

"Wow," Leith said as he helped me lift the chair from the back of my truck. "This looks incredible—way better than it did when I left it with you. I thought you said you might have to change out the fabric."

"Collins traced the original fabric back to a Wyoming mill, and they mailed us everything they had," I explained. "It was more than enough, so if your mom wants anything else done with it, let me know. I'll save it for you guys."

Leith gave me a confused look. "Collins? Collins…Cartwright? She's back here?"

"Yeah," I said. "For a little over a week now."

The shock on Leith's face was crystal clear. "That's…interesting," Leith said. Normally, I'd let it go. I wasn't the world's chattiest guy. Don't get me wrong, I was polite, and I liked to talk to people I liked, but I didn't know Leith well enough to like him.

But I wanted to hear more about Collins.

"Is it?" I asked. We lowered the chair all the way to the ground, and I straightened up.

Leith nodded. "She's kind of…elusive. When she comes back to town she goes in and out like a ghost through a wall." Huh. I wonder if he knew how dead-on that description was. "She's always been that way, though. Growing up, I always thought she was mysterious—even as a seven-year-old."

"How can a seven-year-old be mysterious?"

Leith shrugged. “Maybe it’s just as opposed to Clarke.”

“Yeah, they seem…” I thought of the best words to use. “Pretty different” is what I settled on. It struck me then how hard it would be growing up with someone you would inevitably be compared to all the time—for both of them.

“Oh, they are,” he said. I didn’t know if I liked how well he seemed to know Collins—especially because I’d heard that Leith was a flirt and had found himself recently single. Was there a history there? And why should I care? “Collins just marches to the beat of her own drum. She comes off pretty standoffish, but not in like a mean way, I guess. She’s a hell of a photographer, though. Have you seen any of her work?”

“No, I haven’t,” I said honestly. I was certainly curious about it, but it felt like a weird invasion of privacy to google her while she was sleeping twenty feet away from me.

“She took a film portrait of my dad while we were in high school—part of a series she was doing for art class. It captured him better than my own eyes. My mom chose it for his funeral program. Help me carry this chair inside, and I’ll show it to you.”

“Sure thing,” I said. Leith and I lifted the chair again and started making our way toward his front door. It wasn’t heavy, just oddly shaped, so it was easy for Leith to keep it steady with one hand while he pushed the door open.

“Where are we headed?” I asked.

“Just around the corner to the living room,” he said. When we set the chair down, a black-and-white photograph hanging on the opposite wall caught my attention. I’m not sure how I knew that it was the one Collins took—especially because it was one of many photos on the gallery wall—but I felt in my bones that it was hers.

“Is that…?” I trailed off, nodding toward the photo. It was pretty big, well over a foot tall and half as wide.

“Yeah.” Leith nodded. “It’s good, isn’t it?”

Even though I knew that I’d never seen this photo before, it felt familiar—nostalgic almost. It made me miss someone I’d never met.

The photo was from the chest up, and Leith’s dad was slightly off center—enough that you could see a piece of the *Wilkes Farm* sign behind him. The cowboy hat he was wearing was a little off-kilter, and he had a

toothpick hanging out of his mouth—even though he was smiling just enough that I could see the gap between his two front teeth.

"It's…yeah," I said. It was way better than good. "She took this in high school?" Now I was even more curious about what her work looked like.

"Mmm-hmm." Leith took a few steps forward, so we were in line with one another. I didn't realize I'd gravitated closer to the photo. "It's exactly how I want to remember him, too. I don't think I've ever thanked her for it. Can you do that for me?"

I nodded. "I will."

"You know, there were only fifteen people in our class growing up, and Collins and Clarke were the only girls in it until their friend Sadie moved to Sweetwater Peak in high school."

"Woof," I sighed. "I can't imagine what that must've been like for them."

"Well," Leith said. "The one thing they have in common is their absolute inability to take shit from anyone, so"—Leith laughed a little—"they were fine."

"That sounds about right," I said.

Leith opened his mouth to say something else and then closed it again. "You're, um, you're close to Clarke, too, right?"

I shrugged. "I don't know if we're close, but the entire Cartwright family has been really good to me since I moved here."

"Right, got it."

"Why do you ask?"

"I, um, just texted her about something earlier this week, and I haven't heard back from her." Now *that* was interesting. Clarke was on top of her messages—she didn't let them pile up like I now knew her sister did.

"I'm not sure I'll be much help there."

"Yeah, yeah, for sure," Leith said as a little black dot ran into the room and jumped right into his arms.

"Is this the culprit?" I nodded at the black Lab puppy in Leith's arms who was doing its best job at trying to bite off his fingers.

"Yeah, this is the little demon—Bill."

"Bill?" I asked.

"I'm not very creative." Leith shrugged. "And I think he kind of looks like a Bill." I reached out to scratch Bill's head, and he pushed his head into

my hand.

And then immediately tried to bite my fingers.

“Dammit, Bill,” Leith whined.

“He’s cute,” I said. “But keep that little bitey motherfucker away from that chair.”

“Will do,” Leith said. “Thanks, Brady. How can I repay you?”

“Tell your friends,” I said.

“Done.”

—

On my way back to the shop, I saw a familiar figure walking along the side of the road. I rolled the passenger window down and slowed the truck to a stop.

“Hey,” I called to Collins. “Need a ride?”

“Depends,” she said. “Are you clothed?”

I gave her an annoyed look. “You can see me.”

“Not all of you,” she said as she stepped closer to the truck. “You could be Winnie-the-Pooh-ing it in there.”

I leaned over and pushed the passenger door open. “You’re ridiculous.”

She smiled a little. Even with the sarcastic jabs, she seemed…off.

“How are your parents?” I asked.

“Fine,” she said as she buckled her seatbelt. “Everyone is fine. What did you get up to today?”

“I delivered that chair to the Wilkeses.”

“Wow, look at you, working overtime,” Collins said in a way that I think she wanted to be playful, but it sounded hollow. “Did Trudy see it, or just golden boy?”

“Is Leith golden boy?” I asked, and Collins nodded. “Just golden boy, then,” I said. “He was, um, very interested to know you’re back in town.”

Collins gave me a look that said she didn’t believe me. “Leith couldn’t care less about me, Brady.”

“Did you guys…”

I didn’t even finish my sentence before Collins cut me off. “God, no,” she said with a shudder. “Clarke’s adolescent crush on him was exhausting, though.” I’d never heard her say her sister’s name with bitterness like that.

“Did you know that the Wilkeses have the portrait you took of…” Shit, I didn’t actually know Leith’s dad’s name.

“Wilder?” Collins asked, surprised.

“Is that his dad?” Huh. Wilder Wilkes was quite a name.

“Yeah. That’s him. Wow. I took that when I was like sixteen,” she said. “I didn’t even know anyone had a copy of it.”

“It’s really good, Collins,” I said. “It’s hanging in their living room. Leith told me they used it for Wilder’s funeral program.”

Collins looked at her hands in her lap. “I didn’t know that,” she said quietly. “That’s…nice. That’s really nice.”

“Did you do more portraits like that?” I asked.

“From the same project, yeah. It was my first time working with film. I swiped an old film camera from Toades. There were ten of them, I think.”

“It’s really fucking good,” I said. “I’d, um, love to see more of your work sometime.” Collins turned her head to look out the window and didn’t respond.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Fine,” she said again.

But she didn’t seem like it. “You know, I’ve noticed photography seems like a touchy subject for you.” I didn’t know exactly why I decided to voice my observation, but now it was out there. Collins gave me a dejected shrug. It tugged at me. “Do you not like it anymore?” I asked—most of me expected her not to answer, but she did.

“I love it,” she said. Her voice was wobbly. “It’s my favorite thing in the world. It’s all I’ve ever wanted to do.”

“But?” I asked, sensing there was one there.

“I can’t do it without the voices. I don’t know how to do it when they’re not talking to me.” The voices, meaning the ghosts.

“Why not?” I slowed the truck down, so I could turn into the alleyway that led to the small lot behind the shop.

“It’s complicated,” Collins sighed.

“Try me,” I said as the truck rolled to a stop. I felt better now that I could face her. I wanted her to know that I was here, and I was listening.

“That portrait you saw today,” she said. “It wasn’t just a picture of Wilder. His uncle is in it, too—the person who passed the farm to him.” I thought back to the photo—how it was framed with the *Wilkes Farm* sign,

and how Wilder was the subject, but he didn't feel like the only one. "I did a portrait of Boone for that series, too—with one of his horses and some of his dogs. There's one of Cleo, the woman who owns the bar, with her mother."

"So every picture…" I trailed off.

"Has a subject that no one can see," Collins finished. "I don't do human portraits anymore. That's not what I'm known for. But every photo I've taken of places and things around the world features someone who used to be living—someone who I've talked to and gotten to know. They don't appear in the photos, obviously, but I aim to capture them with something they loved or built or the place where they had snuck away to spend time with their lover or where they looked out to the horizon and felt hope.

"If I can't talk to them, the places are meaningless." Collins swallowed. "And I've slowly watched every photo I've taken since they started to fade lose its soul."

I felt the pain in her voice like a kick to the stomach. "I'm sorry," I said quietly. "I'm so sorry, Collins."

She looked away from me, out the window, and brought a hand up to wipe at her eyes. "I feel like I'm losing my soul, too." And then she sucked in a breath. I couldn't take it anymore. I unbuckled my seatbelt and scooted closer to her. I didn't reach for her or touch her or anything, but I wanted to.

"What happened?" I asked cautiously. Collins had been more vulnerable with me in the past few days than I ever expected, but I sensed we were treading into even deeper waters.

"It wasn't one specific thing," she sighed. "It was a culmination of them, I think." I nodded, waiting for her to keep going. She turned back to me, eyes glossy. I balled my hand into a fist to stop myself from touching her face. "Last year, I got this opportunity to work with Robert Bright on this Alaskan wolf project for *Blue Sky Geographic*. He's a Pulitzer Prize–winning photographer. A huge deal. He wanted a second shooter, and the Blue Sky team hired me.

"When I got there, I found out that Robert had also brought his son, Jacoby. Robert had pitched Jacoby as his second shooter, but Blue Sky said they didn't like his portfolio. Both of them treated me like dirt. Robert criticized every one of my shots. He would have me send my raw files to him at the end of every day, and he called my work contrived and

derivative. Which normally wouldn't faze me, but I'd looked up to him for so long. I'd seen every photo he'd ever published. He took this photo of an old mountain lion walking to his final resting place. I had a poster of it on my wall growing up. It's still on the wall of my bedroom at my parents' house."

"That's…hard," I said. "When someone you admire doesn't live up to who you thought he was."

"It only got worse from there. When I saw a few of Jacoby's shots, I noticed that he was trying to replicate my framing. When I brought it up to him, told him that I'd be happy to show him how I choose my frame—without any wolf ghosts, obviously—he scoffed at me, told me there was no way he needed tips from a nobody like me.

"I stood my ground, though—gave my opinions on the shots and how I thought we could make everything more cohesive."

"Let me guess. They didn't take any of that well."

"They called me difficult, and being labeled a difficult woman on a project full of men is basically a death sentence. After that, Blue Sky started giving me really intense critiques, too. My interactions with them flipped on a dime overnight—I got left off emails and because of that, I ended up getting kicked off a lot of site visits because I didn't know they were happening. I would get down to a hotel lobby at the time I thought we were meeting, only to be told the time got changed and everyone had left without me. When I did get to take photos, I was consistently told that they were unusable, but I never got concrete feedback on why.

"I, um, had a hard time after that. I lashed out at the assistants, showed up to shoots late, turned in my photos late…and the more unsure of myself I became, the quieter the voices got." I had a sinking feeling that I knew how this part of the story ended.

"I got fired from my dream job," she sighed. "And I started to believe all the things they said about my work. I didn't get offered any big jobs anywhere else after that. Photography is a small world, and when people felt like they had to choose between hiring me or staying on an influential man's good side, Robert won out."

Collins set her hand on the seat, and her shoulders slumped. I couldn't fight it anymore. I reached out and put my hand on top of hers. She didn't move, so I didn't either.

“You didn’t deserve that,” I said.

“I think maybe I did,” she whispered. “I wasn’t…nice to people after that. Everything went downhill after that project, but I sped it up by meeting people’s low expectations of me. There wasn’t any reason for people to keep giving me chances. I just kept sinking, and my abilities started to fade the deeper I got. And now,” she sighed, “I’m here.”

I didn’t know how to respond to everything she had just told me. She had just cracked herself wide open, and I wanted to make sure she knew I was here for her—and even though she felt like so much had abandoned her, I wasn’t going anywhere.

“I’m sorry,” she said after a few breaths’ worth of silence. “I didn’t mean to dump…”

“No,” I interrupted her. “Don’t apologize. I just…I really want to say the right thing here—I want you to know I’m sorry you’ve been carrying all that around.”

Collins blinked a few times. “Thank you.” She blew out a breath. “I can’t believe this is the second time you’ve seen me cry behind this stupid shop.”

“Do you want me to cry, too?” I asked. “Try and even the score a bit.” I didn’t know what spell was floating around my truck cab, but I felt like I’d do anything in this moment to make her laugh.

And she did. A little.

“Thank you, Brady.” Collins squeezed my hand.

14
COLLINS



I sat on the floor next to my bed, and I stared at the seemingly infinite depths underneath it. I'd been like this awhile—at least a few hours, based on the position of the moon out my window.

I kept waiting for one of the apartment ghosts to push the suitcase out from under the bed like they'd been doing every goddamn day since I got here.

Except for today, apparently.

Today, apparently, they wanted me to do it myself.

"Screw you guys," I muttered. "The one time I want you to move this stupid bag, and you all leave me hanging."

I sighed loud enough that I worried I might wake Brady up. It'd been a busy few days at the shop after Leith Wilkes told everyone who would listen about how great Coop's Upholstery was. I swear the shop was filled with at least half the town's furniture.

And Brady was great with every person who walked through the door. My people skills, however, could use a little work. I'd been a bit of a grump since Sunday. Fighting with Clarke always threw me off kilter, but this was worse than usual. There was also all the emotional baggage I'd dumped on Brady to consider. Some people felt better after they let everything out. I felt embarrassed. I was just grateful we hadn't had time to talk about it again since.

I couldn’t stop thinking about how Leith’s family had held on to the photo I took for so long. It was so unexpected, but it felt…surprisingly good. Like I had created something that lasted, even when my career, my talent, hadn’t.

And that was how I ended up on the floor of my bedroom. I knew I had some old scans of the rest of the series on my laptop, which I had packed with my photography equipment. I couldn’t look at the photos without opening Pandora’s box under there.

I stared at the darkness until the sky outside my window started to change.

“Fuck it,” I muttered, and reached under the bed, grabbed the suitcase handle, and slid it out from under the bed. The noise it made as it dragged across the floor sounded like nails on a chalkboard—fitting.

I didn’t give myself time to second-guess anything, or else I’d be here for another four hours. Instead, I immediately flipped the suitcase up on its side, entered the combo on the lock (triple sixes, of course), and slid the zippers, letting the suitcase fall flat open.

Here lies Collins Cartwright’s livelihood, I thought as I looked down. Everything inside was just as I’d left it—as if it were waiting for me, or maybe it was resigned to its fate to rot under the bed for the rest of eternity. I had the urge to shove it back into the bed chasm, and let the latter run its course.

The stubborn part of me refused to be bested by a case of inanimate objects, so I slid my laptop out of its case and took a deep breath before I opened it.

The screen lit up asking for my password. I swallowed and cracked my knuckles before I typed it in. I felt like I was preparing to enter the ring and go eight rounds with this thing.

Once I tapped the enter key, a loading bar appeared at the bottom of the screen. I guessed it would take some time for this thing to boot up after I’d abandoned it for so long. It didn’t matter. I’d waited all night—a few more minutes wouldn’t kill me, and if it did, at least I’d go out facing my fears. That had to count for something, right?

“Collins?” I heard Brady’s voice. “Are you okay?”

I shut my laptop and slid it onto the floor before getting up and poking my head out of my bedroom door. “I’m fine,” I called.

“It’s eight-thirty,” Brady said. *Shit.* “Are you coming down?”

“Yeah!” I quickly looked around my room for a pair of pants—god, I really should consider cleaning this place at some point. I spotted a pair of dark blue jeans hanging off the edge of my bed. I swiped them and jumped into them as quickly as I could. I was still buttoning them when I got out to the kitchen.

Brady raised an eyebrow at me. “Rough night?” he asked.

“What makes you say that?” I asked, trying to smooth my hair down and straighten the oversized Freddy Krueger T-shirt I was wearing. Brady looked at me like it was obvious. “I’m fine,” I said. “Just overslept a little.” Oh, how I wished that were the case instead of the reality that I’d accidentally pulled an all-nighter staring at the bottom of my bed.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” he said. “I would’ve let you sleep if you didn’t answer.”

“Good friend, pushover boss.” I grabbed a coffee cup from one of the cabinets and filled it with what was left in the pot. I could still feel Brady’s eyes on me.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked. “You seem a little, um, scattered.” That was the nicest way he could’ve put it, I was sure.

“I’m fine,” I lied. “Let’s roll. You’ve got work to do.”

—

My head was bobbing at my desk an hour later. The coffee I’d downed was doing absolutely nothing to disguise my fatigue. It couldn’t hurt if I laid my head down on my desk for just a minute. I looked to the back of the shop where Brady was meticulously pinning a piping border. In my delirious state, I let out a giggle at all of the half-baked jokes in my head about him laying down pipe.

I lowered my head to my desk and let my eyelids blink closed—just for a minute.

“Collins.” Brady’s voice was near me a second later. How did he get over here so fast?

“Hmmm?”

“Are you sick or something?” he asked. He sounded worried.

“No,” I said groggily. “Why?”

“You slept the last half of the day away.” Brady crouched down, so we were almost at eye level. “Are you okay?”

“I—have I really been asleep that long?” I asked, and Brady nodded. I noticed that the light coming in from the windows was more orange than it would be in the middle of the day. “Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“I figured if you fell asleep at your desk, you probably needed the rest.”

“Fuck, I’m sorry.” I shook my head and slapped at my cheeks a little. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep. I don’t know what happened.”

“I’m worried about you,” Brady said. “Seriously. Why don’t you go upstairs and lie down?”

“I’m good, I promise.” I held out a pinky to Brady. “No more sleeping on the job, I swear.”

Brady’s brow was furrowed. He wasn’t convinced. “Well, you’re technically off the job, so you’re free to be asleep in your bed now.”

“I’m good,” I said, feeling more awake than I had a few minutes ago, and I remembered what led me to this state of exhaustion in the first place. It was stupid that I’d spent all night working up the courage to open my laptop to look at the portraits when I knew where all of the originals were. “But since it’s still light out…I might, um, go somewhere.”

“Really? Where to?”

I bit my lip. “It’s another hideaway—a spot that I think could be considered part of our quest.” I fiddled with the rings on my fingers. “If you’re up for it.”

“I’m up for anything.” Brady grinned at me. “Lead the way.”

—

“We probably should’ve done this under the cover of darkness,” I admitted as I tried to pull off the plywood that was nailed to the building’s back entrance. It used to be a house but was most recently inhabited by one of the now-closed bait and fly shops in town.

“Yeah, darkness is usually better for breaking and entering.”

“We’re not breaking and entering,” I said. “No one lives here.”

No one alive, anyway.

“I don’t think that’s the qualification for not breaking and entering,” Brady said. “And if it is, we’re still trespassing—at the very least.” He

looked around nervously.

“Good thing we’re not going to get caught, then, huh?” I said, and gave the plywood one last good pull, and it finally separated from the house. “Christ, they’ve really got that on there good since the last time I came in here.”

“Do you do this often?”

“Trespass? Yes. At this particular location? Not for a long time,” I said, laying the plywood up against the house. “C’mon,” I said as I climbed through the hole it left.

I heard Brady sigh before following behind me.

The house was older than Toades, and one of the few buildings on the road behind Sweetwater Peak’s Main Street. It was one big room, one level, and an attic. As soon as Brady made it through the door, which was a little small for his tall frame, his eyes zeroed in on the big burgundy stain in the middle of the wood floor. Shit. I was hoping he would miss that.

“Collins, did you bring me to a murder house?”

I looked at him sheepishly. “Not in the way you’re thinking,” I said.

“Oh my god.” Brady shook his head quickly. “Nope, no.”

“Would it make you feel better if I told you that the decapitation was totally accidental—”

“Absolutely not.”

“—and that Larry has no hard feelings and is totally chill and okay with how he went out?”

Brady brought his hands up to either side of his head. His eyes were so wide I thought they might pop out of his skull. “You brought me to a *murder house*!”

“Again, it’s an *accidental* murder house.” Brady’s eye twitched. “And we’re not hanging out in the murder area. We’re going to the attic.”

“Yeah, because the attic in a murder house is so much better.”

“Isn’t it, though?”

“No!”

I shrugged. “Well, we’re still going up there.” I grabbed Brady’s hand and pulled him toward the pantry. Inside, there was a skinny staircase adjacent to the structure that led all the way up to where we wanted to be.

“You are bad for my blood pressure, trouble,” Brady grumbled.

“Bill me for your insurance premium,” I said. It seemed like a small price to pay for not only the chance at getting my abilities back but also watching Brady have a little freak-out anytime we went somewhere that was even slightly macabre. “Okay, up you go.”

“Why do I have to go first?” he asked.

“Because there’s definitely going to be spiderwebs on the way up, and those give me the heebie-jeebies.”

“So accidental decapitation, falling through a floor in an abandoned church, and seeing ghosts is all fine, but you draw the line at spiderwebs?”

I clicked my tongue. “Pretty much. C’mon, B,” I said. “I think you’ll actually like what’s up there.”

“Please tell me it’s not Larry’s head,” Brady whined.

“You are so dramatic. No, Larry’s entire body is safely interred in the Sweetwater Peak mausoleum. He’s fine.” The first part of that was true, but I guess I didn’t know if Larry was currently okay. I looked around for any sight of him but came up short. I looked back at Brady and pointed toward the hole in the pantry ceiling. “Up you go.”

Brady muttered something I couldn’t make out as he started his climb—probably curses at me. I couldn’t fight my smile, so I took advantage of the fact that he was turned away from me and allowed a grin to stretch across my face.

Once half of his body was through to the attic, I started my climb, too. Brady coughed and sputtered a few times above me. “You were right about the spiderwebs, holy hell.”

“Thank you for taking one for the team,” I said.

“I can’t see shit up here,” Brady said. “It’s pitch dark.”

“That’s kind of the point of a darkroom,” I said when I reached the top of the stair ladder. I pushed myself all the way into the room and started feeling for the small switch I knew was nearby. I found it after a few aimless jabs in its general direction and pushed on it. A soft red light glowed throughout the room. Thank god my connection to the fuse box was still intact. The red light didn’t improve visibility right away, but after our eyes adjusted, it would be better.

“This is your darkroom?” Brady asked.

I crawled over to where I could see him sitting. The attic wasn’t tall enough for either of us to stand up all the way.

“It was, yeah,” I said. “And everything seems to be just how I left it.” I looked around. “Thank you, Larry,” I said—even though I couldn’t feel him around and didn’t know if he could hear me.

“Is he, um, here with us?”

“Not that I can tell,” I said. “But he deserves a thank-you anyway.”

“Is he the reason you haven’t been nailed for trespassing?” Brady asked. I detected a hint of sarcasm in his tone. “How did you get this whole setup up here without anyone knowing about it?”

“It took a few months,” I said. “And I had to steal most of the equipment, too.”

“Oh.” Brady’s sarcasm was fully shining now. “Trespassing and robbery. Lovely.”

“Sorry you hired a criminal.” I bumped his shoulder with mine. “I grew out of the stealing thing, at least.” Mostly, anyway. “So you don’t have to worry about that.”

“Comforting.”

“I thought so.” I nodded. “I wanted a place of my own—that no one knew about—where I could practice doing what I loved without anyone watching.”

“Besides Larry,” Brady said.

“Exactly.” I reached back behind us to where there were a bunch of folded posterboards against the wall. I felt for the one that had duct tape on the corners. It took a second, but I got it and carefully brought it over our heads and set it on the floor in front of us.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“Open it,” I said—mostly because I didn’t know if I could bring myself to do it, and I really didn’t want a repeat of the suitcase stare-down situation from this morning with an audience. I pulled out my phone and turned the flashlight on.

Brady reached for one of the duct tape corners and slowly flipped my makeshift folder open. The top picture was the one he was already familiar with: the portrait of Wilder Wilkes. I had forgotten what it looked like—how sunny Wilder’s smile was.

“Is this all of them?” he said, looking at me. We were close—touching. I could feel the warmth of his body against mine.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Can I?”

“Knock yourself out.” Brady carefully flipped the portrait of Wilder like the page of a book to reveal the next one. It was Cleo, the owner of the bar. She was sitting cross-legged on top of the bar, and her elbow was resting on a bottle of whiskey.

“And her mom is in this?” Brady asked.

“Yup,” I said. “Joann is right here.” I pointed to a spot on the bar.

I looked at Brady, who was squinting. “It’s kind of blurry there,” he said.

“That’s her,” I said. “They all show up somehow. In this one, it’s pretty easy to pick out if you know what you’re looking for, but sometimes it’s impossible—even for me.”

Brady flipped to the next one: Boone. “You said his animals are in this one?”

“Yeah,” I said. “They’re all very attached to him.” I ran my fingers lightly over the lines in Boone’s face. There were a lot less of them in this picture than there were now.

“The animals…They don’t talk, though, right? Like even in death?”

I couldn’t stifle my giggle. “No,” I said. “The laws of nature still apply.” Brady flipped the pages again and again—a new face appearing each time, and he’d ask me who was in the picture with them, and I’d show him where they were at if I knew, all the way until the last photo.

Clarke.

“Who’s with her?” he asked.

I sighed. “Earnest. He’s…been around us for years.”

“Is he related to you guys?”

“No, he’s not, but he is family in his own way. He’s in Toades. This room is his favorite.”

“And that’s you in the vanity mirror—your reflection I mean—taking the picture?”

“Good eye,” I said. You could only see my hand and a sliver of my camera. “Earnest is here.” I pointed to the open music console, and the vinyl record that was inside. The record had the slightest warp to it that wasn’t there in real life.

“Can Clarke see him, too?” Brady asked. I didn’t really know how to answer that. As far as I knew, neither of us had ever told anyone about what

we could do, outside of our parents. I had already broken that rule.

"You don't have to tell me," Brady said after my silence. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," I said. "Really. I'm just trying to respect how I think she would answer in this situation." I looked down at the sixteen-year-old version of my twin sister. I wasn't mad at this version of her. "I think she'd be okay with me telling you that she can see him, too."

"Are you two okay?"

"Why would you ask that?"

"It's just…on Sunday, after you saw her, things seemed kind of…off. And she hasn't come by since last week. And you've been a little…" Brady trailed off.

"Thought better of reminding me how grumpy I've been, huh?"

I watched him cringe a little. "Sorry."

"Don't be," I sighed. "You're very observant, you know."

"I'm trying to keep up with you."

"Clarke and I had a fight on Sunday. To me, it felt like it came out of nowhere, but it seems like it was bubbling under her skin for a while. It was a bad one. I walked out."

"What was it about?"

"Family stuff," I sighed.

"That's tough," Brady said.

I looked around at my makeshift darkroom, which looked as if it had been frozen in time. It was another reminder that Sweetwater Peak was always waiting for me no matter what.

But then I thought about how I would've felt if this house had been leveled when Brady and I got here—if it was all gone. After all, a developer wouldn't stop at Toades. Every place in this town that someone loved would be in danger. And I was shocked by the anger that rose up inside me at the thought—how much I did not want that to happen, how ready I felt to defend this place after spending my life trying to escape it.

Change was inevitable, but change at the hands of a developer who didn't care about anything but a payday was not how I wanted to see this town go.

I didn't want that to happen.

I couldn't let it.

I wrapped my arms around myself. When did it get so cold up here? Within a few seconds, Brady unzipped his fleece jacket and put it around my shoulders.

“Oh,” I said dumbly. “Thank you.”

“Anytime,” Brady responded.

The sides of our bodies were still touching. I looked up to find him already looking down at me. Suddenly, it didn’t just feel like there was a temperature drop in the room. It felt like we’d been raised to an elevation that made my lungs scream for air. For a girl who grew up underneath the highest peak in Wyoming, that had to be pretty damn high. It felt smaller up here, too.

The way Brady looked wrapped in the dark red of the room made me lean closer to him, and I could’ve sworn he got closer to me. That annoying thing in my chest started to bang at my rib cage—desperately trying to get out.

Brady tucked my hair behind my ear, and I wanted to lean into the warmth of his hand. He got closer again, leaning toward me. I was a breath away from letting my eyelids flutter shut.

Welcome home, Collins. I almost didn’t hear it. The voice was so quiet and thin. My spine went ramrod straight.

“Larry?” I said, looking around. I stood up quickly, rising fast enough that when my head hit the ceiling with a resounding *thwack*, the momentum sent me right back down.

“Fuck, Collins.” I felt his hand on my back and I wrapped my arms around the back of my head. “That sounded bad.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and let out a whimper as I rocked back and forth—trying to move the pain out.

“What can I do?” Brady asked.

“I’m good,” I said through clenched teeth. “I heard something. I think I heard him.”

“That’s great, really,” Brady said. “But I’m more concerned about getting some ice on your head and making sure you’re not concussed.”

“I’m not concussed,” I mumbled.

“Better safe than sorry,” Brady said. “We can come back, but I think for now, it’s time to go home.”

My head was ringing, and when I finally looked at Brady, I couldn’t be sure that there weren’t two of him. Defeated, I nodded, and we started making our way out of the attic.

15
BRADY



I gently palpated the top of Collins's head with the tips of my fingers. It was tender, and there was a hell of a bump. We made it back to the house okay, even though Collins was a little stumbly, and the stairs were kind of a struggle. Now I had her safely on the couch, where I could survey the damage to her noggin.

"Ow." Collins flinched.

"I bet," I said. "You're growing a second head up here."

"Seems kind of unfair that I get two heads and Larry has none," Collins said, and my mouth dropped open as I gave her a look. "Too soon?" she asked.

"Not for me," I said. "Maybe for Larry, though."

"I think Larry would be grateful to not have a head if he saw the size of this goose egg on mine. I can feel it getting bigger, I swear."

"Might want to wear a hat for the next couple of days." I nodded.

"Jackass." Collins fought a smile. "So what's the prognosis? Am I going to live?"

"Unsure," I said as I walked over to the freezer to grab a bag of frozen corn that I had bought over a year ago and never used. I brought it back to Collins and watched her wince as she placed it on top of her head.

I quickly typed *concussion test and symptoms* into the browser on my phone. "Do you feel nauseated or lightheaded?"

"Nope," she answered.

“Are your ears ringing?” She shook her head. “Double or blurry vision?”

“At first maybe, but not anymore,” she said. “And no dizziness or sensitivity to light and noise.”

“Have you had a concussion before?”

“No,” she said. “I can see your phone screen, though, Dr. Cooper.”

