

KIMBERLY LAFONTAINE



LET IT  
SHINE

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By

Kimberly  
LaFontaine

**LET IT SHINE**

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**CREDITS**

EXECUTIVE EDITOR: TARA YOUNG

COVER DESIGN BY SHERI

## **DEDICATION**

*November 22. The Eiffel Tower in Las Vegas—one of the most romantically lavish and important experiences of my life. Romance isn't dead. And passion is real. Sarah, you've opened my eyes.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing the acknowledgments is harder than writing the novel itself. Inevitably, someone is always left out. So I'll start by saying that I'm blessed for every person in my life. They've each added brilliant colors in their own special ways. Your unshaken faith in me is what keeps me going, especially in following my dreams as a writer.

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## Prologue

Life, even in its most terrifying moments, has such beauty to offer.

I'd prayed a thousand times for the strength to enjoy every minute of my life—even the hardest ones—but could never see past the pain. Fear would shut me down. Ice would flood my chest and freeze the tears in my eyes. Those precious minutes would slip by without registering, forever lost in a hazy blur.

Then finally, when it was most inconvenient and unexpected, a moment of pure clarity slammed home and thawed my senses.

It had been raining. Cool, steel gray clouds rolled across the sky for hours, opening up and crashing down on the earth in random increments. My body ached with dreaded anticipation—physical pain building beneath the bridge of my nose, drawing a straight line across my forehead to my temples, creeping around the back of my neck and shoulders, and down my spine. My feet were heavy, my chest tight. I felt like I couldn't breathe or focus or think of tomorrow.

Even a nice chilled pinot grigio straight from the bottle couldn't calm my nerves as I waited and paced and chain-smoked until my throat was completely raw.

My life was falling apart.

A year before, I thought I had everything I needed to make life good—a love that wouldn't quit, a decent job that I didn't like but that got me by, good friends and family, and a comfortable home that wasn't quite the white picket fence but would do. Then disaster struck, and it all began to shift and change. A deep-seeded longing pumped through my veins and began to define me, despite my best efforts to thwart it.

It's impossible to shove every unpleasant moment and thought into a box and not expect it to eventually explode. Mine wasn't a small outburst. It was more like a mushroom cloud that lingered and hung over every aspect of my being, poisoning everything and everyone around me.

Some people might call it a quarter-life crisis. I prefer to think of it as realization dawning that I am who I am and I'll never be anybody else.

I lost the job. I lost some friends. And I changed so much that my relationship suffered until we fell out of love with each other.

I can still see her in the low light of our living room, sitting on the couch with me, her hazel eyes misty and beautiful as I said, "I don't think we can reconcile our differences," and how she took a deep breath and nodded slowly, sighing—part in relief that I finally had the courage to say it, part in agonized discovery that it was truly over.

The way she looked at me as we dared to open up and say the things we'd been holding back, for fear of rocking the relationship that had already withered and died, was one of those terrible, hard moments in life that I could finally appreciate for being so powerfully beautiful.

The inner strength shining from those eyes nearly brought me to my knees with gratitude for having been granted one of my deepest desires. Even if it hurt like hell and filled me with unbearable disappointment and regret. I will never forget that look or the way the room smelled of incense, the sound of the prattling rain against the windows and how shaky her voice was as she tried to be strong for us both while I wept uncontrollably.

To say it was just another one of those eye-opening moments would be a horrible understatement.

## Chapter One

The walls were too white, too simple to tolerate. At first it was just the bedroom, the wall opposite the bed. It glared in the dark as I lay awake, unable to sleep. It mocked me with its lack of pictures and history. It said, “You have nothing. And you are alone.”

A few days, a trip to the art shop, eighteen middle-of-the-night hours, and twenty brushes destroyed and discarded, fixed that. The glaring white was replaced by powerful, beautiful friends and allies who could watch over me while I slept through dreamless nights. Symbols of hope and balance, of protection and ancient magicks.

Two days later, it was the bathroom. Then the living room wall by the fireplace. That one took a week. Bright acrylics splashed across doorframes, ivy vines winding down the hallway into the kitchen, hours upon hours of therapy painting. I had nothing but my colors and my brushes, my rags and my dad’s tattered Vietnam-era Army shirt to comfort me at night.

My phone rang frequently—friends worried about me. I rarely answered. E-mails flooded my inbox. I opened them only if they were work-related. It wasn’t that I didn’t care or appreciate their concern; it was that I was tired of the words of advice that sounded like regurgitated bullshit they got from a movie or self-help book. The same words I’d spoken so many times before and never realized how hollow they sounded until it was my turn to be on the receiving end.

The hardwood floors were covered with yellowed newspapers, splattered with paint, tape barely holding the pages down while I paced barefoot and smoked my cigarettes indoors despite my vow not to do so. Like so many other things, my willpower had gone to shit.

I’d told my friends I could handle this. I’d be fine. It won’t kill me. Don’t worry about me. I’m a strong and independent woman. I’d get through it. I knew damned straight that most people can only tolerate a grieving person for so long, and I’d reached the limit with many of the people close to me.

“Jordan,” they’d say, “it’s time to move on and let it go. You said you two ended things on good terms. And anyway, weren’t you the one who did the breaking up?”

Or, “I know it’s hard, but you’ve got to deal with it. And soon.”

Even worse: “Make some plans. Get out more. You’ll meet someone and it’ll get better.”

Hi, my name is Jordan Coones, and I don’t give a shit what you think I should do. It’s my life. And everybody is on her own timeframe. And there’s no time limit for getting over a woman you thought you’d spend the rest of your life with. So screw anybody who says otherwise.

Sixty-eight days and counting. Sixty-seven dreamless nights. Two months, a week, and a few days to get my head straight about the whole mess. No, I hadn’t bought new furniture. No, I hadn’t put up pictures, unpacked all my boxes, or tried to see anyone new.

And yes, I ran over that night in my head. Every word. Every look. Over and over and over again. It was the right thing to do. No doubt about it. But that didn’t mean it wasn’t going to hurt or make me feel guilty for being the destroyer of hopes and dreams. That’s how I felt—wrong or not. And that’s what tortured me at night.

My life was an unstructured mess of talking myself out of bed, snagging what gigs I could, and painting murals in rich families’ homes for their spoiled children. Little sailboats for boys, rainbows and fairytale castles for girls. An occasional

mural on the side of a grungy bar to class it up a bit. Every once in a while, a gig would let me be more artistic. I treasured those and charged less than my regular rate to ensure I got them.

I was always covered and smelling of paint when I came home, scrubbed it off in the rickety tub of the old duplex, then got the stuff all over myself again at night. I am completely in love with the smell of paint.

It was the most productive I'd been in years. It was good work—adventurous, honest, and passionate art. No more holding back. I was painting for myself.

And yet...

Days blurred together, no matter my attempts to keep them all separate. The dust hadn't settled yet in the recent upheaval, and I was already itching for something big to happen. Anything to shake things up and get me out of my self-pity routine.

Sometimes, when it was too quiet in the duplex, I'd pick up the phone and call my ex—we'd promised not to sacrifice the friendship—and we'd talk for hours. We weren't doing nearly as bad as we could have been. We were functioning, sort of, which was good enough. We could usually hold a conversation without too much bitterness or blame surfacing.

That night, it was mid-May, wonderfully mild for Texas, sixty-eight days after I chose to end it for our mutual happiness, she called to tell me the news.

"Jordan, we need to talk. It's important. Can I come over?"

I looked at the disaster zone that was my living room. I thought about what a neat freak she was and how she'd always been on my case about paints and newspapers littering the second bedroom. It made me snicker.

"Yeah, of course."

A few seconds ticked by as I finished my cigarette and put it out in the overflowing ashtray next to the fresh canvas I'd picked up that morning, intending to paint the night away since all the walls were covered. I looked at the mountain of butts and tried to picture her reaction. It shouldn't matter. But it did. I could see her disapproving look, could imagine her nose scrunched as she stood and surveyed the empty wine bottles littering the floors, could hear the lecture in my head as clearly as though she were standing there already.

"Oh, hell."

I opened a few windows to get some of the smoke out, sprayed some air freshener, and marched into the kitchen to find a trash bag.

Twenty minutes later, sweating and breathing a little too fast from scrambling to make the place presentable, I opened the door to her familiar knocking. Too late, I felt the light breeze on my bare legs and realized I was still in my dad's Army shirt and little else. I grinned at her, embarrassed, and told her to make herself comfortable while I went to put some pants on. I watched her look around the room, searching for a place to sit.

"I'm gonna make us some tea," I said when I returned, properly clothed. She just nodded, her fingers knitted together in her lap, her eyes not meeting mine. She'd found a paint-free spot on the floor and sat cross-legged against the wall. I had to force myself not to let the ice flood my chest and numb my mind. If she wouldn't even look at me, the news had to be something I wouldn't like. No matter what had happened between us, and even though we'd decided to limit our contact for a while, we could always talk reasonably comfortably and honest when face to face.

What-ifs raced through my mind as I boiled the water and prepared the mugs. For a split second, I wondered if she'd found someone new. It wasn't even surprising that not a single spark of jealousy surfaced. I wanted my Alex to be happy, and I couldn't give her that. Maybe somebody else could.

We needed something calming, I thought, and chose chamomile for this particular night.

She took the steaming mug and set it down on the newspapers. She looked up and down the walls, a small smile curling her lips. I had forgotten that she hadn't seen what I'd done to the place. Neither had my landlord, which was fortunate.

"I think you're getting better," she said simply. "Love the Ganesh in the corner."

"Thanks."

Awkward silence filled the room. To be honest, I'd expected more of a reaction out of her. The urge to light another cigarette was overwhelming. I started tearing at the newspaper on the floor, needing something to do with my hands.

“So what’s going on?” I finally broke the silence.

She cleared her throat and laughed nervously.

“I have something to tell you,” she began and faltered.

“I got that when you called. So spit it out.”

“You’re not going to like it…”

“Try me.”

She sighed and took a sip from her mug, her eyes finally meeting mine. She’d never been good at this kind of thing—making announcements of importance. The hesitancy always made it worse for me. I began to grind my teeth, choked the demanding words back, knowing it would only take her longer to spill the beans if I pushed too much.

Finally, “It’s unexpected, and… uh… a good opportunity for me.” She paused and smiled softly, almost tenderly apologetic. “I got a promotion, and I’m moving to Phoenix.”

For a few seconds, all the air left the room and was replaced by something too heavy to breathe. Words refused to move past my throat, though plenty wanted to break free. Angry words. Happy words. Confused words. I coughed and cleared my throat.

“Okay” was all I could say.

She sighed again and shifted as though she was going to move closer.

“Don’t,” I told her, as anger finally broke through. I tried my best to squelch it but wasn’t strong enough to play the friend that night. “Good for you,” I nearly spat, took a deep breath, and tried to shift gears. “Really. Hope you’ll be happy there. I just thought we were going to stay close and salvage our friendship. That’s all. Guess I was wrong to hope I could keep you in my life.”

Anger flashed in her eyes now.

“And exactly what makes you think we can’t still be friends?”

“Don’t pretend you thought I’d take this well. You said I wouldn’t like it. I don’t.”

“It’s not for you to decide. I’m going. It’s done. I leave in a week.”

Our eyes locked. I could feel the heat in my cheeks and the burning behind my eyes that meant the tears were on their way. There’d been too many tears lately.

“I didn’t mean…” My voice cracked. “Damn it, Alex, I just wasn’t prepared for this, okay? I’m sorry if I’m not reacting the way you wanted me to. It’ll be okay. It has to be.”

“Damned straight it has to be.”

But it wasn’t going to be okay. Not for a long time. That moment, that announcement made me feel like I’d taken ten steps back on my path to recovery. It made me want to toss her out of my sanctuary and curl up and cry. It felt like losing her all over again, like she wouldn’t be leaving if only I could have found it in myself to relearn how to love her. And as those thoughts crossed my mind, the anger came back.

What had made me hesitate most in ending our relationship was not indecisiveness or a reluctance to face reality and admit it was over. No, I got that. It was the friendship that I’d been so scared to lose. And now she’d be gone, just like that.

I sat frozen, listening to her babble nervously about the new job, nodding when appropriate, asking simple questions about the move and where she’d be living. The ice kept starting to tingle in my toes and my fingertips, but I shoved it back angrily. I would not numb this out.

It was a losing battle. By the time she left, I was shivering. I sat in front of the canvas and painted the worst painting I’d created in years.

Four days, she told me. Four days to get decent enough to attend her going-away party, then help her move the next day. Four days to clean up enough to interact socially with our mutual friends, whom I’d been avoiding and ignoring for months.

Two bottles of wine weren’t nearly enough to thaw me out.

I'd been waiting for something to shake me up. Been dreading and longing for it, to be honest. And it had hit hard. That night, furiously slapping paint on the canvas with thick brushstrokes, I had no idea how overwhelming it was about to get.

## Chapter Two

I stared at the twenty-nine-year-old woman looking back at me in the mirror for several long minutes, touching my lips, running my fingertips across my forehead, trying to smooth the worry lines. I stretched the loose skin around my eyes, frowning at the dark circles. I ran my hands through shoulder-length wild brown hair, ruffling the layers that made me look like a hippie, and decided I'd go with the brushing-is-overrated look.

I took my time getting ready—partly stalling, partly enjoying the attention I so rarely paid myself—rubbing in lotions and makeup and putting on mascara. There was no need to impress anybody. It just felt nice to spend some time on myself after so much neglect. My favorite well-worn and bleached-out jeans felt comfortingly snug on my hips, the cream-colored, flowing shirt soft against my skin.

I'd show them I hadn't fallen apart completely. I could do this. And without drinking heavily before I showed up.

If I were to be honest, I'd have to admit that I was more than a touch nervous about seeing a lot of the people I'd be running into that night. There had been so little contact over the past month that I didn't even want to call or e-mail anybody because I'd have to apologize and explain again why I was "hiding."

Nobody ever got it.

"But you know I'm here for you," they'd say. "You can talk to me about anything."

Sure, then the lecture about moving on comes. Or the bullshit distraction games start—"Let's just watch a goofy movie or something and order pizza. That'll cheer you up."

Not really. But thanks anyway. I'd rather drink some heavy dark wine and express my frustration through art. And they got bored while I sat with my sketchpad and went through pages and pages, being completely non-responsive at the bar. And then they made up excuses and left.

I am not a drama queen. I do not want your sympathy. I'm grieving and just want to work this out on my own—at my own damned pace, thank you very much.

Sure, I did the breaking up. But that can hurt just as much, can be just as heartbreaking and tragic as being left. There were so many things I wanted out of life, and it got to a point where I realized that despite my desperate desire to make things work and be happy with Alex, I just couldn't do it. Maybe what I wanted didn't exist in the real world, but the need to be free to try to find it became so overpowering—a million times stronger than the need to settle for a lesser kind of love with a woman who deserved better than a lover who wasn't quite on the same page with her anymore.

So sure, tell me it'll all be okay. Life is beautiful. Blah-blah-blah. It's all just meaningless noise, like white static. Rarely did anyone say anything that struck a nerve or resonated, that penetrated the chaos that my head had become.

But that day was turning out to be not so bad while I was getting ready for the party. Taking care of myself physically felt productive and good. I'd gone Rollerblading in the park, listening to Janis Joplin on my iPod. "Get It While You Can." You sing it, sister.

And I bought a bed frame to put my mattress on. And then a couch and a kitchen table with chairs. I'd been working so much, drowning my sorrows in gigs, that I no longer qualified as broke. Which was pretty nice.

My favorite flowers were also blooming along the highways, drawing a smile as I drove home. Indian paintbrushes. Though technically considered a weed, they were wild and free and beautiful. Kind of like myself, some might say.

I'm not depressing all the time. I am not always the dark, tortured artist. This was only a temporary condition. And if I dug deep enough into my psyche, I realized that the depressing-to-happy ratio would change with time. I just wished it was that time already.

So I deliberately blasted music from a happier play list while I danced half-dressed around the duplex and got ready. This was my personal, private pep rally. And hell if I would ever give up my guilty pleasures—Justin Timberlake, Pussycat Dolls, Outkast, and Pink. I'm supposed to be that politically correct, lesbian feminist, hippie activist who cares more about Ani DiFranco and Melissa Etheridge music than mainstream dance hits. I'm supposed to scoff at that stuff. But you know, it's fun. And I needed fun in my life.

I'm expected to like and do a lot of things. It's easy to follow the labels that people give you. And then, if you bend the rules a little, everybody's surprised. I'd had enough of that. I stopped dancing abruptly—"Sexy Back" was shaking the duplex—and laughed. I laughed so hard my sides started hurting and I couldn't catch my breath. It was a wild, hysterical laughter that hadn't filled my chest in so long it was painful. I gasped and laughed, started shaking my butt again, and laughed some more.

Fuck what anybody thought. To hell with the mocking and the labeling. I decided I'd play this very list for anybody I allowed in my sanctuary. Especially when Alex was supposed to come over the night before she left like she'd promised for some wine and goodbyes. Let's see what she says when she finds out I downloaded "Don't Cha."

It's kind of amusing, the small things that'll make you smile in trying times. Like songs and wildflowers on the highway.

And with a smile still on my face, I hopped into my beat-up rusted ancient Firebird, gunned the engine, and hit the road. That night would break the seventy-one nights of painting in a row. It would probably be good for me. I hoped so. I told myself so. And I nearly believed it.

"Thanks for coming," Alex whispered in my ear when I hugged her in the doorway. I forced myself not to look over her shoulder at the boxes stacked along the wall. I tried not to notice how nice she looked with her long blond hair straightened perfectly and how a nice new shirt hugged her just right. I didn't allow the smile to slip off my face when she said, "I wasn't sure you'd come."

"I'm here. I promised, remember? And I don't intend to always break my promises."

She gave me The Look. The pointed one with her left eyebrow raised. The one where her lips tighten and she might as well just say, "Don't go there." Caught that double meaning, I guess.

We pulled apart and she took the bottle of wine I offered and wandered off without another word.

I'd have to watch saying those kinds of things. I don't even know why I said it. Me, a touch bitter? No way. But that was not cool. I'd decided not to begrudge her a good opportunity and chance at a new start. Miss Alex Sanders deserved a better friend than that.

Before I could really think about it, someone tapped me on the shoulder.

"Hey."

Leslie Becker. No, I didn't mind seeing her at all. She was one of the few I'd kept in contact with over the past two months—Friday night visits to The Red Door, where they served my favorite beer on tap. We'd talk for an eternity. Sometimes I'd talk and she'd let me do so without the lectures, gave me the freedom to rant and express myself, just listening. It was refreshing, and she was the only one who got why it hurt so fucking much and why it wouldn't just go away on everybody else's time schedule. Definitely the reason why we'd kept hanging out. And she had her own shit. We commiserated well, Leslie and I.

At some point, she'd slipped from being Alex's co-worker's ex-lover and good friend, whom I saw once in a blue moon, to my drinking buddy, then to my dear friend. I should have known she'd be at this party. It made me feel much better about being there.

I pulled her in for a long hug, let her run her hands up and down my back. She never needed to pester me about how I was. If I didn't volunteer, she just knew anyway. She pulled back and smiled warmly.

"You look nice. Good day today?"

“A hell of a lot better than it has been.”

“I miss seeing you at Tom’s. No point in going there if you’re not mixing the drinks.”

“Couldn’t stand it anymore. Business picked up for me, too. It was just time. We can go hang out there, though. You know that.” And I laughed. That place nearly squashed my ambitions—too many late, long hours. It had been nice to have Leslie come in with her friends. It made a difference in how the night went. But that wasn’t enough to stay.

That year was the year of big, scary changes, and that was one of them. Even through all the shit that was going on, I felt a touch of pride for having walked out of that place after so many years. It was long overdue.

“I know. It’s good for you. Even if you are working yourself half to death.”

“You know I love it.” That drew another smile. Yeah, I did love it. Even the boring bits of sailboats in little boys’ rooms. There’s something about the smell of paint and working with my hands that just turns my soul on. One of my secret desires was to open and run a small gallery someday. Maybe it would happen.

“I heard you did some work on your own place. Can’t believe you kept that a secret.”

“Alex tell you about that?”

“Of course. I want to see it.”

We looked at each other for several long seconds. I hadn’t let anybody come over since the therapy painting started, save Alex that one time. And even she hadn’t seen everything. The art that wound down the hallways and into the bedroom and bathroom was very personal. I wasn’t sure Leslie realized what she was asking of me. Then I noticed the fading smile, how it was slowly replaced by a more serious, encouraging expression, how her pale blue eyes pinned me and went straight through me. Maybe she did realize.

“Okay,” I whispered, cleared my throat, and ruffled her short dark hair. “But you need to know that—”

“You don’t have to explain,” she said.

I closed my mouth and let my hand drop away, the justifications dying in my throat.

“Tonight. We’ll stay as long as you can tolerate the party, then we’ll go.”

I just nodded. I thought of the empty wine bottles in the living room. The overflowing ashtray. The half-finished painting of two women making love. The dirty, paint-speckled newspapers plastered over the floors. The horribly rank mess that was the kitchen sink overflowing with plates and pans. The clothes all over my bedroom floor.

Then I caught the bemused smile tugging at her lips.

“My place is a wreck.”

“I don’t give a shit if your place is a wreck.”

“All right, but you’ve been warned.”

She smiled and hugged me again, then took my arm and led me into the kitchen. She grabbed a beer and handed it to me with a smile that said, “You look like you need a drink.” It made me grin in spite of my sudden, inexplicable nervousness.

And I would have said something nice like “Thank you,” but people had spotted me and surrounded me, showering hugs and sympathetic smiles that made my insides cringe.

Leslie watched from the corner of the room. I’d catch her eye occasionally over the shoulder of a friend, and she’d raise her eyebrow, her lips curling. In a strange way, it was comforting to know that she could read me from across the room. “Yeah, I know,” her look said. “Just get through it. They mean well.”

Two beers. Four glasses of wine. It wasn’t like Alex was on cloud nine. She was still dealing, too. I knew that. The forced smile on her face told it well enough, though few seemed to recognize it. Some of her co-workers didn’t know how to interact with me, so they didn’t. I wondered what they thought of me now—Alex’s girl who had dumped her.

A thousand words of uncomfortable comfort. Alex, trying to play all smiles and happy for the many friends and co-workers who had shown up. Me, trying to reconnect with people without talking about her. Them, asking me how I was. Resorting to talking about my gigs. And music. Idle chit-chat. Someone put some music on and suggested we play some games. Me, avoiding said games and sneaking outside for a quiet cigarette on the balcony, ignoring the cacophony filtering through the sliding glass door. Trying not to think of the nights I’d shared on this balcony with Alex, attempting

to woo her with candles and dinner. Checking my phone for the time—only two hours had passed, but it was midnight. Time to go yet? Debating on having another drink and deciding it wouldn't be a good idea. Damn.

The glass door slid open.

“You okay?”

“As okay as I'm going to be.”

“Let's go.”

“Good idea.”

Leslie and I split up and went to say our goodbyes. Some people tried to talk me into staying, tried to bribe me with more booze and a “guaranteed good time.” Funny. I had better plans. Sorry. Alex just nodded and smiled, real this time. I'd probably stayed a lot longer than she thought I would. And I felt a little bad about leaving but couldn't take one more minute of that party. My good day was threatening to turn sour, and I didn't want that.

Sure, there were people there who I did miss and hadn't seen for a while. What I missed, though, was the pre-breakup versions of them—good times minus the way they looked at me now, like they thought I was going to hurt myself or something. Not likely.

Sighing, I finally made it across the threshold, down the stairs, and into the parking lot. The air was crisper, fresher somehow, more breathable.

“I'll follow you.”

“Right. It's not far.” I forgot she didn't even know how to get there. It seemed so stupid all of the sudden that she didn't know. And it was my own fault.

Yeah, so I was nervous and smoked three cigarettes in fifteen minutes, my radio blasting. If you think I have some trust issues, you're absolutely right. This one wasn't going to hurt me, though. I couldn't even imagine that. The worst that could happen wasn't that she wouldn't like my style. It was the subject matter that bothered me. What an artist chooses to paint is much more important than what colors she picks or how she paints.

She stood behind me as I struggled with the keys, my heart pounding.

“If you don't want to do this, you don't have to. We can go somewhere else.” Her words filtered through the freight train in my head and I slowly turned. How the hell does she do that? Like we're the same person sometimes.

“No,” I said firmly, surprising myself. “It's okay. I want to share this with you. I'm only nervous because what you think matters to me, and it's very personal. Revealing.” Then I turned around and unlocked the door. I hit the light switch and stepped aside to let her in.

The silence lasted half an eternity, marred only by the crinkling of newspaper under her boots as she turned around and around, scanning the walls. She reached out and touched the paint, ran her fingers along Ganesh's trunk and broken tusk. Another few minutes of silence, then a soft, “Wow.”

Nervous and relieved laughter bubbled up from my chest. I nodded to myself—it had been right to bring her here—and headed for the kitchen in search of a bottle of wine and two glasses. When I rounded the corner to the living room, her eyes were shining, staring directly at me.

“Thank you.” She wasn't talking about the glass of wine I handed her. It made me smile.

She started asking questions and I gave her answers.

“And what does this mean to you?” and “What made you decide to paint this?” and “What were you thinking when you did this part?”

It felt good to talk about it. I turned on more lights, walked with her into the bathroom. Then the kitchen. She made fun of the dishes. We poured more wine and analyzed the bedroom walls. I explained the different deities and what they represent. She knew I was loosely pagan and asked about the symbols.

“That one is for balance and transcendence. Painted it because I need it. That one is something I was inspired to paint from a tarot deck—the temperance card—basically the same as the last one, only with a stronger emphasis on patience.”

“Yeah, you could use some of that.”

Soft laughter.

“Calling the pot black, Miss Kettle?”

“Shut up.”

She grinned and took a sip of wine.

“Tell me why you’ve had a good day.”

“You’ll laugh.”

“Maybe. So what if I do?”

I took her back into the living room and plopped down in front of the computer, pulled up my music library, and selected the play list. The music started. It was loud and upbeat, obnoxious and fun. I waited for the laughter, but it never came. Spinning around in my chair, I found her with a very strange expression on her face.

“What?”

“I fucking love that song. I can’t believe you like that song.”

“Why’s that?”

“I get so much shit for liking that song.”

“So would I if anybody knew. I can’t believe you like that song.”

And it was another one of many moments that we just looked at each other and felt like we were looking at ourselves. Very strange and quite wonderful.

“So that’s what made it a good day?”

“That and Indian paintbrushes and finally buying some furniture for this place.”

“Mmm...simple pleasures and big steps.”

“Yeah.”

We listened to the whole list sitting on the floor. We talked about Alex leaving. We talked about Leslie’s own problems and heartbreak. We sang along and laughed at each other and enjoyed the wine. It was intimate and not scary at all. Maybe I was still capable of letting someone in. She’d already made it past the outer wall and my troops weren’t keeping her from checking out the inner defenses. There are some people you’ll meet who can crash straight through, who seem like you’ve known them your whole life, who are so precious and rare and just get you like no one ever has. For me, Leslie was one of those people.

She was real. When she listened, her eyes weren’t dulled by an internal search for the next bit of information to contribute to the conversation. When she spoke, it was brutally honest and raw. Tears would fall from her eyes and run freely, unabashedly. And she would reach out without fear, taking my hand in hers, needing and craving contact. Just like I did. She was just like me.