“Oh,” I said. It was probably a good sign that she could read the tiny text when I was next to her on the couch. “Right. Well, I’m still not convinced you don’t have one based on the sheer volume of the sound your head produced when it connected with the ceiling.”

“Good thing I’ve got this thick skull, huh?”

“No comment,” I said. “Let me look at your pupils.” Collins turned her body to face me dead-on and widened her eyes. “You look like a tarsier,” I said, and put a finger under her chin. We were almost the same distance away right now as we were in the darkroom—when I was about to lean down farther and do something I’ve wanted to do since the moment this woman blew into my life.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a tiny, wide-eyed, kind of creepy but also weirdly cute animal.” I looked from one of her eyes to the other, trying to discern any visible differences in the size of her pupils.

“Hmm,” Collins sighed. “I’ll take it, I guess.”

“Your pupils look okay,” I said. “But I’m going to monitor you for the next couple of hours.”

“Do I have to keep the corn on my head?”

“Yes,” I said. Collins gave me a pout, and it was fucking adorable. “And when those thaw out, I’ve got frozen peas to replace them.” I don’t know what possessed me—maybe one of the apparently many apartment ghosts I had—but I reached out to fiddle with the ends of her hair at her shoulder. She sucked in a breath. “I’m happy you’re okay.”

Collins closed her eyes for a second. “Thank you—for going with me,” she said as she opened them. “And for the corn, of course.”

“Anytime, trouble,” I said. “The goose egg doesn’t stand a chance against the corn.”

16
COLLINS



"So," Brady asked as I helped him put all his tools away. "Where are we going this weekend?"

"I've been thinking about that, actually," I said.

"One should hope so."

I bumped him with my hip and Brady dropped the tack hammer he was holding, and it clattered onto the bench. When I looked up at him, it seemed like a blush started to creep up his neck.

"S-so," he stammered. "What were you thinking?"

"I have two options for you," I said. "And it's going to depend on whether you want to interact with other living people, or if you just want to take in a view."

"Which one do you think gets you closer to interacting with nonliving people?" Brady asked.

"This is your quest, too, Brady," I said. "And I took you to an *accidental*"—I emphasized that—"murder house a few days ago, so I think the least I can do is let you pick."

"I'm not really in a people mood," Brady sighed. "The past week has been a lot."

I nodded, agreeing. It had been pretty nonstop. "It's good, though, right? People coming into the store, being busy?"

"Absolutely." Brady nodded. "No complaints."

Something about the way he said that made me want to backtrack a little. “You can complain, you know,” I said. “It’s a basic human right.”

“I don’t think complaining because I’ve had a little bit of a business boom is the right message to send to the universe.”

“Okay, then don’t complain about that,” I said. “But it’s okay to complain about being tired because of it or how many tacks you’ve stepped on or the fact that we can’t find the magnet strip that picks them all up.”

“I guess.”

“So, I actually think you should complain more.”

“This is exactly one of the things I dreamed when I moved here,” Brady responded. “I like putting in hard work and having it pay off.”

“Just because it’s a dream doesn’t mean it can’t also be exhausting,” I said. “C’mon—just one little complaint.”

Brady rolled his eyes until they nailed me with a pointed look. “My back hurts.” He straightened his spine a little, and I heard it make a few cartilaginous pops.

“Okay, good start.” I nodded. “So, for the no-living-people option, I was thinking we head up to the river. We’re at that time of year when we could either have another month of warm weather or it could snow tomorrow.”

“Good point,” Brady said.

“It’s honestly a miracle it didn’t snow once in August,” I said. “When did you move here last year?”

“Halloween,” he said.

“Ooooh, spooky. I like it.”

Brady shook his head. “It was just like any other day.”

“Moving to a ghost town on Halloween is not just like any other day. I bet it was foggy and dreary, and I *know* the crows were squawky.”

“I don’t remember,” Brady said. “Well, maybe the crows were kind of noisy. I hadn’t heard anything like that before.”

“What did it feel like when you got here for the first time?” I asked. “I’ve always wondered how this place feels to other people—to people who haven’t grown up with all of the shadows.”

“I wasn’t really focused on how the town felt.”

“What were you focused on?”

There was a pause. “How I felt.”

“And how did you feel?”

Brady turned and leaned his hip against the workbench. “Free, I guess. A little scared—the same feeling I get when I’m standing on the edge of something that’s high up.”

“Are you afraid of heights?” I asked.

“Not like petrified, but I have a healthy fear of them.”

“So you were healthily afraid of Sweetwater Peak?” I gave Brady a half smile. “That kind of proves my point.”

“Not of Sweetwater Peak. Of a new beginning, I guess,” Brady said.

“But new beginnings are freeing,” I said. I used to be the poster child for new beginnings—maybe not a big, life-altering one like the one Brady had made for himself, but small ones, like when I went from place to place on assignment. I loved it—especially coming from a place like this, where everything stayed the same.

“There was a lot of pressure on this one,” Brady said. “I really wanted it to work.”

I looked around at the groups of furniture that had come in over the past couple of days and the fabric scraps all over the floor. “Well, I think it’s working.”

Brady shrugged. “It has been lately.”

“You’ve certainly gotten a lot less boring.” I nodded.

A noise came out of Brady that might’ve been a laugh. “Would Boring Brady say that we can close up shop even though it’s not even two, so we can get up to the river with daylight to spare?”

“Only a boring person would think that would qualify them as not boring,” I said with a grin. But the truth was, I loved spending this time with Brady. I looked forward to it. Yeah, we were pretty much constantly in each other’s orbit given the living and working situation, but when we went on these little adventures, it felt like…more, I guess. More intentional, maybe, like he was choosing to spend time with me outside of the shop or apartment.

I liked that—being chosen.

Plus, I was excited to bring Brady to this spot. There weren’t really that many ghosts to be seen—ghosts that I knew and would recognize, anyway—but I was going to show Brady one of my favorite places in Sweetwater Peak that I thought he would love, too.

I didn’t think he’d venture back to the church or Larry’s house on his own, but maybe where I was taking him tonight could be his place—somewhere he could go for himself, by himself, after I made my way out of Sweetwater Peak again.

The thought of leaving Sweetwater Peak didn’t make me sad, but it didn’t feel…inevitable anymore—like it was something I had to do to survive. I knew I probably would leave eventually, but it felt more like a *choice* than it ever had before. And there was something about Brady that made me feel like it wouldn’t be an easy one, something that would make me think more about what I was leaving behind.

“So we’re closing?” I asked hopefully.

“We’re closing,” Brady said, and without thinking, I threw my arms around his neck. The sound that came out of him was somewhere between a laugh and a grunt—like I’d accidentally knocked the wind out of him. I shocked both of us, but if he knew what I was thinking about a second ago, he’d understand. He put one of his arms around me and lifted me in the air with ease, and I instinctively wound my arms tighter.

We stayed there for a second—suspended in time—just long enough for me to remember that I liked the feeling of his arms around me.

When he set me down, the air felt heavier, but I felt lighter. Brady’s eyes were so blue. I’d never really noticed the crinkles around them before or how his floppy hair fell so perfectly by them.

Brady’s hand lingered on my waist for a few seconds. He nodded his head. “Go lock the door,” he said gruffly. For half a second, my mind went somewhere it absolutely should *not* have gone, which included but was not limited to sex on the half-finished couch he’d been working on today.

“Wh-what?” I stammered.

“Closing, remember?” Right. Of course. Brady wanted me to lock the door because we were leaving—not because he wanted to take me on the couch.

Bummer.

No, not a bummer, Collins. Get a fucking grip.

I walked toward the front door and swiped the key off my desk on the way. I noticed that two orbs were glowing in my path—spinning around each other. It almost looked like they were dancing, which would be new. “Good afternoon,” I said to them as I walked by.

The orbs disappeared. “Okay, bad afternoon, then, assholes,” I muttered.

The front door to Coop’s was also an asshole. My success rate of locking it on the first try was embarrassingly low. You had to put the key halfway in, give the knob an aggressive jiggle, push the key in slightly more, then give it a gentler jiggle, and then maybe, just maybe, the key would go all the way in the slot. But even if that happened, the likelihood of the tumblers actually turning when you turned the key were pretty low, so you had to just keep jiggling everything until whatever maze was inside the doorknob gave way and let you lock it.

I was in the process of the final jiggle when I let out a frustrated grunt. “Why don’t you get a new doorknob?” I called back to Brady, who had taken off his leather apron and was washing his hands in the back sink.

“I like that one,” he called back. “Builds character.”

I gave the doorknob one more shake, and the key finally turned to lock the door. Now I just had to get it out, which was a whole other thing.

“I would rather dig a five-by-five hole to build character than lock this goddamn door,” I said.

“Is that a *Holes* reference?”

“Nothing gets past you,” I responded with a pointed look at Brady, who just smiled at me. He really had to stop doing that.

—

It took nearly an hour to get up to the Sweetwater River, and then a thirty-minute hike to the lookout point I wanted to see.

“For a small town, I sure do have to drive a lot,” Brady said. “I thought everything would be within walking distance or whatever.”

“If you’re on Main or Elm, everything *is* within walking distance,” I countered. “But Sweetwater Peak is the name of both the town and the county. Everything around us might not be Sweetwater Peak proper, but it’s Sweetwater Peak County.”

“Is anything else in Sweetwater Peak County besides Sweetwater Peak?”

“Nope.” I popped the *p*.

“That’s confusing,” Brady said. Before we left, he’d changed into a new pair of jeans, a gray hoodie, and a dark green beanie. His dark brown hair

was long enough that pieces of it stuck out of the bottom.

I was still working with my capsule wardrobe, so I wore the same thing I wore to the church, but switched out my Docs for an old pair of hiking boots I kept in the trunk of my car, along with a small daypack.

"What's in there?" Brady asked.

"It's just like a hiking pack," I said. "Extra water, first-aid kit, compass, a couple of those foil blankets—that sort of thing."

"That seems oddly…prepared for you."

"You know me for a few weeks, and you think you've got me all figured out?" I asked.

Brady kept his eyes on the road, but I saw his mouth tilt up. "No, but I'm really trying, Collins." I finally cracked the code on why my name sounded so good when he said it. He enunciated it and lingered on the *s* for half a millisecond too long.

Brady and I didn't have a ton in common on the surface, but I was trying to figure him out, too. So far, I liked everything I saw.

I liked the way he only drank half of his coffee in the morning because too much made him jittery. I liked how he talked to every client like they were the most important part of his day—even when Mrs. Rockwell and her bad hearing aids made him repeat everything he was telling her and yell a little bit over the phone—in a very kind way. I liked how focused he was when he was working and the attention to detail he put into every piece.

I liked that he believed me when I told him about the ghosts, even if my abilities were outside his realm of comprehension. And I liked that he subsequently decided to traipse all over this godforsaken town with me—even when trespassing was involved.

Most of all, I liked the way he looked at me like I was a puzzle he was dying to solve instead of one he wished he could put back in the box.

"Well," I said. "My dad taught me not to fuck around with the outdoors. The world is beautiful, and nature should be approached with respect, and—what did you say about heights and new beginnings earlier? A healthy dose of fear? That applies here, too." I shrugged. "Nature, and all it has to offer, should be enjoyed responsibly—and that means being prepared."

"From what I know about Dex, that sounds like him." Brady nodded. "Is that why he exclusively wears hiking boots and fleece jackets?"

That got another laugh out of me. I laughed a lot around Brady. I wouldn't say that I didn't laugh often anyway, but he pulled them out of me at a quicker rate than anyone else in recent memory. "Yeah, probably. He's gotta be ready for a hike at a moment's notice—even when he's working. He's basically seen the whole country through a windshield, and that's nowhere near enough for him. He wants to be out in it constantly."

"One time, he asked me if I wanted to come pick up trash along a trail with him."

"Yeah, he does that every Saturday he's home—weather permitting," I said. "Did you go?"

Brady shook his head. "I, um, told him I couldn't, but now I wish I'd said yes."

"Why didn't you?"

"I don't really know. It was in the spring after I got here, so I guess I'd just gotten too used to holing myself up in the apartment. It felt harder to get out and do something than it did to just stay in."

"Classic inertia." I nodded. Even though I don't think that's exactly what Isaac Newton was talking about, the basic principle worked for both me and Brady—just on different sides of the coin. I kept bouncing around until I was forced to stop, and Brady stayed put until he was encouraged to move.

"He'll ask again, I promise. More than making sure he is excessively contributing to the 'leave no trace' ideology, that man loves to talk."

"Is that where you get it from?" Brady asked.

I gave him a look that he didn't see because he was a responsible driver. The way one of his wrists was draped over the steering wheel was making me feel things. "I don't love to talk," I said. "Clarke loves to talk. That's where *she* got it from."

Brady shrugged. "I think you talk a lot—at least to me."

"You're one of the very few exceptions to the rule," I said. I really didn't mean for it to sound flirty, so of course, it did.

"I didn't think you were into rules." *But I'm into you.* And I was. Into him, I think. But I didn't really know what to do with that.

"I'm not," I said. "Which is why I'm breaking that one for you."

The truck was silent. I thought that Brady would try to change the subject. Honestly, I was tempted to change it myself, but I also wanted to

see how he would react—whether or not he would brush it off and move on.

But after a few beats, he said, “I like that,” and silence fell again. I tried (and failed) to slow my breathing down. Between that and my heartbeat, there was a thunderstorm raging inside the quiet cab.

“Th-the road is just up here,” I stammered. I guessed I was going to be the one changing the subject.

“I know how to get to the river, Collins.” Brady’s voice sounded… deeper? I had to be imagining it.

“Not to my part of the river,” I responded—playing it cool, I hoped. “We’re going to turn right in like three-quarters of a mile and then drive for fifteen more minutes.”

“Fifteen?” Brady asked. “We’re only ten minutes away from the viewpoint.”

“Again, not my viewpoint,” I said. “I promise you’re going to like it.”

“We’ll see,” Brady said.

“What about you?” I asked.

“What about me?”

“What do you get from your parents? We always talk about me and my family and Sweetwater Peak, but I want to know about you.”

“Why?” Brady said with a huff.

I was honest when I answered. “Because I like you.” That seemed to stun him for a moment, but he recovered quickly—way quicker than I did a few seconds ago. “We’re friends,” I added as an afterthought.

I watched Brady swallow. “I don’t really know,” he said. “I’ve never thought about that before.”

“Well, think about it now,” I said. “And don’t miss the turn.” I pointed at the hard left coming up, and Brady slowed the truck down to make it.

“I don’t know my dad that well,” Brady said as we turned. “He and my mom got divorced when I was one, and my mom remarried a year later, so my father figure has always been more my stepdad, Arnold, than my actual dad.”

“What’s your mom’s name?” I asked.

“Penny,” he said. “She’s great, for the most part. Every mom has their thing, you know?”

I nodded. I did know. “What’s her thing?”

“She struggles with being alone, and because of that, I think she settles for less than she deserves—especially with men—which has created this weird sense of insecurity. My brothers say she hasn’t always been like that, but it’s the only way I’ve ever known her.”

“How many siblings do you have?”

“Three older brothers and an older stepsister—Arnold’s daughter—but she was sixteen when our parents got married, so she was out of the house by the time I could talk. I’ve never really known her.”

“It’s weird for me that you’re the baby of the family,” I said. “You’re so steady and responsible.”

“My therapist used to say it’s because I spent my life trying to manage the emotions of the adults around me. I didn’t want to cause problems. I wanted everything to be easy. Most of the time, I still do.”

Now I can better understand why he almost never complained. “You go to therapy?”

“Not since I moved here, but, um, I had a lot going on before that and needed help sorting through it all.”

It must’ve been the significant other. I stood by my instinct from when I first met him: it was heartbreak that made Brady decide to leave his entire life behind, but maybe multiple kinds. I decided not to push it right now. “Are you close with your siblings?”

Brady audibly exhaled. “I’m closest with my oldest brother, James. He’s ten years older than me, and I talk to him the most. My middle brother is Alex. We talk sometimes, and the one closest in age to me is Ben. We don’t really talk.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I think we’re too different,” Brady said. “I’ll always be there if he needs me, but we have vastly different belief and ethics systems, I think.”

“What do you believe in?” I knew he didn’t believe in ghosts. At least, he thought he didn’t believe in ghosts.

Brady shrugged. “I believe in people. I believe that most are good, or at least, they want and try to be. I believe in looking out for your fellow man and doing your best to leave the world better than the way you found it.”

“Those are good things to believe in,” I said. Those were nearly identical values to the ones Dex and Joanie raised me on. It sounded like Brady had found those things himself. “I believe in those things, too.”

Brady glanced over at me—his gaze was warm, kind. He took a deep breath before he said: “I like you, too, Collins. In case you were curious.”

Suddenly, I felt like I needed to crawl out of my skin and hide under the bench seat. How was I supposed to not think about his arms or his smile or the crinkles around his eyes when he said shit like that?

“Good to know,” I said, quieter than I intended to, and then we fell into a comfortable silence. Still charged, but comfortable, nonetheless. This type of comfort was new for me. I didn’t know what to do with it.

I looked at myself in the side mirror—watched the trees whip past me, looked up at the sky, which was covered in giant fluffy clouds—some gray, some white. There was nowhere else on the planet where I felt this close to the sky, like I could reach out and touch it or take a bite out of the cotton candy clouds.

The trees in Sweetwater Peak felt different from trees I’d seen anywhere else too. The clouds clung to them, and their shadows looked heavy and impossible to lift. When I was a kid, I shared that observation with my dad and asked him why the branches weren’t droopy. To me, it looked like they should collapse under the weight of the darkness. Dex told me that darkness doesn’t always have to be heavy and that if it was, the trees were built to carry it.

The permanently dark and moody trees against the blue sky was what I saw when I closed my eyes—no matter how far away I was from home.

Sometimes, this route would also have the silvery wisps of animal ghosts—elk, deer, bears, wolves, even—running through the woods. As a kid, I struggled with the circle of life and how that related to animals. I didn’t like the concept of predators and prey, and I hated that animals didn’t live forever. I hated that cars hit deer exploring their own home and the survival-of-the-fittest bullshit.

But my abilities helped once I started noticing animals continuing to roam after they’d died—like they completed one circle of life and now they got to live out another one without the danger and detriment of the first.

That was what I always came up to the river looking for. It gave me hope that everything—no matter how hard or terrible it felt—was as it was meant to be.

“You’ll want to slow down a little bit here,” I said to Brady. “About a hundred feet up, the road ends, but there’s a little alcove of trees off to the

right, which is perfect parking."

"Got it," he said, and I felt the truck slow as he took his foot off the gas pedal. "Why does it feel so much darker up here?"

"The forest gets denser the farther up you go," I said. "The trees get taller and block more of the light." That was the logical answer, but I always felt like it was more than logic that gave the forest and the Sweetwater River its vibe.

Brady pulled into the alcove of trees. The trees here grew in a nearly perfect arch, so trucks almost always fit perfectly. Not that it would matter if it didn't—we could park in the middle of the road. No one was coming up here.

When I opened the passenger door, the first thing I noticed was the chill in the air, and I was grateful I'd put on a few extra layers—a tank top and a long-sleeve—under my hoodie to keep my trunk nice and warm.

"Why does the road just…end?" Brady asked when we met up at the back of his truck.

I slung my daypack over my shoulder. "Whoever was doing the road construction saw some weird shit that scared them enough that they left the road abandoned and unfinished."

"I feel like you're yanking my chain again," Brady said with a shake of his head.

"I'm not. I promise," I said, putting my hand over my heart. "It's not my fault you've lived here for a year and never realized how creepy it is. C'mon. We're going to head up this trail for a while."

Brady gestured for me to go first. "So what kind of 'weird shit' did they see?"

"So, in my experience," I started. "Ghosts aren't really malevolent or unkind. Mostly, they're just neutral toward the living—we're small potatoes compared to whatever parallel realm they're existing in. But the ones that have anchored themselves up here are…different."

"Anchored themselves?" Brady asked from behind me.

"Oh, um, that's a term that Clarke and I coined. It just means where a spirit chooses to be—the place where their energy is the strongest."

"Got it. So, different how?"

"They're a little more…wary of visitors, I guess. Sometimes, a little sinister."

Brady's footsteps stopped behind me. "So first, you took me to a structurally unstable church, then a literal murder house, and now you're telling me you brought me to a place with sinister ghosts?" Brady demanded. "Great." The sarcasm in his voice was palpable but so was the amusement.

"They're only sinister sometimes!"

"That's really reassuring, Collins."

I stopped and turned around to face him. "You said you don't even believe in ghosts!"

He took a few steps closer to me before he stopped again. His blue eyes were on me, and I liked having him in my space. I wanted him closer. "I do if they're sinister. I don't want to get possessed or some shit."

"I would not let you get possessed," I said.

"I don't think you can control that."

"Okay, maybe not, but I can be very persuasive. I'd talk the ghost out of it—tell them you're not worth possessing."

Brady looked like he was fighting a smile. "I don't know if I should be offended that you don't think I'm worth possessing."

"Oh my god. Do you want to get possessed or not?"

"I'm going to go with no."

"Good answer," I said, and turned back around. I probably wouldn't even notice if I got possessed with everything I had going on.

"So," Brady said. "Tell me what weird shit the road workers saw."

"I don't want to send you running back down the mountain," I joked. "Are you sure you can handle it?"

"Only one way to find out."

"Apparently, there's a spirit that haunts this part of the woods," I said as we walked. "She's kind of like Sweetwater Peak's version of Bloody Mary, but the kids call her the Lady in White. She's in the forest because that's where she was supposed to rendezvous with her lover, but her husband got to him first. They say she died here of a broken heart."

"That feels like a classic," Brady said.

I nodded. "Her schtick is that if you turn off your headlights or flashlight or whatever, so you're in complete darkness, put a white sheet over your head, and whisper a secret, she'll appear when you take the sheet off your head."

“Did you ever try?” Brady asked.

“Duh,” I said. “But I’ve never seen her. I think she might actually just be a ghost story.” Of course, I believed that there had to be some truth to it. In my opinion, she had probably just faded away with time.

“But all the workers saw something, right? If they stopped construction on the road?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, but they could’ve seen a lot of things. The Lady in White was just the most well-known possibility.”

“Is she still waiting for the guy to show up?” Brady asked.

“That’s the story,” I said. “She was the reason I started exploring up here on my own—thought she could benefit from a little girl talk.”

Wind blew through the trees as we walked, and they creaked loudly as they swayed back and forth. The trail had started to slope upward, so our conversation dwindled a little bit, but not completely. We talked about deliveries for next week, the weather, Brady’s general dislike of zucchini and almonds. I would’ve let the conversation stop, but the farther along we got on the trail, the more my internal ghost radar went off. I felt like Brady and I were being watched in a way that made me uneasy. I didn’t want him to feel that way, too. I felt weirdly protective over this upholsterer.

A branch snapped ahead of us, and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. “What was that?” Brady asked.

“Probably just an animal,” I said—for both of our benefits. This was a new feeling for me. I didn’t scare easily, but that was mostly because I had a decent understanding of the paranormal. I’d interacted with it my whole life. It was second nature—like breathing.

But now my breath was labored. I was stuck between understanding the world as I knew it existed while being forced to experience it like everyone else. I was out of touch with myself and my surroundings, and being up here—secluded and away from familiar spirits—I felt it deeply.

And it freaked me the fuck out.

The next time the wind blew through the trees, it sounded like a groan.

“I gotta tell you, trouble,” Brady said behind me. “I am not a fan of these noises. They all sound too…human.” I only had two nicknames, but I think the one Brady had taken to calling me every once in a while was my favorite.

“We only have a little while left,” I said. There was a streak of silver out of the corner of my eye, and I whipped my head toward it, quickly realizing that I’d never had to defend myself against the spirits before—at least, not when I didn’t know if they could hear me.

I audibly sighed in relief when I saw it was just a deer.

“Are you good?” Brady asked. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think this creepy forest was getting to you, too.”

“Good thing you know better,” I said.

“What did you see over there?” he asked, pushing.

“Nothing to worry about,” I said. “You know, you would last like two seconds in a horror movie.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Brady argued. “Because I wouldn’t ignore the signs. As soon as shit starts getting weird, I’m out of there.” Little did he know, shit was already weird on this mountain. I couldn’t shake the goosebumps.

“Whatever you say,” I responded. A branch snapped ahead of us again.

“God, I hate that noise,” Brady said behind me. “I didn’t know how much I hated that noise until I stepped on all those branches on the way into the church. It sounded like a graveyard.”

“It’s disturbing to me that’s where your mind went,” I tried to joke, but the air around us was weighing on me.

“I think I can blame that one on you,” Brady said.

The trail was more uneven than it was the last time I was up here, and some parts were overgrown, but every time I stumbled, I knew Brady was behind me and wouldn’t let me fall. When we had to climb over fallen trees, he would take the lead and give me his hand to keep me steady.

The trees were starting to get even more dense, and I could hear the river rushing ahead of us. We were getting closer. It was getting darker and darker the farther we headed into the trees, but right when it felt like it was about to go black, an opening appeared ahead of us.

The uneasiness that wrapped itself around my bones on the trail started to loosen and unwind itself when I saw the rushing water. My mouth stretched into a grin. The excitement felt like electricity coursing through my veins. I didn’t quite know why—I’d seen this a million times before.

Maybe because I was about to share it with someone else for the first time.

When I turned back to Brady, I saw the eyes that had been watching us the whole time. She was standing behind him. Her form was gauzy and gray but clear. She had hair that hit at her waist, and it looked like she was wearing a nightgown—very on brand.

"Holy shit," I breathed.

"You good?" he asked. The woman reached out and dragged her hand from Brady's shoulder to his wrist. I watched the chill run through him.

"She's here," I said, and the woman's eyes snapped to mine. An angry line formed between her eyebrows as she looked at me. Could she hear me?

"Wait, what?"

"The Lady in White," I said. The line between her brows deepened. Okay, maybe she didn't like that moniker, but I didn't know her actual name. She put her hands possessively on Brady's shoulders.

He turned his head to look behind him. Of course, he couldn't see anything. "You're freaking me out for real this time, Collins."

"What's your name?" I asked the woman, who continued to stare at me as she ran her hands over Brady's neck and shoulders. I didn't recognize the feeling in the pit of my stomach, but I wanted her ghost-hands off him.

"Can you feel her?" I brought my attention back to Brady.

He stilled. "Wait. She's touching me?" His voice was ever so slightly shaky. I nodded.

"What do I do?"

I reached out and grabbed his hand. "Keep moving," I said. I was wary of this one—that didn't happen very often. I tugged on his hand, but he didn't budge.

"Collins." His eyes were wide. "I can't move."

"What?"

"I can't move. When I go to walk, there's like this weird shooting pain up my leg." The Lady in White was smiling. I watched as she pushed herself through his body until she was in front of him. "Something just happened," he said. "What just happened?"

"I don't think you want to know," I muttered. The woman wrapped her arms around Brady's neck and laid her head on his shoulder.

Was this why I'd never seen her before? Because I didn't have a man with me? Was she using Brady as a stand-in for the lover who never showed up?

“He’s not yours,” I said to the woman. “He’s not the one you’re waiting for. He’s, um, he’s mine.”

Her eyes narrowed at me, and she tilted her head toward me—like she had trouble hearing what I was saying.

“He’s mine,” I said again, with a little more confidence. “We’re just here to see the river, and then we’ll leave.” The woman put a hand over her ear, like my words were hurting her. When she opened her mouth, no sound came out. “Please,” I said. “I know you’re waiting for someone. But this isn’t him.” The woman’s nostrils flared. “I promise,” I said. The woman looked up at Brady and nuzzled her head into his chest before she stepped back.

“He looks like him.” I heard her. Holy shit, I heard her. Her voice was far away and staticky, but I could hear it.

“He’s not the one you’re waiting for,” I tried again, but I also wanted her to understand I empathized with her. “What’s his name?” I asked quickly. “Maybe I can find him, and tell him you’re here—that you’re waiting for him.”

This time, I didn’t hear any words—only static.

Brady squeezed my hand, and I squeezed his back. I looked at him and tried to communicate without talking. *Try again*, I thought. *Try walking again.*

Brady understood and took a step forward. I nearly collapsed in relief. “Thank you,” I said to her. “I know you’re tired of being alone. I promise I’ll try to find him.”

Brady pulled me against him and let out a sigh of relief. I didn’t tell him that we weren’t out of the woods yet. The woman’s eyes stayed on us as Brady buried his head in my shoulder.

I saw the longing in her face—the sadness. Her mouth opened at the same time a gust of wind went through the trees. The wind wailed, blowing hard enough that it nearly knocked me to my knees.

And then she was gone.

“Oh my god,” I breathed. Brady squeezed me tighter.

“I felt her leave,” Brady said. “In the wind—I felt her blow away.”

I pushed back so I could look at him. I put my hands on either side of his face, searching his eyes for any signs of harm. “Are you okay?”

“Fine.” He nodded. “It was crazy—my body got so cold, like my bones were frosting over, and then everything started to hurt.”

“She went through you,” I said. “Temperature changes are common, but they’re usually more like…environmental than internal.”

Brady shook his head. “That was fucking crazy,” he said. “Can we get out of here?”

I took a deep breath. “We’re only about thirty steps away from what I wanted to show you,” I said.

He swallowed. “Do you think she’ll come back?”

“No,” I said honestly. “I think we’re safe. And if she does, I’ll try the flashlight trick.”

“The flashlight trick?”

“I told you that ghosts don’t like harsh, artificial light. I have a high-powered light in the daypack. I’ll shine it right in her eyes.”

“Why didn’t you do that *now*?” he asked.

“Honestly,” I said, “I was, um, I was too worried about you, I guess. I… forgot.” Brady reached up and put one of his hands over mine.

“She heard you, right?”

“I think so,” I said. “And I heard her, too.”

“You did?” Brady’s eyes brightened.

“Kind of. It was like she was talking to me through a walkie-talkie, though. I missed most of it, but the parts that I got…” The parts that I got made my heart swell up in my chest, made the hope ember flare up in a way that pushed out some of the darkness.

Brady smiled, like he knew how much it all meant to me. “Then me getting weirdly trapped by a ghost was worth it,” he said. “Okay. We can go to wherever you’re taking me on the condition that we run as fast as we can down the mountain afterward.”

“Deal.” I nodded. When he took his hand off mine, I grabbed it, so we walked hand in hand until I saw the water ahead.

I turned to Brady, whose eyes were looking ahead at the water. “Okay,” I said, getting his attention. “When the trees end, the ground underneath us also ends.” His eyes met mine, and widened. I could almost hear him thinking, *Where the fuck did you bring me, Collins?* As if the ghost run-in wasn’t enough.

“So watch your step,” I said with a grin.

With only a few steps left, I could see the rock that protruded out of the river. That was where Brady and I wanted to be. To get there, you just had to jump the eighteen inches between the cliff and the rock, which was just big enough to hold two people.

Before I could take the leap over to the rock, Brady grabbed my waist and pulled me back to him. I liked the weight of his hands on my hips. “What the fuck?” he asked over the roar of the water. “You were not about to just jump onto that rock. Not after what just happened.”

I turned my head to face him, and I felt his grip tighten. “It’s easy,” I said. “I promise.” We were close again. It occurred to me that all I would have to do is push up on my tiptoes and my mouth would be on his.