She was the one who would eventually teach me that being emotionally raw was not a weakness, but an amazing strength, that it allows for terrifying lows but also incredible highs. You love harder and longer and stronger. The passion in me that I’d tried to restrain for so long—that was bursting at the seams to be free—was nothing to hide or push down. I wasn’t losing my fucking mind, like I’d thought for so long, wanting things that everybody said only happened in movies and fairytales.

It felt so good to know that she was just like me. I could talk to her about these things without the blank look of not understanding, meeting me across the table.

It didn’t matter that we’d both started out knowing each other as somebody else’s friend or lover. It didn’t matter that I was twenty-nine years old and she was a decade and a half older. When you think about your dearest, closest friends, it’s often impossible to discern when and where that unbreakable connection was made. But with Leslie, I’d always remember. It was one of those beautiful moments in life.

That night, under the soft candlelight and during intimate conversation—more intimate than either of us had had in a very long time—I could almost feel our souls touch.

And that’s when the bond was forged. I knew in an instant that we’d always be in each other’s lives in an important way.

There’s always a risk in making new friends and true, strong connections. But sometimes, on very rare occasions, it’s worth the risk to let your guard down. Completely. Blindly. And after seventy-one nights of painting until morning’s dusk

filtered through the blinds, I decided it was worth letting this one in. All the way. Better to share the intimacy of such a strong friendship than never know it for fear of being hurt again. I needed this. Desperately. And so did she.

## Chapter Three

Alex was gone, off in another state to start a new life. Missing her was instant and painful. It hit me in the gut the second she got in her car and drove off. We'd tried not to drag out the goodbye. There had been an awkward moment when she nearly kissed me and realized it just in time to pull back. We'd shared a knowing but sad smile, hugged shortly, and let go.

No matter what had happened between us, she'd been my lover and dear friend for six years. Our lives were so intertwined that there were few stories I could tell that didn't involve Alex in some way or another. It hurt to watch her leave. I wanted to wrap my arms around her and beg for her to stay. I stood in the street and watched the red car lights fade into the distance, remaining in the spot for another minute or so before dragging my feet back to the duplex.

All I could think about was how much we'd wanted to make life good for each other and how, in the end, we'd just made it miserable. I had to remind myself of that, missing her so much.

My canvas would be filled in a few hours, then what? Go and buy another?

A search revealed that not a drop of wine remained. Damn it.

And I was out of cigarettes, too.

Fine, just take away all my vices and self-medication.

For an hour, I surfed the Internet. My cell phone rang several times, but I didn't answer it. Not now. I was barely hanging on and it was getting late. It buzzed three times and I looked away from the monitor with mild curiosity. The buzzing meant it was a text message. I didn't get many of those.

"How are you holding up?"

The simple question drew a pleasantly surprised but brief smile. Leslie, of course. And she probably knew I wasn't doing well at all. I fumbled with the phone for a minute, squinting at the tiny letters, typing awkwardly.

"Not well. Feel. Like. Shit."

Well, that just about summed it up. At least I could be honest with her and didn't have to sugarcoat everything. I debated asking if she wanted to have a drink and decided against pestering her so late on a Sunday night. She was a morning worker, unlike myself. I never managed well with the nine-to-five kind of jobs.

Less than a minute passed before she replied. "Need to talk?"

"Yes," I started typing back, "need a drink." Then I stopped. This was silly. I erased the draft message and called her number.

"It'll take forever if we text back and forth," I said by way of a greeting.

"Do you want to talk?"

"Not if it's too late for you."

She laughed. "Meet me at The Red Door."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For understanding."

A few seconds of crackled silence passed.

“You sounded like you needed me. It’s my turn to take care of you.”

She hung up and I couldn’t help but smile. It wasn’t that I felt better or stronger. What made me smile was knowing that she could pick me up when I fell, that she was willing and able. It was going to be a rough conversation. There would be no laughter. Neither of us had anything to celebrate, and life of late had been more than difficult for both of us. But having her get me was a great comfort.

I had dear friends I’d known since high school who cared very much about my happiness and well-being. They called and sent flowers and tried to share and listen. They tried hard in their own ways to help me get my feet back on the ground. And I loved them very much. But just as with Alex, I was changing—in some ways reverting back to a wilder, more passionate version of myself that I’d tried for years to write off as too reckless and immature, and in other ways allowing parts of myself to surface that I’d never let loose. A lot of what I was doing didn’t go over well. Many simply couldn’t understand how I could change so much in a single year. They got that the tragedy that happened the year before was the catalyst and that I’d never be the same. In theory, they empathized.

But I was so tired of hearing “I miss the way you used to be.” Or “I’m worried about you. You seem so different.”

Damn it, so yeah, I was different. But we’re supposed to grow, right? And change isn’t the end of the world. Walking through fire and surviving it will forge a stronger self. It’ll tear you up and rebuild you in ways you never thought possible. And it can go down either street—make you dark and hard or make you appreciate what you still have so much more.

Tragedies have a way of doing that. Like losing your father to a car bomb in Iraq. Gods, that still hurt like hell. He was only supposed to be gone for a few months, working as a private construction contractor and getting that fat hazard paycheck. Instead, he was ripped away, torn out of my life in a random flash of violence and fire. I can’t say that losing him to a disease like cancer would have been any easier, but when you toss murder into the death equation, it takes grief to a whole new level.

I wept for weeks. He was all over the apartment I’d shared with Alex. There was the washer he’d repaired for me. The bookshelf he’d built from scratch. The flatware he’d given me for Christmas my sophomore year in college. The list goes on. It came to a point where I could hardly stand to be there. So I wasn’t there. I went Rollerblading, worked as many shifts at the bar as I could handle. I painted canvases at the park on a new easel, because the one he’d built hurt me too much to see. Alex tried so hard to be strong for us both. She loved him, too. She’d been part of the family, completely accepted, like an adopted daughter. But her strength for us both made it hard to talk about him and the senseless loss.

My priorities shifted and changed with each passing day. My life became a series of all-or-nothings, of race or stop, of feel until you burst or don’t bother. I let the grief ride me for months. Let it ride me so completely that I began to see life as too short to waste on anything less than magical.

That’s when the emotions exploded from the tight lid I’d kept them under. That’s when passion became more important than a career, when intimacy became more precious than money, and when the fairytale love was more valuable than comfort and companionship alone. I’d tried to share what I’d given up as not real. I made the grand romantic gestures, or at least tried my best, because for a while, I wanted so badly to be able to share that with Alex. Too late, I realized that it wasn’t her cup of tea and that our visions of the future had changed so drastically that we couldn’t make them fit together anymore.

I rambled about romance to anyone who would listen and was quickly labeled a “die-hard romantic.” Like it was a bad thing. Most of my friends would chuckle when I talked about how much I’d love to walk on the beach by moonlight, holding hands with a lover who appreciated the setting. Or how beautiful it would be to dance in the rain. I’d hear what I’d heard all along—that shit only happens in the movies.

It’s hard to explain how I could go from being reasonably practical about relationships to becoming such a sappy dreamer. Alex couldn’t follow me there. All I know is that I woke up one morning from a nightmare of burning flesh and melting metal and knew. The message of the dream seemed so clear: Quit hiding behind convention, from what other people tell you love should be like and don’t hold anything back because it can all be over in a flash. I was covered in sweat, tangled in blankets, panting, clutching my pentagram necklace tightly in my right fist—so tight the edges bit into the palm of my hand.

And I prayed.

“Please, let me value every minute of my life. Give me the strength to see beauty in even the most terrible of moments. I don’t want to miss anything you and this life have to offer.”

It became my mantra. My prayers were heard. And even if it was terrifying at first and made my life all that much more difficult for the beauty of hard times, I wouldn’t trade that gift for anything in the world. Of all the things I’d ever prayed for, that was the one and only thing I was granted. And that had to mean something. To me, it meant that what I’d locked away was meant to be let loose—my do-or-die impulses, my passion for romance, my emotions.

And to hell with the consequences.

I turned off my computer and stood slowly. I touched my pentagram, rubbed the edges of it like a worry rock. It was always soothing, comforting, like an anchor holding the ship at bay in a storm. I went into the bedroom and put on some jeans and a T-shirt, glad to be getting out.

It only took ten minutes to make it to the bar. Not a single stoplight on the way there was red. I sped and there were no cops to flash their blue lights at me. I found a parking spot right up front—a rarity. Call me superstitious, but when the drive goes that smoothly, I typically take it as a sign that I was meant to make whatever trip I was making. Even if it was just a short distance to The Red Door.

Leslie sat at the table we had claimed as “ours,” a beer sitting in front of the chair that was “mine.” She smiled at me—that honest, wonderful smile—and motioned for me to take a seat. I wasn’t even sitting at the table for a full minute before the tears came and flowed down my cheeks. All she’d done was reach across the table to give my hand a gentle encouraging squeeze.

“It’s so fucking hard,” I whispered, choking back the sobs that threatened to burst from my lips. I wiped my eyes angrily, hating the public display of vulnerability.

“I know.” She handed me a napkin, so I could wipe my eyes and blow my nose, never looking away. Leslie was not a woman to be uncomfortable with grief. She understood it. I knew that she wouldn’t walk away from this or try to cheer me up. One of the most frequent pieces of advice she dished out was, “You feel what you need to feel. Don’t ignore it. Let it happen.”

And I tried so hard. Tried not to numb it out and let it wash over me.

## Chapter Four

Rain prattled softly on the edges of my porch as I sat in an old rocking chair with a steaming cup of coffee. Alex had been gone for three weeks. She'd called only twice—once to let me know she made it all right and once to tell me about her first week at the new job. I wanted the rain to come down harder. I longed for the sound of crashing thunder. A shiver ran up and down my spine, though it was humid and warm.

The coffee felt good sliding down my throat. I tried desperately not to think of another rainy afternoon ninety-something days before but couldn't stop the memory from swimming to the surface. It had been much harder to push things away once the box exploded.

And just like that, I was back—gone from a moment of reasonable comfort and calm to stormy and upset.

It was the day after the breakup. I had crawled out of bed to see why it was so dark outside. A glance at the clock had shown that it was after two o'clock in the afternoon. Not surprising, really, since I'd been up most of the night and hadn't drifted off until light began to filter through the blinds.

As I moved to extricate myself from the sheets on the office futon, the headphones slipped from my ears and I heard the rumbling. Shit, I thought, and hurried toward the door.

A storm was raging wildly, spraying me with horizontal rain even from the wind-protected apartment entryway. The parking lot was nearly flooded, and lightning flashed threateningly overhead.

My first thought was how appropriately the weather reflected my mood.

I removed the headphones and iPod from my pocket and set them aside. I stepped into the wall of rain and let it pound the top of my head, gush down the back of my neck, and soak my jeans in less than thirty seconds. It was like standing in a shower, except it smelled fresh and metallic. A smile curled my lips. There's nothing a good rain can't wash away. It removes the humidity and pollen from the air and makes it more breathable. It can temporarily pound out the demons so that all you hear is the clapping of thunder and roar of the rain—the negative voices shocked and silent in your head.

Needles on my face, scrubbing, cleansing as I closed my eyes and turned my face up to meet the storm. Burning on my cheeks and forehead. Slowly, I tipped my chin back down and sighed, breathed deep through my nose.

I didn't want to go back inside where every inch of the home was covered in Alex and me. It was impossible to think there, to figure out what to do next. The tightness in my chest was overwhelming. All I could think about was that I needed someone to hold me and tell me it was going to be okay. But I couldn't bear the thought of having to speak the words out loud, to make them more real. How do you ask for comfort without saying you need it?

"Alex and I broke up last night," I whispered, choking on the words. "Alex and I broke up last night." A pause. "I'm single again." Another pause. "It was for the best."

Sure, I thought, keep telling yourself that and maybe it won't hurt so much.

I watched the sidewalk and couldn't tell if raindrops were hitting the puddle I stood in directly or if the water was running off my body and making the water ripple. A shiver ran down my spine and forced me to admit that it was time to go back inside.

Standing in the storm, going outside to be with it and in it without first checking the television to see if there was any danger was the kind of thing that Alex didn't get about me. Trailing off mid-sentence while walking across a crowded

plaza to stop and stare at the sunset—all crimson reds and golden hues—was another. But I needed those moments, craved beauty like a drug. And it felt good to get a hit of it before having to face the reality of the ugly, emotional mess I'd made.

Dripping in the entryway, I stopped and stared. I'd spent the night in the second bedroom, crammed tight between the desk and my paints and easels on the futon. I'd been unable to sleep and tried listening to music, finally drifting off into a restless slumber around seven o'clock in the morning. I hadn't heard Alex move around. But she'd been busy.

It was a shock to see a handful of boxes already neatly packed and stacked in the corner. The reality hit me like a freight train, smashed me under its wheels. My hands shook first, then my knees, and I had to sit down.

What my eyes showed me was a logical consequence of the sequence of events I myself had initiated. But the pounding in my chest colored my vision faster than I could handle. I should have known this would happen pretty damned soon. I should have known because Alex and I dealt with pain in very different ways. She would keep herself busy, be the responsible one to swallow the blow and take action immediately. I sure as hell wasn't.

*"What are we going to do?"*

*"We can't live together."*

*Silence. Rain hit the windows as tears ran down my cheeks.*

*"I know that, Jordan. I mean, how soon are we going to move out?"*

*"Soon."*

*She grabbed my right foot and held it tenderly, giving a reassuring squeeze. And I felt so weak, so terribly low to make her be the strong one again when I was the one who was ending our future.*

*"I'm sorry," I whispered, voice tight. "I never would have thought... I didn't mean for things to turn out this way."*

*"Me too." And then her own tears came.*

*We moved closer and held on to each other tightly. The first truly comforting embrace we'd had in months. It was beautiful and terrible at the same time—to have such desperately needed, loving contact when it was far too late. And she pulled back enough to look at me with impossibly sad eyes. It shattered my heart into a million pieces, and I shuddered, unable to meet her gaze for more than a few seconds.*

I went to the fridge and grabbed a beer, drank it down in five minutes, thought about grabbing another, and decided not to. That was not the time to drink. I sat on the couch and allowed the tears to fall. I looked at the boxes, wrapped my arms around myself, and cried some more. I couldn't move or think or focus.

Remembering that afternoon forced the tears to the surface again. It had been over three months. Fuck, it still hurt to think that I'd hurt her so much. It wasn't myself I was crying for anymore. It was her. And as suddenly as the tears had come, the anger surfaced. I was crying for the hurt of a woman who didn't even care to call me more than once a week anymore. And she'd been so cheerful on the phone the last time we'd spoken. How hurt could she possibly be?

I set the coffee mug on the porch and stood, dropped the blanket off my shoulders, and stepped out into the rain once more.

*"Beat it out of me," I whispered. "Please."*

*And I let the skies rain down on me until I felt completely numb.*

*"How do you get bronchitis in the middle of the summer?"*

I shrugged my shoulders, not quite meeting Brandon's eyes. "Dunno," I muttered noncommittally, taking the hot tea he offered me.

Maybe it was standing barefoot in the rain for an hour or so, feeling the warm drops turn cool as the sun went down, then going back into the duplex where the air conditioning blasted down on my soaked clothes while I painted for three hours. Not that I'd ever admit that to him. He was one of those friends who didn't quite get me that way.

*"Right," he said in a tone that indicated he didn't quite believe me. Ignoring it, I took a sip of the tea and sighed.*

*"When are you going to stop this shit?"*

I looked up then, surprised by his bossy tone. He wasn't one to ever raise his voice—Mr. I'm-A-Buddhist-Pacifist-Dude. But he had.

*"Stop what shit?"*

He sighed dramatically and leaned forward on the couch, hooking my chin with his fingers and forcing me to look into his eyes. We just stared at each other for a second or two. “Stop feeling sorry for yourself,” he finally said in a half-whisper. “Stop sitting around, waiting for a better, happier life to come knocking on your door. Stop wallowing. Stop living in the past and driving yourself mad. Stop hating the way things have changed. Stop acting the tortured artist all the fucking time.”

Shocked silence.

I wanted to yell a retort—opened my mouth and got as far as “How dare...” before shutting it again. That last sentence penetrated the anger. Maybe it was stupid, but the fact that my love-everything friend had dropped the F-bomb made me shut up and listen.

“How dare I what?” he demanded, still in that half-whisper, our eyes locked firmly. “How dare I care? How dare I worry? How dare I give a shit that my friend has been making herself crazy for three months?”

“No...” I whispered hoarsely, clearing my voice to finally interject.

“Don’t. Don’t give me that shit about being on your own timeframe again.” His hand dropped away from my chin and he looked away. “I know it hurts. But you have to deal with it and move on.” He paused and stood up. “I’m not saying you need to go out and find a new girlfriend. I’m not expecting you to drop it and be happy all of the sudden. But I do expect you to be strong—strong, like the Jordan I’ve always known.”

He began to pace and I just watched him. It had been years since I’d seen him this agitated. I knew him well enough to know he was working himself into a rant and I didn’t want to stop him. Yeah, Brandon, just let it out. Tell me nasty things you think I need to hear because you don’t get me anymore.

“You think I don’t understand? You think you’ve changed so much I can’t recognize the look in your eyes anymore? Damn it, Jordan, you are not so different. Not at all. You’re still you. You’re just...” He hesitated, threw his arms up in a desperate search for the right words. “... just Jordan, without the damned mask.”

I finally found my voice. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You go on and on about this do-or-die shit, about how life is so precious and beautiful and rare. Well, duh, Jordan. Of course it is. And you think nobody understands. You’re poor, poor, Jordan—so misunderstood.” He threw me a dirty look then, and I realized he was truly angry. This wasn’t a normal rant. He looked hurt.

“You’ve always been kind of like this, it’s just more intense now. You were trying to put yourself in a box, trying to be all responsible and grow up. And I knew,” he gestured emphatically with his arms, “I knew it wouldn’t last and would blow up at some point. I just didn’t realize it was going to be this dramatic or destructive. I tried to tell you, didn’t I? Don’t stuff away your passion. Don’t shut off pieces of your soul. I tried to talk to you about it, but you wouldn’t listen. Just like now.”

He showed me stormy eyes. There was deep disappointment there, too.

“You ignore my calls for months, then come crawling back when you’re sick because you need somebody to take care of you. And lucky me, I’m it. You can’t do that. We’re supposed to be best friends. I’ve been worried sick. I love you. Don’t fucking hide from me. I know what happened with your father—”

“...was hell,” I shot at him furiously. “It was hell and it fucked me up.”

“...and Alex—that was hell, too, I’m sure. Breakups are terrible, I know. But you’re better than this.” And he swept his arms around my living room, indicating the empty wine bottles and overflowing ashtrays. “I thought you were over this.”

My shoulders slumped. “I was...”

“Apparently not,” he said, lowering his voice with visible effort. “Look, if I didn’t care, I’d keep my mouth shut. But as a friend who loves you, I can’t just watch you hurt yourself. Get a grip. Seriously.”

My throat felt tight and it wasn’t just the illness. I coughed, felt the rattling in my chest, closed my eyes against the pain, and let the moment pass. A shifting on the other end of the couch let me know Brandon had sat back down. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly in a long sigh.

“I just want you to be okay,” he finally said as calmly as he could. “And stop this shit. Now. Not tomorrow, not in a week, but right now.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“Yes, it is. You make a choice to fix your life and you do it.”

“Every situation you’re ever in, you’re there because you want to be or you’d fix it?” I quoted one of his life’s rules back at him a bit harsher than I’d intended.

He looked at me and ran his hands through his curly brown hair in an effort to remain calm. “Yes. Exactly. And don’t mock me.”

I slumped farther into the pillows on the couch and closed my eyes against the tears that were so close to the surface—always so close. I swallowed past the lump in my throat.

“I’ll try.”

“You do that,” he muttered and took my hand. “Promise.”

I nodded and promised I’d try to pull it together. I promised to cut down on the drinking. I promised not to ignore his calls anymore. Having seen his eyes so full of hurt, I think I might have promised anything to make that look go away. Then he made me promise not to feel sorry for myself or him for having hurt him.

Maybe Brandon was right, and he did still get me.

Hell, maybe I’d been wrong about my friends, or at least about him. I had to consider it as a possibility. It had been going on for months. It was then nearly mid-June. I’d missed barbecues, birthdays, going to the movies, weekly coffee shop meetings, all kinds of long-standing plans... I’d only let three people into my new home—Alex, Leslie, and now Brandon. I’d only called him because Leslie was out of town, and knowing that made me feel guilty with my hand in his. He squeezed reassuringly, almost as though he knew and was forgiving me. Then he scooted closer, wrapped his arms around my shoulders, and pulled me close to him. I began to cry softly until great sobs wracked my body.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered into his shoulder, and he said nothing.

I don’t know how much time passed. But I do know that something shifted inside me that afternoon. Something important was happening. The guilt on my shoulders felt a little lighter, the pain in my heart grew fainter. Brandon’s angry words were the slap in the face I’d needed. He didn’t give me regurgitated advice. He didn’t promise it would all be better or that happiness was mine for the taking if only I’d take another chance.

He just told me I was better than this, and those were the words that finally slapped me awake and made me want to try a little harder. Yeah, I was better than marching down the path toward alcoholism. Yeah, I was definitely better than sitting in my duplex nearly every night, crying, feeling like a horrible woman for being unable to be happy with Alex, for allowing myself to chase my dreams.

And my dreams certainly didn’t include drowning in self-pity.

He got a trash bag from the kitchen and picked up the empty bottles. He emptied the ashtrays and tore the newspapers and tape from the floors. He filled five or six bags without a word, not letting me help because “I want to do this for you and you’re sick.”

I listened to him pour out the remaining wine and didn’t protest.

Once upon a time, Brandon and I were roommates in college. We’d both been depressed and we’d drunk wine together. A lot of wine. So much, in fact, that we nearly flunked out because we weren’t very good at functioning in class with a hangover every day. It took years to learn control and drink in moderation. Brandon didn’t drink at all anymore. He had a right to be worried about me. He’d seen me at my worst, and if he was dumping out all the alcohol in my home, I knew it had to be bad. So I let him do it.

I had no intention to stop drinking, but I’d sure as hell watch myself.

When he left, he kissed me on the cheek and said simply, “Now don’t be a stranger.”

I managed an embarrassed half-laugh, and though it nearly hurt to smile, my lips curved against his stubbly cheek. “I’ll call you in a couple of days.”

He nodded and left the duplex. The silence that followed his departure didn’t seem as thick as it had. And for the first time in months, I went to bed without the buzz of alcohol.

I slept just fine.

## Chapter Five

Jackson's room was different. No little sailboats for this two-year-old kid. No jungle with scary cats, either. I was loving this job. His parents were what you'd call intellectuals—not pretentious or stuffy, just big thinkers and big dreamers. I swore they were ex-hippies, the real thing.

I dipped my inch-wide paintbrush into a plastic cup of a crimson light hue and added a touch to the galaxy's swirling axis. I took a step back, examined the wall, and stepped forward to repeat.

The bartender at Vintage had hooked me up with this couple. It was a Dallas bar that catered to artsy types, where I have to admit I'd hung out for more than just the purpose of networking. I'd done some work there, which had been nerve-wracking—an artist painting for other artists who would just sit around and critique it all night. Jackson's parents had apparently been on the nicer side of the critiquing spectrum.

When they called, they said some of my favorite words in the world.

"We love your work. We don't care how much you want or how long it takes. Can we sit down and chat about it? Vintage has a new wine we'd like to try..."

They asked how much. I asked what they wanted me to paint and forced myself not to look too excited. Sure, I'll paint a big-ass galaxy with a bazillion stars and brilliant colors. Yeah, and you have to buy the paints and supplies. And by the way, it'll cost you two grand (not eight hundred per room, my usual rate). You'll pay it? Fucking beautiful.

It was day eight at the March residence. With my iPod buds plugged firmly in my ear, I swayed to the music and added some swirling mist here and a star there. I had twenty buckets of paint and innumerable plastic cups with my own mixes and was dreaming of seeing the earth from space, listening to the soundtrack to *Star Wars*.

Alex had been gone for a month. She'd called me earlier that morning to chat—the third call she'd made. She was loving her new job. I was hating it.

"Do you miss Texas yet?"

"Nope. Don't think I will, either."

She told me she'd been waiting for me to call her. And my insecurities about her not caring anymore changed into a deep embarrassment. Duh, I could have called her instead of waiting around for her to do so.

She asked how I was doing. And I could honestly tell her that things were going a little better.

I set the crimson light hue on the floor and picked up a cup filled with phthalo blue, my favorite color to paint with. It was the base for many of my paintings, a rich, midnight blue—great, set against the brilliant red mist.

One of the things I loved so much about that gig was that it was truly challenging. I'd never painted a galaxy before, something I neglected to mention to my clients. It was hard as hell getting it to look like the pictures they handed me, getting the colors and proportions just right. It was going to make for a fantastic addition to my portfolio.

I wiped my sweaty face and decided it was time for a break. My phone buzzed in my pocket just as I stepped outside and took a deep breath of summer to clear my head from the many fumes.

"What are you doing for lunch?"

I checked my watch. It was barely eleven o'clock. The Marches were at work at the university, and I could take my break whenever, so long as they came home to much visible progress. I'd been at it for three hours already, and progress was clearly visible.

"Thought about going to Taco Bell. You have a better offer?"

I lighted a cigarette and waited. I might have been new to the texting thing, but Leslie sure wasn't. Thirty seconds later, I got her response.

"Mud bugs?"

It made me laugh. She had this thing for crawfish, and they were in season. Only two weeks before, she'd given me a lesson on how to properly shell and eat the messy, spicy suckers. And it sounded damn good. My stomach began to rumble in anticipation.

"Hooters or Razoo's?"

Another thirty seconds. "No Hooters. Can't have a pitcher of beer and head back to work. Razoo's downtown?"

"Okay. Meet in 30 minutes?"

"11:45."

"You got it."

I snuffed out the cigarette and headed back inside. It would have been best if I'd immediately begun to wash up and headed out, but I stared at that wall for ten minutes, taking in my work.

Now I'm not a bragger. I won't typically carry on about my business or all the things I've painted unless I'm extremely drunk or someone is asking a bunch of questions. Or unless I'm pitching to a potential client. It's amazing, though, how you can do your craft for years and years and still be surprised by something you yourself produced. I guess it would be like a writer reading over some paragraphs and saying, "Damn, I can't believe I actually wrote that."

I couldn't believe I'd painted that, even though the paint was still fresh and wet in patches on the wall. Alex was right, I was getting better. If only I could find more March types to fund my creativity the way they had—without a definite deadline or tight fist around the checkbook.

And suddenly, I was saddened because I wanted so much for Alex to be there and see it. Sometimes, when I started painting murals, she'd come over to see my work. She had supported my dream and given good feedback. It just felt wrong that she wasn't there to see one of my best pieces yet. Wrong that she wasn't knocking on the Marches' front door, a bag of fast food in hand to share my break with me. Wrong that she didn't even know what I was working on anymore and didn't ask when we talked. Wrong that she was in another fucking state and was loving it.

And just as suddenly, I felt stupid for all those thoughts—angry that I should feel sad about my ex-lover not being there to share this moment of breakthrough in my art. Annoyed, too, because I had a perfectly good lunch plan with a dear friend and was wasting time feeling sorry for myself. Again.

The soundtrack came to an end and the lack of noise pulled me from my musings. "Shit," I muttered and headed for the bathroom. "Let it go," I ordered myself while scrubbing furiously at my hands and face—yes, I'd gotten some crimson on my nose somehow—and tore off the Army shirt, replacing it with a spare T-shirt from my bag of supplies.