A blush crept up my cheeks, and I quickly looked away from him. “You can’t be serious,” he said. I felt his breath at my ear.

Instead of answering and potentially giving away how being so close to him was affecting me, I put my hands over his and gently pushed them off. He moved them immediately, and I hopped over the gap.

I turned back and held my hand out to him. His eyes were so firmly planted on me that I don’t think he realized what was around us yet. I watched his chest rise and fall with a deep breath before he hopped the gap, too, and took my hand upon landing.

“Look,” I said as loud as I could. “Look around.”

I saw it when he realized. This part of the Sweetwater River was like no other. It was where it was the steepest and fastest moving. It had eroded into the side of the mountain like the sharpest turn of a waterslide—that point where the momentum would push you up the side, and you’d almost flip over. From where we stood on the rock, it was like we were looking straight ahead to a wall of rushing water.

Brady’s mouth dropped open. His blue eyes flitted all around us, taking it in. He was totally and completely awestruck. The look on his face was pure and unadulterated wonder.

For the first time in a long time, I wished I had my camera.

17
BRADY



Today had already been unbelievable, but being held hostage by a ghost less than five minutes ago had nothing on what I was looking at right now. The way the river tilted upward across the mountain, the way it rushed at an angle so steep that it made me feel like it could've fallen on me at any moment.

But it didn't.

It rushed past Collins and me. The sound of it terrified me, but it also made me feel like I was alive—like the river was the blood rushing through my veins, and its roar was my heartbeat in my ears.

I'd never seen anything like this. I didn't know the planet could even create something so extraordinary. It made me realize how *little* I'd really seen of it before this, and now I wanted to see so much more, all of the things like this that made me feel like I was totally and completely insignificant.

This wasn't what I'd expected when Collins had told me we were going to the river, but honestly, nothing about her has been as I'd expected, and I loved it. Everything felt bigger and more substantial with her around—like my world was dialed up to eleven.

"Holy shit," I whispered even though I knew Collins couldn't hear me over the rush of the water. I squeezed her hand instead—once I realized I was still holding it.

She squeezed mine back.

I'd spent most of today invading Collins's personal space, like when I'd grabbed her waist before she jumped from the edge of the forest to the rock we were now standing on. The gap between had been tiny—just a little over a foot, probably—but it was big enough that she had to do a little hop, which felt more than a little dangerous. It took my brain less than a second to think of all the things that could go wrong because of that little hop, and it was fucking terrifying. So I pulled her back to me, and it felt so natural—to have her that close. I wished she were still there, even though the moment had passed.

I had meant what I said in the truck: I liked her. And I think part of me liked her from the second she pepper-sprayed me, and now, the rest of me was catching up. It was like I was helpless against the forces that were pushing us together—like it was all supernatural, and I wasn't just talking about the ghosts.

When I looked at her now, she wasn't looking at the natural wonder around us. She was looking at me.

"It's magnificent, isn't it?" she yelled over the water. When I nodded, she laughed. "Way better than the boring old overlook, yeah? Worth a sinister spirit run-in?" I nodded again—stunned silent, apparently.

Don't get me wrong, the regular-schmegular Sweetwater River overlook was beautiful—clear views of the back side of the Elk Spine mountain range, looked beautiful at sunset and all that, but it wasn't this.

This was…fuck, this was a miracle.

"Do you want to sit for a minute?" Collins yelled, and pointed back toward the forest ledge that we'd jumped from.

"Yeah," I yelled back. It took everything in me to let go of her hand, but I was going to make sure I went first this time and caught her on the other side—or so I thought. But Collins just hopped back after me with ease. There went my excuse to touch her.

Collins sat down and let her feet hang over the ledge—which was enough to give me another heart attack. Apparently, she did not have a healthy fear of heights like I did. When I sat down, I kept my legs crossed and as far away from the ledge as I could get. "Ghosts he can handle. Feet dangling, though, hard pass," Collins said, talking more to herself than me, as she handed me a clear plastic bag with a sandwich in it. I didn't have to

open it to know it was her favorite snack—a peanut butter and honey sandwich sprinkled with mini M&M's.

It was growing on me, too.

"How did you find this?" I asked Collins as I took a bite of my sandwich.

She shrugged. "I was on the road one day, saw the trail, and decided to follow it. That's how I find everything in this town—curiosity and blind faith that nothing is going to kill me." I tried not to think about the run-in back there: how it felt like my bones had been replaced with shards of ice or the look on Collins's face when I told her I couldn't move.

"I didn't really have a lot of friends growing up," Collins continued. "The ones I did have were because I was Clarke's sister—not because I was me—so I spent a lot of time exploring on my own."

"Leith told me that you and Clarke were the only girls in your class until Sadie moved here," I said.

Collins laughed. "God, how long were you and Leith talking? He seemed to give you an awful lot of information on me."

I shrugged. "Can never have enough blackmail material."

"Okay, sure." Collins nodded. "But yeah, that's true—just Clarke and me against the world at Sweetwater Peak Elementary." Her voice went wistful, and I knew she was still thinking about their argument.

"I never really thought about what it would be like to grow up in a town like this."

Collins's eyes shifted back toward the river, and she suddenly seemed far away. "Isolating," she said. "Really isolating." I liked listening to her talk, so I just waited—giving her the space to keep going if she wanted to.

After a few beats, she sighed. "I liked the adventures and the ghosts and how safe I felt. I liked working at Boone's farm and my family's antique shop, and I like that growing up here is the thing that makes me…me. But it's also just…stifling. Nothing ever changes. Nothing ever moves. Sweetwater Peak is exactly as it was, as it is, and as it will always be."

I shrugged. "That doesn't necessarily sound like a bad thing."

Collins looked over at me. "You're right. I don't want anything here to change. I want it to stay exactly how it is."

"Then why lament over it?"

"Because it's my control group."

“I’m not following.”

“It’s the thing that I’ll always be able to compare myself to—the thing that will determine whether I’ve changed or whether I’ve stayed the same,” she said. “And this time around, it’s making me feel like I’ve changed for the worse.”

“Because of the ghost thing?” I asked.

“Partly.” She nodded. “It feels like I’ve spent the last year or so dropping things as I ran from place to place—like my arms were too full—so I just started leaving things behind. But now I’m not sure what I have left. I think that’s why I’ve got this block. But sometimes when I’m with you, I feel like myself.”

I had the urge to wrap my arms around her and pull her into my chest, but I refrained.

I didn’t want to try and placate her. Right now, it felt more important to just…sit with it all.

With her.

“I feel like myself with you, too,” I said after a while. “Not so lost, I guess.”

I didn’t expect what happened next. Collins leaned over to put her head on my shoulder. “Then it all might be worth it.”

18
COLLINS



I kept my promise to Brady and we ran our asses down the mountain as soon as we were ready to leave, and didn't look back. We didn't even say a word in the truck until we'd made it back to the town limits.

"So," Brady said to break the silence. "I think I believe in ghosts now—in case you were wondering." I burst out laughing, and neither of us stopped for a long time.

Even though I was exhausted when I finally got into bed, I still couldn't manage to fall into any sort of restful sleep. I stuffed my face into my pillow and let out a scream—hoping it was as muffled in reality as it sounded to my ears. I flipped my phone over on my nightstand to see what time it was. Four-forty-seven.

Even if I could sleep, it wouldn't even be worth it at this point, so I pushed myself out of bed and padded to the kitchen to switch on the coffee maker.

Clarke would be getting up any minute now. She was a five A.M.-er. I thought about texting her—telling her we needed to hash it out because I had so much to tell her—but I didn't. I wasn't sure if she wanted me to—if she wanted me here at all at this point.

I bent over and put my elbows on the kitchen counter so I could watch the coffee drip into the pot up close. It was kind of hypnotic.

"Good morning." Brady's voice startled me a few minutes later.

“Morning,” I said without turning to face him—I was still focused on the coffee. “You’re up early.”

“I could say the same thing about you,” Brady said.

“Couldn’t sleep,” I sighed.

“Me either,” Brady said. He was in my peripheral vision now—grabbing two coffee mugs out of the cabinet above the sink. He wasn’t wearing a shirt. “I think the adrenaline from yesterday is still pumping.”

“That means the crash is going to come for you.” I pushed up off my elbows. “Good thing it’s Saturday.”

“Then it’ll come for you, too.”

“Nah.” I shook my head. “I never sleep anymore. Running on fumes is just my constant state of being.” Brady set both coffee cups down next to the coffee maker, and I pulled the pot out to fill them all the way up.

“Do you want breakfast?” Brady asked. “I can make something with all those eggs Boone gives you.”

“Something other than peanut butter toast might be good for once,” I said. “How can I help?”

Brady moved to the other side of me and opened the fridge. “Keep me company?” The look he gave me didn’t just give me butterflies in my stomach. I felt like those motherfuckers had made their way all the way to my toes.

“S-sure,” I stammered. I took a deep breath to help me recover. “So, now that you’ve had a chance to sleep, well lie down, on yesterday, how are you feeling?”

Brady talked while cracking eggs into a bowl. “I’m still waiting for you to tell me that it was a very-well-thought-out and elaborate prank, honestly.”

“I’ve never once had that much forethought,” I said. “But thank you for thinking that highly of me.”

“It’s just wild,” Brady continued. “I’ve never believed in or experienced anything like that. I believed you when you told me about your…abilities, but that had less to do with the actual ghosts and everything to do with you as a person. I don’t really know how to process or react to ghosts existing. I keep wondering if that means, you know, everything *else* exists, too.”

“If it makes you feel better, I’ve never come in contact with a vampire or a werewolf or a demon that I know of.” I didn’t tell him that I thought the

world was wide enough for all of those things to exist.

“There’s still time.” Brady shrugged. “It’s crazy how alive you feel after coming in contact with the dead.”

“Now you know why Ouija boards are so popular,” I half joked. I could hear rain tapping on the roof of the apartment.

“My experience with a Ouija board has nothing on what I felt yesterday,” Brady said as he whisked all the eggs together.

My ears perked up. “I didn’t really take you for a Ouija board guy.”

“I’m not,” Brady said. “My, um, ex’s brother brought one to a party once.”

“The ex that inspired the move to Sweetwater Peak?” I asked. My voice was tentative. He’d never willingly volunteered any information about this before.

“That’s the one,” Brady said.

I took a sip of my coffee. “So what…happened?”

“There’s not much to say.” Brady shrugged. “We didn’t work out.”

“Usually, when someone says there’s not much to say about something, there’s a whole lot to say,” I said. “I’m speaking from experience there. Also, anything that makes you want to change your entire life probably qualifies as something.” I couldn’t deny that I was curious from the beginning about Brady’s previous relationship, but now that I knew him better, I genuinely couldn’t compute why anyone would let him go. Brady stayed quiet. “C’mon,” I prodded. “You know so much about me.”

“I don’t like to talk about her.” Brady sighed.

“Because it hurts?” I asked—unsure if I wanted an answer if that was the case. I was feeling…things for Brady. I didn’t want to think about him being hung up on someone else, but I also had to know if that was the case.

“No,” Brady said quickly. “It’s not like that. The whole situation was just complicated. I didn’t just break up with someone. We were engaged, and I broke it off, so I feel like I didn’t just derail my life. I derailed hers, too.”

“Oh,” I said dumbly.

“I still feel a lot of guilt about that, I guess. I don’t regret breaking it off. It was the right choice for me, and for her, too, I think. There was no way it was going to work. But it still makes me feel shitty when I think about it.”

Sweet Brady, I thought. “I’m sorry,” I said.

He didn’t respond right away. I watched his back as he poured the eggs into a pan on the stove and pushed them around with a plastic spatula. Even though he wasn’t straining or anything, I could see the muscles on his back working as he cooked. He also grabbed a pack of bacon out of the fridge and laid pieces of it in a separate pan, then put two pieces of bread in the toaster.

“Anything else you want to know?” he asked without looking at me.

I wanted to know everything about Brady’s entire romantic history, but that wasn’t what he was asking. “What’s her name?”

“Jackie.”

“How long were you guys together?”

“Seven years.” Holy fuck. That’s a long time.

“Do you ever miss her?” My voice was quieter than I meant for it to be.

Brady grabbed a plate and pushed the eggs out of the pan onto it, followed by the bacon and toast. Then he brought the plate to where I was sitting at the table. He put it in the middle and sat across from me.

His eyes met mine. God, they were so blue. It felt like he was looking right into my soul when he said, “Not even once, Collins.”

19
COLLINS



I walked through the front door of Coop’s on Monday afternoon looking like a drowned rat. Brady looked up when the door opened and the little bell rang. “It’s really coming down out there,” I said. For the past few days, there had been a constant sprinkle in Sweetwater Peak. Today, though, it had turned into a torrential downpour, and it just happened to start on my walk back to Coop’s after I had picked up food for Brady and me. “Let’s hope that our lunches survived.”

“If they didn’t, I hope you won’t judge me for crying.”

I shrugged. “I like to see a grown man cry every once in a while. It’s good for the soul.” I had gotten us lunch from Sevens—a Vietnamese restaurant owned by Sadie’s family.

Sevens was definitely the best restaurant in town. Sadie’s dad was born and raised in Vietnam, went to France for culinary school, and moved to the United States to work in the restaurant industry. Somewhere along the way, he fell in love, opened his own restaurants, had a family, subsequently got tired of the grind, and moved his family to Sweetwater Peak, of all places, which I was personally very grateful for.

Sweetwater Peak might’ve been too small for a Dollar General, but it wasn’t too small for a decent restaurant.

I examined the plastic bag that held two containers of pho broth, and two boxes with all of the fixings. “It looks like everything held up,” I said. “But it’s a little cold. We can heat up the broth on the stove.”

“Sounds good,” Brady said. “We can be done down here anyway. I doubt anyone’s coming in with that horror happening outside, and I got ahead of schedule yesterday.”

“Brady Cooper, I love it when you talk dirty,” I purred, which caused Brady to accidentally hammer his thumb.

“Fuck,” he grunted, and put the injured thumb in his mouth. I tried not to laugh because I felt bad that he’s hurt himself, but he’d flustered me enough over the past week that it felt good to return the favor.

I set the bag on my desk and walked back to where he was working on a love seat. “Let me see,” I said, and held my hand out.

Brady gave me his hand, and I held it up to examine his thumb, which was red and already had a bruise forming under the nail. “Ouch,” I said.

“You’re telling me,” he breathed.

“Maybe you should ice it or something—at least run it under cold water.” Taking care of him was the least I could do after he’d done the same when I’d knocked my head in the darkroom, but every second that passed while I held on to his hand resulted in the air around us getting incrementally heavier. This was what happened when we touched—in the darkroom, at the river, in the kitchen. You’d think I’d be used to it after multiple incidents, but I didn’t know if I’d ever be used to the pull that Brady had on me.

Now the shop felt the way the stormy sky outside looked—intense and electric.

“It’s fine.” Brady’s voice was lower, and I pretended I didn’t notice.

“C’mon,” I said, pulling him toward the stairs. I swiped the take-out bag off my desk on the way. Brady didn’t protest.

Once we were up the stairs, I realized that I hadn’t thought this all the way through. Brady and I never really went downstairs or came upstairs at the same time, or if we did, we just separated and went through our own doors. So now that we were here, and his hand was still in mine, I didn’t know which door we should go through—his front door or mine.

I made a split-second decision to go through mine—I was leading the way, after all—even though my half of the apartment was in complete and total disarray.

“Close your eyes!” I called back to Brady, who laughed.

“Oh my god, why are there so many piles? I thought you were working with limited belongings,” he said.

“I am. I’m also a really excellent packer.” I walked faster, trying to get him and his pile judgment out of my side of the apartment.

“How do you know which clothes are clean and which are dirty?”

“Leave me alone, Brady!”

“I am genuinely curious. This place is insane.”

We made it to the hallway that led to our joined kitchen, but I kept up my pace. “You were supposed to close your eyes,” I said.

“Too much to take in,” Brady said. “Plus, I don’t trust you to not walk me straight into a wall, and then I’d have a bum thumb *and* forehead.”

I couldn’t really argue with him there. “Cold water,” I said, gesturing toward the sink. “Now.”

“I think I like you bossy,” Brady said as he walked past me.

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” I said.

“And this is why I hit my thumb,” Brady muttered.

“What do you mean?”

Brady turned on the sink and put his thumb under the stream of water. “We flirt, I get flustered, bad things happen.”

“You think we’re flirting?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest. We were. We had been for a while—especially as we got more comfortable with one another.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been interested in flirting, but I’m sure I still know what it looks like.”

“How long is a while?” I asked. He was good at flirting, so if I hadn’t known that his previous relationship had lasted seven years, I would think he was a regular.

“A while.” Brady shrugged and turned off the water. He walked toward me. I took a few steps back until the back of my thighs hit the kitchen table.

When he got close enough, I held up one of my hands to his chest. I didn’t know what he was doing, but I didn’t know what *I* would do if he got any closer.

“What are you doing?” I asked, my voice breathy.

“Flustering you for a change,” he said.

“Well, someone thinks highly of himself, doesn’t he,” I grumbled.

“Tell me it’s one-sided, then.” He leaned down, so his head was near my ear. “Tell me it’s just me.”

I was about to tell him just that. I was fine with lying—good at it, even—but when I opened my mouth nothing came out.

“That’s what I thought.” Brady’s voice vibrated all the way through me, and I had to put my hands on the table behind me for balance.

He stepped closer to me again—so close that we were almost touching. I felt one of his hands skim my waist, and I let my eyes flutter closed. He was going to kiss me, and I was going to let him. I would’ve let him in the darkroom, and I would’ve let him a million times since then.

And I wanted to kiss him back. With *vigor.*

But the kiss never came. Instead, his hand left my waist and reached behind me for the take-out bag. “C’mon, trouble,” he said. “Let’s eat.”

—

Our late lunch was accompanied by thick sexual tension, relentless rain against the windows, and the occasional boom of thunder and flash of lightning.

My phone buzzed with a FaceTime call from Boone when we were almost finished. I picked it up after one ring. “Hey,” I said as Boone appeared on the screen. He held the phone at the worst possible angle, and most of my screen was his scraggly beard.

“Hey, kid,” he said. “Called your parents and your sister, so wanted to check in and make sure you weren’t doing anything stupid in the storm.”

Does flirting with my roommate-slash-boss count?

“I see where your priorities are,” I said. Boone grunted in lieu of responding to my sarcasm. I glanced up at Brady, who was watching me intently. “Why am I last?”

“Because if you were doing something stupid, I’d have to rescue you, and then I’d never get to check in with the rest of your family.”

“Well, I’m not doing anything stupid.” Currently, anyway. “How are you? House holding up okay?” I worried about Boone when we got any kind of storm—he was so far out of town and all on his own, but unlike the rest of us, at least he was on his own power grid. When the rest of the town blacked out, Boone’s property stayed lit.

“Got a leak in the living room that I never got around to fixin’—regrettin’ that now, but nothing I can do.” I thought about how Boone looked dismounting his horse a few weeks ago. I couldn’t imagine him getting on his roof to fix a leak. “All the animals are in.” Boone turned his phone—his entire phone, of course, not just the camera.

The dogs, the cats, and the pig were all sound asleep on the rug in front of him. “Horses are good, and cows have shelter.”

“That’s good,” I said. “If I’d known the rain was going to shift to something like this, I would’ve come up there.”

“Don’t you worry about me,” he said. “Glad you’re okay.”

“Brady and I were just having lunch.” I flipped my camera to show Brady, who looked like a deer in the headlights.

“Uh, h-hi.” Brady waved.

Boone grunted.

“Be safe, kid,” Boone said when I flipped the screen back to me.

“Will do. Love you.”

“Yeah, yeah. And Collins,” Boone said. “Grow a pair and talk to your sister, soon. This standoff isn’t good for either of you.” And then he hung up. Well, if Boone knew Clarke and I were fighting, then my parents did, too. Lovely.

I put my phone back down on the table.

“That’s the most I’ve ever heard him talk,” Brady said. “He obviously likes you, but he still sounds so mean—is that his voice’s permanent setting?”

“It’s just his way,” I sighed.

“I’ll take your word for it.” Brady shook his head. “So you and Clarke are still in a stalemate?”

“I’m planning to talk to her soon,” I lied. I wasn’t. I was hoping everything with the Cartwrights in general would just fix itself. “I’m going to have to YouTube how to fix a roof leak,” I said, switching gears. “There’s no way he can get on his roof by himself, but I’m confident I can figure it out.”

“Your whole family is close with him?” Brady asked.

I nodded. “It all started with my mom. When she feels like someone doesn’t like her, she has an insatiable need to change that—Clarke is the

same way—and it worked with Boone. He was part of our family before Clarke and I were even born."

"That's…nice," Brady said.

"It is." I smiled and stood up from the table to clear the dishes.

"I'll do that," Brady said quickly, but I shook my head.

"I owe you for breakfast," I said. "This cleanup is on me, and you've seen the state of my apartment, so you know how rare that is. I'll take this one."

"I'm still going to help," he said, standing up, and as he did, the lights went out.

20
BRADY



"Good thing I have all these candles, huh?" Collins said as she lit a bunch of them around the kitchen and living room.

"God," I said. "Your smugness is palpable right now."

"How would you survive this power outage without me?" Honestly, I'd probably be doing better if she weren't here. The darkness and the glow of the candles made me want to touch her again. To finish what I started earlier. I thought I had just been teasing her, but I was teasing both of us, and I was regretting it.

Today, Collins was wearing this long-sleeve black sweater that looked like it should have buttons, but instead, it just had two spots where she tied the sides together. I had spotted flashes of her skin all day and the black bra that those useless fucking ties did nothing to hide.

I wanted to pull on those ties and watch them come undone.

"Earth to Brady," I heard Collins say through the haze of my thoughts. She was right in front of me.

"S-sorry," I said. "What did you say?"

"I asked you if you thought this is enough candles," Collins said. "It's only going to get darker. We might need more later."

I looked around the apartment. There were at least twenty candles, all emitting a soft, warm glow. I purposefully kept my eyes off Collins. "I think this is plenty," I said.

Collins flopped onto the couch. "Well," she said. "What should we do?"

“We?” I asked. She nodded. “I don’t know.” Against my better judgment, I sat down on the couch beside her, laid my head on the cushion, and closed my eyes.

“Believe it or not, Sweetwater Peak loses power quite often,” she said.

“I do believe that,” I said. In the year I’d lived here, we’d lost power six or seven times.

“You should really have a generator handy,” Collins said. I peeked at her through one open eye. Her body was angled toward mine and her arm was on the back of the couch, and she was looking at me with her head resting on her palm. If I moved my knee two inches, I’d bump her.

I moved my knee.

“So I’ve been told,” I sighed. “What do you usually do when the power’s out?”

“Clarke and I would talk to the ghosts, usually,” Collins said. “We’d also play board games. It always felt like the best time to read a good horror novel, too, but I’d get sick of holding my flashlight.”

“And ghosts don’t like artificial light,” I said, parroting Collins’s words.

“Right.” She nodded. “They also don’t like inclement weather.”

“Can they get wet?” I asked. Collins bit down on a smile. “From the rain,” I clarified.

She was still smiling as she shook her head. “I think it’s just one of those things that rolls over from life to death. You get used to being inside when it rains, standing next to a fire when it snows—that sort of thing.”

“That makes sense.” I nodded. The version of me that met Collins last month wouldn’t believe how easily I’d just accepted these facts about the supernatural. He’d probably think I was just as nutty as Collins.

Now that I had my own experience with her ghosts, it was easier for me to notice the way her eyes constantly tracked things around the room wherever we were. I watched the hope in her eyes when she saw something I couldn’t, and how it faded away in an instant when she would say something that didn’t get the response she was hoping for.

“So what did you and the ghosts talk about back then?” I asked, opening my eyes now and angling my head toward her.

Collins shrugged. “I liked listening to their stories.”

“About what?” I asked.

“Their lives, usually, but also about how they’d died or what they’d seen since. They see our world more clearly than we ever will—they’re better at understanding a bigger picture, where I get lost in the details. I just like hearing about life from their perspective.”

I never thought about it that way. Collins scooted a little closer to me. “I’ve, um, never told anyone about my abilities before. It’s nice…that you know.”

That took me aback. “Nobody?” I asked. “Not your friends or a boyfriend or even Boone?” Collins’s questions about Jackie had me unwillingly thinking about her romantic history—whether she had left anyone behind when she came back to Sweetwater Peak.

Collins shook her head. “I don’t really have friends like that. It was hard for me to get close with anyone in photography. My career took off kind of fast. That plus my general distrust of people made it hard for me. I never really knew if that was because they liked me or because they liked what I produced and what they thought that meant I could do for them. I think it was a form of self-preservation—avoiding friendships.

“It never felt worth it to me to share more pieces of myself with other people than I had to.”

“And what about a boyfriend?” I asked—hoping I was pulling off the playing-it-cool thing.

“You’re fishing,” Collins said with a grin.

“So what?” I asked. “You were fishing the other day, and I bit.”

“Fair.” Collins paused as if in thought. “I don’t think I’ve ever had a relationship in the way you would define it. I could barely imagine being in the same place for seven months, let alone seven years. Honestly, I admire that—the stillness.”

“You’ve seriously never had a boyfriend?” I asked. “Or a girlfriend?”

Collins shook her head. “Nope. There were a few times I could’ve come close. I like sex and intimacy, and sometimes that means the lines get blurry, but I didn’t let myself go too far down that road.”

All it took was a mention of sex from Collins for the dam on my thoughts to break and for my mind to be flooded with all the things I’d pushed down—the way her dagger tattoo disappeared under her black miniskirt, the flimsy tank top she wore to bed that left nothing to the imagination, the way she looked at my naked body when we had our

unexpected run-in—even the way she was bent over the counter on Saturday.

Collins snapped her fingers in front of my face, startling me. “What?” I asked quickly.

“You totally zoned out,” she said. “Where’d you go?”

“Nowhere,” I said quickly. “It’s just hard for me to believe that you’ve never been in a relationship,” I said. “You’re…”

Collins raised a brow at me. “I’m what, Brady?”

“P-pretty,” I stammered. “And intriguing.”

“Hmm. Well, thank you,” Collins said. “But regardless, this ability is the part of myself that I’ve always been smart enough to protect—sometimes it feels like the only part I’ve been able to protect.”

I was honored that she trusted me enough to share this so openly with me, but I was also sad for the Collins who thought she needed so much protection.

“What about Boone?” I asked.

Collins shook her head. “We’ve never told him outright, but Boone is observant. He always knows more than he lets on, so I’m sure he knows somewhere in his mind that the Cartwright family isn’t totally normal.”

“Your whole family can do this?” I asked.

Collins shook her head. “Just me and Clarke can do the talking and the seeing. My mom calls herself ‘sensitive,’ meaning she can feel the things that we see. She knows when ghosts are around, she can sense their intentions and their energy. We got the mutated version of her genes, I guess.”

“And your dad?”

“Wonderfully normal,” Collins said with a soft smile. “But he consistently says it makes sense that the remarkable woman he fell in love with produced two more remarkable women.”

“You have a good family,” I said.

Collins nodded. “You’re a good listener.”

I was starting to think that listening to Collins talk was one of my favorite things to do. “You listen to the ghosts, I’ll listen to you—deal?”

“Deal,” Collins said.

“I have an idea. You said you used to play board games when the power was out?” She nodded. “You in?”

“I’d have to see the games before committing,” she said with a smile.

I got up from the couch and went to the closet at the end of the hall on my side of the apartment. I scanned the top shelves and moved some towels and a junk box before I saw them.

Life, Sorry, Candyland, and a chess board. I pulled them down from the shelf and went back out to the living room. “Pick your poison,” I said to Collins, who was squinting to see the titles of the games on each box.

“Life,” she said after a few seconds. “Definitely Life.”

“Interesting,” I said. “I thought you’d be more of a Sorry girl.”

Collins shrugged. “Life has better props.” I pulled Life out of the stack and set it on the coffee table.

The layer of dust on the top of the box was thick and grimy, but when I pulled the top off, the game inside was mostly pristine.

Collins and I both took pieces out of the box and set up different parts of the board.

“Pick your car,” I said.

“Blue, obviously.” Collins plucked the blue game piece from the box and put it at the starting line. I picked the white one, and Collins shook her head. “Typical Brady,” she muttered.

The paper money and stock certificates were looking a little worse for wear, but everything else was great. “All right, let’s play the Game of Life.”

“That makes me want to quote that one Prince song,” Collins said. “ ‘Dearly beloved—’ ” she started, but I cut her off.

“Do not get that song stuck in my head. I’m begging you.”

Collins’s eyes immediately went feline. “I love a man who begs,” she said.

I shook my head. “I walked right into that one,” I sighed. If given the opportunity, I wouldn’t have a problem begging Collins for anything.

“Don’t worry, I won’t make you beg in front of an audience.”

I tilted my head, confused. “What? Wait—are there ghosts in here?”

“This whole building is crawling with them, Brady,” Collins said. “But yes. We currently have company.”

I looked around, not knowing what I was expecting to see.

“Don’t worry,” Collins whispered. “No one is too close. They’re not here for us—they’re here for the candles.”

“Really?” I whispered.

“Moths to a flame and all that,” she said. “I don’t think they can feel the warmth, but I think they like the glow.”

“How many?” I asked.

“Six, I think,” Collins said.

“How do you live your life with them just…being around all the time?” I asked as I spun and moved my car.

Collins shrugged. “I don’t know anything different. It doesn’t bother me.”

“None of them here are like the other one, right?”

“Not in the slightest,” she said. “They’re kind of annoying, but harmless. I don’t really know anything about them, though.”

“You haven’t been able to hear any snippets around here?”

“Not yet,” she said.

“Hopefully soon,” I said, and moved my car four spaces. “Dammit. Twins,” I said, reading the space.

“Ugh, yeah, twins are awful,” Collins laughed. I tried to remember the last time I felt this at ease with someone else, but I couldn’t.

I saw Collins wrap one of her arms around her middle as she used the other one to spin. “Are you cold?” I asked. It did feel kind of chilly in here.

“I always forget that when the power goes out, so does the heat,” she said. I reached behind myself and grabbed the blanket I kept on the couch.

I scooted around the game board, so we were no longer on opposite but adjacent sides of it, and close enough together that I could put the blanket over both of our shoulders.

“Thank you,” Collins said as she moved her car. “Fuck, not the divorce.”

“I’ve heard first husbands are always a dud anyway.”

“Good point.” Collins grinned. “Um, speaking of commitments that don’t work out…”

“You want to know why I called off my engagement,” I finished for her. She looked down and nodded.

“I’ve *maybe* been wondering about it since you first told me.”

“We just weren’t right for each other.”

“How did you know that? Just a feeling?”

“More like a deep, aching sense of dread,” I said. “We met because my roommate was dating her sister. We kept getting thrown together in every

group situation, so at some point we just kind of decided to be together because it was convenient. I'm not saying we didn't have good times or that I didn't care about her, but I think I was mostly just going through the motions of what I thought my life should be like.

"When the basis of your entire relationship is convenience, it's hard to care enough about someone to grow with them instead of apart from them. For the last couple of years, we were more like roommates than a couple. We didn't care enough about each other to grow together. I was just really unhappy."