I was going to have to make up time on the road. Half an hour from Dallas to Fort Worth is not nearly enough.

Breathless, I raced through the restaurant's front door and scanned the room, spotting her in a booth in the corner. There was an unhappy look about her—maybe it was the way she was sitting—and I first thought she was upset that I was ten minutes late. But as I got closer and our eyes met, I knew it was much more than that.

Her blue eyes were swimming in unshed tears and her hands trembled slightly. Damn, I thought, wondering what had happened.

"Hey," I said softly and slid into the booth next to her, instead of sitting opposite.

She just looked at me and a tear trickled down her cheek. She swiped at it angrily.

"Hey," she whispered back so that I barely heard it above the crowd.

I put my arm around her shoulder, giving her a half-hug. She let me hold her for a few seconds, then shrugged as though uncomfortable. I moved my arm.

"I ordered already," she said matter-of-factly.

“Thanks.” I paused. “What happened?”

She cleared her throat. For a few silent seconds, I thought she wasn’t going to tell me. She began to knit her fingers together, then stopped and began to tear at a coaster on the table, making tiny pieces and placing them in a pile.

“Amy has a guy. She’s fucking him, I know it.”

I’d immediately known from her tear-filled eyes that it would probably have something to do with Amy. But the words still shocked me. “What?” I blurted stupidly.

“Ran into her at Starbucks about an hour ago. She was with that friend of hers.” She shot me a meaningful look. We’d talked about this before. Leslie had never liked that particular friend, and having met her myself, I couldn’t blame her. Leslie took a deep breath and continued. “I stopped at the door and almost turned around to leave, but they were talking and I... I heard her talking about that guy she called her boyfriend and how great he is.” She stopped abruptly.

And this was Leslie’s shit—her misery that had kept us going for hours at The Red Door, long before Alex and I broke up.

Once upon a time, when I first met them—together, through Alex—they’d seemed like one of the happiest couples I’d ever seen. It had made me jealous, though I’d never admit that to Leslie. We went on a couple of double dates. Amy and Alex were fairly quiet, while Leslie and I carried the conversation.

Amy was a spunky redhead, a few months older than me, and perhaps I should have felt closer to her because we were so close in age. But it was Leslie I clicked with and Amy remained an acquaintance—Alex’s friend.

Six months later, they had a nasty, messy breakup. That was in late August, so it had been a little less than a year before. My friend got dumped in a text message. It pissed me off every time I thought about it. There had been no closure talks, just bitter heartbreak. After three years, you’d think a person would owe the other an explanation. But Leslie never got hers.

For months, she waited for a phone call, a knock on the door, a letter, another text message. Anything. She never got it. She told me once that she would sit around and fantasize about Amy coming crawling back to her. If not that, then she would imagine Amy crying, hurting, regretting her decision to leave.

It was a long time before I could tell her that Alex and I were having problems—didn’t want to dump my junk on her when she was barely getting by. But it just kind of came out one night. She’d told me that she was envious of what I have, which made me cry and confess. She tried to help me patch things up. And I followed her suggestions, to no avail. Many a night, we sat staring down the bottom of an empty beer glass, commiserating.

This mess at Starbucks was going to put her back a few months. No doubt about it.

I had tried to keep my feelings about Amy neutral. I tried very hard. People just break up, you know? There are always valid reasons. I just hated the way she did it.

Leslie’s hand was already reaching for mine. I took it and squeezed gently.

“What did you do?” I asked tentatively.

She took a deep breath, as though trying to maintain control.

“I got the hell out of there. I don’t think they saw me. I didn’t know what to do.”

“Good. There’s nothing to say or do.”

She looked at me then with watery eyes. Her hand was growing tighter around mine. She tried to smile, but it was more of a grimace. “Maybe I should have asked—”

“Nothing,” I interjected, having a pretty good idea where this was headed.

She snorted and took a sip of her water. She wiped away another tear and ran a frustrated hand through her disheveled hair.

“How do I get past this?” she finally demanded after a long silence.

“I don’t know.” A pause. “Honey, I just want you to be happy. You deserve better than this.” Then I remembered Brandon’s words. “You can do better than this.”

Pale eyes pinned me in place and she looked angry for a heartbeat. Then she closed her eyes and nodded. I didn’t kid myself that she believed those words. But maybe she’d think about them. Maybe they’d eventually sink in. Looking at my

beautiful, amazing friend, I prayed with all my heart that her pain would slide away. And soon. Because I could almost physically feel it and it made my heart hurt for her.

I wished for her to find someone who loved like her—fierce and deep. I touched my pentagram with my free hand, listening to her soft, forcibly controlled breathing, and prayed that she would find the strength to let it go and find a better, stronger love. Because Leslie needed that. Because she had so much love to give and it was all bottled up in her chest, suffocating her.

Our food arrived and we dropped the subject in favor of lighter conversation.

Brandon may have dumped out all the wine, but that didn't stop me from picking up a bottle on the way home from the Marches that night. The mural was done and I was extremely proud of myself. They loved it, too, and swore they'd refer me to their friends.

I wanted to celebrate and I had the next few days off until my next appointment.

For a week, I'd behaved. No beer at The Red Door. No wine at home. Nothing. And perhaps my break should have lasted longer, but I didn't care. It wasn't a matter of me being upset or angry. I just felt like experiencing the sensation of heavy dark wine exploding on my tongue.

I sat out on the porch, sipping the wine. I'd been outside for an hour, just listening to the sounds of the Texas summer night. Crickets. Wind rattling through the tall oak trees. The sound of soft, distant thunder. A dog barking for several minutes before being scolded by its owner, and very distantly, I could hear the rush of cars on Interstate 30.

And I was thinking—mostly about what Brandon said about me being better than feeling sorry for myself and needing to snap out of this funk. About how it was a choice. So I made my choice, rocking on the porch. I would not allow myself to follow the dark tunnel anymore. I decided it was fine and good to fully experience life through passion and emotions, but to wallow forever in grief was not an admirable thing.

Logically, the guilt I bore on my shoulders was not entirely mine to carry. It takes two to ruin a relationship. So I'd carry my half and drop the rest. I was not the destroyer of hopes and dreams. I was the woman who broke the news in the most tender and loving way I could—with tears and honesty. That had to count for something. It was certainly better than packing my shit and skipping out of town or sending a text message or being mean about it.

And wasn't it Alex who had rejected my every attempt to patch things up?

Yeah, it was. So I'm not to blame entirely. This guilt thing had to stop.

I had to stop thinking about it and her all the damned time. I took a sip of wine and wracked my brain for something else to focus on. I stumbled across the conversation over lunch. It made me worry about my friend, wonder what kind of night she was having.

My phone showed that it was after two o'clock in the morning. Was she sleeping? Was she crying in bed? She'd been so good lately, checking on me, making sure I was okay. Daily phone calls and text messages and lots of hugs. I wanted so desperately to help her, make sure she knew that I cared about her. And without thinking, I started typing a text message.

"This is your friendly reminder that you are a wonderful, beautiful, amazing woman." I hit send and stuffed my phone back in my pocket. I rested my head against the back of the rocking chair and knew how true those words were.

## Chapter Six

“You don’t know how nice it was to wake up to that message. Turned over and went back to sleep with a smile on my face.”

My lips curled into a big grin. I read and reread the text message, lying in bed. The buzzing had woken me up. It was only eight o’clock in the morning, certainly earlier than I usually got up. But I was awake now—a smile on my face so early in the day for the first time in a very long time.

I stretched and yawned. The whole day was ahead of me and I somehow knew that it was going to be a good one.

I dressed in some beat-up jeans and a T-shirt, strapped on my Rollerblades, and headed out—long, confident strides along the neighborhood roads where few cars passed. It wasn’t hot yet, but the humidity let me know that it was going to be soon. Good thing I’d been woken up so early, I thought, and grinned again.

It was a Wednesday. My appointment for my next gig, when I’d meet with my clients to discuss which paints and supplies to buy, was the following Monday at six p.m. Rollerblading, feeling so good about using my body and being in the sun, made me long for the days Brandon and I had taken spur-of-the-moment road trips to go hiking or camping. It had been years, since before Alex, because she didn’t like it if I was gone too long and wasn’t interested in the outdoorsy kinds of activities. It wasn’t something we could share. How many invitations had I turned down?

Wasn’t the point of being alone again to rediscover myself more fully and live life a little harder, a little richer? I came to an abrupt stop and ran fingers through sweaty, windblown hair, thinking. I wondered what Brandon was up to and if he’d be game.

Only one way to find out.

“Hey,” he answered the phone quickly. “I’m at work. Can’t talk long. What’s up?”

“When do you get off work?”

“Two o’clock. Why? You wanna hang out?”

“In a manner of speaking.” I actually giggled. “Road trip?”

“What?”

“You wanna ditch this place and get away for a few days? You know, like we used to do?” A few seconds passed in silence, and I wondered if I should ask again.

Then, “Hmm... I work tomorrow and Friday, but I think I’m feeling a bit sick.” He gave a fake cough and we both laughed. “Hell yes, Jordan. I’ll finish this shift and go pack my stuff and you can come get me. Your idea, you drive. I’ll call in sick tomorrow. How long we gonna go?”

“Till Sunday?”

“Excellent. Be at my apartment at three o’clock and I’ll be ready. Gotta go.”

“Bye.” And he hung up.

For a few seconds, I stood in the middle of the street, hardly believing what I’d just done. What I would be doing. I couldn’t stop the dread filling my chest automatically—the feeling I’d always gotten when I knew Alex wouldn’t like something.

“I don’t answer to her anymore,” I told myself aloud. A pause. “I can do whatever the hell I want to. And I want to do this.”

The dread slowly receded and was almost immediately replaced by giddy excitement. Hell, I needed to get moving. I had to get home and go through my boxed-up junk to find my camping gear. Six years... did I even still have everything, or had it gotten purged in the many moves? Maybe I’d have to go shopping.

I pushed off quickly and sped down the streets. A shower and an hourlong search of my stuff later, I discovered that I’d have to make a trip to the sporting goods shop to pick up half the things we’d need. Damn.

But I was so excited. I felt genuinely happy. Why on earth hadn’t I thought of this earlier? It was so simple.

I bought a ton of stuff, dropped about seven hundred dollars at the store, and eagerly swapped my sneakers and jeans for the new shorts and hiking sandals I’d picked up. My trunk was stuffed to the brim by the time I’d made my last stop—the grocery store—and pulled into the apartment complex where Brandon lived.

He was sitting outside, waiting for me, a hiking pack slung over his shoulder, his glasses slightly askew. A broad grin split his face when I parked and got out. He crushed me in a hug, pack and all, and said, “Now this is more like it.”

We pulled apart and dumped his pack in the backseat. “I’m so happy we’re doing this. Thank you so much.”

“Me too.”

I started the engine and made to pull out of the parking space. He touched my arm and gave me a strange look. “What?”

“Where are we going?”

I turned off the ignition and started laughing hard.

“Damn, didn’t even think of that.” I dug around under the driver’s seat and pulled out an old worn road map of Texas. I unfolded it and scanned several favorites of ours. Big Bend. Padre Island. Enchanted Rock.

“Any ideas?” I asked, still scanning the map.

“It’s summer. I veto Big Bend—it’ll be too hot in the desert. Padre Island will probably be swamped with college freshmen.” Brandon pretended to gag and I rolled my eyes. “But going to the beach sounds like fun. You brought a tent, right?”

“Yeah,” I said slowly, now focusing on the coastline. “What about Galveston?”

“Never been there. Let’s go.”

I looked at the highways and nodded. We pulled out and hit the road, music blasting loud, windows rolled down to get wind in our hair. We were singing along, laughing, smiling broadly, Brandon’s feet perched on the dashboard, my fingers drumming on the steering wheel.

My phone’s buzzing went unheard, and I wouldn’t notice it for several hours.

“Red Door tonight? Could use a drink...”

I felt a fleeting moment of guilt. Leslie needed me and here I was at a gas station just south of Houston, four hours away. And the message had gone unnoticed for several hours.

“Can’t tonight. Sorry, honey. Decided to get away for a few days. On a road trip with Brandon. Call?”

I fully expected her typically quick response. But I’d smoked two cigarettes already and she hadn’t texted or called. Brandon was starting to fidget and I shoved the phone in my pocket. She could, of course, be busy. Perhaps she’d found someone else to accompany her to The Red Door. I fought the impulse to turn the car around. That would just be too much.

I couldn’t shake a feeling of dread—a very real, physical tightening in my chest. That feeling was competing with excitement at the sight of the ocean at dusk. I had reached for my phone numerous times over the past hour and decided not to call her. She’d be fine. I wasn’t the only friend in her life who could help.

Brandon and I found a campsite and paid our ten bucks. We didn’t bother with the tent. We quickly emptied our pockets into the car and raced down to the water’s edge, now glittering silver under the full moon—pearly gray sand flying under our pounding feet—and splashed straight into the water, laughing like children.

Waist deep in the cool waves, rocking back and forth, grinning for several seconds. A splash of saltwater in the face. A shout of surprise. Sputtering. Chasing after Brandon, whose longer and stronger legs took him out of range. Calling

after him—“Wait up!”—and diving, grabbing his feet, dumping him on his butt. Getting my head shoved underwater, sputtering some more. Tasting the salt on my lips and feeling the slight burn in my eyes. Gods, this was great.

We played for an hour, running up and down the beach, shivering in the cool ocean breeze, splashing back through the water, and repeating. Finally, panting and laughing, we made our way back up to the campgrounds and wrapped towels around our shoulders, then went about setting up the tent and loading it up.

Brandon wrapped his arm around my shoulder as we stood and watched the waves. A surge of affection flooded my entire being for this man who had been my friend for so long. I opened my mouth to tell him how much he meant to me but shut it. There was no need. Sometimes, a moment of comfortable silence can convey so much more than words.

“I’m so happy we’re here together,” he said, and his voice was soft.

“Me too.” I sighed happily. A pause. “Wanna build a fire on the beach?”

“Can we?”

“Don’t know. But let’s do it anyway.”

“Trying to discover the quickest way of getting chucked out of here?”

I snorted and shook my head. “No, I just want a fire on the beach.”

“Okay then. Let’s get to it.”

Brandon went to scour the beach for dry driftwood while I went back to the car, intent on getting my lighter, cigarettes, and that day’s newspaper, which we’d bought on the way to read to each other. I wondered what time it was and picked up my phone, noticing the blinking red light that indicated another message.

“Oh. Hope you have fun. I’ll call tomorrow. Kind of up in my head tonight and don’t want to talk about it anymore. Please understand.”

Sighing, I read it again. And again. Reading between the lines, she was probably at home. Likely drinking. I fought the urge to call her anyway and put the phone away after typing back, “Okay. Please be safe.” It was after ten o’clock and Brandon was probably wondering what was taking me so long, so I grabbed the necessary items and headed back for the beach.

The campground was nearly deserted. There were only three other tents and a couple of cars. By the looks of things, the tents were empty and we suspected the occupants had gone into Galveston proper for a night on the town. Something neither of us was interested in. No way in hell were we going to leave the beach when we’d just arrived.

Now that I thought about it, the beach was the perfect getaway to revive my soul. I can’t tell you when I fell in love with the ocean. The salty air, the endless crashing of waves upon the sand, the smell of suntan lotion and the sun beating down on my head. It made me feel connected to the earth in ways that no other type of place could.

There’s something about the simplicity of vast skies kissing the endless waters that makes it possible to let heavy thoughts slide away and just enjoy being. To feel humble and connected to the world. To focus on little else than the feel of gritty sand between toes and salt drying on arms and legs.

“Let’s get this thing started.” I jumped. His voice had thundered through my thoughts and scattered them.

I just nodded and began tearing up the newspaper, arranging the twigs, seaweed, and logs until I was satisfied. I lighted bits and pieces on one side, letting the stiff breeze do most of the work for me. It had been a damned long time and I was a little rusty. It took the better part of half an hour before the fire was acceptably lit and wouldn’t go out again, during which time Brandon laughed and jeered. “Thought you were supposed to be good at this,” “Do you need me to go buy a bottle of lighter fluid?” and “Come on now, we want a fire before the sun comes up.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah...” I snorted and coughed on the smoke. “I don’t see you down here in the sand getting a fire started.” I looked up at him and grinned wickedly. “And as far as I remember, you’re not allowed to make the fire anymore after what happened last time.”

Brandon’s smile slid off his face and he grimaced, clearly embarrassed. He ruffled his hair and looked away to hide the blush creeping up his neck, but it was the same reaction I always got.

The first time we’d gone camping, we’d brought along a few friends, a girl he was interested in among them. He was, of course, trying to impress her and thus decided he’d be the one to make the fire.

It had been raining. A lot. All the wood he carried in from the forest was wet. We didn't have any newspaper and he refused to let me help. We had, however, brought some lighter fluid, which he poured all over the damp wood. Grinning broadly, he'd dropped a match onto the pile. For a fleeting, horrible second, I thought he'd set himself on fire. He'd screamed at the fireball that leapt into the air and immediately died—having exhausted its energy in an instant and was unable to consume the wet logs.

And there he stood, his face splotchy red—not truly scorched, more the red of a bad sunburn—his eyebrows and low bangs singed, the smell of burning hair hanging in the air around him. A few seconds of silence passed. He looked at the girl, who scoffed at him in disbelief and looked away.

“Very showy,” I'd whispered in a half-laugh and got cuffed in the arm.

And that was Brandon. Fun, cuddly, lovable Brandon. Part goofy, part adorable, part horn dawg. To use a few clichés, he had a heart of gold, would give away his last shirt, would take a bullet for you, and was smart in an, I'm-a-thinking-man's-poet, kind of way.

I loved him very much. And if I wasn't so damned gay, so very much into women... Well, there was a time when we might have ended up together. But that was long ago and our friendship had grown into something comfortable and warm. I never should have hidden from him those past few months, should have trusted him to catch me when I fell.

Being with Brandon on that beach was going to be a much better cure for my heartsick than all the wine money could buy.

I gave him a few minutes to let the blush flush away, pretending to stoke the fire and rearrange the extra driftwood. When he plopped down in the sand a few feet behind me and sighed, I knew it was safe to continue the conversation.

“Fire's going.”

“Shut up.” He laughed lightly. “I can't even remember that girl's name.”

“Not surprising. You only knew her for a weekend, most of which she spent avoiding you in case you decided to pull another stunt.”

Brandon grinned at me and grabbed me around the waist and pulled me over next to him as though I weighed nothing. I squeaked in surprise and snorted, making us both laugh until we nearly burst.

The fire crackled in the ocean breeze as we drank tea—note the absence of wine—and shared meaningful events over the past few months. He told me about the numerous rejections he'd received for his poetry and how it had discouraged him until he decided he'd keep plugging away regardless, and “To hell with those pretentious fools.” About how his job was getting him down. About the girl he was dating who didn't seem to know him at all and kept trying to change him.

I told him to tell her to stop or dump her.

And then we got to how I'd isolated myself and how it wasn't healthy. Yeah, same old stuff. In my defense, I explained, I'd gone out at least once a week with Leslie. And bringing up her name made me remember the text message and how she was “up in her head.” I didn't realize I'd trailed off and was staring into the fire thinking about her, until Brandon snapped his fingers in front of my eyes.

“Hello? Where'd you go off to?”

“Hmm? Oh, sorry.” And now it was my turn to look embarrassed, though the now blazing firelight hid it well. “Just worried.”

“About?”

I hesitated. It's not like I could explain the whole situation regarding Leslie and Amy to Brandon. It was none of his business. And it occurred to me quite suddenly that it would be difficult to explain why I was so worried anyway.

“About?” Brandon repeated, now somewhat bemusedly.

“I got a text message from her earlier that's making me worry.” The look he gave me indicated that would not be enough. “She's had it rough, too, lately. Breakup stuff, you know? We talk about it. We have these long intimate conversations that last for hours...” And now the look he gave me changed. And I knew that look.

“Oh, don't even go there. It's not like that,” I snapped, more defensively than I'd intended. Where did that come from? Jeez, that's just one more thing to add to the list of crap I had to examine later. “We're good friends.”

“Right.” He clearly wasn’t convinced that’s all we were. And damned if that one short snippet of conversation didn’t keep me up half the night, wondering.

## Chapter Seven

Gods, I'd forgotten how loud Brandon snored. It was like a crash between a freight train and a lion's growl. If I didn't know for damned sure it was the breeze rattling the tent, I'd have said it was his snoring.

When I jabbed him hard in the ribs, hoping to wake him enough so he'd get the hint and at least roll over, which may have helped the snoring situation, he just gave a mighty grunt and continued on, louder than ever.

I finally just gave up.

After dressing quickly and not-so-quietly, I slipped out into the bright sunshine and checked my phone, discovering that it was barely seven o'clock in the morning. Groaning in annoyance—who gets up at freaking seven on their vacation?—I stretched, yawned, ruffled my saltwater-matted hair, and decided to go for a walk. I was half a mile down the beach, happily strolling along the water's edge, when my phone buzzed.

"What the...?" I mumbled as I dug the thing from my pocket. Nobody in their right mind would call me this early. Then my still-sleepy brain caught up with that logic and I realized the buzzing meant text message, not call. Before I flipped it open, I knew who it was.

"You're probably still asleep. Thank you for understanding. I'll be okay. Good days and bad days... you know? Hope you're having fun. Get some sun on those lily-white legs."

"Lily white?" I asked aloud, looking down at my legs.

"Funny, smartass," I started texting back. "Just cuz you fake bake doesn't mean your tan is better than the one I'll have when I get back. And you're welcome. Was worried but it's okay."

I pocketed the phone and hadn't walked twenty steps when it buzzed again. For some reason, it made me laugh. Like I knew what was coming before I checked the message.

"Right. You'll be a darker shade of white then. Cream maybe?"

"Arrg. You're infuriating."

"Or maybe lobster red? Hope you have some SPF 5,000."

"You're in a better mood. Guess you just need a target for your smartass jokes."

"Hehehe. Guess so. And you make such a good target."

"Gee, thanks."

A few minutes passed while I watched the waves, the phone in hand as I wasn't bothering to put it away when it was constantly buzzing. I pictured her in her house, her fingers quickly typing, a grin playing on her lips. The thought of it made me smile involuntarily. I didn't even realize I was smiling until my cheeks began to hurt from it. At the same moment I realized how broadly I was smiling, a mental picture of the look Brandon had given me the night before came into clear view.

The smile crumbled.

No way. I was just enjoying the playful teasing. And I enjoyed her company. Leslie is an incredible woman and there's no harm in acknowledging that, I thought. No problem with finally getting the intimacy in conversation that I had craved for so long. I'd listened to her stories, held her hand while she cried. I'd told her things even Brandon didn't know. She was the best listener I'd ever met.

The smile returned.

Leslie was a dear, close, loving friend who made my life richer for being in it. She was my rock, my shoulder to cry on, and I needed her in my life. And just because her smile made my day brighter and her hugs made me feel safe and warm didn't mean anything other than that I appreciated her company. So Brandon could shove it.

"Just realized I have no idea where you are. Curious."

"Walking along the beach in Galveston, near Pirates Beach. We're camping. Be here till Sunday, I think."

This time, the stretch between messages was even longer than before. She was probably getting ready for work. I'd already turned to make my way back to the tent and was about to pocket my phone when it buzzed.

"I'm jealous. Wish I was there, too. Love the beach. Not in a tent, though. Don't do the tent thing."

"Wuss."

I counted seconds this time and laughed triumphantly when it was less than a minute before I got a response.

"I'll have you know that I'm at an age where I deserve and like creature comforts. And tents aren't my idea of comfort. Give me a good hotel with room service any day."

"Spoiled brat."

"Butthead."

I stared at her retort. Guess we'd regressed to high school cleverness. I was almost back to the tent, typing as I walked, when I ran smack into Brandon.

"Whoa!" he shouted, half-surprised and laughing.

I snapped my phone shut and grinned stupidly up at him. "Sorry."

"Who were you texting?"

"Uh..."

"Leslie."

"Yeah."

My first instinct was to launch into some sort of explanation when he again gave me that knowing smile. I wanted to say something like, "We were just having some texting fun" or "It's none of your business" or "I don't get why you're implying what you're implying with your smug looks, damn it." But I knew if I said any of those things, it would solidify his opinion, which as far as I was concerned was stupid, since he didn't know her and had never seen us together.

And as though he could read the thoughts chasing around inside my head, he said, "We should all hang out sometime."

"Yeah," I said, a little uncertainly now. This guy was not exactly well-behaved around new friends of mine. For one thing, he always invariably got me into trouble by letting stuff slip, telling embarrassing stories and whatnot. And if he said... Damn, that would be awkward. "We'll see."

I felt the phone buzz in my pocket, knew it would be Leslie, but let it go without reaching for it. Brandon held out his arm for me to take and I took it, having to seriously fight the urge to dig the phone back out. Some part of me realized that I'd check it the first opportunity I got and immediately respond. I took that part and shoved it down as far as it would go and tried to forget about it.

Forgetting about it lasted exactly three hours, by which time Brandon was splashing around in the waves again and I was "catching some rays." Or rather, I was lying on my stomach on a beach towel, my phone in hand, having a conversation with Leslie. It wasn't that I couldn't resist the temptation. It was that I felt like I shouldn't have to.

"I wish I could get her out of my head. How do I do that?"

"I don't know. She'll be there for a while. She burned you pretty badly."

"Do you ever see her?"

"Haven't seen her in months. Don't want to, really. Not gonna make the effort."

"Why? I thought she was your friend."

"She was Alex's friend, my acquaintance. And if I saw her, I'd probably give her a piece of my mind."

"What would you say?"

“That she fucked up.”

The sun was beating down on my back. I was wearing a skimpy bikini, something I hadn't done in ages. It was brand new, black, and made me feel sexy. But of all the things I'd bought, suntan lotion hadn't been one of them. Yeah, that was stupid. The warm tingling had already begun, which meant the pink was spreading. Brandon was supposed to go to the store soon and pick up some lunch, suntan lotion, and aloe. So I ignored the tingling and turned over onto my back, waiting for Leslie's response.

It didn't immediately come. After twenty minutes and another switch back to my stomach, I began to wonder if I'd gone too far with the “she fucked up” comment. For someone who just recently learned how to type a quick text message, I sure was beginning to expect quick and lengthy responses. I set the phone aside and decided not to worry about it. Or at least not to worry about it too much.

Brandon's broad-shouldered shadow cut the heat and I rolled onto my back. He stood over me, his shaggy hair dripping cool water onto my stomach. I squirmed and giggled, finally kicking him out of the way.

“Heading out. You're burning, by the way. I'll hurry and get you some SPF 10 million.”

“You're just as bad as...” I stopped, laughed, and said, “Anyway. Just hurry up.”

Still dripping with salt water and covered in sand, he hopped into my car, making me cringe. No doubt I'd be finding grains of sand from this trip for the next year. A long half hour passed, during which I closed my eyes and focused on the smell of salt in the air and the sound of crashing waves, swooping sea gulls, and the laughter of nearby children building their sandcastles and looking for shells. For about two seconds, I remembered that Alex and I had always planned to go to the beach someday and never made it. But the thought drifted away, sucked from my head by the ocean, which demanded simplicity and contentment.

I was dozing when the phone finally buzzed again. It was still in my hand and shocked me fully awake. I blinked at the bright sun and rolled over, finally sitting up.