"Did you tell her that?"

I nodded. "I did. She told me it would pass. Instead, it just seeped into every part of my life, and then it became more than being unhappy with my life—I was unhappy with myself. Now that I'm on the outside of it, and because of therapy, I realize that Jackie liked control, and the closer I got to rock bottom, the more malleable I got. It took me longer than it should have to realize how shell-like I'd become. I couldn't stay there anymore—couldn't be that guy. I realized that it was more important to me to leave and try to find a great thing than stay for a sure thing that felt detrimental to me."

"I'm so sorry, Brady," Collins whispered. "You deserve better than that."

"I know," I said. "I tried not to be a dick about it, but there's really no way around that when you're breaking off an engagement for a reason that feels more conceptual than concrete—especially when you're trying to communicate that to a woman who's logical and literal in every sense of the word."

"Was it worth it? Blowing up your whole life because there could maybe be something better out there?" Collins asked. Her eyes were so soft.

I thought about the motorcycle I bought after I broke off the engagement. I thought about what it felt like to ride it through different states and on winding roads. I thought about how I felt the first time I saw Sweetwater Peak on the horizon—like there was a whole world out there waiting for me, and this small town was just the start.

I thought about old churches and attics. I thought about the paint on my shop windows, and my full books. I thought about the Sweetwater River,

and most of all, I thought about the woman beside me who could talk to ghosts. “Yeah,” I said, looking at her. “It was worth it.”

Then, as if a gust of air blew through the apartment, all of the candles went out, and Collins and I were left in the dark. I felt the air start to charge up with my breath.

“Was that…?”

“I don’t know,” Collins breathed. Our shoulders were touching, and I felt her shift her body to face mine. “Brady.”

“Yeah?” I said. My voice was low.

I heard Collins swallow. “It’s not just one-sided.” I brought my hand to the side of her face and lowered my forehead to hers.

“I know,” I whispered. “I know, Collins.” I felt Collins’s hand in my shirt, and I used my other hand to pull the blanket tighter around us. “Do we still have an audience?”

Collins pulled away from me to look around the apartment. “No, not anymore,” she said. “Why?”

“Because I’m going to kiss you now,” I said before I brought my mouth to hers. There was no hesitancy, no questioning. As soon as our lips touched, her hands were in my hair, and I felt like I couldn’t get close enough to her. I pushed up on my knees, and she came with me. I wrapped my arms around her waist, and made sure there was no space between us.

Her tongue slid against my lip, and I opened my mouth for her with a groan. I followed her lead, tangling my tongue with hers and moving my hands across her back, down to her waist, and back up to her face until I felt lightheaded.

I pulled back to catch my breath. “You’re good at that,” I said.

“So are you.” Thank god she sounded out of breath, too.

“Again?” I asked. Or, maybe begged.

“Again,” Collins agreed.

21
COLLINS



I woke up the next morning to my phone vibrating nearby. I groggily blinked a few times and reached out for it. Something tightened around my waist—an arm maybe? Wait. I'd know that arm anywhere.

"Your phone is ringing." Brady yawned, and then kissed the back of my neck. I suppressed the shiver that went down my spine.

Last night, Brady and I kissed…a lot. It didn't go further than that, but even just kissing Brady made me feel like I was stripped down with all of my flaws on display. Not in a bad way. He made me feel comfortable.

I pushed myself up to a sitting position, grabbed my phone off the coffee table, and answered. "Hey, Dad," I said. "Everything okay?"

"Good morning, peanut," Dex said on the other end of the phone. "Sorry if I woke you up—I thought you'd be getting ready for work." All the lights were on in the apartment kitchen, which meant the power must've come back on at some point in the night.

"Overslept," I said. "What's up? Are you home?"

"I'm on my way," he said. "I won't get there until tomorrow, but your mom needs some help. The basement flooded last night," my dad said. "The water pump we had in the walkout finally shit out." My parents had a walkout basement, and the stairs that led out were notorious for flooding—it was why they never finished the basement all the way. My dad had a janky water pump system he'd created with an extension cord, a water pump he found in the trash, and a dream.

“Oh no,” I said. “Is everything okay down there?”

“It’s…it’s pretty bad. A lot of stuff is going to have to go. Do you think you could head over there after work? Clarke’s going to be at the shop all day, and your mom will probably be back and forth.”

For some reason, my eyes shifted back to Brady, who was watching me intently. “Go help them,” he whispered.

Are you sure? I mouthed, and he nodded.

“I can come over now,” I said. “Brady is ahead of schedule this week, so I’m not needed here at the moment.”

I heard my dad’s sigh of relief on the other end of the phone. “I’m so happy you’re here, peanut. I’ll call your mom back and tell her.”

“I’ll be over in like thirty minutes,” I said.

“Sounds good. Love you.”

“Love you,” I said, and then hung up. Without my dad on the phone, I was back to remembering that I woke up in Brady’s arms less than ninety seconds ago. I cleared my throat. “Good morning.”

“Morning,” Brady said. “I don’t remember falling asleep out here.”

I shook my head. “Me either.” I remember moving to the couch while we were kissing, but I didn’t remember when it shifted from that, to spoons, to restful sleep.

It was probably the first full night of sleep I’d gotten in over a year.

“I’m, um, sorry about…” Brady gestured toward the couch.

I brought my hand to the side of his face. “Don’t worry about it,” I said. “Last night was good…it was really good.”

Brady’s mouth stretched into a tentative grin. “I’m glad you think so.”

I nodded. “I’m going to take a quick shower and then go to my parents’. Thanks for letting me off today.”

“I’ll go with you,” Brady said. “Three sets of hands are better than two.”

“Um.” I couldn’t really argue with that; plus, I could shirk all the heavy lifting onto Brady if things were really dreary in the basement. I wasn’t quite sure what I was walking into. “Sure, yeah, okay.”

“Rally in twenty?” he asked, and I nodded before darting toward my side of the apartment. I shut the door to my bathroom and quickly turned the shower on before pressing my back against the door. I slid down to the floor and pulled my knees up to my chest.

I don’t know why waking up with Brady made everything feel so different. I was afraid something bigger was happening here. And I didn’t do this—not in Sweetwater Peak.

But Brady wasn’t from Sweetwater Peak. I realized now that he was the best and most unexpected part of coming back home.

I took a deep breath. I didn’t know how to deal with this yet. I didn’t even know if there was something to deal with. Maybe it was the candles and the darkness that did us in, or maybe it was how he listened to me like my voice was the only one he wanted to hear. Maybe it’s because I felt that way about him, too.

Oh god. I was doomed.

I pushed up off the floor and decided not to think about it. For now, I’d just shower and let the water wash everything else away.

The only problem was that Brady was under my skin—not atop it.

—

I found my mom in the kitchen when I got to my parents’ house. She looked up at me and tried to smile, but her eyes were red and swollen. “Hi, baby,” she forced out.

I walked over to her and put an arm around her shoulder. “How bad is it, Mom?”

“It’s bad,” she sighed, and wiped at her eyes. “It’s really bad. I thought I’d make you breakfast before you have to start lifting a bunch of waterlogged boxes.”

“It’s fine, Mom,” I said. “You don’t have to do that. I’m ready to help.” I cleared my throat a little. “And, um, Brady’s going to come help, too.”

“He is?” The surprise was evident in her face.

I nodded. “He called the hardware store on our way here to see if they had a water pump, and they do, so he dropped me off and went to pick it up.”

“That’s…nice of him.”

“I know Dad is going to miss the old one, but we can give it a funeral and everything,” I said.

My mom gave me a half laugh. “We gave that water pump a good second life. Sometimes new things are necessary.” She went quiet for a

moment before she clapped her hands together. “Well then, both of you will need breakfast.”

“But isn’t this kind of time sensitive?” I asked. “The longer stuff sits, the less chance we have of saving it.”

“They’re just things, Collins,” my mom sighed. It sounded like she was trying to convince herself of that, too.

“But you love things,” I responded. Both of my parents did. They’d spent their entire lives collecting stuff—built a business that was literally all about things.

“I do,” my mom said. “But what’s ruined is ruined, and unfortunately, I think there’s less to save down there than you think.”

The way my mom said it—resigned—hit me square in the chest.

“I’m so sorry, Mom.”

I watched a tear slide its way down my mom’s cheek. “It’s okay,” she said. “We’ll be okay.”

“Not because you’re going to sell the building to some developer, right?” I asked without thinking. My mouth moved way faster than my brain.

Joanie’s eyes widened. “Where did you hear about that?” she asked.

“Clarke,” I said.

“Of course,” my mom sighed. “I might as well be honest here. We declined their first offer.” I already knew that.

“Their *first* offer? Meaning there’s a second?” Joanie nodded slowly. “And you haven’t said no this time?”

“I haven’t said yes either, but the timing…homeowner’s insurance is a joke, and you know we’ve always had a tight belt. I don’t think it can get much tighter.”

“I’ll help,” I said, even though I didn’t have any money. “You can’t sell Toades. It’s your dream. It’s Clarke’s dream.”

“Dreams change, Collins.” Her voice sounded sad. “Dreams flood and become unrecognizable. I don’t know where my head is at right now. I need to talk to your father. Today just isn’t the day for this discussion. It’s too… it’s just a bad day. If we decide to sell, you and Clarke will be the first to know, and I promise, our goal is always to hold on to Toades.”

I knew that my stalemate with Clarke couldn’t last any longer than it took for me to clean out the basement today. She needed to know that the

developer situation had not gone away.

“Okay,” I said, letting the conversation fall to the wayside for now. I needed Clarke.

There was a knock on the front door. “Come in,” I yelled, and my mom turned her back to me to start on breakfast.

Brady appeared in the kitchen a few seconds later. Every time I saw him, I had to fight a dreamy sigh. It was annoying how good he looked in jeans and a hoodie. He was carrying what I assumed was the water pump under one arm.

“Hi, Brady,” my mom said brightly—someone get her an Oscar.

“Hi, Mrs. Cartwright,” he responded. “I’m really sorry.”

“I’ve told you a million times to call me Joanie, please,” my mom said. “Thank you for coming to help out, and for the water pump—it’s very kind of you.”

“Uh, yeah.” Brady stuttered a little. “Happy to help out.”

“I’m making us a little breakfast first. How do you feel about blueberry pancakes?”

“I feel great about that,” he said. “Thank you.”

I motioned for Brady to come sit on the stool next to me. “I feel like I should warn you that we’re having these the Collins way,” my mom said.

“What’s the Collins way?” Brady asked.

“Straight from the Jiffy muffin mix box,” my mom said. “She won’t eat pancakes any other way.” It was true. I’ve been to a lot of trendy brunch spots and no fancy blueberry pancake beat the blueberry pancake from the Jiffy blueberry muffin mix.

The kitchen started to smell like browned butter and sugar after a few minutes. My mom asked Brady about Coop’s as she cooked.

After she put a plate in front of Brady and me, she held up two jars of homemade syrup. “Collins likes cherry with hers, but we’ve got maple, too.”

“I’ll try them the Collins way,” Brady said, and smiled at me. I looked away. *Don’t look at me like that while my mom is around.*

The first bite was heavenly. I closed my eyes while I chewed—so sweet and fluffy and buttery. My mom, who’s never been quiet once in her life, talked Brady’s ear off as we ate. She was totally enthralled by the fabric ordering process.

“Did you lose power last night?” Joanie asked, and both Brady and I nodded. “We’ll have to get you a backup generator, Brady. I’ll send Dex over with one when he gets home.”

“He doesn’t have to do that,” Brady said. “Really, I talked to someone at the hardware store this morning.”

“Al is a price gouger.” My mom shook her head. “But he doesn’t dare do it to Dex. Let him take care of it.” Brady took it all in stride—gave good answers and asked thoughtful questions.

“So what did you two get up to last night?” my mom asked, looking at me, then Brady.

“Board games,” I blurted out quickly, too quickly, because Joanie’s eyes landed back on me and narrowed.

“We played Life,” Brady added on.

“Super boring night,” I said. What was wrong with me? Why was I giving her more information?

“Okay, ouch.” Brady smiled at me. “I ended up with twins.”

My mom huffed. “My thoughts are with you.” She gave me an amused smile.

I shoved a forkful of pancakes into my mouth. “All done,” I said after I swallowed. “Let’s get cracking on this basement.”

Joanie’s eyes lingered on me for a second too long before she said, “Keep your shoes on. We’ve got quite a splash zone down here.”

As soon as I stepped off the hardwood stairs and onto the basement’s orange shag carpeting, I felt the unmistakable sploosh of saturated, wet carpet. I didn’t know if the shag would survive this.

That made me sad.

“Dex is hoping the sun comes out at some point in the next couple of days, so we can try to dry stuff outside, but until then, we’re just going to have to plug in every fan we can find and hope for the best.”

“I brought the industrial fan from the shop,” Brady said behind me. He did? He must’ve put it in his truck before I was ready because we walked out to his truck together. Our shoulders bumped a few times—not like I was paying attention or anything. “Might help dry some things out in here.”

I took everything in. There were water stains three feet up the walls, and standing water was in the corners.

My mom's phone rang—she was the only person who hadn't had her cell on silent for the last decade. It was Clarke. I knew from the ring tone: "Free Fallin'," by Tom Petty. Mine was "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald."

"Hello?" my mom answered. After a second, her brows knit together. "Slow down, Clarke. Tell me what's going on." Both Brady and I stilled. "The basement and the attic?" my mom asked, and brought her hand up to cover her mouth—like she was in shock. "Okay, I'll be there soon…No, Collins and Brady are here. I'm on my way."

Both Brady and I waited for whatever it was Clarke had told her. Joanie's eyes went glassy. "Clarke just got into the shop," she said, her voice wavering. "There's damage there, too. I have to…"

"Go," I said. My voice wavered, too. Brady put his hand on the small of my back—steadying me. "We'll take care of stuff here." My mom nodded, and she turned to head up the stairs.

Once she was out of sight, Brady pulled me into his arms, and I buried my head in his chest. A breath shuddered out of me.

"This is bad," I said. "The basement is in way worse shape than I thought, and Toades…" I couldn't even think about Toades. Brady's hands went up and down my spine. "It's just…I'm worried this is going to change everything. That stupid storm blew in and pushed everything in the wrong direction."

"What do you mean?"

"There's this developer that's been sniffing around Toades, and my parents' other properties in town." Brady's hands stilled on my back. This impacted him, too. "They said no to the initial offer but look at this place." I gestured around me. "There's so much damage here—so much money—not even knowing what's going on at the shop. I'm scared that this will tip the scale."

Brady pulled me in again and took a deep breath. "We can't control any of that right now," he said. His lips were in my hair. "But we can control what goes on in this basement—how we help your parents here, and maybe tomorrow we can take on Toades, okay?"

I wound my arms around him tighter and nodded. I wasn't used to this—worrying about the future and what the big picture of it would look like.

For the past year, I'd just been focused on making it through a few days at a time.

I breathed deep. "Okay," I said on my exhale. "Where do you think we should start?"

"There's a decently dry spot in the middle of the room—there's no way this house is level—so maybe we pull everything out to the dry point, and if it can be salvaged, take it upstairs."

"All right." I nodded. "Let's rock and roll."

—

"God, my parents have so much shit," I lamented about two hours later. "I never thought it was a problem until this moment." I was surrounded by boxes upon boxes of vinyl records and cassette tapes, pulp magazines, and random trinkets.

"It's not too bad," Brady said. "It seems like most of it is well organized, and it should be pretty easy to determine what will not survive the Great Flood."

"At least the waterbed survived," I sighed.

"Wait," Brady said. "The bed in there is a *waterbed*?"

I nodded. "My parents apparently bought it from a traveling door-to-door salesman—they're suckers. They only slept on it one night before moving it down here. My mom said she woke up constantly thinking she was going to pee her pants."

Brady barked a laugh. "I didn't know those still existed anywhere."

"Welcome to the Cartwrights, where one traveling salesman's waterbed is my parents' guest bed."

"Can I…" Brady looked embarrassed. "Lay on it? I've never been on one before."

I stifled a giggle. "Knock yourself out."

"Care to join me?" Brady asked. I nodded, and we made our way back toward the bedroom. "God," he said. "I should've assumed this was a waterbed based on the white tiger bedding alone."

"It came with it, apparently." Brady started inching toward the bed. He looked nervous, for some reason. "You're not going to pop it," I said. "This thing has survived many a high school make-out session."

Brady shot me a look, and I shrugged. Then he grabbed my hand and pulled me down onto it with him. The bed rocked and sloshed and forced the two of us to the middle. “Oh my god,” Brady laughed. He sounded light and amused. “This thing is terrible!”

“It really is,” I laughed, and when I turned onto my side to look at him, our knees touched. That was all it took for the air to leave the room.

Brady pushed his forehead against mine, and I let my eyes flutter closed. I let instinct and desire take over as I put my hand on his waist. He brought one of his hands up to cup my cheek. I felt him breathe me in.

He moved his hand from my cheek to my neck, from my neck to my shoulder and down my arm to my waist. Everywhere his hand went felt like it was on fire. At this rate, I could probably use my body heat to dry out the basement.

“Is this okay?” he whispered, and I nodded.

The hand on my hip pulled me closer to him so our bodies were flush. A small gasp escaped me, and I knotted my fingers in his hair.

“More than okay,” I said quietly.

His hand started roaming again—down my thigh and back up, over my back and shoulder until his thumb ended up on my bottom lip. He pulled it down slightly, and I wanted to suck his thumb into my mouth.

“Fuck, Collins,” he breathed. I felt it on my face; his forehead was still pressed against mine. “I’m happy I kissed you last night.”

“I’m happy you did, too,” I said. My eyes were still closed.

I felt his lips on my forehead and was immediately grateful I wasn’t standing, with the way my knees buckled under the weight of his pure affection. “Think I could beat the previous make-outs? I want to be in a league of my own.”

You already are. “Only one way to find out,” I breathed.

“We have a basement to clean,” Brady breathed.

“Ugh, fine,” I said, blinking my eyes open. I was met with Brady’s baby blues. “But I’m worried we’ll never get out of this bed.”

“Is that right?” Brady’s eyes twinkled.

“Not like that, B,” I laughed. “Have you ever tried to get out of a waterbed?”

“Considering I’ve never been on a waterbed, no.” Brady pushed my hair back behind my ear, and his thumb stayed on my chin.

“Go for it,” I said with a sly grin.

Brady sat up—or at least, he tried.

“There’s gotta be a technique involved.”

“Maybe you need to work on your core strength,” I said.

“I do not.”

“Everybody does,” I said. “And the waterbed says otherwise.”

Brady leaned back and rocked himself forward. The momentum finally got him out of the waterbed, and he breathed a sigh of relief. “I fucking hate that thing,” he said.

“Okay, now you have to leave, so I can get out of it.”

“Absolutely not.” Brady folded his arms. “The waterbed struggle observation is going to go both ways.”

“I don’t struggle,” I said. “I have a top-secret strategy, and it’s going to stay that way.” I lifted my hand and made a motion for Brady to turn around.

He rolled his eyes and let out an annoyed huff but obliged.

I tucked my elbows into my sides, crossed my hands over my chest, tucked my chin, and rolled sideways. My body was able to make a full rotation before I was airborne for half a second and then hit the floor with something between a thud and a sploosh.

Brady’s back was still to me. “Collins, did you just roll out of the waterbed?”

I stared up at the ceiling. “Sure did.” And I unfortunately did not take the water situation into account. I felt it soaking into my back.

“I’m annoyed I didn’t think of that,” Brady said as he turned and saw me on the floor. He bit his lip and tried not to smile. “C’mon, weirdo.” He held his hand out to me, and I took it.

—

Brady and I continued to work through boxes. Almost everything was damaged—there were a few boxes of vinyls that I was hopeful we could salvage if we got them dry. There were lots of vintage pillows and blankets—soft surfaces that unfortunately wouldn’t survive the water.

Every time we had to put one in the throw-away pile, I swear Brady’s shoulders dropped half an inch. Poor upholsterer.

It was starting to weigh on me—box after box full of things from my life going into a pile that would end up at the dump. My shoulders slumped. “How about a break?” I asked Brady. “I need a boost—maybe a little photosynthesizing.”

“Sure,” he said.

We went upstairs and out my parents’ back door. The sun was shining through the clouds, and the ground was wet. There were dark storm clouds on the horizon, so I knew that this sun spot wouldn’t last very long.

I stopped in the sun’s path and closed my eyes, but I needed even more warmth. I kept walking toward where I knew the sun would hit with full force—the trampoline. Brady must’ve noticed what my destination was because he picked up the pace—fully started running toward the trampoline at the back of the yard.

He flung himself onto it and started bouncing. His smile took up his entire face as he jumped up and down. “You’re goofier than I thought you’d be when we first met,” I called to him.

“Sorry I wasn’t very carefree when you maced me,” he said back.

When I got closer to the trampoline, I held up my hands to my face like I was holding my camera and pushed down on the imaginary button with my index finger, taking a mental picture that I would store away. That familiar urge to remember a moment, which had been dormant for so long, seemed to spark every time I was with Brady lately.

“Bounce with me,” Brady said.

“Fine,” I said as I stepped onto the trampoline, “but if you double-bounce me, I swear to god I will end you.”

“No promises, trouble.” Brady grinned. I rolled my eyes.

It had been actual years since I’d jumped on this trampoline, and I’d forgotten how it felt to be suspended in the air for half a second before my feet hit the stretchy black surface. I kept my face toward the sun and let muscle memory take over.

“I love this,” I said. “I feel so content.”

“No, really,” Brady said. “I should come over here every time I’m stressed.”

“What do you get stressed about?” I asked, facing him instead of the sun now, but with the grin still wide and bright on his face, it was basically the same thing.

“Everything, all the time,” he said.

“Give me a little more.”

“I don’t know,” Brady started. “Like when you told me I was wasting my fresh start.”

“I never said that,” I protested.

“Maybe not exactly, but you implied it.” Brady grinned. “I haven’t felt as…wary about that recently.”

“Recently?” I asked.

“You’ve had a mostly positive effect on me,” he said.

“You’re the first person to ever say that.”

Our jumps brought us close enough together that I landed on Brady’s feet when I came back down, and both of us ended up flat on our backs laughing. I watched Brady’s chest move with his laugh and the crinkles around his eyes deepen as he smiled.

When he looked over at me, his eyes were soft. I felt safe in them.

Brady turned his body, reached over, and gently cupped my cheek. “It all feels right.” My breath caught in my throat, and I didn’t even register the thunderclap until the rain started soaking my skin.

“Oh my god,” I laughed. “Wyoming: where the weather can turn on a dime.”

But Brady continued to stroke my cheek, and I let my hand come to his waist. “Has anyone ever kissed you here, Collins?” he asked. I watched the rain soak his dark hair and drip down his face.

When I shook my head, Brady’s thumb brushed over my lip, and he leaned closer. I met him halfway.

He knotted his fingers in my hair gently, and I pushed my body into his. This was different from last night. That was slow, exploratory. This…this was urgent. I moved my hands up and down his body—over his chest, shoulders, and arms. I couldn’t be close enough to him. I loved the way he pulled my waist into his hips. When his tongue pressed against my mouth, I opened for him.

I reveled in the heat building between us. It kept me warm from the rain. I noticed the way he handled me with care and how he held me like I was precious to him.

Brady’s hand moved from my hair, down my back, to the back of my thigh, and I used that as a chance to hitch my leg over him. A low moan

came from his throat. I moved my hand to the waistband of his jeans and slipped it under his shirt.

Had I always liked kissing this much? I didn't know. I didn't think so, but I liked this. A lot. I liked the way his body felt against mine, and the feeling of his tongue inside my mouth.

"God," Brady groaned against my mouth. "You're perfect." I didn't quite agree with that, but I knew this moment was. He gently used his body to push me back so he was on top of me, shielding me from the rain. I brought the hand under his shirt to his back and dug into his skin with my nails. Brady's hips rolled into mine, and I gasped.

More. I needed more.

He kept himself hovering over me with one hand and dragged the other up my abdomen and between my breasts until his hand rested on the side of my neck.

Brady pulled back and rested his forehead against mine. His chest was heaving. "I forgot to breathe," he said. "You're so good that I forgot to breathe."

My lips stretched into a smile. "Careful," I said. "I might let that go to my head."

Brady kissed me again and then pulled back. "I think you should—let it go to your head. I think you should be aware of how amazing you are, Collins."

I didn't want to think about what that meant or where this could go. I just wanted to be here—in this landscape of old memories as the rain watered the seeds of new ones.

Instead of responding—instead of telling him what he was starting to mean to me, I just gripped him by his hoodie and pulled his mouth back down to mine.

22
BRADY



We called it a day at the Cartwrights' around six. Joanie wasn't back yet, but she texted Collins and told her that she'd be home soon and we could head out. I set up the new water pump—just in case another storm decided to rage.

"Do you think you could drop me at Clarke's?" Collins asked when we got into my truck. "I need to talk to her. It's time," she sighed. "It's actually way past time, but stubbornness is a Cartwright trait. I've actually never had to be the one to give in, though." I gave her a look out of the corner of my eye. "I know," she sighed. "That's not something to be proud of."

"Does this thing between you and Clarke have to do with the developer?"

"Kind of," Collins said. "It's mixed up in it, for sure, but I think it has more to do with me."

"What about you?"

"Being shitty," Collins sighed. "Floating back to town and depending on Clarke to direct me instead of helping her out the way she asked me to."

"Don't be too hard on yourself," I said. "Do you know who the developer is?" I asked.

Collins shook her head. "No, but I have a picture of the letter with their name on it on my phone. Why?"

"I…actually used to work for one," I said. "Maybe I know something about them that could help you, somehow."

“Really? I’ll find the picture and text it to you, then. Thank you.”

I turned down the street to Clarke’s house. When I rolled the truck to a stop, Collins took a deep breath.

“You got this,” I said. “Do you want to text me when you’re ready to come home? I can come get you.”

“I’ll walk,” she said. She reached across the bench seat and squeezed my hand. “I’ll see you soon.”

Collins hopped out of the truck and walked toward Clarke’s door. I didn’t pull away, not yet, not until she got inside. My phone buzzed in my pocket, and when I pulled it out, I saw that Collins had sent the picture of the letter. She must have sent it while she was walking up to the door, probably to distract herself from the conversation she was about to have.

Clarke’s door opened, and Collins turned around and gave me a double thumbs-up. I pulled the truck back onto the road and drove back to the shop.

Once I was parked, I opened the message from Collins and zoomed in on the letter, and I couldn’t believe what I saw. I blinked a few times, as if trying to erase the name in front of me.

Sullivan Enterprises, owned by Edwin “Ed” Sullivan—the owner and CEO of the company I used to work for…

…and father of Jackie Sullivan.

Shit.

23
COLLINS



Clarke looked surprised when she swung open her front door and saw me standing there. Normally when we fought, my approach was to annoy her enough that she had to yell at me; that always started a conversation. But it didn't seem like the right approach here.

"Oh," Clarke said. "Hi."

"Were you expecting someone else?"

"No," she responded quickly. "I wasn't expecting anyone." I narrowed my eyes at her. She was being weird and not just because we were fighting, but I let it slide.

"Can I come in?"

"What if I say no?" Clarke asked.

"I'll go around the back and sneak in your window and lay in your bed in my outside clothes."

Clarke let out an annoyed sigh and moved out of the way so I could get inside. "So today sucked," I said once I got in. I slipped off my shoes and made my way to Clarke's couch.

"Yeah, it did."

I patted the spot on the couch next to me. "Sit with me. We need to talk."

Clarke put her hand over her heart and put a look of faux shock on her face. "Are you breaking up with me?"

If she was joking, maybe this wouldn't be so bad. "Unfortunately, we're bound for life."

"How's the house?" Clarke said as she collapsed on the couch.

"Standing, but worse than I thought it would be," I sighed. "How's the shop?"

Clarke laid her head back and squeezed her eyes shut. "It's bad, Collins."

"I was afraid of that," I said. "Before we get into all of that I…want to, um, apologize. I've been thinking about what you said—about how I've been treating you since I got home…and even before. Really, Lars. I'm sorry." Clarke looked up at me, and I sat on the other side of her couch. Pearl lifted her big head—just now noticing that I was here. "I'm sorry I made you feel like you weren't a priority to me or that you couldn't depend on me when I got back here. And I'm sorry you've had to carry the weight of Toades by yourself."

Clarke bit the inside of her cheek, but she didn't say anything. "Good apology," she said.

"For me, yes," I said. I didn't tell her I'd been practicing it in my head for days. "And I didn't even make you yell."

"You've only been here for five minutes," Clarke said.

"Now we need to talk about Mom and Dad. I know you said that Mom told you that she and Dad turned the developer down, but this morning she didn't seem so sure."

"What do you mean?"

"They got a second offer."

Clarke straightened her spine. "She told you that? You asked her about it, like directly?"

I nodded. "Yes—to both."

"I'm impressed by the second part," Clarke said. "And extremely concerned about the first part. But my nervous system is shot after today, Ollie," Clarke sighed. "I don't think I can handle one more thing tonight." I decided that I wasn't going to tell her about my problem…not yet. I didn't want it to sound like an excuse for the way I'd been treating her because it wasn't—not a good one anyway.

I went to hug Clarke, but my arm knocked a bunch of envelopes over. "Jesus Christ," I said as I bent down to gather them up. "Who is sending

you so much mail?”

“It’s all from Toades,” Clarke said. “I haven’t had a chance to go through it yet. Leave it. Do you want me to make us dinner?”

I shook my head. “I’m going to go home,” I said. “Make out with Brady a little more.”

Clarke’s jaw dropped open. “Collins Cartwright. Spill.”

I stood up and started walking toward the front door. “Another time,” I said. “But rest, okay? Take care of yourself. We’re going to figure this thing out with Mom and Dad. They’re not going to accept that offer, I promise.” I opened Clarke’s front door. “I’ll call you in the morning. We’ll hatch a plan.”

“Text me when you get home.”

“I will. No more ghosting…from me anyway.”

24
BRADY



I was pacing back and forth when Collins came into the kitchen a little over an hour later.

"Fully clothed in the kitchen this time?" Collins said with a grin. "Bummer." I tried to smile back, but I'm sure it came off as more of a grimace because Collins asked, "Everything okay?"

I swallowed. "I have to tell you something."

"We got nailed for trespassing by Sweetwater Peak's singular law enforcement officer? If it makes you feel better, Gerry is a dick, and I'm not convinced he has any sort of actual jurisdiction." I shook my head. "Okay, do you want me to keep guessing?" I shook my head again. "Words, Brady. You're freaking me out."

"Maybe we should sit?" I said, gesturing toward the couch.

"Okay…" Her voice was apprehensive, but she started padding toward the couch. "You coming?" she asked, looking back at me.

"Yeah, sorry," I said before going to sit next to her.

"What's wrong, B?" Collins put her hand on my bouncing knee. "You're wound like a drum."

"The company that made the offer on your parents' properties was Sullivan Enterprises. Their headquarters are in Redmond, Washington."

"That's where you're from," Collins said. I could see her perk up. "Have you heard of them?"

“Yeah, I have,” I sighed. “I actually used to work for them.” Collins’s eyes widened. “So did Jackie—still does as far as I know, and they’re owned by Ed Sullivan.” I swallowed again. “Jackie’s dad.”

Collins blinked slowly a few times. Then she turned her head—like she was looking around for something.

“What are you doing?”

“Just searching for a camera to look into,” she said. “There’s no way this is real. Oh my god,” she muttered—more to herself than me. “What are the odds?”

“I know. I’m sorr—” I didn’t get a chance to finish because Collins burst into laughter.

“Oh my god,” she said again through her laugh. “You’re telling me that your ex-fiancée’s dad is the one who’s trying to swoop in on my family’s livelihood, and that livelihood just happens to be in the place that you ran away to, and you and I are…” Collins trailed off before bowling over. She was laughing so hard that it sounded like she was gasping for air.

“Are you…are you okay?”

Collins straightened up and let out an amused sigh as she wiped a tear from the corner of one of her eyes. “That’s fucking hilarious,” she said, and looked up at the ceiling. “And when I thought maybe my life wasn’t a cosmic joke.”

I shook my head. “This isn’t the reaction I was expecting,” I said honestly.

Collins tilted her head at me. “What were you expecting?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “I thought you might be mad or something.”

“At you?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Collins’s hand found my knee again. “Unless you’re also telling me that you have some sort of in with the spirit realm, and you’re the one who blocked the ghosts from talking to me in order to send me to my own personal rock bottom, so I would become the down-on-her-luck photographer who would be forced to come home, only to make me like *like* you and then fulfill your incredibly detailed plot of owning an antique shop, this building, and one more dilapidated one down the road, I’m not mad at you.” Her thumb rubbed back and forth. “Is that what you’re telling me?”

“No,” I said immediately. “Of course not.”

“Okay, then,” Collins said, looking at me earnestly. “Then I’m not mad at you.” She gave my knee one more squeeze before leaning back on the couch and sighing. “I’m mad at the situation in general, though, and I have a lot of questions.”

“Shoot.” I nodded.

“Not tonight,” Collins said softly. “Today feels like it’s lasted eight million years, and I don’t want to spend what’s left of it thinking about my home crumbling around me.”

“We won’t let that happen,” I said, pulling her to my chest. It felt so normal to have my arms wrapped around her—to feel her forehead pressed against my sternum.

“My dad always says, ‘Today, you rest. Tomorrow, you fight.’ He said it whenever Clarke and I were struggling with something.”

“I like that,” I said. “So, tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” Collins agreed, and wound her arms around my waist. She was right. Today had felt long. I couldn’t believe Collins and I kissed for the first time just over twenty-four hours ago.

“So,” I said into her hair. “You *like* like me?” I felt her shake a little against my chest—laughing, I hope.

“That’s what you took away from my little monologue?”

“It stuck out,” I said. “Maybe because I haven’t heard anyone say that since I was fourteen.”

“I don’t know why we leave it behind,” Collins said. “It’s a good descriptor.”

“Is it true?” I asked. Collins was quiet for a few beats.

“Of course it’s true,” she whispered. Then she grabbed the collar of my shirt and pulled my mouth down to hers; I guess she didn’t care whether we had an audience this time. I dragged my hands down her body until I could slide one of my hands into the back pocket of her jeans.

“Hot,” she breathed against my mouth, and I grinned.

“Yeah, you are.” I backed Collins into the wall right next to the hallway that led to my side of the apartment—my room. Collins snagged my bottom lip between her teeth right as one of her hands found its way under my shirt. I moaned into her mouth, and her kiss just got more fervent. “More,” she

said. Her hands moved from my abdomen to my hips, which was all the leverage she needed to pull my middle into her.

I moved from kissing her mouth to her jawline, to under her ear, and down her neck. “Do you want to go to my room?” I asked right before I bit down on the space where her neck and shoulder met.

“Yeah,” she breathed. “I really do.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I mean…like you said, it’s been a day.”

“I started the day with you, and I want to end it that way—maybe try to not think about everything that happened in between. At least for a little while.”

That was enough for me. I hoisted her up into my arms, and her legs wrapped around me. It was her turn to give my neck some attention, and it was a miracle my legs didn’t give out as I walked backward and fumbled to open my door.

“Easy there, tiger,” Collins said as she pulled back. Her lips were swollen, and her eyes were hooded. I felt a deep satisfaction that she looked that way because of me.

Collins looked around. “It’s so clean in here,” she said.

“Compared to your side?” I asked. “I’m sure.”

“Hey,” she said, and gave me a peck on the mouth. “Don’t be mean to me when I’m getting ready to tear your clothes off.”

A low growl came out of my throat, and I kissed her hard. My lizard brain had finally taken over. I couldn’t think about anything but Collins and the fact that it felt like there were too many layers between us. I wanted her skin on mine. I wanted to lick my way up and down her entire body. I wanted to watch her writhe and finally see what she looked like while she was taking me.

I did my best to get us to my bedroom without taking my mouth off hers, and for the most part, I was successful. We bumped into a few walls along the way, but she didn’t seem to mind.

Once we were in my room, I tossed her onto my bed. She didn’t have time to finish the gasp that came out of her when she hit the mattress because I was on her in an instant, swallowing it.

Her hands immediately went for the hem of my shirt, and I rose for just a second to pull it over my head. Collins pushed up on her knees and dragged her hands slowly up my abdomen and chest. “Remember what I

said about core strength?" she said. Her eyes were hungry as she took me in. "I was so wrong. Absolutely dead wrong. Your core is delightful, and I want to bite it."

I pulled her to me using the belt loops on her jeans and loved the way it felt when her arms wrapped around my bare upper half. One of her hands tugged at my hair, and it hurt just right. I slid my hands under her shirt and gripped her waist. My hands were big enough that my pinkies slid just under the waistband of her jeans.

"Jacket off," I ground out. Collins shrugged off her leather jacket, leaving her in a white tank top that was more than a little bit see-through. I pulled it up over her head, leaving her in a black bra. "Fuck," I breathed as I took her in. I knew about the tattoos on her arms, but now I could see one on her ribs, one on her sternum, and one disappearing into her jeans on her hip. I made a plan to lick them all. "You're beautiful," I said.

We fell back on the bed and back into each other. When she went for my jeans, she pulled back and waited for me to nod. I did, and then she unbuttoned them and grasped my cock in record time. My hips thrust into her hand. "God," I moaned. "Warn a guy next time," I said.

Collins giggled, and I wanted to bottle the sound. Our mouths made their way back to each other, and I let my hands roam over her body. God, I was so fucking obsessed with everything about her. I dug my fingers into her hips, and she gasped against my mouth. I don't know how long we stayed like that. I didn't care. All I cared about was her. "Do you…do you want to fuck around?" Collins asked.

For some stupid fucking reason, I hesitated.

"Y-yes," I said against her mouth, but Collins pulled back. The look on her face told me she'd caught the hesitation.

"What's up?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said, and I tried to kiss her again, but she turned her head, and I sighed.

Her chest was heaving, and I was having a hard time not staring at her. "Talk to me."

I buried my head in her shoulder and groaned. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm…I got nervous." I knew I was blushing—embarrassed. I wanted to be smooth, suave. I wanted to rock this woman's fucking world the way she deserved.

“Keep talking,” Collins said. Her fingers were lightly tickling my back.

I pushed up, an elbow on either side of her head. God, here we go. “I’ve…um, I’ve only ever been with two other people.”

Collins’s expression softened, and she brought a hand up to my cheek. “Did I go too fast?” she asked. “I’m sorry.”

I leaned into her touch. “No, it’s not you,” I said. “I want you. I want you so fucking bad, but I’m just…I don’t know if I’m good at this with someone else, and really *really* want it to be good for you. I want to do it right.” I wanted her back to arch under my touch. I wanted to feel her come all over me. I wanted to be the reason she felt almost unbearably good.

“It will be, Brady. You’re good for me,” she said. “But we don’t have to do this tonight—not if you’re feeling pressure.”

“I want you, Collins.”

“I want you, too,” she said. “But I want you to feel comfortable. I want you to feel good—not just because we’re having sex, but because it feels right for us to be together that way.”

Collins pushed at me gently and rolled us so she was straddling my hips. My cock ached for her—she was so close. I wrapped my arms around her waist as tightly as I could. I didn’t want her to get away from me. “We can keep doing this,” she said, rolling her hips slightly, and I hissed a breath. “I’m super happy to just make out with you—put my mouth all over you. Making out is severely underrated, in my opinion. My presidential platform would be more make-outs everywhere—in books, movies, real life—literally everywhere.” I rubbed my hands up and down her thighs. “We could also call it a night and go watch a movie on the couch,” she said. “I’m just happy to be with you, B.”

There was so much feeling in her voice. I was shocked I didn’t melt underneath her. “Kiss me some more,” I said.

Collins’s perfect mouth stretched into a feline smile as she leaned down to me. “I’m a big fan of your mouth,” she said before sealing ours together. She rolled her hips again—just lightly enough to drive me absolutely fucking insane. I moved my hands to her ass and let my fingers slip into the soft flesh—talk about wanting to bite something, my god.

I didn’t notice when she reached one of her hands around her back to unclasp her bra until she rose up again to pull it off. The silver barbells in each of her nipples glinted in the dark. “Holy fuck,” I breathed. I didn’t

think Collins would ever stop surprising me, and the thought made me grin into our kiss. The feeling of her bare body against mine, along with the cold metal, nearly sent me over the edge.

“I’m so turned on, Brady, fuck,” Collins moaned. “I—I have an idea,” she said as she pressed her forehead against mine. She wasn’t close enough. I wanted her closer. “Do you want to watch me?”

“Wh-what?” I asked.

“I’ll show you what I do to get myself off,” she breathed. “Do you want to watch me?” she asked again.

“Yes,” I said. I didn’t even think about it. Did I want to watch her fuck herself? Yeah, absolutely, no doubt about it.

She rolled off me, starting to unbutton her pants, but I stopped her.

“I can do this part,” I said. “Let me.” Collins let her hands fall to the mattress while I undid the button on her jeans and slid the zipper down. I kissed her stomach as I inched her jeans slowly down her legs—torturously slow for the both of us. Her panties were black and lacy. “Is this the type of underwear you’re wearing around all the time?” I asked.

“They make me feel hot,” she breathed.

“You *are* hot, Collins,” I said with a kiss to her hip bone. “Should I take these off, too?”

“Yeah,” Collins moaned. When I slid off her underwear, I sat back on my knees where I had the perfect view of her spread out before me. I couldn’t believe I now had this woman fully naked in my bed, and I wasn’t going to fuck her myself.

But I liked that she wanted me to watch. I liked that she cared that I was taking it slow, and that she didn’t make me feel like less of a man because of it.

“Show me,” I said. My voice was nearly unrecognizable as I watched her spread her legs and dip one of her hands between her pretty thighs. I tracked her hand with my gaze, and moaned when I saw her bare, wet pussy. “Talk to me while you do it,” I begged. “Tell me everything you like.”

“I like the way you’re looking at me,” she said. She kept one hand on her breasts. “Like you’re ready to pounce.” She had no clue how true that was. She started playing with herself—moving two of her fingers over her clit.

I took my cock out of my boxers and grasped it with the same hand I was holding her panties in, and I watched her hips roll with her movements. “I like stimulation like this,” she said. “And I like being filled.”

One of her fingers disappeared inside her, and my dick jerked. “I would want you deeper, though,” she said. “Where only you could reach.” I stroked my hand up and down. “I’d want your mouth on my tits, too,” she said as she squeezed her breasts.

“Fucking hell,” I said.

“I’d want you to go slow at first—until both of us couldn’t take anymore, until you had no choice but to pound into me over and over again.” Her voice was getting breathier, less controlled. I watched her chest heave and her fingers speed up on her cunt.

“God,” she moaned. “I’m so wet for you, and you haven’t even touched me here. This is all for you.”

I couldn’t take it anymore. I needed to touch her. “Let me help, baby. Please, can I help?” I was begging her. I sounded possessed, and maybe I was—by her.

Collins nodded. “Please,” she said.

I moved up closer to her, and I kept stroking my cock as I moved my other hand near her entrance. “How many fingers, baby?” I asked.

“Two,” she breathed. “Please.”

I slid my middle and pointer fingers into her and then out—she was so fucking wet and warm, and I moaned when I saw my fingers covered in her. “Yes,” she moaned. “Just like that.”

I matched the pace of the circles she was making on her clit. Her breaths got shorter, and I felt her starting to tighten around my fingers, but I didn’t speed up. She didn’t tell me to, so I kept my pace.

“God, Brady,” she moaned. “I’m going to come.”

“Yes, baby,” I said, and couldn’t fucking believe that I had a front-row seat to this. “I can feel you. I can feel your perfect cunt getting tighter around me. Fuck.”

“Speed up a little,” she moaned. “Deeper.” I did what she said and felt like I’d won the lottery when her back started to bow off the mattress. Her pussy had my fingers in a vise, and after a few seconds, her body went rigid and her mouth fell open. Her fingers stopped on her clit, but I didn’t. I kept

pumping mine in and out of her—desperate to take her all the way through this.

Her moans were hot as hell, and I realized I was almost there, too. I kept stroking my cock with her panties, loving the way the friction felt against the sensitive skin. “Come on me,” Collins moaned.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yes. I want it.” My movements sped up, and I got close to her. “I love watching you. Oh my god.”

“I’m close, baby.”

“I need it, Brady, please,” she whined. The way her voice sounded—so fucking desperate and needy—sent me over the edge. My orgasm rushed down my spine and barreled through me. I kept stroking myself while I painted her stomach.

“Fuck,” I moaned. “Holy fuck.”

For a second, the only sound in the room was our heavy breathing. I gently rubbed the sides of her thighs. I needed to touch her while I watched her come down. I wanted to memorize the way her chest was heaving and the way her breath sounded. After a few minutes, Collins gave me a wicked smile. “That was fun,” she said.

“That was…fuck, yeah. That was fun.” I nodded and looked at her stomach again. It was covered in me. “I’ll clean you up,” I said. But instead of going to get a towel, I put my hand on her stomach so I could rub my cum into her skin.

“That shouldn’t be hot,” she breathed. “Why is that hot?”

“Who fucking knows,” I said, and kissed her. Hard, then soft. “I could watch you do that for the rest of forever.”

“Ditto,” she said.

“One sec.” I pulled back and actually went to get a towel this time. When I came back to my bedroom, Collins was right where I left her—right where I wanted her to stay.

I cleaned her off gently before lying down next to her and pulling her into my arms. I wanted to be as close to her as possible. I wanted to feel every part of my skin against her. “Thank you,” I whispered, and kissed her head. Everything felt more…intimate after what we just did—more vulnerable. I felt like I’d cut my chest open and laid my heart out at

Collins's feet. Lucky for me, she handled it with care. "For that. For being patient with me."

Her hand was rubbing at my chest. "You're worth everything, Brady."

25
COLLINS



I slept like a rock for a few blissful hours under the weight of Brady's arm on my waist. I woke up to the glow of the moon shining directly through his window. As soon as I felt the light on my face, my head started whirring with the events of yesterday. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to time my breathing with Brady's—slow and steady.

It didn't work, and I didn't want to toss and turn so much that I ended up waking him. I slid out from under his arm and moved as quietly as I could out of his room and to the other side of the apartment. The ghost with the chewing gum winked at me when I walked through the living room.

"Grow up," I muttered, blushing.

When I got to my room, I paused for a second—not quite sure what to do next. I didn't want to try and go back to sleep or stay here. I felt restless. But not in a bad way. Maybe I was just ready to seize the day—because of Brady.

And then I knew where I wanted to go. I slid into a pair of jeans and one of Boone's old Carhartt jackets before making my way out of the apartment, down the stairs, and through the back door.

My plan was to be back before Brady woke up, but right now, I needed to go to Toades.

There was no sound as I walked through the almost-darkness. It was that blink-and-you'd-miss-it time of night when the sky was indigo instead

of black. All I could hear was the sound of my steps and my breath as I picked up the pace—trying to stay warm.

Thoughts about everything flooded my head, but most of them somehow came back to Brady. Last night was fun, but more than that, it was…intimate. I felt safe with Brady—stable. I'd spent my whole life waiting to get out of this place, and once I did that, I never stayed in a place long enough to establish any roots. Which was okay because, no matter what, I always muscled my way forward.

But before I came back home, I wasn't moving in any direction—forward or backward. But I also wasn't stuck. It felt more like I was existing behind a dirty window. I could see my life, but I couldn't feel it—couldn't get close enough to it to change it.

But I just stayed there—never looking back to see how far I'd strayed from home and from myself. When I got here, it felt like I'd never find my way back.

Now I didn't think that was still the case, and I wondered how much of it had to do with Brady. Maybe not directly, but indirectly, Brady's fingerprints were all over my time at home.

And I loved it.

I pulled my jacket tighter around me as I walked. Snow started to fall in slow motion. It wasn't quite cold enough for it to stick yet, but I was fairly confident we'd have a few inches by the end of the day.

Even though I constantly lamented over my fucked-up sleep schedule, I didn't know if I ever wanted to lose this—being awake when everyone else was entering their deepest sleep. In Sweetwater Peak, it was when the town looked the most like itself. It was when the cracks in the sidewalk were the most visible, when the shadows got bigger and darker, and when the spirits had the town to themselves.

When I got to Toades, I stood in front of the old house and looked up at it. Like everything else, it looked more menacing in the dark—the windows suddenly became eyes that I felt could see everything, and the door was a mouth that wanted nothing more than to swallow you whole.

I made my way up the steps and grabbed the spare key out of a birdhouse on the far side of the porch—super secure. I shut the door and locked it behind me, intending to make my way up to the second floor

immediately. But when I turned from the door, my heart fell so hard I almost heard it hit the floor.

All of the first-floor inventory was in piles, and the paintings were off the walls. The hardwood floors felt almost squishy beneath my feet. I walked toward the back of the shop, where I saw that the back door was missing. It was replaced with a piece of plywood. Neither Clarke nor my mom had told me that the door didn't make it through the storm. I had expected issues with the roof, which had gotten shoddier and shoddier as the years went on, but I thought this floor would be fine.

I felt the tears push their way to my eyes as I took in Toades—this beautiful thing my parents had built. Our family was inextricable from this place. Clarke's and my heights were measured in the hall closet. There were pictures of us in the vintage frames. I spent just as much of my life here growing up as I did in my own house.

We couldn't lose this.

I closed my eyes for a second and took a deep breath, trying to remember Brady's assurances.

We aren't going to lose this.

I almost turned around and left, but I came here for a reason and that reason was upstairs. So I put on my blinders and moved up the stairs.

The first bedroom on the right was where my parents kept the music console that Clarke and I loved—the one that Earnest was anchored to. When I walked into the room, I didn't know what I was going to feel, but I hoped it wasn't nothing—after everything I had felt in the past twenty-four hours, I hoped I wasn't still empty.

I walked over to the console and thumbed through a few of the records next to it. I picked one that I knew Earnest liked—the Dusty Springfield single "The Windmills of Your Mind." I slid it out of its case, carefully lowered it onto the turntable, and switched it on before making my way to the love seat underneath the window. I let my head fall back, and I closed my eyes.

I wasn't exactly sure why I felt like I needed to come here. All I knew is that when I woke up with Brady this morning, I remembered what it was like to bask in the glow of the moon instead of turning my back to it and living in the shadow it cast.

My path was lit. I just had to follow it.

I was still scared of the disappointment, but I had to know. I had to be brave enough to face the outcome—whatever it was. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel…hopeful, and that was dangerous. Hope is one of those things that can be crushed in an instant. It terrified me. I just…I felt good.

I knew a lot of it had to do with Brady—all of it, maybe. He'd succeeded at burrowing himself into the cavern in my chest, and it wasn't empty anymore.

A few minutes later, it felt like there was the softest of breezes in the room, and when I opened my eyes, I knew I'd see Earnest next to me on the couch.

He was in his final form—a young man with a button-down shirt, open sweater, and floppy hair. He didn't smile when I opened my eyes—just looked at me.

"Hi," I said quietly.

"Hello." His voice wasn't completely clear. There was still that radio static buzz behind his words.

"I've missed you," I breathed—relieved that I could hear him at all. "I haven't seen you since I've been home."

"I've seen you," Earnest said.

"I've only been here once," I said. I didn't tell him I'd been avoiding this place, but I think he knew.

"It didn't feel like you were ever going to come see me." Earnest looked down at his white, wispy hands, and I felt like a jerk.

Avoiding Toades—avoiding him—was the same as avoiding Clarke and my parents. All of them felt like a reminder of what I felt like I'd lost, but I guess they were also reminders of everything I had…and I had a lot here—even more now.

"I've been trying to get your attention, so I had to broaden my reach."

My mind went back to the familiar presence I felt in the apartment. "You came to Coop's?" I asked.

"I tried, but I faded too much by the time I got there—you couldn't see me." Brady's was close enough that I thought Earnest would be fine going there. Maybe he'd been here for too long. "It was hard to see you. It was like looking at you through a windshield in the rain. And now…"

"Now what?"

“You still feel different.” The static got stronger. “Far away. I have to strain to hear you. It’s like something’s…jammed.”

Was that why they weren’t talking back? Because they were having trouble hearing me too?

“At the shop, in the apartment…I was shouting at you, and you didn’t even flinch. I even moved all of your camera equipment. Well, as much as I could. I’m not as strong over there.”

“You’re the one who kept pushing the suitcase out from under my bed?”

Earnest nodded. “Why is it under there anyway? You haven’t even touched it.”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek instead of answering. Even though the desire to start capturing moments had been pushing its way back up to the surface, I still hadn’t pulled the trigger on actually getting a camera out yet.

“Are you okay?”

“I wasn’t. Not when I got here,” I said, honestly. “But I’m getting there, I think.”

“Because of the upholsterer?” Earnest grinned. I didn’t know how badly I needed to see that—to feel at least kind of forgiven. I wished I could hear him clearly. I liked that Earnest knew about Brady. It felt like Brady was the reason I was here—why I was brave enough to even try to talk to Earnest.

“God, you’re so nosy,” I said, feigning annoyance. “And no. But it’s been nice to have him next to me on the way.”

“You’re blushing,” Earnest said through the static, then turned his face toward the bedroom window. “I miss that feeling.”

I’d never given too much thought to Earnest’s life. His death was a tragedy; he had been young and handsome—of course he’d left someone behind.

“Did you ever try to find…the person who made you blush?” I asked. “Afterward?”

Earnest nodded. “But I couldn’t. That’s the only thing I remember before ending up here—with the console and the two of you.” That was decades after he died. I stayed quiet. I found a lot of comfort in knowing that there was some sort of space outside of human understanding where people like Earnest could continue to exist, but I was constantly reminded that the rules of it weren’t set in stone. “This has been my home ever since.”

“Have you seen the damage?”

Earnest nodded. “There are a couple others here right now. All of us tried to move something in front of the door after it broke, but that goes way past our limits of turning lights on and off and pushing cameras out from under the bed.”

“I’m sorry that happened—to your home.”

“It’s yours, too, Collins,” Earnest said. I thought his voice was clearer, but it was more likely that my mind was playing tricks on me.

He was right. This was my home, and I wasn’t going to let anything happen to it.

26
BRADY



“Do you ever sleep?” I asked Collins when she came into the kitchen. I was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee. When I woke up this morning, she was nowhere to be found, and it freaked me out. Last time she didn’t tell anyone where she was going, she ended up on the side of the road ready to sleep in her car.

“Sorry. I thought I’d be back before you got up,” she said.

“I didn’t love that,” I said honestly. “That you were gone when I woke up after we…” I trailed off and shook my head. I felt like an idiot.

“Oh, Brady,” Collins said softly. She walked toward me and gently plopped herself in my lap. I instinctively put one of my hands on her thigh as she draped her arms around my shoulders. “I’m sorry. There was just… something I felt like I had to do. Next time, I’ll leave a note—even if I’m going somewhere for five minutes in the middle of the night.”

“Next time?” I asked—and I couldn’t ignore the hope that made its way into my voice.

“Worried that was a one-night stand?” Collins said. “It wasn’t for me.”

“I didn’t think so,” I said. “But it feels good to be sure.”

“I really am sorry,” Collins said. “I didn’t mean to make you worry or make you feel…like I didn’t want to be here with you, or anything. Because I did. I do.”

“Thank you for saying that.” Collins leaned down and kissed me quick. “So where did you go so early?”

Collins sighed. “Toades. It’s bad in there.”

“How bad?”

“Bad enough that I understand why my parents might not want to deal with it if given the opportunity,” Collins said. “But the entire thing could burn to the ground and Clarke wouldn’t think twice about putting the ashes together piece by piece until it was whole again. I don’t want her to lose it.”

I nodded. “So you two are okay after yesterday?”

“We’re always okay,” Collins said. “Sometimes we’re just not good. It’s a sister thing.” She shrugged. “So, since it’s tomorrow now, I guess I should ask all those questions I have for you…” She trailed off.

“Go ahead,” I said.

“Tell me about Sullivan Enterprises. What would they even want with property in a town like this one?”

I took a deep breath. “Their whole schtick is ‘small-town revitalization,’ ” I said. “They generally start by buying some midrange holdings—not any sort of prime real estate, but something adjacent to the prime real estate.”

“What do you think the prime real estate is in Sweetwater Peak?”

“I would guess Wilkes Farm—that’s where the money is here,” I said. “They use this strategy to eventually push the prime real estate holders to sell because everyone else around them already has. They’re an island.”

“Good strategy,” Collins said. She was biting down on her lip.

“The revitalization label is intentional. It’s real estate propaganda.”

“So they don’t actually help anything?”

I shook my head. “Nearly every town they’ve developed is struggling. Once the construction is done, all the jobs that they promise to bring to these towns are also gone, and everyone is back to square one. Most of the new buildings stay empty because no one can afford them. He raises rent on businesses after the first six months through some weird loophole in his contracts, which they can’t afford, so they lose their space and then he sues them for money owed.”

“Fuck,” Collins said. “So we need to keep him far away from Toades.”

“Far away from Sweetwater Peak,” I said. “If your parents have really already turned him down, he’s moved on to someone else. He’s a clever predator.”

“And you worked for him?”

I swallowed hard. “Yeah.”

“And he would’ve been your father-in-law?” I nodded, and Collins’s brows knitted together—thinking. “I’m just…having a hard time imagining you working for a person like that, at a place like that.”

Honestly, that was a relief. “I was…different. To me, the results of everything felt so far away—the towns, the people—everything. It was easy for me to push it out of my way—out of sight, out of mind.” It wasn’t until I saw that feature in *Blue Sky Geographic* that I could even visualize what a town like that could look like, and that there were people who lived there who were negatively affected by the numbers on my computer screen.

“I get that,” Collins said quietly. “So what exactly did you do for them?”

“Algorithms and formulas and projections—stuff like that. The main thing I worked on was an algorithm that used census data to identify potential targets.”

“Is that how they found Sweetwater Peak?”

“I don’t know, truly,” I said. “I don’t think it’s significant enough—numbers-wise—to get picked up by it.”

“Oh,” Collins said, and I wished I could tell what she was thinking. “What about Jackie? What did she do?”

“She was usually the boots on the ground for the deals—site visits, point of contact for the sellers. A lot of client relationship stuff. She sees the whole thing as a challenge. Like her dad, she’ll do anything for a deal. It’s like a game. She’s really good at it.”

“Oh.”

I nodded. “Collins…you’re sure your parents haven’t signed anything? Ed is a crafty motherfucker.”

“I’m mostly sure. I don’t know why they would even consider it. They hate corporations, and they love Sweetwater Peak.”

“Maybe they’re just putting some feelers out—seeing how much the properties are worth to get a new mortgage loan or something.”

Collins buried her head in my shoulder. “Unfortunately, I don’t know what that means, or why it’s relevant,” she lamented.

“It just means that we can’t get too carried away until we know exactly what’s going on. As far as you know, they rejected the first offer and haven’t heard anything since, right?”

“They got a second one,” I admitted. “But they haven’t responded, as far as I know.”

“Then there’s no use worrying about it right now—not until we know something.” I knew Sullivan Enterprises well enough to know that probably wasn’t the case, but for Collins, I needed it to be true right now. I held her tighter to me and tried not to think about it.

“Are you going to go back to your parents’ today?” I asked.

I felt Collins nod. “Yeah, and I’m going to fill Clarke in on everything you just told me.”

“Do you need help?”

“Not this time,” Collins said, and I felt her lips press against my neck. “But thank you for asking.”

27
BRADY



As soon as I saw the *Turn Back Now* sign, I immediately regretted this plan I had concocted. I'd never been up to Boone's property, and there was a reason for that. The man gave off the world's strongest "don't fuck with me" energy. He'd only ever given me grunts and withering looks. Joanie said it was because he was wary of outsiders—even though I was pretty sure he himself wasn't from Sweetwater Peak, but whatever.

Anyway, Collins cared about him, and I cared about Collins, so here I was on a Saturday morning, determined to fix this man's roof. She'd had a rough couple of days, and she mentioned more than once that she was worried about him, and I wanted to help out in any way I could.

Collins was back at her parents' today. It sounded like the four of them were going from the house to the shop trying to put the pieces back together. I told her I had some things to do at my shop, which was true. But this was more important—for a lot of reasons. Plus, I was an able-bodied thirty-two-year-old man—getting on a roof felt like the least I could do after this week.

But of course, it all came back to Collins. I thought about her constantly. I was pretty much desperate to always have her mouth on mine, even though it would inevitably result in my untimely death because, for some reason, kissing her made me forget to breathe.

But if I died while kissing Collins, I'd die a happy man.

Fuck, I was down bad.

I couldn’t think about that—at least right now. I didn’t need those types of thoughts popping up when I was in the presence of her grandfather-like figure. I looked ahead and promptly slammed on the brakes. There was a gate on the road, and I didn’t even notice because my head was so full of Collins. God, she had the power to kill me even when she wasn’t around.

I got out of my truck and pushed the gate open, drove through it, and then closed it. I did that two more times before I ended up on a steep, winding dirt road. The last gate was already open, and I could see Boone’s house in the distance.

A dog came out of nowhere, and I hit my brakes again. I decided this was as good a place as any to park, so I got out and three more dogs came my way—including a yappy little Chihuahua who looked and sounded like it was hell-bent on ripping out my jugular.

Great.

I squinted at the fifth animal coming toward me. Was that a *pig*?

I grabbed my toolbox out of my truck bed and started walking toward the house. Once I was close enough to the menagerie, they turned around and ran toward the house, too—no doubt warning Boone that he was about to have company. Except for the Chihuahua—it charged me and went for my pant leg.

I let out a squeal—a manly squeal—and shook my leg a few times. “Please don’t,” I begged the dog, who growled around its hold on my jeans. When it didn’t let up, I bent down and picked it up. It did not like that. The little goblin continued to growl and bark and tried to bite my fingers and my face.

“Chill out,” I said. “I come in peace, you little devil.” The Chihuahua didn’t let up as I walked toward the house.

It’s fine, I thought. *He’s literally like eighty. He’s not scary.*

Just when I got to Boone’s front steps, his screen door swung open, and he stepped onto the porch.