“You'd really tell her that?” Instant relief. It hadn't been too much.

“Yes, I would. She fucked up. You deserve better than that. You're a good woman, Leslie. You have much to give. I'm most angry about the way she did it. It's just wrong.”

A minute of silence, during which I imagined having such a conversation with Amy. She hadn't done anything to hurt me. I pictured her red hair and always unreadable smile. I imagined that face contorting when I said she'd fucked up. It gave me a sense of satisfaction. The anger I felt was very real. Somebody had to tell her that ditching someone you claim to love in a text message just wasn't right.

“Wow. That really does piss you off. What else would you tell her?”

“That you're awesome. Sweet. Generous. A good listener. A good friend.”

“You're my champion.”

And then I blushed. A bad, full-fledged, bright red, down-to-my-chest blush.

“Champion?” I mouthed, a little bewildered. Champion, as in protector? I'd never been anyone's champion. And just because I gave someone a piece of my mind didn't truly make me anybody's protector. A sharp laugh bubbled up from my throat, and I decided it was time to put the phone away.

The charcoal slid across the page roughly—sharp, confident lines, all angles and shadows. I wiped my forearm across my sweaty forehead and squinted at the horizon. Brandon fidgeted nervously. “Hey, no moving,” I said.

“How much longer? I feel like I've been here forever. And my leg is cramping.”

“It can't have been more than half an hour,” I said distractedly and added another sea gull and touched up the shadow of a wave. “Almost done.”

This was another thing we'd done a thousand times, though Brandon had been so much more patient in the past. Guess we were both a little rusty. He'd been my first model—back when we were freshmen in college—when I could only pay in pizza and beer.

“Come on, Jordan. What if somebody comes?”

“Oh, bah.” I snorted. “Nobody's gonna come if they haven't already. And I said no moving.”

He grunted and adjusted his hand so it was as it had been. He was nude and nervous, and I knew he'd balk at any moment. So I sped up the dancing charcoal, scratching shadows across his face and muscular chest and blackening his hair. It would be kind of amusing if a family came up from between the beach houses not too far away.

"If you're not done in a minute..." he threatened, looking mutinous.

"One minute."

He sighed exasperatedly and I stopped drawing a few seconds later. It wasn't half-bad, considering it had been at least a year since I'd picked up a piece of charcoal.

"Done?" he demanded.

"Yup."

"'Bout time." He stretched, groaning, like a cat after a nap. Then he stood and hastily put his swim trunks back on, quickly padding over to see his portrait.

"Glad to see you've still got the gift," he said, grinning. "Though your proportions might be off." He sniggered, pointing.

"You wish."

"I thought art was about interpretation."

"It is. But this is a technical piece—maybe a little heavy on 1940s expressionism style. But definitely not surrealistic."

"Ha. Ha. You think you're so clever."

"Pretty much."

He took the paper from me and rolled it into a tube. We headed back along the beach toward the campsite. The sun was setting on a long day of water and sun and no drama.

Mostly it's the simple things in life that make it worth living. Enjoying your craft. Laughter. The sun on your back and wind in your hair. A cold shower to wash away the salt and lotion and sweat, followed by soothing aloe afterward. An ice-cold soda burning its way down your throat. Eating ham and cheese sandwiches with mustard and tomatoes. A card game during which you lose all your quarters.

And then there are the more complicated things that make life not just worth living, but make it rich and full. Moonlight sparkling silver on the waves. Seeing your favorite constellation high in the night sky. Trading intimate secrets with a friend or lover. Taking risks. Dreaming of a better tomorrow, of romance and passion and love. Digging deep down within one's self, doing away with the lies we tell ourselves for whatever reason and facing what's true and real.

While most of my mind was on the fun of the evening, on finally getting large blocks of quality time with Brandon, on listening to his jokes and stories and watching him smile, a small part was sifting through bits and pieces of conversation, concentrating on small touches and big truths. Most of which I wasn't nearly ready enough to deal with.

Deciding I didn't care if I got teased for checking my phone again, I dug it out and watched the light blink red for several long seconds. I lighted a cigarette and took a drag, expelling the smoke slowly. Brandon had gone oddly still but I ignored that.

I flipped it open and read the four words glaring back at me in the dark.

"I fucking miss you."

Yeah, honey, I miss you, too, I realized and typed as much.

"What does Leslie have to say?" Brandon asked, smirking. I showed him and didn't even try to hide the smile on my face.

Digging just a little, scratching the surface tentatively, I had to admit that it wasn't Brandon's first suspicious look that tipped me off to the beginning of a seemingly inevitable shift in my feelings. It had been there for a while, growing quietly and steadily beneath the surface. Each time we texted, it became a little stronger. Each time I heard her voice. Each time I saw her face and she hugged me goodbye. There were so many questions. And we were both so fucked up over our recent relationships.

This can't be happening, I thought desperately, and it won't.

But even as I told myself that, my racing pulse told a different story as I reread those four words. It was one of those truths that are supposed to make life richer and fuller. Numbing it out wasn't going to make it go away. But I could keep it a secret. A little crush is perfectly acceptable between friends, so long as certain lines aren't crossed.

Look at Brandon and me—perfectly comfortable, perfectly safe, perfectly uncomplicated. And we'd slept together, once, on a night of drunken debauchery eight years before. It was just one of those unexpected things that happened. Certainly neither of us had planned it and we were a little embarrassed the next day. He was my one and only hetero sex experience. But we were okay. And if we could do that and be okay, then Leslie and I could be okay, especially if we didn't do that, and I didn't tell her.

“You miss her that much, too?” Brandon asked quietly.

I hesitated for about a minute and cleared my throat. “Yeah.”

“Tell me about her.”

So I did. Everything. All the conversations we'd had. All the drama we'd shared. How we'd leaned on each other. How real she was. The shit she'd been through. Her age and how she didn't trust love anymore. Brandon listened and nodded, didn't interject for once, and didn't smile smugly.

Before I went to sleep—it must have been two in the morning or so—I sent one last text. If she was going to be that honest, then I could give a little back.

“I care about you so much. Hope you're sleeping well. I'll be home soon.”

## Chapter Eight

“Damn it, Brandon, fucking roll over already.”

“Jordan, wake up.”

“If you don’t stop snoring, I’m gonna have to hit you.”

“Jordan, quit muttering. You have to wake up.”

My shoulders shook again and the roaring in my ears wouldn’t go away. I sighed exasperatedly and opened my eyes, fully intending to roll over and smack him. Hard. But he was kneeling over me, his hands on my shoulders, a look of excitement on his face.

“Seriously, get up. Now.”

I sat up. “What the hell’s going on?”

“Tropical storm.”

And then I was wide awake. The tent was flapping violently. There was an ominous ripping sound and Brandon said again, more urgently now, “Get up!”

I was still in my swim shorts and a T-shirt from the night before but didn’t bother to change. Now was not the time. We crawled out of the tent and into the horizontal rain. The waves were tall and crashing madly against the shore—much too close for comfort. I shivered in the stiff, wet breeze, taking in the violently roiling clouds. “Shit.”

“Yeah,” Brandon said and laughed hysterically. “Shit is right.”

“Fuck, we should have checked the weather last night.”

“Too damned late now.”

“The tent’s gonna fly away if we don’t take it down.” I looked around. The other tents and cars had disappeared. “Let’s pack.”

We dragged our shit from the tent as fast as we could, dumping it haphazardly in the backseat and trunk. The tent ripped at one corner, but we managed to get it down before it was destroyed. Panting, we hopped into the front of the car and I started the engine, searching the AM radio for a news station.

“Tropical storm Alison is expected to make landfall within the next hour. Sixty-mile-per-hour winds and heavy rains are already pounding the beaches near Galveston, and authorities advise immediate evacuation. A flash flood warning is in effect until eleven a.m. ...”

We sat in silence for several long minutes while listening to the rest of the weather forecast and warnings. Brandon cursed.

“We gonna ditch out of here or what?” he asked anxiously.

I sighed heavily. It wasn’t exactly how I’d planned to spend my Friday morning. I thought tropical storms and hurricanes weren’t supposed to start pounding the Gulf until late summer—as in August, not July. Of all the times it should have started early...

“Yeah, let’s go.” I gunned the engine and we headed out to the main road along the coast. From there, the waves looked even higher, more threatening. They crashed along the barriers and splashed onto the roads. Rain was pounding

down so heavily that my windshield wipers hardly helped my visibility. Flash floods, indeed. “Only a couple of miles,” I said, more to comfort myself than Brandon.

“Where are we going to go?”

“Into Galveston, find a Denny’s or something. It’s only eight o’clock. We can hang out there for a few hours and figure out what to do. Maybe it’ll pass and we can go back.”

“You think?” He sounded more than a little skeptical.

“I hope so.”

The drive was slow and tense. A mile down the road, we hit traffic—other travelers seeking refuge elsewhere. If we’d have been in a hotel, I might not have bothered leaving unless ordered to do so. But a tent isn’t exactly storm-proof.

My phone buzzed repeatedly, but I ignored it. The crashing waves were making me incredibly nervous, especially when they splashed over the barrier and sprayed my car. Brandon jumped every time, cursing furiously.

“Damn it. We need to get the hell out of here. Why aren’t we moving? Jordan, what if it gets worse and we’re stuck here?”

“Shut up, Brandon.”

We inched along. Half an hour had passed and we’d only gone a mile. My fingers drummed on the steering wheel and I couldn’t seem to stop it. Sirens were going off, adding a sense of panic and dread. Brandon was pale, and pearls of cold sweat beaded on his forehead. His glasses kept slipping down his sweaty nose and he’d push them back in place agitatedly.

I needed a cigarette desperately.

My phone wouldn’t stop buzzing.

“Damn it!” I shouted and hit the steering wheel. Just then, the long line of cars ahead began to move. We were going ten miles per hour. Twenty miles per hour. Thirty.

Finally, we reached our turn and sped through the intersection, where several police officers were directing traffic. We weren’t that much farther from the coast now, but I sighed in relief. Even a dozen blocks was better than a few dozen yards. Brandon sighed, wiped his forehead, and began to laugh again—the note of hysteria gone, replaced by sheer relief.

“Sorry,” he muttered after a few minutes on the tail-end of a soft chuckle.

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it. I was scared, too.” A pause. “Hey, there’s a Denny’s. Let’s stop and have breakfast.”

He nodded, so I pulled into the parking lot. It was nearly empty. Hopefully, the power wouldn’t go out. I felt we’d be safe enough there. The news had said it was a tropical storm, not a hurricane. Surely, it wouldn’t be that bad—tear down a few power lines maybe, beat up a few roofs, and mess with the trees.

The waitress who took our order for coffees and pancakes looked slightly harassed, as though she couldn’t believe we were dense enough to stop in for breakfast and that she should have to leave the shelter of the restroom to serve us.

My phone buzzed again and I dug it out of my pocket.

“Eight new text messages,” the phone flashed and displayed the most recent. “GET OFF THE BEACH. NOW. CALL ME.”

Shit. I hadn’t even thought that anybody would worry about us, especially since only one person knew where we were.

“I have to call Leslie,” I said and showed Brandon the text.

He snorted. “Yeah, you do. You’re in for it.” He grinned nastily, but his face was just then regaining color, so I let him get away with the gibe. “I have to use the restroom anyway.” He slid out of the booth and disappeared.

“I’m safe,” I blurted by way of greeting when she picked up on the first ring.

“I’ve been trying to get a hold of you for over an hour! You scared the crap out of me.”

“I was driving along the coast. It was crazy. There was no way I was going to get on the phone in that shit. I’m sorry.”

A long pause. The phone line crackled in the silence.

“I’m glad you’re safe. Where are you?”

“North of downtown at a Denny’s. It’s not so bad here.”

“The worst hasn’t hit yet.”

“We’ll be okay.”

“Fuck, Jordan.” She went silent again. I could hear clicking in the background. Maybe she was looking up stuff online. Just as I was about to speak, she said, “It should be over in an hour and a half or so. Don’t go anywhere, okay? Promise.”

I did. I promised we’d stay put. It felt a little weird having to promise to be good. At the same time, I couldn’t help but feel touched by her concern and her persistent effort to reach me. A check of my phone later would show she’d called, too.

“I’m okay,” I said quietly. “I’ll be okay. We aren’t going anywhere. We’re both a little freaked out.”

“Good.”

“What’s the weather outlook for the rest of the day?”

“Lots of rain. Thunderstorms. It looks like it’ll clear up by tomorrow, but you shouldn’t be on the beach tonight.”

“Maybe we’ll stay in a hotel.”

This time, the pause was even longer, and for a few seconds, I thought the call had been dropped.

“Sharing a room?”

“Yeah.” What a strange question...

“Okay. Do that. It’ll be safer. Text me later?”

“You know I will.”

“Be careful.”

“Thank you, Leslie.”

“For what?”

“For trying to warn us.”

She laughed and said her goodbyes.

“We’re staying in a hotel?”

I jumped. I hadn’t even noticed that Brandon had slipped back into the booth. When I nodded, he sighed in relief. Apparently, the idea of hanging out in a weather-beaten tent in the pounding rain was not his idea of a good time. I smirked at him, about to poke at his male ego when he cut me off as though he knew.

“Don’t even go there.”

Another text message, eleven o’clock at night. “What are you doing?”

“Was standing in the rain, letting it pound down on me. The storm is so beautiful here. I almost wish we were still at the beach, but I know it’s not safe.”

“It’s storming here, too. I’m laying in bed with the window cracked and the lights off, listening to the soft, rolling thunder and watching the lightning flash.”

“We’re under the same massive storm system. Still connected, even if we are hundreds of miles apart.”

My hair was sopping wet, cool water dripping down my neck. I wasn’t standing in the rain anymore, had moved into the shelter to type my messages so my cell wouldn’t be destroyed. The pause between that last message and the next text seemed to last half an eternity and was probably only about five minutes.