And he was holding a shotgun.

“Didn’t you see the signs?” Boone’s voice was deep and gravelly. “No trespassing. No visitors.”

My brain short-circuited. “I’m Brady,” I said dumbly. The little dog in my arms started to kick and squirm, so I set it down. It scampered over to

Boone and planted itself right in front of his feet—standing guard and continuing to growl at me for good measure.

Boone grunted. “I know who you are, city boy. Why the hell are you on my property?”

I held up my toolbox. “I thought I could help you fix your roof.”

Boone’s green eyes narrowed. “I don’t want your help. How the hell did you know about that?”

“Collins sent me,” I lied. “She was worried.”

Boone’s gaze softened in real time, and my shoulders relaxed a bit. “The kid sent you?” he asked.

I nodded. “She would’ve come.” A lie. “But she’s helping her parents out today, so she asked me to take a look.”

“She didn’t tell me that,” Boone said—eyes narrowing again.

“She didn’t think you’d want a stranger on your property,” I said. “Figured it was better to ask forgiveness than permission.”

“Hmph.”

“It’ll take twenty minutes,” I offered. “And then I’ll be out of your hair.”

I could almost see Boone weighing the pros and cons of this offer. “Fine,” he said after a minute, and then pointed an old, crooked finger at me. “But no funny business.”

I held my hands up. “No funny business,” I agreed. “Maybe we can also put the shotgun back in the safe,” I suggested.

Boone grinned—an evil, terrifying, grin. “It ain’t loaded, pretty boy. Don’t you worry about it.” Well, it was a very effective intimidation tactic—that was for sure.

“Right, got it,” I said. “Okay, well, let’s do this, I guess.” Boone stepped back inside his house—I didn’t think I was invited in, so I stayed on the porch. When he reappeared, he was wearing a worn-out cowboy hat and a weathered denim jacket.

“Leak’s at the back of the house,” he grumbled. He shouldered past me and down the porch steps. I turned to follow, but I let the dogs and the pig go first. The Chihuahua caught my eye and bared its little teeth at me.

I bared mine back.

“Don’t worry,” Boone said with his back to me. “Chicken only kills when commanded.”

My mouth dropped open a little. This little demon's name was *Chicken*? I figured Butch or Hell Boy or something.

"Lady is the tripod, Hank is the pittie, and Phil is the farm mutt," Boone said. "And the pig's name is Pig."

"Makes sense."

I looked around at my surroundings. Boone's property was beautiful. I could see a barn a few hundred feet back with a few horses out in the pasture. On the other side of it, I saw different sections with chickens, goats, and sheep. There was a greenhouse nearby, too.

"You've got a nice setup here," I said. "How long have you lived here?"

"Forty years, give or take," Boone said.

"Where are you from originally?" Maybe I could loosen him up—warm him up to me, I guess—or at least get him to chill out with the grunting.

"Meadowlark."

"I rode through there when I moved here—nice place."

Boone grunted. Again. "Too big." Of all the adjectives I could think of to describe Meadowlark, "big" wasn't anywhere on the list.

"How many horses do you have?" I asked.

"Nine."

"How many sheep?"

"Thirty. Fifteen goats and a donkey, too, before you ask," Boone grumbled. "You city folks always want to yap."

"I'm not from a big city," I said. "I'm from Redmond—Washington."

"Big city," Boone said.

"Why'd you move here?" I asked.

"Because I wanted to."

"Do you have any family in Meadowlark?"

"Little brother," Boone said, then stopped in front of a ladder. "I was going to get up there myself this morning, but Chicken lost his shit every time I tried."

I looked at the little gremlin, who had stopped next to Boone's feet and was oscillating between growling at me and looking up at his owner with admiration.

"How old is Chicken?"

"Seventeen, probably," Boone said. "Ladder's a little rickety—careful on your way up." Well, that was reassuring.

I set down my toolbox and grabbed the tool belt out of it. I slid in the hammer, a few nails, roofing cement, and tar paper.

When I got in front of the ladder, I reached out and gave it a few shakes. *Rickety* was a steep understatement. I didn't know how this thing was still standing. I took a deep breath and started up it. I'd never felt more physically unsteady in my life, and that was only heightened by the fact that Boone, the tough-as-nails old bastard, was watching me and judging me. Harshly, probably.

The ladder started to bow inward once I got to the middle of it, and I suppressed a curse. When I was close enough to the roof, I reached out, abandoned the ladder, and pulled myself onto it. Take that for core strength.

I saw the damaged part of the roof immediately. When I stood and started walking toward it, I noticed that different parts of the roof felt soft. I made a mental note of that. I started removing the damaged shingles once I got to the leak. I didn't have any replacements, but I'd put some wood over my patch to hold it over until I could get some.

It didn't take long. The hole wasn't very big, and I'd done this a million times. My stepdad, Arnold, refused to call anyone to do anything—no plumber, no electrician, nothing. He did it all on his own, and he made all of us help. Sometimes we'd make the problem worse, but most of the time, it turned out okay. I didn't understand how he just…knew how to fix things, but I was glad he had given me that skill too. That skill had given me a second chance when I needed it.

When I was satisfied with my work, I walked back to the edge of the roof. "We're all good up here," I called down to Boone, who was clearing some debris from the side of his house. "Do you have any more shingles?" I asked.

"No, but I've got a piece of plywood around the back. I'll get it."

"Thanks," I said. Boone disappeared from my view—followed by his gaggle of animals, except for Chicken. That little motherfucker was not going to let me out of his sight.

Likewise, asshole.

Boone returned a few minutes later with a two-by-two piece of plywood. "If you can hold it above your head, I can just reach for it," I said, and Boone nodded.

That worked fine, and once I had it on the roof, I put it over my patch and secured it with a few nails.

Going down the ladder seemed a hell of a lot scarier than going up, so I opted out of it—mostly. I went down a few rungs, then held on to the side of the roof and kicked my feet off the ladder and let myself hang. The drop was probably only about five feet. I looked down, took a deep breath, and let myself fall.

I hit the ground pretty hard, but I kept my knees loose and let myself roll. When I looked up, Boone was standing over me and shook his head. “Fuckin’ city folks.”

Then, much to my surprise, he outstretched a hand. I took it.

“We’re going to get more rain tonight,” Boone said. “We’ll see how your fix holds up.”

“The weather says we’re in for a sunny couple of days,” I told him.

Boone shook his head. “It’s going to rain. I feel it in my knees and in my shoulders. Old bones know.”

“Well, I’ll guarantee that roof,” I said.

“We’ll see,” Boone grunted. “And I know Collins didn’t send you. She wouldn’t send a stranger up here.”

I swallowed.

“She already likes you, you know,” he said. “You didn’t have to take pity on an old recluse.”

“No pity here,” I said. How did he know how Collins felt about me? Did she talk about me? “I don’t have anything else to do today,” I said tentatively—trying to figure out the best way to word this, so that Boone would accept the help I was offering. “What should we do next?”

—

A few hours later, Boone and I were replacing his barn’s sliding door. Apparently it had been broken for a few months and wouldn’t close all the way, which was fine for his horses in the summer, but with winter around the corner, I was happy to help him fix it.

Boone was sitting on a barrel near where I was working, sanding down a piece of wood that we were going to use as the door-locking mechanism. I could see why Collins loved him so much. He was tough and brash and

rough around the edges, but a man didn't have a gaggle of dogs following him around and horses that nickered when he approached or even chickens that came his way without hesitation unless those animals knew that they were loved and cared for.

"Sage is the newest member of the herd," he was telling me. "She's a retired barrel horse—has some problems with her tendons."

"Just from doing too much for too long?" I asked. I didn't know anything about horses, but I liked learning.

"Barrel racing involves a lot of turning and stopping," Boone said. "Imagine running as fast as you can, and having to skid to a stop, speed back up, and stop and turn again."

"Knees would be shot." I nodded.

"Right, and barrel horses who are cared for generally love their job—you take care of your horse, your horse will take care of you type of thing, but they'll tell you when their job starts to hurt, and at that point it's time to retire."

"Are all of your horses retired from something else?" I asked.

"Most of them." Boone nodded. "I've got two barrel horses, three bucking horses, and a couple of retired dude horses. That dappled one in the corner stall, though, his mom came to me pregnant, and I didn't know."

"I bet that was a surprise," I said.

"You're telling me." Boone shook his head. "I let her free pasture, so the door to her paddock stayed open. One day, I come out, and this tiny dot is prancing around with her." One thing was for sure, that horse wasn't tiny anymore.

"What's his name?"

"Shadowfax," Boone said.

"Wait." I paused what I was doing. "Like from *Lord of the Rings*?"

Boone raise an amused brow at me. "Just like that, yeah."

"What does an old rancher know about *Lord of the Rings*?" I laughed.

"I read those books long before Orlando Broom or whatever the hell his name is starred in the movies. I've still got my original paperbacks somewhere in the house. I stole them from my hometown library." I couldn't be all the way sure, but I think one side of Boone's mouth tilted a little bit—almost a smile. "My saint of a brother replaced them years later, though. He was riddled with guilt."

I looked over at Shadowfax. “He definitely looks like the Lord of Horses,” I said. “Is there a reason that some horses have green names and others don’t?” While Boone was going through his horses’ names, I noticed that a lot them were shades of green.

“Caught that, did you?” Boone said. “My brother does the same thing but with blue. It’s this thing we started when we were kids, and we never really stopped. If they come to me with a name, I usually keep it, but if they don’t, they get a green name—makes them part of the family.”

“But Shadowfax?”

Boone shrugged. “Just fit him. Sometimes I wonder if he would’ve been that big if I didn’t name him that, or if his name had any influence.”

“Classic nature-versus-nurture situation,” I said.

Talking to Boone made me realize how much I’d isolated myself over the past year. But with Collins, I was getting better. It occurred to me that it might be nice—to be more involved in things, to meet new people—to listen to them talk the way I was listening to Boone now.

If it weren’t for Collins, I wouldn’t have even had the courage to come up here on my own, but now, I was happy I did.

28
BRADY



COLLINS: I heard you made a trip up to Boone's today.

BRADY: News travels fast.

BRADY: I actually liked being up there. He's not so bad in the light of day.

COLLINS: A ringing endorsement.

COLLINS: Did you see any of the ghost animals that follow Boone around all day?

BRADY: You're telling me that man has both living and ghostly animals following him around?

COLLINS: Sure does.

COLLINS: Thank you, by the way.

COLLINS: It means a lot to me that you would help him.

BRADY: How was your day?

COLLINS: Long. Just got out of the shower and thrilled to finally feel clean.

BRADY: Well, Clarke and Sadie invited me out tonight. You in?

COLLINS: Ouch. My own sister invited you over me?

BRADY: I think they have a rule to invite me out once a month.

COLLINS: Out as in bar or arcade?

BRADY: Arcade. Apparently, the bar is closed tonight after someone accidentally slingshotted a rock into the liquor shelves.

COLLINS: Classic.

COLLINS: I guess it would be nice to blow off some steam.

I saw Clarke's truck when I parked. I'd never actually been inside the arcade, but I saw a picture of it in the photo essay that inspired my move here. It was blurry and haunting, which is the exact opposite thing you'd expect an arcade and bowling alley to be.

When the door opened, I was hit with the smell of stale cigarette smoke. Right when you walked in, there was a bar alcove. My eyes landed on Collins immediately—sitting at a large booth with Clarke, Sadie, and some guy I didn't know.

She was wearing a short black skirt, sheer black tights that looked like they had sparkles on them, and a pair of black leather boots that went up to her knees. I tracked my gaze slowly up her legs until I got to the big leather jacket she loved.

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to smooth it, but it just flopped back down.

I gravitated toward her—moth to a flame or whatever. When Collins saw me, she grinned so wide, I thought someone had turned an extra light on in here. My heart skipped over itself, and I tripped over my own feet—nearly going to the floor, but I recovered—not particularly well.

When I got to the booth, it took me longer than it should've to remember that there were other people here. "Hey," Collins said.

"Hi." God, she was pretty. Collins slid farther into the booth, so I could slide in next to her. I bumped into something on her hip.

"Sorry…my camera," she said, and opened her jacket to show me that she was wearing it like a cross-body bag. I'd never actually seen her with her camera. It felt like a big deal—that she'd brought it out with her.

"Hey, Brady," Clarke said next to her, and then the hellos went down the booth.

"Hey, Clarke," I said. "Sadie"—I nodded my head—"and guy I don't know."

Sadie laughed. "This is Mitch," she said, gesturing to the man who had his arm around her. "He's from Sulphurdale."

Ah, that explained why I didn't know him. Even though I wasn't the world's most social guy, I still knew everyone in this town—at least by

reputation if not in actuality.

“Brady,” I said, and reached across the table to shake Mitch’s hand. Weak-ass handshake. “Nice to meet you.”

“How were things at your parents’?” I asked her.

“Fine,” Collins and Clarke said at the same time.

“Their basement is all cleared out, and everything that needed to go is gone. They’re just in the process of drying it all out now,” Clarke said.

“They’re trying to save the shag carpeting,” Collins said, picking up her drink and taking a sip. “And hoping the wood panels don’t start to smell like mildew in addition to cigarette smoke now.”

“That would be a real assault on the senses, wouldn’t it?” I asked as the guy at the bar called a number.

“That’s our pizza!” Sadie said. “I’ll grab it, and then we can meet at the bowling lane.” We all slid out of the booth at the same time, and Collins came with me to get bowling shoes.

“How old do you think these are?” I asked.

“I don’t think you want to know,” she said. “But I’d double up on socks if you have them.”

“Oh god,” I groaned.

Collins laughed. “I’m going to get a drink. Do you want anything?” I shook my head. “Okay. We’re lane two.” There were only two lanes, so even if she didn’t tell me, I would have had a fifty-fifty shot. Plus, I spotted Clarke wiping off her bowling ball with a disinfectant wipe.

“Can you do that to the inside of my shoes?” I asked as I walked up to her.

“Nothing can save those,” she said. “Where’s Collins?”

“Getting a drink,” I said.

Clarke nodded. “So what’s going on with you two?”

I swallowed. “What do you mean?” I tried—and failed, I’m sure—to sound clueless.

“I have eyes, Brady,” Clarke said. “And I know my sister. She’s like that one pistachio in every bag that’s impossible to crack, and most people who try get hurt doing so.”

“Meaning?” I asked.

“She doesn’t confide in people. She doesn’t tell anyone when something is stressing her out, and if someone puts their arm around her, she threatens

to bite it off, and the chance that she actually *does* bite it off is not zero."

"We haven't talked about it," I said honestly.

"Now, that sounds like her," Clarke said. "But there's…something?"

"There's something," I said. "I, um, really like her, Clarke." That was the understatement of the century, but I needed Clarke to know that this was real for me.

"Why?" Clarke asked. "I'm not asking that in a 'I can't believe it' way, because I can. She's wonderful. I know that—I know that the best, probably. I'm asking because I'll go to the mat to protect her every time—no matter how much I like you."

That made me smile. "So you should get why I like her, then."

"Tell me anyway."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "She's…playful. And unexpected. I like the way her brain works." I looked over at where Collins was standing at the small bar, sticking a straw in a foam cup the size of my head. "She makes me feel lighter, I guess."

When I looked back at Clarke, her eyes were softer than they were a second ago. "Those are good answers," she said.

"The right answers?"

Clarke nodded. "You see her. As her. Collins's career made her a well-known name in a specific niche, and I think she had a hard time being herself when she was in those spaces. She didn't want to let anyone down who admired her work by being a version of herself that she thought they wouldn't like, so she did what she's always done—kept her distance." I didn't think there was a version of Collins that I wouldn't like.

"I went with her to an awards ceremony a few years ago, and the way she chameleoned to the crowd and to the people was kind of…crazy. I didn't even recognize her, and I'm her twin. It's a talent for sure, but it kind of freaked me out. And I guess I just didn't know if she was giving you the chameleon or giving you Collins."

"And now you know?" I asked.

"And now I know." Clarke nodded.

"Are you guys talking about me?" Collins's voice cut through our conversation.

"Yep," Clarke said at the same time I said, "Yes."

“So you know that Brady has a massive, giant crush on me?” Collins asked her sister.

“Sure do.” Clarke smiled.

“Hey,” I said. “I don’t think this is a one-sided deal.”

“Whatever.” Collins fought a smile and rolled her eyes. “We’ll see if you still like me after I kick your ass in bowling.”

29
COLLINS



Drama Mama’s had a different name nearly every time I’d been to it. It was owned by the same family, but after their mom had died, they had been in a constant argument over who owned the most of it. Whenever one of them took a vacation or even just left Sweetwater Peak for a couple of hours, they would come back to a new name and a new sign because one of the siblings had been prepared and lying in wait. It was entertaining for the rest of us.

Even though the name had changed, I didn’t think this place had been updated since approximately 1982.

It felt like a time machine, which is one of the things I loved about it. I also liked that orbs floated around this place like crazy, and every once in a while, a ghost with a thick mustache, Coke-bottle glasses, and a bowling shirt would walk past the two bowling lanes.

This place also exclusively played the Doors, which contributed to the general haunted vibe. Even though it was one of the only places for entertainment in town, it was rarely full. Tonight, it looked like it was just our group, an older bowling league, and a few teenagers who had opted out of the favored Sweetwater Peak pastime of getting drunk in a field.

I went in search of my regular bowling ball—eight pounds, stark white—and found it on one of the stands. Brady went for a red twelve-pounder.

“You’re up first, Olly,” Clarke said when I returned with my ball.

God, it had been a really long time since I'd bowled. I took a deep breath and swung—chucking the bowling ball down the lane with all of my might.

It immediately veered into the gutter.

Brady laughed and gave me a slow clap. "Nice," he said. "So when is that ass-kicking going to commence?"

"I'm just warming up," I said. "Don't get too comfortable."

Clarke went after me, then Sadie, and Mitch. All of them bowled substantially better than I did, but I was determined to win.

Brady winked at me when he walked up to bowl, and I thanked the universe I wasn't holding a ball at that moment because I would've promptly dropped it. He took off his jacket, so I could see the muscles in his arm working as he brought the ball back behind him. There was an orb floating around him as he took a step forward, lighting him in just the right way, and I quickly snagged my camera for an action shot right as the ball left his hand.

He got a fucking strike.

When he turned around, he had a wide grin on his face. "It's all in the follow-through," he said.

"Blah blah blah," I said with an eye roll, and snapped one more picture of his wide grin. I'd show him follow-through.

I grabbed my camera before I went to my parents' house this morning. I didn't even think about it—I just knew I would want it at Toades with me, and I did. As soon as I walked in, I started snapping photos of both the shop and the house I grew up in. And even though it had been a while since my camera strap was slung across my body, it still felt like an extension of me—my favorite part of me, maybe.

Even though it was kind of horrifying to sort through your entire childhood when it was soaking wet, we didn't get time with the four of us very often, and I wanted to capture it all.

Or because I didn't know how long all of it would still be ours, and I wanted to make sure we had something to remember.

Regardless of the reasoning, it felt good. Better than I thought it would. To be able to look through the viewfinder again, to snap a fleeting moment that would then last forever.

When the pins were ready, I grabbed my ball. I swung my ball back as hard as I could, but I didn't realize that Brady was still behind me. I felt my ball connect with his body, and I heard him let out a shocked groan.

I dropped the ball, and it had enough forward momentum that it started going down the lane. When I turned around, Brady was doubled over with his hands over his crotch. "Nice," he ground out—it sounded like he'd lost his voice. "Got me right where it counts."

I slapped my hand over my mouth to stifle my laugh. "I'm so sorry," I said.

Brady looked up at me. "No, you're not, you liar." He let his head fall, and I heard him take a deep breath. "You got me good."

"Do you need a minute?" I giggled. I brought my hands up to my eyes—using my imaginary camera again to take a mental picture. I'd let him off the hook with the real one.

He nodded, and groaned, "Oh my god." I put my hand on his shoulder and started rubbing back and forth.

"Nice one, Collins!" I heard from the lane next to us. I looked over to see the entire bowling league laughing at poor Brady. I gave them all a thumbs-up.

"I hate you," Brady ground out.

"No, you don't." I slapped him on the back. "Now walk it off, we have a game to play."

Even with his, um, erectile injury, Brady still absolutely obliterated me. Which was fine; I was ready to open a can of whoop-ass on him in Skee-Ball.

The machines in this place had definitely seen better days. The paint on them was basically nonexistent, so unless you had memorized the number of points each hole was worth, you just had to go for it and wait for your score to appear on the electronic screen.

"Still waiting for that ass-kicking," Brady said as he put tokens in two of the Skee-Ball machines that were right next to each other. "And throwing a bowling ball into *my* balls doesn't count. You have to win, and you haven't done that yet."

"Challenge accepted."

The mechanism in the machine that released all the balls went off, so Brady and I both started chucking them up the ramp as fast as we could. We

were both throwing them hard enough that they shook and rattled the guard, and neither of us was getting as many points as we wanted.

I finally sank one into one of the top corner holes after a few deadbeat balls, and let out a little cheer. Brady sank one in the same place right after me, which turned my cheer into a curse.

And then he did it again. “Keep up,” he said over the sounds of the arcade. I tuned him out and focused on my balls—not his…either set.

We ran out at the same time, and when I looked up at the score marquee, I thrust my fist in the air in triumph. I beat Brady by twenty-five points—not exactly an ass-kicking, but I’d take it.

“Good game,” he said, and outstretched his hand for me to shake. When I took it, he pulled me in close and whispered in my ear, “That was hot.” A shiver went down my spine, and I tried to remain calm.

“What’s next?” I stammered.

“Pool?”

“Another ass-kicking coming right up!”

30
COLLINS



I, unfortunately, did not kick Brady's ass in pool. I did, however, get *my* ass kicked by both him *and* Sadie in pool. Also unfortunately, Brady did not take up my offer for him to teach me by pressing up against me and bending me over the pool table to help me take my shots.

He did blush when I asked, though, which felt like the big win of the evening. His hands also kept finding me—brushing my hip bone when I'd walk by him, a gentle slap to the side of my thigh on the rare occasion that I did make a good shot.

Everything with him had started to feel like we had something here that was worth pursuing. But I didn't want it to be the *only* thing going in my life, and that was where I was getting stuck. I was happy to keep going with Brady, but I didn't want to let myself get too far gone before I figured out what the hell I was going to do with my life.

Did I want to stay in Sweetwater Peak? Yes, eventually; the past few weeks had confirmed that, though it had taken me by surprise. I didn't want to stay here right now, but I think I wanted to end up here—in this place where every part of myself had grown from. It didn't feel like it was time to put down permanent roots just yet. But I wasn't sure of anything else.

I drove home from the arcade with Brady and sat as close to him as I could on the bench seat. He kept his arm around me, and I had to physically restrain myself from trying to start something up in the truck.

That didn't last for very long, though.

I turned my body toward him more, and pressed my lips to his neck. I heard his sharp exhale, which only spurred me on. I slowly trailed my hand up his thigh.

“Are you trying to seduce me, trouble?” Brady asked.

“I don’t know—is it working?”

“It started working as soon as I saw you,” he said breathily as I moved my fingers to the inside of his thigh.

“Is that so?” I asked, smiling like the Cheshire cat, I was sure.

“It is so,” he breathed. “You look incredible.”

I kissed his neck again. “Tell me more,” I said.

I felt Brady swallow. “I—I like your skirt,” he said.

“Why?” I asked.

“I liked the way it looked when you were bent over the pool table.” Heat started to ooze down my spine. Now we were getting somewhere.

I let out a dramatic gasp. “Were you staring at my ass, Brady Cooper?”

“I was staring at everything, Collins,” he said, and looked down at me. “Everything about you feels like it’s specifically designed to torture me.”

“Torture you? Me?” I pressed my hand against my chest in faux shock.

Brady shook his head and let out a strained laugh. “You know exactly what you do to me,” he said as he pulled his truck to a stop in front of Coop’s.

“What do I do to you?” I asked.

Brady paused for a second before literally pouncing on me. In under a second, my back was on the bench seat and my legs were wrapped around his middle. One of his hands was gripping my chin as he kissed me—hard.

I grinned into our kiss and knotted my fingers in his hair. He rolled his hips into mine, and I gasped into his mouth.

“Oh, so that’s what I do to you,” I said.

“Among many other things.” He kissed me again and again and again. I felt his hand move from my knee to the back of my thigh and under my skirt. I pushed my hips up into his, begging for more. “Fuck,” he ground out.

I tried to do it again, but my leg hit the steering wheel hard enough that the horn beeped, zapping us away from each other like we were teenagers who’d just got caught by our parents. Both of us laughed, and Brady pressed his forehead against mine.

“Let’s go inside,” he said, helping me get upright.

For the first time since I moved here, Brady struggled to get the front door of Coop’s unlocked.

“Having trouble?” I asked.

“You fluster me,” he said before he gave the doorknob one more aggressive shake, and it finally popped open.

As soon as we were through the door, I kissed him again, pushing him back toward a love seat that he’d been working on this week. When his calves hit it, he fell down to a sit, and I straddled him. “Hi,” I said as I brought my hands up to either side of his face.

“Hi,” he said. Then I slowly lowered my mouth to his. When our lips touched, I felt him relax—like he’d been waiting for this all night like I had. I felt his hands move up my back and back down, and I reveled in how natural it felt for him to touch me.

“God, I’ve been waiting for this,” he said against my mouth. “For this to go exactly where I want it to go.”

“Where do you want it to go?” I asked.

“All the way,” he said, and nipped at my jaw.

“Thank fuck,” I said, rolling my hips against him. “Please,” I begged.

“God,” Brady moaned. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to say no to you.”

“Good,” I said as I shrugged off my jacket. Brady pulled back to look at me. His hands went from circling my ribs to my waist and back again.

“What is this thing?” he asked, eyes on my corset top. “It’s insane.”

“Just a shirt,” I breathed.

“This is not just a shirt, Collins,” he said as he licked my collarbone. “This is a contraption that is tailor-made to drive me insane.”

My head fell back as he licked and sucked at my chest, right above the low neckline of the corset. “Can I take it off?” he asked.

“Please,” I breathed. He reached his arms around me and started to slowly—torturously so—undo the line of hook-and-eye closures that went along my spine.

“Faster,” I said.

“Don’t rush me, Collins,” Brady whispered. “Because I’m powerless against you. I’ll do exactly what you want—I’ll go faster, and later wish I’d taken it slow because we only get it…like this…once.”

His words sent my heart pounding against my rib cage—like it was trying to bust its way out of me to find safety in Brady—like the rest of me already did.

“Okay,” I said. I stroked his hair and kissed his temple. “Then I want it slow. I want you slow and deep and demanding.” I felt the last closure give way on my back, and Brady slid the straps down my shoulders before pulling the top all the way off me and gently tossing it to the floor.

I watched his eyes take me in. The way he looked at me made me want to hide, but it also made me want to bask in his sight. His lips tracked my collarbone again, and then lower, until he sucked one of my nipples into his mouth, and I gasped—the piercing made them feel almost too sensitive with him.

His tongue moved over the metal, and my hips rolled against him. He moved to my other breast and did the same thing—sucked it into his mouth hard and then used the tip of his tongue to soothe it.

“I like these,” he said. “I like these a lot.” He bit down on one of my nipples and gently dragged it through his teeth. “And this,” he said before he licked the wilted rose tattoo on my sternum. I wanted his tongue on every part of me.

I gasped and my head fell backward. “Oh my god.”

“Kiss me, please.” Brady’s voice was hoarse, and I brought my mouth back to his. His kiss was punishing and sloppy and perfect.

“Stand up for a second, baby,” he whispered. “I want the rest of these clothes off you.” Brady wrapped his arms tight around my waist before standing and lifting both of us off the couch. He kissed me one more time before lowering me enough that my feet could hit the ground.

I bent to take my boots off, but he stopped me. “I want to do it,” he said. “Please.”

I didn’t know it was possible for someone to be this gentle and also this hot at the same time.

Brady got down on his knees in front of me. He put one hand gently on the back of my knee before using the other to unzip my knee-length boot. He held on to the back of the heel while I stepped out of it and used his shoulders for balance. He did the same thing with the other foot, then reached up under my skirt to pull my tights down—slowly and with care.

“You pack light,” he said, looking up at me. “I don’t want to ruin anything.”

My heart jumped into my throat, and it felt like I couldn’t swallow. I didn’t know that was something he noticed or cared about. I didn’t know if anyone had ever cared about me the way Brady did.

He unzipped my skirt and slid it down my legs, leaving me only in a red seamless pair of panties.

“I like these too,” he said as he kissed one of my hip bones and then the other before he rose to his feet. “You’re beautiful, Collins.”

I know he wanted to go slow, but I couldn’t take it anymore. I basically rocket-launched myself back into his arms, and he caught me with ease. The friction of my bare skin against his clothes was delicious, and I couldn’t get close enough to him.

Our tongues tangled as he laid me back down on the couch. His mouth didn’t leave mine when one of his middle fingers dragged down my front, dipped underneath my underwear, and slipped into me with ease. My back arched underneath him, and I moaned.

“Fuck,” he whimpered. “You’re so wet.” His finger pumped in and out of me, and I bucked underneath him. I felt like I was overstimulated—between how gentle he was with me, the way he felt on top of me, and his finger inside me, I felt like I wanted to crawl out of my skin and attach myself to him—super normal or whatever.

“I need you, Brady,” I said. “Please. I want you inside me.”

“I am inside you,” he said, and I could hear the grin in his voice. “You’ll have to be more specific, you know—use your words. I know you know how.” A vision of him kneeling in front of me while I got myself off and he watched made its way to the front of my brain. My back arched at the memory, and a shiver made its way down my spine.

Brady grinned at me. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m thinking about that, too.”

“Bradyyy,” I whined. His thumb was making circles on my clit—just the way I showed him.

“Tell me, Collins. I’ll give you anything. Just tell me what you need.”

“I need your cock, baby,” I moaned. “Please.” I felt his finger slip out of me, and Brady pushed up on his elbow so he could look at me. When he brought his fingers up to my mouth, I opened instinctively and let him slide

them in my mouth, and I closed my lips around them, so I could taste myself.

“Show me your tongue,” Brady whispered as he pulled his fingers out of my mouth. “I want to give you a taste of me. Is that okay?”

I opened my mouth in response and did what he asked. I didn’t know I was so good at following directions—maybe just his. Brady’s hand gripped my jaw hard as I stuck my tongue out a little bit. I wanted it to leave a mark. “Look at you,” he said right before he spit in my mouth. I moaned when I felt it hit my tongue. “Swallow me,” Brady said with his forehead pressed against mine. A shiver racked my whole body as I did what he said. Who knew this nerdy man had *this* mouth?

“Are you ready?” he asked me softly.

“Yes,” I moaned. “Please.”

Brady wrapped his arms around my back and pulled me up, so both of us were on our knees. I pushed him back so he was sitting and straddled him again. I went for the hem of his crewneck and pulled it over his head so I could drag my hands all over his body.

“Fuck,” he breathed. “I like it when you use your nails.” I dragged my nails down his chest, and his head fell back onto the headrest of the couch. The noise that came out of his mouth was somewhere between a moan and a whimper. I wanted to hear it over and over again.

“I need to go get a condom, Collins,” he moaned, and looked up at me.

I held out my arm in response and poked at the birth control bar under my skin. “I’m all good if you are,” I breathed. “I want to feel every part of you. I want to feel it when you fill me up.” His hips bucked up into me at the words, and I moaned again.

“I’m good,” he said. “I’m so fucking good.” I immediately brought my hands to his belt, and undid it and his pants in record time. He lifted his hips enough for me to push his pants down his muscular thighs. Why had I been paying such close attention to his arms when these existed? Holy hell.

I licked the palm of my hand before I grabbed his hard cock, and moved my hand up and down a few times. “Holy shit, Collins. Put me inside you. Please.” I wanted to tease him, make him wait a little bit longer, but I couldn’t. I already felt like I was going to go insane if I didn’t have him as close to me as possible in the next five seconds.

I positioned his dick at my entrance and started to slide down. Both of our moans filled the empty shop, and I had to stop for a second. He was big. “I have to go slow,” I said. “It’s a lot.”

“Then go slow, baby.” Brady leaned forward and took one of my nipples into his mouth again. Goosebumps rose all over my skin. “You can take it.” I slid down another inch and gasped. “Relax,” Brady whispered against my chest. “I’ve got you.”

“Kiss me,” I moaned. I was fucking addicted to this man’s mouth being on mine. Our tongues tangled with each other’s as I got him fully seated inside me. When my center met his hips, I gasped and clenched down on him.

Brady’s hips bucked up involuntarily. “Careful,” he breathed. “If you do that, this is going to be over before it even starts. How do you feel?”

“Full,” I said, and I felt his cock twitch inside me.

Brady’s head fell back again. “God, you better start moving if you’re going to say shit like that,” he said.

“Whatever you say,” I said, and started rocking my hips into him.

“Fuck.” His hands roamed all over my body—my shoulders, my back, my hips, my ass—as I found my rhythm. “Oh my fucking god, Collins. I love being inside you.”

“Keep talking,” I moaned. I loved hearing his voice—hearing what I did to him.

“You feel so good,” he said. “You’re so good at this.” Brady started to move his thumb over my clit, and I could feel my orgasm starting to ooze down my spine in record time. Everything about Brady made my senses go haywire. I had no control. All I could do was be along for the ride.

I moved my hips faster, and a strangled noise came out of Brady’s throat. “That’s it, baby. Fuck me just like that.”

“I’m close,” I moaned.

“God, yes, use me. Come all over my cock. It’s all yours.” I started to lose control, and my body started to jerk. The moans that came out of Brady were unrestrained—like he was losing control, too—like we had no choice but to fall into each other and never come out. “I can feel you getting tighter, holy shit. That’s it. God, I can’t wait to feel you.” My mouth fell open with a moan, and I couldn’t move anymore, but Brady pushed himself up into me as he played with my clit.

I moaned his name over and over again as the wave crashed through me. My body trembled and my lungs felt like I couldn't suck down enough air no matter how hard I tried. I collapsed into Brady's shoulder, and I immediately felt his hands moving up and down my spine.

"That's it, baby," he whispered in my ear. When I pulled back and looked down at him, he was looking at me with so much tenderness that I felt he could see right down to my marrow.

He held up his hands in front of his face, and moved his index finger—taking a mental picture of me. I collapsed against him again, and he went back to rubbing my back and whispering praise in my ear. He was still hard inside me.

"Let me take care of you," I said against his shoulder.

"I'm good right here, Collins," he said softly. "You were so perfect."

"I want to," I said. "I need to." I rose up slowly, and both of us gasped as Brady slid out of me.

I got on my knees in front of him. His cock was covered in me, and I wrapped my lips around it. "Oh, fuck," Brady said. He held my hair back and stroked my cheeks as I moved my mouth up and down and twisted my hands around the base of his dick. "Spit on it, Collins," he ground out, and I took my mouth off him, so I could look him right in the eye while I did exactly what he said. His eyes were hooded and wild. I watched his head fall back when I skated my teeth up the underside of his cock before taking it back into my mouth. "This isn't going to take very long, holy shit."

Brady's hips bucked, and I reveled in the power I had over him. "Collins, I'm going to come." He pulled at my hair, but I didn't budge. "I'm serious, baby—oh, oh—" Brady groaned as he spent himself in my mouth. His body jerked, and his hips bucked, and when I looked up at him, he looked like he'd totally lost control.

I loved it.

I swallowed as much of him as I could and licked up and down his shaft. "Too much," he gasped. "It's too much." He leaned forward and pulled me onto the couch with him. "Holy fuck," he said as he stroked my cheek.

"Yeah," I breathed.

His eyes caught on the side of my mouth, and he smiled. "What?" I asked.

“You, um, you have a little bit of, um…me on you.” I instinctively brought my hand up to wipe at my mouth, but Brady stopped me. “I’ll get it,” he said softly. He licked the side of my mouth and then kissed me. I wrapped my arms around his neck, and our legs intertwined. Brady tucked my head under his chin and started rubbing my back again.

“I think I finally get the whole ‘love seats are for lovers’ thing,” I breathed—remembering what he told me about the name when I first came home. “We should probably take the steamer to this one before delivery.”

“Before it goes to Toades?”

My mouth fell open. “Please tell me you’re joking,” I said. Brady bit down on a smile and shook his head. I slapped my hand over my mouth and started laughing. Brady’s body shook with laughter, too.

I wanted to stay here forever.

He pulled me even closer to him, and I felt like nothing could get to me here—not when I was with him. I wanted to take this feeling with me everywhere. Or maybe I just wanted to take him with me everywhere.

“Brady,” I whispered “I—” My voice trailed off.

“Me too, Collins,” he said with his lips on my forehead. “Me too.”

31
COLLINS



I woke up pressed against Brady. At some point last night, we made our way upstairs for a shower and then collapsed in his bed.

It didn't seem like either of us moved the whole night. My head was still tucked under his chin, my hands were still resting on his chest, and his arms were still wrapped around me. As if sensing my consciousness, he pulled me close and breathed me in.

I felt him shrug out from underneath me, kissing my forehead, my nose, and my cheeks—just basically everywhere he could reach. I kept my eyes closed but let out a tired sigh, stretching my body.

"Good morning," he said—this time with a kiss to my mouth.

"Too early," I sighed, and curled into him again.

"Go back to sleep, then, trouble," he said. "I'll make breakfast, okay?"

"Pancakes?" I asked hopefully with one eye open.

"Whatever you want," he laughed. "I don't know how to make them with the muffin mix, though, but I do have pancake mix."

I nodded into his chest. "Perfect."

I heard him rustle around his drawers and make his way out to the kitchen, banging around the cabinets, most likely in search of pancake mix, as I nestled into the warm spot he left behind.

I flipped through all the delicious memories of last night, remembering all the perfect moments that captured how good it felt to be with Brady. I thought of his caresses, and how they had powered me like my own

personal backup generator. It made me think of the ghosts—how they were anchored to places. When Brady's hands were on me in any way, it felt like he was my anchor—the thing holding me to the ground so I didn't float away.

For someone who felt like they'd been floating for a year, feeling the metaphorical dirt between my toes when he touched me was everything.

He had helped bring me back to my roots, which had helped bring me back to the ghosts, and ultimately to myself. But I was still hiding part of myself from him, and now, more than ever, I wanted to show him.

He came back into the room with two mugs and a plate, which he set on the nightstand as he sat on the edge of the bed next to me.

"Those smell good," I mumbled, smiling as I opened my eyes.

"So do you," he said. "Are you hungry?" I nodded and sat up. "I put some of your mini M&M's in them. Thought you'd like that."

I felt my heart squeeze. My stomach grumbled, suddenly famished, but I couldn't think about the pancakes until I could kiss him.

I heard Brady groan and pull me closer. "If I start kissing you, I don't think I'm going to be able to stop for a while. You good with cold pancakes?"

"That does sound pretty great. But…do you want to go somewhere with me?" I asked, softly. "No murders took place there that I know of."

"That's not as comforting as you think it is," Brady said. "Another Collins spot?"

"For now," I nodded. "It's about to be a Collins and Brady spot, just like the rest of them, though."

—

It took about fifteen minutes to walk from the back door of Coop's to the area of the forest that you could get to from town. About fifty feet in, there was a cellar door—covered by sticks, leaves, and dirt. If you didn't know it was there, you'd miss it.

"God, this town is like a creepy game of Candy Land," Brady said behind me as I brushed the forest debris off the top of the wooden door. There weren't any handles, which is another reason the cellar was

unidentifiable. I pried the cellar door open and gently let it fall to the side. “What is this?”

“About five hundred yards back, there’s some remains of an old house that didn’t stand the test of time. It belonged to Sweetwater Peak’s postmaster, who assumed her post in 1933—at the height of the Great Depression. She was in the role for over forty years and became the closest thing Sweetwater Peak has ever had to an archivist. Her name was Emily Hofstadt.”

“And you know this because I’m assuming you and Emily used to chat?” Brady asked, kind of in disbelief.

I nodded. “Emily isn’t around all the time. She’s always been very hit or miss, but she came to me at the post office one day. I was taking pictures of it. Well, I was taking a picture of a gaggle of ghosts who stayed at the post office to gossip in death the same way they did in life. She said she could tell I had a penchant for history and showed me this. She didn’t have anyone to leave it to. Someday, I’d like to get it organized enough to add to it—to pick up where she left off.

“This cellar has decades of Sweetwater Peak history.” I stepped onto the first rung of the ladder that led inside. I skipped the last few and jumped to the bottom. The walls of the cellar were stone, and the ground was dirt. It was plain, but it had shelves and shelves of wooden boxes that were full of history—newspapers, artifacts, journals, business ledgers—anything you could think of.

Brady came down after me. “It’s big down here,” he said.

I nodded. “Bigger than you can see,” I said with a sly smile.

“How is that possible?”

“Sweetwater Peak has very cold, very snowy winters, and obviously, they were even worse in 1933—”

“Climate change?”

“—Right. So instead of trudging through the snow, or being stuck in her house…”

“You’re not going to tell me there’s a tunnel to the post office, are you?”

I felt the grin split my face. “That’s exactly what I’m going to tell you. Don’t worry—I won’t make you walk all the way through it this time.”

Brady was quiet for a second. “You really do love this town, don’t you?”

I thought about that for a second. Anytime someone had asked me that previously, I answered with a sharp, resounding no. It felt like a defense mechanism—a way to avoid how much I missed it when I was gone and to make leaving easier when I came back. But as I had been revisiting these places that I had called my own, I felt different. Or maybe I felt the same, and this was the first time I had gotten out of my own way enough to see it.

This place built me—for better or worse. It was the place I left to find myself, but it was also the place I came back to, so I could do the same thing.

"I do," I said quietly.

"I do, too," Brady said. "I like it in general, but I really like your version of it. So what are we down here for?"

"I told you about Earnest?" Brady nodded. "He said something the other day that made me want to look at his obituary again. I have it down here." I opened the box closest to the ladder and started thumbing through the papers inside. I wish I were more organized, but that's not really my thing. Usually, however, I'm good at remembering where something is. I had a good feeling about this box.

"He said something?" Brady asked. "You heard him?" The happiness in his voice made me want to plant one on him in this dark and dusty cellar.

"Yeah." I nodded. "There's still some like…supernatural interference, but we had a conversation. It didn't feel like the right time to ask him to remind me about his death deets."

"Makes sense," Brady said. "How, um, how did he die?"

"Someone ran his car off the road when he was on his way to the Sweetwater River. His car wrapped around a tree. They didn't find him for days."

"That's…"

"I know," I sighed. "But something about it is gnawing at me more than usual. I've never really thought about the person who did it. I've only ever thought about Earnest, and how unfair it was for him." I kept flipping papers.

"How can I help?" Brady asked.

"No need," I said right as I found a newspaper marked with a bright pink sticky note. "I got it." Brady looked over my shoulder as I went through it.

“The fifties?” he asked.

I nodded. Obituaries were near the back. I folded the paper in half—I knew that what I was looking for was below the fold. “There he is,” I said—pointing out Earnest’s paragraphs. There was no picture. I read the lines, but there was nothing I didn’t know—nothing about the driver of the other car.

I let out a sigh. “Damn, I thought I missed something.” I opened the paper all the way so I could refold it correctly. The obituary at the top snagged my attention—the picture, rather. It was a young woman with blond hair, light eyes, and an expression that made me feel like I could feel her sadness through the decades that separated us.

“Does she look familiar to you?” I asked Brady. He shook his head. “Where have I seen her before?” I muttered to myself. I skimmed her paragraphs. Adeline Bennett, frozen to death near the Sweetwater River.

Oh my god.

“Holy fuck! It’s her.” I turned to Brady. “It’s the Lady in White. Earnest was the lover she was meeting!” I recognized her picture now. She looked just like she had in the forest, but in the photo her hair was curled and pinned instead of wild and free.

“The thing that messed with me?” Brady asked, stunned.

I nodded excitedly. “And I’d put money on it being her husband who ran Earnest off the road.”

“It *is* always the husband.” Brady nodded.

“Right!” I exclaimed. What if I could keep my promise to her? To arrange their meetup—a little postmortem rendezvous. I didn’t know if Earnest could get out to the river without fading, or if she could get… anywhere else, really.

I let my thoughts swim as I watched Brady. He looked around the cellar. His eyes caught on something in the corner, and he walked toward a low shelf. The light blue border of a magazine sitting on top of a box was visible.

I forgot it was here. I brought it to show to Emily when I got my print version.

Brady picked it up slowly and blew dust off the cover. “This…this is the view of the Sweetwater River that you showed me. I didn’t recognize it while we were there, but now…”

Brady flipped the magazine open and thumbed through it as quickly as he could until he landed on the page. Page seventy-two. I knew it by heart. He flipped it to show me.

I saw the image of Main Street. It was the last photo I took for the series, but the first one the audience saw. All of the photos were in black and white. The white text over it said *Ghost (of a) Town: A Forgotten Town in Western America.* And underneath the photo: *A Feature by Collins Cartwright.*

"Oh my god," Brady whispered. "It was you." He kept flipping through the photo story—black-and-white pictures of the town appearing page after page until he got to the last one. It was an *About the Photographer* page. I didn't have to see it head-on. I knew that there was a photo of me in front of Toades. My hair was longer than it was now. There was a barely discernible glow next to my shoulder—Earnest.

" 'Collins Cartwright,' " Brady read aloud, " 'was born and raised in a town North of Nowhere—where the road ends and the shadows begin. She believes the best stories have already been forgotten and the best places remain undiscovered. She hopes it stays that way. This is her first feature in *Blue Sky Geographic.*' " He stared down at it for a second, then at me, then back to the picture.

Then a smile climbed up his face—all the way to his eyes where the wrinkles at the corners of them appeared. He set the magazine down and rushed me—grabbing my face with both hands and bringing his mouth down on mine.

"You brought me here," he said as he pressed our foreheads together. I held on to his wrists while his hands stayed on either side of my face. "It was you."

I kept my eyes closed—clinging to him and breathing him in.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

"Waiting for the right moment." I shrugged. It was deeper than that. I had a complicated relationship with this piece because of my complicated relationship with this town. It was the thing that had skyrocketed my career and gave me new opportunities that I never would've dreamed of. But it also brought pressure and more self-doubt than I thought I was strong enough to carry.

I cleared my throat and kept going. “I didn’t know how to be proud of it after everything changed for me last year. I didn’t know how to reckon with how this big, life-changing dream could also bring me so much pain—could wear me down and burn me out. I still have such a hard time carving out enough space in my chest for all of those things to be true—especially after it all went away. I didn’t know how people would see me anymore. And I wanted you to see me…beyond my work. Even then—even before I knew that we could be something.”

Brady nodded and mumbled something to himself, something that sounded a lot like *chameleon.* But then he took my hands and looked straight at me. “Your work doesn’t define you, Collins,” he said. “But you should be proud of it. This piece? It changed my life. It pushed me to feel something that I’d bottled all up. It forced me to take a risk I never thought I’d be brave enough to take, and I’m a better man because of it. You’ve made me so much braver, brave enough to even say…” He trailed off and took a deep breath. “I love you. I’m in love with you, and it has nothing to do with this, nothing to do with who everyone else thinks you are, and everything to do with who I know you are.” He brought his hands up to cup my face. “I love you. Is that okay?”

“Yes,” I said immediately and quietly, but I just knew he’d hear me loud and clear. “Me too,” I whispered. *This is the good stuff.*

“This really is a treasure trove,” Brady said, and I had no idea whether he meant this cellar, this town, or this thing we were building, but it didn’t really matter, because then he kissed me again.

32
BRADY



“I can’t believe you’ve never seen a taffy puller before,” Collins said to me as we watched Hugo—said taffy puller—load the hot, sugary, salty paste onto a metal spike sticking out of the wall of the taffy shop.

I’d never seen the taffy being pulled, but in a way, I had seen the inside of the Sweetwater Taffy Shop. It was part of Collins’s feature. Now, every time I saw a place I saw in the magazine, I wondered who the subject was—their story and why Collins chose to take their picture.

“I’ve gotten the Sweetwater Saltwater Taffy at the grocery store, Collins,” I told her.

“Going to the shop is like a rite of passage for living here, Brady,” she said. “It’s literally a seven-minute walk from your front door. I’m not asking you to go to the factory.” It felt like there was an unspoken *yet* at the end of that sentence.

“What’s the difference between the taffy store and the grocery store?” I asked.

“The vibes!” Collins exclaimed like I’d asked her the most ridiculous question ever. “The aesthetic! The taffy puller!”

“What’s a taffy puller?”

“Who’s the taffy puller is a better question,” Collins said. “His name is Chayton. The taffy at the factory, which is what you get at the grocery store, is pulled by a taffy puller machine. All the stuff you buy at the store is hand-pulled by Chayton and his daughter.”

“I didn’t know that was a thing,” I admitted.

“Because you’ve never been to the store!”

God, she was ridiculous. I loved it. “Fine,” I relented. “We can go to the goddamn taffy store.”

And now we were here, and I was watching Chayton with stars in my eyes, I was sure. It was actually kind of fascinating—the taffy pulling process, I mean. It was crazy to see how it went from this giant sugar slab to a tiny, chewy piece of taffy.

I heard the shutter of Collins’s camera, and my smile widened. Her camera had been attached to her over the past week. She kept it on her at all times, and even though I didn’t know how I felt about being her subject—at least one of them—I loved that she was taking pictures freely again. It felt like a big step for her.

Collins listed off a few flavors of taffy to Chayton when he had a break in pulling. “Lots of chokecherry cream, please,” she said.

“What’s a chokecherry?” I asked.

“It’s the small, dark berry plant you see in the forests during the summer. There’s a variation of them that’s native to Wyoming—and it’s the best flavor of taffy. Isn’t that right, Chayton?” Collins asked.

“That’s right, Miss Collins,” Chayton responded as he put a twist tie around our bag and slid it across the counter. I handed Chayton some cash, and Collins and I headed out.

“Can you imagine how strong he is?” I asked as we walked back to the shop. “I don’t know if I would survive five minutes of taffy pulling.”

“Have a little more faith in yourself,” Collins said. “I bet you could do five minutes.” I slung my arm around her shoulders and went to noogie her head with my other fist for the comment, but a woman’s voice cut through the cold air.

“Brady?” I went still. No. She couldn’t be here. I looked down at Collins, who was unaware of who exactly was standing outside my shop.

“I’m sorry,” I said to her. “I’m so sorry.” I looked at Jackie. Her blond hair fell over a coat that cost more than the entire building I lived in. “What are you doing here?” I asked, genuinely confused. Was she here for me? How did she find me? She couldn’t send an email or something first?

“Hi,” I heard Collins say next to me as she reached her hand out. “I’m Collins.”

“Jackie.” I put my hand on the small of Collins’s back, and I felt her still.

“What are you doing here?” I asked again as Collins said “N-nice to meet you.” Her voice was shaky, and I wanted to shield her from everything. Jackie being here wasn’t a good sign—for anyone.

I watched Jackie look Collins up and down. “You too,” she said, ignoring me.

“Do I really have to ask a third time?”

Jackie looked at me. “What are *you* doing here?”

“I *live* here,” I said. Jackie’s eyes widened. She didn’t know that.

“I—I’m managing a project for my father,” Jackie stuttered—rare. I’d sufficiently shocked her. “We, uh, we got a signed contract back, so I just came to scope everything out, get the lay of the land.”

What? No…She couldn’t be talking about Toades—about the Cartwrights, could she? I felt Collins wobble, and I pressed my hand more firmly into her back, doing what I could to steady her. Her face had gone white, and her teeth were chattering.

“Let’s go inside,” I said. “It’s cold out here.”

“Is she okay?” Jackie asked, genuinely concerned.

“No,” I said honestly. “Come in. We need to talk to you about your project.” Jackie folded her arms. “Please,” I sighed. “It’s important.”

Collins pulled away from my hand once we were inside. She walked toward her desk and sat down. Her face was blank, eyes empty. I hated it. I heard Jackie’s heels click on the wood floors. I hated that, too.

“How long have you lived here?” she asked, looking around the shop.

“Almost a year,” I said, eyes still on Collins. “Was the contract for a Cartwright, Jackie?” I asked. “For three properties?”

Jackie rolled her eyes. “You know I can’t tell you that.”

“Your dad isn’t here,” I said. “I need to know—we need to know.” Jackie blinked slowly, maybe taking in the fact that I said “we.”

“What are you going to do with the information?” she asked.

“It’s better if you don’t know,” I said. “Plausible deniability.” Jackie looked over at Collins, who was still in a daze. Her eyes softened a little.

“Yeah,” she said, turning back to me. “That name…it sounds familiar.” I almost rolled my eyes—like she didn’t know every part of the contract like the back of her hand.

“Fuck.” I dragged a hand down my face and took a few steps toward Collins, and kneeled down beside her. “We’re going to fix this, baby. I promise,” I said softly.

“You can’t, Brady,” Jackie said. She wasn’t being harsh or cold. Her voice was neutral, like she was just stating a fact. I hated that tone.

“They said they didn’t sign anything,” Collins whispered. I didn’t think she was talking to either of us.

“Collins, right?” Jackie asked. Her tone shifted a little. It was kinder than it was when she talked to me, and I couldn’t blame her.

“Right,” Collins said without making eye contact.

“I wouldn’t be here if there wasn’t a signature on paper,” Jackie said, verbalizing what I already knew was true.

“We’ll fix it, Collins,” I said again, then looked at Jackie. “I’m not letting your soul-sucking vampire of a father turn this town into a bunch of white and gray cubes that no one can afford. Not again. How did he even find this place?”

Jackie was quiet for a second. “I showed him,” she said. “I saw it in that magazine you liked—the pictures of it, I mean. You left it behind. I didn’t realize you *moved here*.” If I had been standing, I would’ve stumbled backward.

That meant…that meant I did this. I brought her here—I brought Ed here. It was my fault that everything the Cartwrights owned was now at stake.

“That means this is all my fault,” I heard Collins say.

“No,” I said immediately. “You will not blame yourself for this, Collins.” I would blame myself, though. Collins looked at me and then at Jackie, who was very obviously confused.

“I—I took those pictures,” Collins said. “It’s my family’s properties you’re scoping out.”

“I’m sorry,” Jackie said. She sounded like she meant it. “You’re a very talented photographer,” she added, like that made any of this better.

“If you didn’t know I moved here, why were you standing outside my shop?” I asked, feeling protective.

“I parked my car down the street,” she said. “I was just walking down the main road, and noticed this window, and that’s when you saw me. I’m

just as surprised to see you as you are to see me, I swear." Jackie was a lot of things, but she wasn't a liar.

I nodded. "Do you…do you think you can get me a copy of the contract?"

"What? No," Jackie said. "My father would kill me."

I tore my eyes away from Collins. "Listen, I know I'm the last person on earth you would owe anything to, but you know what your dad does to towns like this. This is my home now. I know you fundamentally disagree with me on the 'revitalization thing,' but I need your help here."

Jackie paused, looking at me. "For her?" She nodded toward Collins.

"And for her family, and for me." I nodded. "And if this contract goes through, you'll have to site-manage the place where I live, and I will fight this project in every way I know how, every step of the way. I know neither of us wants that."

Jackie visibly weighed her options, especially the last part. "And what happens when I go home? With nothing to report?"

"Tell him the properties are a dud. Tell him this town isn't worth his time."

"Is that true?" Jackie asked.

"It's true," I said. "It's too small. My algorithm never would've picked it up because of that, and if it wouldn't have picked it up, there isn't enough money here to make bleeding it dry worth your while." I was doing my best to appeal to her logic. My emotions wouldn't get to her, but facts would—I hoped.

I could see the wheels in Jackie's head turning. After a beat, she opened the messenger bag that was slung across her body and thumbed through a couple of papers. "I'm not giving you these," she said. "You found them—scattered along the side of the road, or something." I nodded. "And if you say otherwise, I swear to god, Brady, I'll make sure this place gets leveled with a bulldozer tomorrow." Her eyes went cold. "And I keep my promises."

"So do I," I said. "And if Ed gets anywhere near this place, I will make his life a living hell."

Jackie pursed her lips and looked around the shop again, then at Collins and me. "You fit here," she said. "I guess now I don't have to wonder about where you ran off to."

I shook my head. “You don’t have to pretend you ever cared about where I went,” I said.

Jackie almost smiled. “You’re right. I didn’t. But I’m still…glad, I guess, to know you found what you were looking for.” She looked back at Collins, and her expression shifted. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Y-yeah,” Collins said. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” Jackie said. “Seriously, don’t.”

She turned to leave, but before she made it all the way out the door, Collins spoke again. “You can tell your dad there was a snowstorm. You can’t get up the road in a storm—they close it down in Sulphurdale—no one in, no one out.”

Once the door closed, I dropped my head into Collins’s lap. Her hands started stroking my hair immediately. “I have to call Clarke,” she said. I nodded. I had my own phone call to make, too.

“And I have to go to Toades. Come with me?”

Anywhere.

33
COLLINS



Clarke, my parents, and I were sitting around the kitchen counter at Toades. Brady was standing in the corner.

"I didn't realize that I was signing something final," my mom said. There were tears in her eyes. "They said it was a precontract—something that would give them permission to come scope out the properties and do inspections and things like that—they said I could back out at any time."

My dad was holding her hands tightly. There were tears in his eyes, too.

"Why would you even think about selling, Mom?" Clarke asked. She was angry.

"It's good money, Clarke—life-changing money. Money that would mean you and Collins wouldn't have to worry about anything ever again."

"I don't want money. I want the shop." Clarke's voice cracked, and I felt it at the base of my throat—where all of my feelings were stuck. I grabbed her hand under the table, and she held on to me tightly.

"My love, you don't know that. I know you love this place, but I didn't want you to feel obligated to take it over someday—to make our life's work yours too. And with the state Toades is in right now…we don't even know how we're going to repair it all—if we can."

"Well, if you had talked to me about it, I would've told you that there's not a single doubt in my mind that this is what I want." Clarke was raising her voice. "What about *my* dreams?"

“Okay,” I chimed in quietly. “I know this is a lot for everyone to take in right now, but we’re going to have to save the therapy session for later. Right now, we need to figure out how to get Toades and your other holdings out of Sullivan’s hands.”

“I don’t think we can, peanut,” my dad said. I’d never heard his voice sound like this before. I didn’t know Dex Cartwright could feel defeat.

The front door to the shop opened and closed. Boone came into the kitchen.

All at once, my mom, Clarke, and I scooted our chairs back from the table and went to hug him. “What are you doing here?” my mom asked; her lower lip was trembling.

“Brady called me,” he said. I looked over at Brady in the corner. He gave me a sad smile. “He told me everything. I came to help.”

We all loved Boone dearly, but I didn’t quite know how he could help here. Brady must’ve seen the confusion on my face because he started talking.

“When I was at Boone’s that day, he told me a lot about his brother—including the fact that his granddaughter’s mom was a real estate lawyer up until very recently. I thought he could help.” Tears pushed their way into my eyes. Brady did that for me—for my family. God, I loved him. At first, I didn’t know how I would know that—I’d never been in love with anyone before, but then I realized that’s exactly *how* I knew—because everything with Brady felt different. I almost felt like my body couldn’t contain it all. It was overwhelming.

“I called my brother, and he called the lawyer. They’re ready for us whenever.” My mom sniffled, and Boone put a weathered hand on her shoulder. “Over my dead body is anyone getting this shop, Joanie. This is yours.” My mom squeezed her eyes shut and nodded. I thought about the twenty-one-year-old girl who’d scrounged up enough money to buy the white house, and how brave she must’ve been to do it all on her own. That version of my mom didn’t know she had just started dating the man she would spend the rest of her life with or that she was about to meet the only father figure she’d ever know in the hardware store.

We had to save this place for all of us, but mostly, we had to save it for her—for every version of my mom who built and grew with this place.

“We can use my laptop,” Clarke said. She popped it open on the counter, and all of us gathered around—except for Brady. I looked back at him and reached my hand out. He pushed off the wall and took it. He wrapped his other arm over my chest and kissed my temple. My family didn’t blink twice at the display of affection.

Boone pecked in his brother’s phone number, and Clarke hit the FaceTime button. He picked up after one ring, and I slapped my hand over my mouth before blurting out, “Holy shit! He looks just like you.” I’d seen pictures of Boone’s brother, but they were from when they were younger—there wasn’t anything current. He and Boone had the same green eyes. His brother’s hair still had some pepper—Boone’s was all salt, and his brother’s beard was much neater.

The man on the screen smiled. “But ten years younger, and a hell of a lot better-looking,” he said.

Boone grunted.

“Amos Ryder,” the man said. “Wish we were all meeting under better circumstances. I’ve heard a lot about all of you.”

“Oh my god, he’s so pleasant,” I whispered to Brady.

“I heard that, Collins,” Boone growled.

“I’m Collins.” I waved. “Nice to meet you, younger Boone!”

“Nice to meet you, too, Collins,” Amos said. “And you must be Clarke,” he said, looking toward my sister. “Which means I’ve also got Joanie, Dex, and Brady in the back. Is that right?”

“You’re good,” Clarke said.

“Is she there?” Boone interrupted. “This is time-sensitive, kid.”

Amos moved his camera to put both him and a regal-looking woman in the frame. She had dark, curly hair and dark eyes. She waved. “Hi,” she said. “I’m Cam Tucker.”

“We really appreciate you taking the time,” my mom said; her voice was still watery.

“No problem at all,” Cam said. “I’ve heard some of the details from Boone, and Brady was able to send over the contract you signed. It sounds like you all have been the victims of some very shady legal practices and clever language. I’m so sorry.”

“Do we have any options?” my dad asked.

“The contract is legally binding, and since it’s for the private sale of property, I don’t think the court of public opinion is an option here.”

“They said it was a precontract,” my mom said.

Cam nodded thoughtfully as she looked at my mom. “Those were a real thing at one time; they just don’t exist in any sort of present law practice,” she said gently.

My mom buried her face in her hands, and I could almost hear the fissures in my heart starting to form. “I feel ridiculous.”

“Hey,” Cam said gently. “Joanie, look at me. This firm set out with the intention to deceive and take advantage of you, and they’ve done it to countless others.” Cam’s voice shifted then to something firmer and more brutal. “And I’m going to do everything in my power to make them pay, okay?”

“What do we do?” my dad asked.

“I have an idea,” Cam said. “It’s a little unorthodox, and there’s no guarantee that we’ll be immediately successful, but it will buy us some time.”

“We’ll do anything,” my mom said.

I watched Cam take a deep breath and look at Amos, who gave her a small nod—like a father encouraging his daughter. “How quickly can you and Dex file for divorce?”

All of the air got sucked out of the room.

“Wh-what?” my mom asked.

“We’re not getting divorced,” my dad said.

“I understand,” Cam said. “And I’m not asking you to get divorced. I’m asking you to file for divorce. There’s no way that Sullivan is going to let you out of escrow, and if you try, he will absolutely file a lawsuit.”

“What will filing for divorce do?” I asked.

“It will allow your parents to freeze all of their assets—including the shop and the multi-use buildings under their name.”

“So?” Clarke asked.

“So they can’t become Sullivan’s if they’re frozen. The hope here is that you tie things up long enough that he walks away.”

“Do you think he will?” my mom asked.

“I think there’s a chance. Sullivan is a path-of-least-resistance guy, and from what we know about him, he tends to target people with smaller

holdings first. I think there's potential for him to move on to his real target in Sweetwater Peak, who we can try to get to ahead of time, and it also gives us time to draw up our own lawsuit."

"W-we're going to sue him?" my mom asked.

"Yes," Cam said with a nod. "The divorce filing and frozen assets give us time to talk to as many people in other small towns as we can, and if we can prove that he acted with intent to harm and made these contracts in bad faith, we can sue him sideways. We might not get any money out of it, but all we need is to get him out of Sweetwater Peak."

I chewed on the inside of my cheek as Brady's thumb rubbed over my shoulder. This made sense to me. It felt batshit crazy, but it made sense. I watched my parents intertwine their hands.

"What do you all think?" Amos asked thoughtfully.

My mom looked up at the computer screen and nodded. "It is a good idea," she said. "But, Cam, I don't know how we can pay you. We're… we're strapped right now."

Cam shook her head. "No need," she said. "My husband and I have everything we need. I want to help you, and if I need another lawyer or two to tag in, I know they will, too."

Tears sprang up in my mom's eyes again, and she nodded.

"Well, my love," my dad said with a kiss to the side of her head. "Let's go file for divorce."

34
COLLINS



My parents stayed on the phone with Cam, so she could walk them through the filing process. Boone left to get back up to his property before dark. Brady and I were sitting on the stairs, and he was rubbing the back of my neck.

“What do you think?” he asked. “About everything.”

“I think it’s crazy,” I said honestly. “And I hope it’s crazy enough to work.” I looked over at him. “Thank you—for calling Boone.”

“It was a shot in the dark,” he said. “But a phone call felt like the least I could do. I—I’d do anything for you.” I kind of felt bad that Brady knew more about Boone’s family than I did. I forgot that he had a life before us. I made a mental note to ask him more about it when I had the chance.

“If this works, I’ll owe you forever,” I said, leaning into him more.

“You won’t owe me anything. And it will work, Collins.” Brady kissed the side of my head. “Are you ready to go home?”

“I need to go through some stuff with Clarke,” I said. “I’ll meet you back at the shop?”

“Do you want me to stay?” he asked, and I shook my head. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” I said. “I’ll text you when I leave.”

Brady nodded and kissed my forehead. Once he was out the front door, I grabbed Clarke’s hand and pulled her up the stairs.

“Are you trying to take my arm out of its socket?” she said sharply.

“Okay, first of all, that feels dramatic,” I said as I opened the door to the console room. “Second of all, I’m not the one you’re mad at, so drop the tone.”

Clarke’s nostrils flared. “I really can’t believe she did that without even talking to any of us.” Clarke shook her head.

“You get one day,” I said. “You get one day to be as angry as you want, but you can’t be mad at her forever. Our parents have only ever made the decisions that they thought were best for us, and they need us right now—both of us.”

“In what world would selling everything they have be good for us?” Clarke demanded.

“In this one, Clarke. When it came down to it, I don’t think Mom would’ve followed through on a contract if it weren’t for the Sullivans’ being shit-asses, but I think she was blinded by the idea of trying to help us.”

“Yeah, well,” Clarke said, folding her arms across her chest.

“We’re going to win this,” I said. “Cam has a good plan.”

“I really hope you’re right, Collins,” Clarke said. “You really stepped up down there.”

“I figured you could use a day off,” I said, and pulled Clarke over to the couch. “Can you get Earnest in here?” I asked.

“Put on Dusty Springfield or Gordon Lightfoot. He’ll show up,” she said. “Why are we up here?”

I stood quickly to throw on one of the vinyls Clarke recommended, and then I grabbed a sheet out of the basket of vintage linens in the corner before turning out the light.

“Do you feel him yet?” I asked.

“Not yet,” she said. “Why are you acting insane?”

“You’ll see,” I said. A few seconds later, the temperature in the room lowered slightly, and the curtains moved, even though there wasn’t a draft.

“Earnest?” I asked, and his form appeared near the doorway. Thank god. “Earnest, Clarke and I are going to try something, and I need you to stick around, okay?” He didn’t move. “Nod if you can hear me.”

He nodded.

I shook the sheet open and put it over my and Clarke’s heads. “What the hell are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m going to tell you a secret,” I said. “And you’re going to tell me one.” I couldn’t see Clarke roll her eyes, but I swear I could hear it.

“We have tried the Lady in White thing a million times,” Clarke said. “I thought we decided like ten years ago that it was just a myth.”

“Humor me,” I said. “Please.”

“Fine,” Clarke sighed. “Spill your secret. And it can’t be about Brady—you two are disgustingly and glaringly obvious.”

I took a deep breath. I knew there had to be a reason I kept putting off telling Clarke, and this was it. I needed a secret. “I didn’t come home to help you,” I said. “I came home because my abilities went away…and I ran out of money.” I tacked on that last part for good measure.

“Your abilities went away?” Clarke asked slowly—like she couldn’t believe it.

“Yeah. They went quiet.”

It was silent for a few beats. I knew my twin was sufficiently stunned. “I…I’m sorry, Olly.” Clarke’s voice was surprised and earnest. “I know how much this part of us means to you.”

It was hard to swallow. I reached over and put my hand on her knee. “I’m sorry, too—for what it did to us.”

“That’s why you pulled away?” Clarke whispered.

“Never again,” I said, and I meant it. Clarke’s hand found mine and squeezed. “Your turn,” I choked out.

I heard Clarke take a deep breath. “Um, okay, well, I’ve been talking to Wilder Wilkes.” My jaw dropped open. Now *that* was juicy.

“What?” I asked. “Why?”

“He’s worried about Leith,” she sighed.

“Oh my god. You’re talking to your childhood crush’s dead dad about him?”

“Shut up!” Clarke said, and swatted me on the arm. “He came to me.” I had a million questions for her. It felt like Clarke and I had switched places—she was using her abilities while I couldn’t. I was about to dive into my questions when both of us heard Earnest.

“Addy?” he asked, bewildered. I heard him—loud and clear. There was no static, no interference. Just Earnest’s voice, and the sound of the victory bell ringing in my chest.

I did it.

I yanked the sheet off our heads and heard Clarke gasp. There she was, in all of her wispy, haunting glory. The Lady in White—Adeline Bennett. I watched in awe as she raised her hand. Earnest did the same, until their palms were touching—well, as much as ghost palms could touch.

"What in the hell…" Clarke whispered.

"I'll fill you in later," I whispered back. Adeline whipped her head toward us, and I waved. "Is that who you were looking for?" I asked her.

And for the first time in over half a century, I was sure of it, Adeline Bennett smiled.

35
BRADY



It had been nearly a week since Dex and Joanie filed for divorce. Their assets were frozen, and legally, Ed had no way of getting them out of escrow and finalizing the sale. He hadn't walked away yet, but it did accomplish what the Cartwrights needed right now: more time.

"You know what I've been thinking a lot about this week?" Collins asked. She was at her desk, and I was working on a set of kitchen chairs.

"Tell me," I said.

"Do you believe in fate?" she asked in response. "That people can be tied together by something bigger?"

"That's quite a question for nine A.M."

Collins smiled at me. "I just…I wonder if every decision I've ever made was leading me to you," she said, and my hammer slipped out of my hand. I didn't even hear it hit the floor.

"I know mine led me to you," I said quietly. I'd never been more sure of anything—the discovery in the cellar only confirmed it. Collins came into my life exactly when I needed her—when I needed something to hope for and something to push me forward, and she did that for me years before I met her on that stormy night.

"So you're in on this?" she asked hopefully, and I walked over and kneeled in front of her chair.

"All in," I said.

She reached out and cupped my face. “I think…I think I know what I want to do next.” I stayed quiet, waiting for her to continue. “After I got the feature on Sweetwater Peak,” Collins said, “I did this run on like small rural towns in America—took pictures for journalists who were talking about education gaps and literacy rates or rural library funding—stuff like that. Turns out, Ed Sullivan has bought property in three of those towns and has started developing.”

“Do you think that was on purpose?” I asked. Collins had been a research fiend over the past week. She had been glued to her laptop during the day and to me at night, which I was obviously okay with. She was also talking to Cam a fair amount and asking a lot of questions. She had her camera out, too—taking pictures of my work or sneaking out in the morning to capture something. She was aglow—the same way she was in the church or at the river.

“I don’t really believe in coincidences like that,” she said. “I wonder if…” Collins bit her lip.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I’ve been wondering how I can be the most helpful—to my family, to Cam, and to all of the people who this company has screwed over.” I rubbed my hands up and down either side of her thighs. “And last night, it kind of hit me. I wonder if Cam needs help gathering information from people impacted in these towns. I wonder if I could help that way.”

I smiled. “You mean, like, go Erin Brockovich?”

Collins laughed. “Exactly that—and I already have pictures and stories from some of these places. Maybe it could be a photography project that someone might be interested in—the before and after—especially if I could find someone willing to write about it. I think this is one of those things that deserves to be bigger—have more light and different eyes on it.”

I agreed with that. This type of business model didn’t start and end with Sullivan Industries, I was sure, and unless more people heard about it, it would keep happening. Ed and everyone like him depended on separation and misinformation to keep them afloat. “Why couldn’t you write about it?”

Collins shook her head. “I tell stories with pictures—not words. It’s a whole different skill set.”

“Do you know anyone?”

“I’ll have to think about it,” she said. “Anyway, what do you think?”

“I think it’s a great idea,” I said truthfully, and swallowed before I asked my question. “So you’d leave Sweetwater Peak again?”

Collins looked at me thoughtfully. “Temporarily,” she said, and kissed me. “This is my home. You could come with me, you know.”

“Really?”

Collins nodded. “I love you, Brady. I’m in this with you.” I thought about why I left Redmond—all the places I wanted to discover when I realized that the world was wider than my own view of it. I thought of the way Sweetwater Peak called to me, how I wondered how many places were left like this. I wanted to see as many of them as I could, and I wanted to see them with Collins.

“I’ll go anywhere with you, Collins,” I said. “To the ends of the earth and back again if you asked me to.”

“What about the shop?” Collins asked, looking around. “You did this all on your own. I don’t want you to leave it behind.”

I shrugged. “I love the shop. I’m proud of it,” I said. “But the ghosts can hold it down for us. We won’t be gone forever, right?”

Collins shook her head. “This is our home, I think.”

“It is.” I nodded. “And you’re my home, too.” With Collins, I felt the most like myself—the most comfortable and content, but also the most adventurous and bold. She blew the dust off my lungs, and I could breathe.

“So it’s you and me, then?” she asked, her hands in my hair.

I turned my head and kissed the inside of her wrist. “You and me,” I agreed.

EPILOGUE

COLLINS



I felt the blanket slip off my shoulders and squeezed my eyes tighter in response. There was no way in hell it was time to wake up yet. I tucked myself closer into Brady's side and felt his arms instinctively tighten around me even though he wasn't awake. Before Brady, I never would've considered myself a cuddler, but now I found myself latched to this man every night—even if I fell asleep not touching him, I'd wake up in the middle of the night snuggled into his side—safe and protected no matter where we were.

We'd been on the road off and on for a few months. So far, we'd been to five towns that were on Sullivan Industries' radar and a few more that Brady remembered from his time there.

I photographed all of them, and I had a feeling that the photos were going to be the best of my career. My heart was all over this project, and it beat stronger and stronger every place we went.

I couldn't pinpoint a singular thing that helped me shift from not-okay to kind-of-all-right. Maybe it was when I decided to fight for Toades or when I apologized to my sister. Maybe it was when I walked down Sweetwater Peak in the moonlight or when I let Brady in. Maybe it was all of it—or none of it. Maybe I just got lucky—or unlucky, depending on how you interpret a bunch of voices returning to someone's head.

Ultimately, though, I learned to let myself exist on a spectrum. Some days were good and some days weren't, but they were all part of my story—my journey back home and beyond.

Over the past few months, Brady and I got copies of contracts, photos of abandoned sites that Sullivan built, and testimonials from the people whose lives he'd ruined—or at least tried to.

Sullivan Industries didn't seem to understand how resilient rural communities could be. They'd never really been able to depend on outside help, but they always seemed to be able to depend on each other—that was at the center of each place we visited. I knew it to be true of my hometown, too. Once word got out about what my family was going through, Sweetwater Peak had shown up for the Cartwrights—donating supplies and their time to patch up Toades—especially Leith Wilkes, if my mom was telling me the truth.

In Stratlinberg, New Mexico, half of the population of two thousand pooled every monetary resource they had to be able to settle Sullivan's lawsuit against them—with Cam's help. Hopefully, they could all start fresh after that.

Other places had a rougher time—like two towns in Oklahoma and one in Iowa. But no matter what, the communities always seemed desperate to help one another bounce back.

Small towns cultivated resilience, and even though mine wasn't perfect, this whole thing had made me proud to be from Sweetwater Peak, Wyoming.

"Collins," said a singsong voice that was way too close to my head.

"Elda," I groaned. "I am nearly one hundred percent positive it is still the middle of the night." Once Brady and I left Sweetwater Peak—about a month after my parents filed for divorce—Elda started appearing again. Only occasionally at first and then more frequently as time went on. The more I felt like myself, the more my abilities rang clear. And no matter if I was traveling or at home, I felt the most like myself with Brady.

"You should get on the road," she whispered, like Brady could hear her even though he couldn't. "Cam's expecting you in Meadowlark at one, and it's a six-hour drive."

We were on our way back to Sweetwater Peak. Cam thought we had enough evidence to go after Sullivan, but we were meeting in person to make sure we had everything appropriately organized and ready to go—with no gaps.

I reluctantly turned away from Brady to check my phone on the nightstand. It was only six. The blanket moved down again—even though we had time. “We’ll be up and at ’em by seven,” I whispered. “Promise.”

“Tell her that I’m always on time,” Brady grumbled groggily.

“That’s why I like him,” Elda said. She then winked at me and wafted away until I couldn’t see her anymore. Brady pulled me back to his front and held me tight.

“I didn’t know being in love with you would come with a built-in ghost alarm,” he said.

“Regretting your decision?”

“Never, trouble,” he said, and kissed the back of my neck. My favorite part about going from place to place and back home was having Brady by my side. He approached everything with so much wonder. He looked at the world the same way he looked at me, and it made me feel like I could do anything.

Publishing the new photo story was percolating in the back of my mind. Since we had been on the road, I hadn’t just been talking to the living; I also talked to the dead. The common denominator between both populations was that they had all experienced something they thought would shake their towns and their lives forever, but at the end of the day, good won out.

Acts of Resilience was the working title. I was trying to find parallels between the stories from the living and the dead and somehow place them in the same photo together. I didn’t know if it would become anything, but so far, I was excited about how it was coming together in my head. I hadn’t been excited about photos in a long time. It was both terrifying and invigorating to feel their pull again. Maybe I wasn’t all the way washed up after all.

“You sleep okay?” Brady murmured.

“Enough,” I said. My night owl tendencies were still alive and well, but with Brady, the sleep that I did get was restful.

“And we have some time before we have to leave?”

“An hour. Maybe a little more,” I said.

Brady’s hand moved from my hip, down my thigh, and back up again. I arched my back into him. “Did you need something?” I breathed—feeling the hard length of him against me.

“You. Always,” he said. I never really saw myself finding a love like Brady’s. I didn’t know if I was built for it—the type of stability and security he gave me—but Brady’s steadiness was different. It was like the trees that bent with the wind only so they wouldn’t break. He kept us firmly planted—our roots deep in the earth—but our branches still had room to sway and move and stretch into the clouds.

Brady’s hand moved to my stomach and pushed me more firmly against him before it dipped in between my legs. I wasn’t wearing anything under the T-shirt of his I slept in. He groaned when his fingers came in contact with my skin.

“You know what this does to me, Collins.” His voice was low.

“Why do you think I keep doing it?” I breathed.

“Trouble.” He kissed the back of my neck, and I felt him move his way down my body until he grabbed my knee to open my legs and slide in between them. My body went tight with anticipation as he lowered his mouth to my center, and I gasped when his tongue landed on my clit. He went at a languid pace—like we had all the time in the world. I put my hands in his hair, and my hips moved against his face involuntarily. His stubble scratched at the inside of my thighs, and I reveled in every sensation.

“Brady,” I moaned. “Oh my god.” He sucked my clit between his teeth and then soothed it with his tongue. He was annoyingly good at this.

“We have to be quick,” I breathed—even though I never wanted it quick with him. I always wanted it long and drawn out and hot and heavy. “If we want to grab breakfast before we go.”

“Fuck breakfast,” he said against my skin as he slid a finger inside me. I gasped and my back arched.

Yeah, fuck breakfast.

—

When we got into Brady’s truck, I checked my phone. I had a couple of messages from Clarke—showing me pictures of a few things Brady and I had found and sent back to Toades and Coop’s—including a midcentury furniture set that Brady was hell-bent on restoring.

“The furniture set made it,” I said, and flipped the phone around to show Brady. I missed my sister. I couldn’t wait to see her soon.

“I can’t wait to get my hands on that,” he said as he merged onto the two-lane highway. We had the road to ourselves, and it was a near-straight shot from Montana to Meadowlark, Wyoming.

And then home.

“I can’t wait for you to get your hands back on me,” I said with a smile.

“Stop flirting with me while I’m driving,” Brady said, tightening his grip on the steering wheel just a little.

“Never,” I laughed. “You’re so cute when you’re flustered.”

Brady gave me a look. “You torture me,” he said.

“And you love it.”

“I love *you*,” he said, and I took my seatbelt off to move to the middle seat of the bench and buckled myself in there, so I could lay my head on his shoulder as I went through the pictures Clarke sent. I made sure we talked every day—not just about updates about our journey to save Toades but also just how she was doing. I messed up last year when I didn’t prioritize talking to my sister about anything and everything. I didn’t want to do that again.

Luckily, we had a lot of practice forgiving each other for all types of things—big and small.

In one of the pictures, she was holding a stack of vintage *Blue Sky Geographic* magazines, and my eyes zeroed in on her left hand. I lifted my head from Brady’s shoulder, and my spine went straight.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Brady…” I said, pinching my phone screen to zoom in on Clarke’s hand, so I could show him what I was seeing. “Is that…is that an engagement ring?”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Five books in, and I still haven't figured out the best way for me to start my acknowledgments, nor have I gotten rid of my fear that I'll forget someone, but I'm going to do my best.

This book was incredibly difficult for me to write—agonizing, even. But it was also the most natural and most true to me, and I have wondered over and over if that's why it was so hard. It's terrifying to put pieces of yourself on a page—especially when they're pieces you'd like to protect.

So I think it makes the most sense to start with those who protected me while I was protecting myself while writing this book: Emma, my editor, and Jess, my agent. There are a million reasons that I couldn't do this job without the two of you, but none of them have been more clear to me than they were during *Soul Searching*. Thank you both for not only giving me room to grow but pushing me to do so.

Thank you to Lexie, who has helped me carry every doubt I've ever had about everything. This book is no different.

Mom and Dad, I know I cried about this one a lot, and I wish I could promise that it wouldn't happen again, but we all know it would be a hollow promise. I'm not sure where my overactive tear ducts came from, but they were really showing up and showing out this time. Thank you for both holding me close and giving me space. I love you.

Becca and Hannah, your unyielding belief in me is one of the most powerful things I've ever felt. I couldn't do this without you. I wouldn't want to.

Stella, my angel, we did it again! I love writing books with you by my side.

Thank you to my cover designer, Austin, for knocking it out of the park once again. I know I brought you a challenge this time around, and you rose to it with grace and determination. The result is more beautiful than I could've imagined.

To my team at the Dial Press, I’m sorry everyone is calling you Daddy Dial. That’s my fault. Actually, I’m not sorry. I love it. Thank you for everything you do for my books and for me. I feel so safe and cared for by each of you.

Sydney, thank you for being part of my world, even though it’s scary sometimes.

Once again, I must thank the *Captain America* franchise for being there when I’m feeling low, along with Diet Coke and Cometeer Coffee.

Last, and most important, I must thank you, dear reader. Thank you for journeying somewhere new. It is the greatest honor of my life that, of all of the incredible books out there, some of you choose to read mine. I adore you.

Soul Searching

Lyla Sage



Dial Delights

Love Stories
for the
Open-Hearted

WELCOME TO SWEETWATER PEAK:
THE PLAYLIST

Music informs every part of my writing process more than anything else. I'm inspired by many things: poetry, media, and my secret Pinterest boards (of course), but I always come back to music. Before I'd even opened a Word document for *Soul Searching,* back when Sweetwater Peak was just a few scribbles in a notebook, I made four different playlists to help me lay a solid foundation for this world: a general Sweetwater Peak playlist, a playlist for Collins, one for Brady, and then one for their relationship. Among all four, there were 123 songs.

This world grew out of some of my favorite songs—songs that remind me of the upholstery shed at my grandparents' house and learning how to use a rotary phone. Songs that have kept me company through broken hearts and long drives on winding mountain roads. Songs that feel like fresh air in my lungs.

Music helps me establish vibes, set scenes, and inform dynamics among characters, settings, and themes. It's safe to say that my books wouldn't be the same without it! Below, I'm laying out twenty songs that I think are essential to Collins, Brady, Clarke, Leith, and the genetic makeup of Sweetwater Peak—where the road ends and the shadows begin.

"American Gothic," Stephen Wilson Jr.
"(Don't Fear) The Reaper," Blue Öyster Cult
"The Windmills of Your Mind," Dusty Springfield
"They're Hanging Me Tonight," Marty Robbins
"Chateau Lobby #4," Father John Misty
"Girl from the North Country," Bob Dylan
"Tear You Apart," She Wants Revenge
"Pictures of You," The Cure

“The Ballad of Boot Hill,” Johnny Cash
“Meet Me in the Woods,” Lord Huron
“Wanna Be Loved,” The Red Clay Strays
“Devil Town,” Bright Eyes
“White Moon,” The White Stripes
“Graves,” Whiskey Shivers
“Run On,” Jamie Bower
“Where the Streets Have No Name,” U2
“American Teenager,” Ethel Cane
“Free Fallin’,” Tom Petty
“The River,” Bruce Springsteen
“Help Me Make It Through the Night,” Kris Kristofferson

Keep reading for an exclusive sneak peek at the first chapter from *Free Falling*, the next book in the Sweetwater Peak series!

1
CLARKE

There was a dead man across the table from me, looking at me with pleading eyes. If he wasn't a ghost, I was sure they'd be glistening with crocodile tears. Even so, I avoided making direct eye contact with him. "C'mon, Clarke, please," he said, bringing his clasped hands under his chin for maximum effect.

"I'm running out of secrets, Earnest," I sighed, keeping my gaze on my laptop screen. I had three estimates in for the new roof for Toades, my family's antiques shop—or premier antiques emporium, like it says on the sign—and the fourth should've been coming in any minute. Palmer told me it would be in today, but Sweetwater Peak locals preferred a slower life pace, so in all actuality, Monday was more likely, or he'd show up on my front porch tomorrow to tell me in person.

Toades suffered a lot of damage in a thunderstorm a few months ago, and repairs had been slow, to say the least. The roof was the biggest and most expensive undertaking, and even though my parents and I patched it the best we were able to, I couldn't put it off any longer.

"And I'm working," I said.

The sun was setting in Sweetwater Peak, Wyoming, and flooding the inside of Toades in a burnt-orange and soft-pink glow. Normally, the warmth of the sunset through the glass would calm me down, but I'd been keyed up for months, with no end in sight. I rolled my shoulders back and down and made an effort to unclench my jaw, but it didn't help. My shoulders ended up back where they were, and my jaw tightened again when Earnest spoke.

"Please," Earnest said. "It's the last time I'll ask this week—I promise."

"It's Friday," I sighed. "I won't even see you again this week." I would normally come in on a Saturday, but my mom thought I was working too

much, so she had been essentially banning me from the store on the weekends. Joanie Cartwright might appear sweet and gentle, but underneath her fringed floral dusters and lavender hair dye, she was not to be trifled with on some matters.

My mom and I had been trifling about a lot of things for months. Fighting to work on Saturdays didn't really seem important enough to add to the pile. And just because I wasn't at the shop on Saturdays didn't mean I couldn't get some work done.

So, if we were being truthful, I probably *was* working too much. I just…didn't have anything better to do.

"Consider it a good-bye present," Earnest said hopefully.

"You know," I said, refreshing my email inbox, "if you weren't already dead, I would kill you." I wouldn't, though. Earnest was family.

My twin sister, Collins, and I had these weirdo abilities. We could talk to and see ghosts. Maybe we never would've noticed or maybe it wouldn't be such an integral part of ourselves if we grew up anywhere but Sweetwater Peak—it's haunted as hell—and our parents did anything else besides owning an antiques shop, but we did and they do.

Collins loved it—our abilities. She found friendship and solace in interacting with the spirit realm. Me? Not so much. I didn't hate my abilities. I just preferred to keep more of my interactions with others on the living side of the earthly plane.

Most of the time, I tuned everything out. I was good at that—reducing the presence of the ghosts to a dull hum. It was like white noise.

Earnest was the exception. He'd been at Toades since I was a kid—tethered to a record console upstairs. Collins and I grew up with him. Weirdly, he felt like the closest thing we had to a brother.

And much like I imagine a brother would, he was currently driving me fucking nuts.

"Please, Clarke," Earnest said again. I let out another sigh. A couple months earlier, Collins somehow managed to give Earnest—who, again, is *dead*—a second chance at the love story that got cut short while he was living. He died in a car accident in 1957. He was on his way to the Sweetwater River to meet his lover, Adeline Bennett.

Adeline froze to death waiting for him (morbid, I know, but those are the facts), and became a Sweetwater Peak ghost story that was told around

bonfires or with flashlights in the woods. Every kid in Sweetwater Peak was told that if you put a white sheet over your head and whispered a secret, the Lady in White would appear. Growing up, Collins and I had tried it a million times with no luck. Until Collins had a run-in with her last fall, both of us assumed she was just that—a ghost story.

But Adeline was very much real. In general, the spirit realm didn't seem to have a lot of rules, but she seemed to be bound by the secrets. Earnest and Adeline had been trying to figure it out—they tried different ways to get to each other now that they knew where the other was at, but they didn't have any luck. Anytime Earnest tried to get to the Sweetwater River, he would fade before he got there and would end up back at Toades—it was the same for Adeline, but she would end up back in the forest.

So, nearly every day, Earnest would ask me to put a sheet over my head and tell a secret, so he and Adeline could rendezvous. I'd told nearly every secret I had—including the fact that I was the one who let Collins's hamster out of its cage when we were nine.

I refreshed my email again—still no estimate. It was past six, which meant I probably wouldn't be hearing from Palmer Roofing until Monday. Annoyed, I reached out and shut my laptop with a little too much force.

Earnest's eyes were still on me. I'd seen a few pictures of him from when he was alive, but they were all in black and white, which was similar to how he appeared to me now—gossamer and wispy around the edges. It made me sad that I didn't know what color his eyes were.

Goddamnit, he was getting to me just like he always did. I could never actually tell him no.

I swiped my coat off the chair next to me and put it over my head. Even though I couldn't see him, I knew Earnest was grinning in a way that made him glow that rivaled the sunset.

"I cheated on a math test my senior year by writing all the formulas on the inside of a water bottle," I said with a deep breath.

Within a few seconds, the temperature in the room fell. I knew that when I pulled my jacket off my head, Adeline would be next to Earnest, and they'd be making googly ghost eyes at each other.

Gross.

So I didn't look at them when I did so. I just shrugged into my coat, slid my laptop in my bag, and got up to leave.

“Thank you, Clarke,” Earnest called as I walked out the front door. I glanced back at Earnest and Adeline, where they would be for the next hour or so until Adeline was whooshed back to the river—heads close together, whispering about something, and I felt a pang in my chest. I shut the door softly so I didn’t disturb them, and I locked it up for the night.

God, even the ghosts could get a partner.

The bitter air biting at my cheeks saved that thought from getting too far. All I could think about on my walk was how cold it was. It was March—still winter in Wyoming, but this winter had been milder than most. Mild enough that there wasn’t snow covering every walkway, so I could walk to work—even though I risked freezing to death every morning and night.

Even though I loved a Sweetwater Peak sunset more than almost anything in the world, I was jonesing for Daylight Savings Time to hit. More than anything, I am a summer girl. Plus, the sun setting at 5:30 P.M. is depressing.

My walk wasn’t long—seven minutes, usually. I couldn’t even listen to the entirety of “American Pie” in that time. I had my gaze on the sunset as I approached my house—trying to romanticize the moment and what would inevitably come after: stovetop mac ’n’ cheese, probably a hot dog, a glass of the finest boxed wine money could buy, and crying over elderly-dog videos on the internet.

But—for once—it didn’t look like that was going to happen because there was something—someone—on my porch. A living someone. I didn’t have to see his face to know it was Leith Wilkes. His broad shoulders and annoyingly perfect hair gave it away immediately.

Shit. What was he doing here?

I’d been avoiding Leith for months, but he’d been persistent. His texts finally quit a few weeks ago, so I thought I was off the hook.

Apparently not.

He smiled when he saw me—a big, bright smile that wouldn’t be out of place in a toothpaste commercial—and gave me a wave.

I didn’t wave back. Suddenly, the mac ’n’ cheese and hot dog combo seemed like the most appealing way to spend my Friday night—even though adolescent me would’ve committed actual crimes to have Leith show up on her front porch.

She was an idiot.

“You’ve been avoiding me,” he said as I got closer. It was then that I realized that Leith wasn’t the only person on my porch. His dad was there, too.

His dead dad.



LYLA SAGE lives in the Wild West with her loyal companion, a sweet, old, blind rescue pit bull. She writes romance that feels like her favorite things: sunshine and big blue skies. She is also the author of *Done and Dusted*, *Swift and Saddled*, *Lost and Lassoed*, and *Wild and Wrangled*. When she's not writing, she's reading.

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