“You are such a romantic.”

My chest felt tight and laughter bubbled up, reaching all the way to my eyes. I could picture her lying in bed, the lights out, squinting at her phone to text another message. I waited, wondering if there’d be more. There was. “I’m glad we can share this” came within seconds. “I miss you.”

Okay. So we thought and acted alike. We could appreciate this moment for what it was. A connection of sorts, something meaningful and real. Deep friendship maybe. A shared appreciation for all things intense and romantic perhaps. Or maybe we were just craving more intimacy. Maybe I missed her and would have given almost anything to be standing in the rain with her by my side so she could feel what I was feeling—the wind, the wetness, the brilliant flashes and roaring thunder. She’d understand the beauty of it.

It would be incredible. Powerful.

I closed my eyes, thinking of what to text back, letting the breeze brush across my face. I realized I was humming a song we both adored. A song about the little wonders in life. And I thought about how happy I was to have such a good woman in my life, how beautiful she was, how...

"Shit," I whispered to myself. But the smile that had appeared didn't go away. My pulse hammered in my neck.

"Damn," I said with more feeling, but the smile widened.

I knew what I wanted to text back, but there was no way I'd do it. Absolutely not. There had to be something equally meaningful that was safer, better. And I began to type and it was from the heart, but my phone rang in mid-text and I stared at the caller ID.

My heart nearly stopped. My smile faltered. It was Alex.

What timing.

"Hey," I answered more apprehensively than I intended. Of all the times she could have called and hadn't over the past couple of weeks and she picked the very moment I was texting something intimate and perhaps inappropriate to another woman...

"I just wanted to say hi." She sounded almost timid.

"What's up? Are you okay?"

"No." She sighed sadly. "I miss you, Jordan. So much."

Without warning, tears stung my eyes and mingled with the fresh rain. It was so shockingly sudden that my hands began to shake. Damn it, I thought angrily. I'd been doing so good. For days now. Weeks, even.

But in all our calls since she'd moved, we'd stuck to lighter conversation. She hadn't shown in any way that she missed me. It had hurt, more than I cared to admit.

I missed her, too. Like crazy. And all the thoughts that had been running through my head only moments before evaporated. My throat was so tight I could barely croak, "I miss you, too, Alex."

There was no mistaking the sniffing on her end of the line. She coughed and cleared her throat.

"What are you doing?"

I told her about the tropical storm and she immediately launched into a concerned lecture about checking the weather before "running off on adventures with Brandon."

My tears dried up.

When she finished, I explained about the need to get away and how I'd been doing quite a bit better lately. Her responses became clipped, monosyllabic. I told her about how well the art was going. Silence. Desperately, I searched for something to talk about that wasn't about us but that we had in common. The first thing that came to mind was Leslie.

"So glad you two are getting along so well."

The pronouncement was followed by more crackling silence. I couldn't tell if that was sarcasm or not. I had no idea how to respond to that. Then she said, "Seen Amy lately?"

"No." There was no keeping the touch of annoyance out of my voice this time.

"Why not?"

"Why do you think?"

"Because you've taken sides. She's asked about you, wondered why you dropped off the face of the planet, says she's worried. I don't know what to tell her."

"You don't have to tell her anything." A surprising anger flared in my chest. "Actually, you can tell her that you're not my keeper and that she could call me if she cares that much, which she hasn't done, by the way."

"You're spending an awful lot of time with Leslie. Every time I talk to her, she tells me about how you two went and did this or that."

"So?"

"Just... never mind."

"So you talk to Amy and Leslie a lot and can't be bothered to call me. I see. I've got to go."

"Yeah, this isn't going well at all."

“No, it’s not.” I couldn’t stop the words that came straight from my heart and bypassed my brain, bursting from my lips. “Have you met anyone yet?”

It wasn’t jealousy that made me ask. I’m not typically a jealous woman. The question was born from a need to know how she was coping and what she was doing.

The mind is sometimes a tricky thing. With mine, given too little information, I’ll race toward all kinds of unseemly conclusions. More often than not, that gets me into trouble. I’d been picturing her, happy there—in my defense, she’d sounded so on the phone—making a new life and new friends and maybe searching for a special someone.

It had been a little over four months since we’d broken up. Depending on your feelings about love and relationships, that’s either enough time to move on or way too little time to even think about dating anybody else. I stood somewhere in the middle. Where did Alex stand? That’s why the question had popped out. Did I have a right to ask it? Probably not.

“Sorry I bothered you. Bye.” She hung up. I stared at the phone for several long minutes. What the hell was wrong with everybody? What the hell was wrong with Alex? What the hell was wrong with me?

I shoved the phone back in my pocket, pulled out a damp pack of cigarettes from my pocket, and lighted one. I took a long drag and exhaled sharply. The deep anger that prickled along my skin was unnerving. I took a long breath, tried to squelch the fury, not liking the feeling at all.

So was she angry that I’d asked if she met anybody, hadn’t, and was exasperated and hurt that I’d asked? Or was she seeing someone, felt guilty, and called to say she missed me but didn’t want to tell me about her new somebody?

“Stop it,” I ordered myself. “What does it matter?”

I began to pace. Ten steps right. Turn. Ten steps back. Turn. Repeat.

It was none of my business. And I wouldn’t begrudge her some happiness. Definitely not. I couldn’t give her what she needed. She couldn’t give me what I needed. We’d never get back together and it wasn’t my heart’s desire to do so anyway. Nor was it hers, as far as I knew. So why this sudden tearful, disastrous phone call? And I didn’t like what she was insinuating.

“So glad you two are getting along so well.”

Yeah, it was definitely sarcasm, I decided.

“Leslie is my friend, damn it,” I muttered, still pacing. “My good friend. Of course we’re getting along well. What’s wrong with that?”

But I stopped pacing, dug out my phone, and pulled up the message I’d been typing before I was interrupted.

“I wish you were here,” it began. “Is it wrong that I miss you so much?”

Oh, to hell with it. I hit send—not because I was trying to prove something or still pissed off at Alex, but because it was honest. And if Leslie was here with me, in front of the hotel, we’d be talking about the phone call I’d just gotten. Or we’d be talking about Amy. Commiserating, as per usual.

Finishing my cigarette, I felt torn between going inside and waking Brandon up, or calling Leslie to tell her what happened. But the thoughts were coming faster and faster, swirling around in an evermore confusing mist of bits and pieces of conversations, text messages, touches, and emotions.

Hell, even I couldn’t keep it straight. How could I expect anyone else to make sense of the mess in my head? I was spiraling and couldn’t shut it down because I’d promised myself to feel what I feel and not numb it out.

Damn, it was hard.

In the end, I bothered neither Leslie nor Brandon. I smoked half a pack of cigarettes, picking apart the pieces of my life and trying to somehow sort it into something manageable.

Some people might call it overanalyzing.

I call it calming the fuck down and figuring shit out. Letting my feelings roll over me and through me until they’ve run their course.

When sleep finally claimed me—sometime past three o’clock in the morning—my dreams were punctuated by flashes of piercing blue eyes.

## Chapter Nine

“Can’t go there on so many levels.”

The text message blazed in the dark. It was amazing that the buzzing had penetrated my dreams and Brandon’s snoring. But it had.

Seven simple words packed with meaning. Or maybe that was just me. If she “couldn’t go there,” did that mean she was experiencing the same unsettling shift in feelings as I was? Or was I projecting and she was just trying to shut me down, knowing exactly where the conversation was headed?

It’s strange how so many small gestures and looks can go unnoticed for so long, but add up to something that feels like being whacked over the head with a two-by-four when realization finally dawns. Picking apart all the pieces, being honest with myself, I’d realized that not only was I strongly attracted to Leslie, but that it went much deeper than that.

Something incredible had been blossoming at the worst possible timing in the world.

The first time she gave me a peck on the lips goodbye, I was surprised, but it was just an affectionate little peck, nothing sexual, just an expression of friendship. It was accompanied by a warm, comforting, full-bodied hug after a long, rough night of tough conversation, about three weeks before I broke up with Alex. That first time, it lasted less than a second.

The next time it was the same. It became a regular thing. But at some point, so subtly I couldn’t pinpoint how or when, those friendly kisses began to linger. Was it me or her? I hadn’t even noticed it was going on until one drunken night in The Red Door’s parking lot.

We’d broken apart abruptly and I realized my hands had crept up the back of her neck and her thumbs were caressing my cheeks. A surprised look passed between us, and we hastily said good night and got the hell out of there in our respective cars. Whoops. I’d filed it away under the drunk stamp and we never mentioned it. I buried it and forgot about it.

We were both very touchy-feely kind of people—the type who comfort with holding and express with touch. Two kinetically wired individuals.

An occasional slip of the lips began to happen. Had happened, now that I thought about it, less than a week before, the last time I’d seen her. But it wasn’t like that one time. She’d kissed me on the neck when we’d said goodbye, had nuzzled there for a few seconds, and it was borderline platonically affectionate. Nothing really to worry about. No serious lines were being crossed. And yet...

I closed my eyes again and imaged her kissing me open-mouthed, full-on—no pretense at a friendly goodbye—with those soft lips of hers. A shiver ran down my spine and I shuddered.

“Shit,” I whispered, realizing my body was already ten steps ahead of my mind.

The seven-word text that woke me had arrived hours after the last one I’d sent. It was nearly five o’clock in the morning. And it was awfully late or terribly early for her to be awake...

The past two hours had been filled with nothing but strange dreams. No response without consequences came to mind. Perhaps the best thing to do would be to ignore her text. Better yet, play it off as an off-hand comment—“I meant because shit’s going on” or something like that.

No. I couldn't do that to Leslie. If nothing else, we were straightforward about everything. We were real—no secrets, no lies, no bullshit.

I opened this can of worms. I'd deal with it.

"Sigh. I know." I typed slowly, hesitating, truly not knowing what else to say. Then added, "You are such a good woman, Leslie. And you mean so much to me. It's just tough keeping my feelings straight. I'm confused."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Thought it was just me and didn't know where you stood. And it sucks. But I need you in my life as a friend, not a lover."

"I need you in my life, too, can't imagine not having that. Don't know what I'd do without you right now."

"Me neither. We'll be okay, my friend. I promise."

"I feel like a coward for talking about this in a text message."

"Don't. You're not a coward. I respect your honesty."

"Can we talk about this face to face when I get back? Just to clear the air?"

"Does the air need to be cleared?"

"I think so."

"Okay. At the bar. Your nickel."

"Thank you."

"I'm going to try and get some sleep now."

"Me too."

I put the phone away, knowing perfectly well that trying to get some sleep was not going to be an option. There was no way it would happen now. A sinking, crushing feeling had seized my chest, making me feel like I needed some air. I got dressed in the dark and headed out for a walk.

The disappointment was instant and physically sickening—my heart and arms and feet so heavy it was hard to walk. I ended up sitting down on a curb in front of Wal-Mart. And tears welled from the confusion and my hands shook as I tried to smoke a cigarette. I needed a drink, but it was too early to buy alcohol. Damned Texas liquor laws.

I couldn't decide if I was more upset about the text conversation with Leslie or the phone conversation with Alex. It blurred together into a mess of sadness. I sat there as the sun slowly rose above the horizon and wondered if my growing feelings for Leslie were genuine or rebound. But I'd never rebounded before, had always been so careful not to do that to anybody, had taken long breaks between the more serious relationships. And the more I thought about it, the more my heart told me this was not a rebound thing. Not that it mattered.

Alex and I had been pulling back for a long time before we ended it. I could almost pinpoint specific dates and events that shook my faith in us and broke something in my heart that couldn't be fixed. It had been a long year of disappointments and growing apart on both sides. Add four months on top of that during which we finally faced the consequences of our actions. Is that long enough to get over her?

How could I even be thinking about another? Even if she was one of the most hauntingly intriguing people I'd ever met.

"Nothing's going to happen anyway. Be grateful you have such a good friend and quit the self-pity bullshit," I ordered myself.

I tried to figure out what had happened with Alex and couldn't understand. She'd wanted to end things, too. Was she having doubts? I wasn't. If she was... It wasn't my fault and not my problem, damn it.

My body began to ache from sitting so uncomfortably for over an hour. Finally, I let my feet carry me back to the hotel and woke Brandon, who looked at me suspiciously. Clearly, my likely puffy-eyed face betrayed the inner turmoil. He said nothing, however, just hugged me tightly, then packed our stuff, and dumped it back in the car.

"I'll drive," he said, and took us back to the beach as though he knew all I needed was to see the ocean and feel the sand beneath my bare feet to calm down.

He was almost right.

I've said before that I'm loosely pagan. Just like Dad was, though he was more the new-agey, hippie type that you'd find at the local Renaissance fair every year. He and Mom got married at one of those. He was a traveling bard for the occasion, and she was a fairy princess. He sang her a song; she read him some poetry. They had a hand fasting ceremony, and the yellowed pictures of it are beautiful.

Needless to say, I had an interesting childhood. And I certainly never saw the inside of a Sunday school classroom.

I'm a lot more skeptical than my parents, less into the organized religion thing and fairly private about my spirituality. I like to work it out on my own, kind of figure it out as I go along rather than trying to follow someone else's instruction book.

No Bibles or prayer books of any kind for me, thank you.

Yeah, I believe in a Goddess. Call her Gaia. Call her Mother Earth. Call her the great spirit in the sky, or God or Allah, or Buddha. It's all the same thing, as far as I'm concerned.

I think of an ageless woman in faded jeans and a loose white shirt, no face, and long, flowing hair, sitting in a forest of giant ancient trees, watching over us all. She is caring and nurturing and connected to everything around us.

You won't find me at a Samhain festival or chanting at a center of worship or casting spells in my duplex. I don't have an altar. I wear the pentagram my father gave me. I sometimes pray. And when I do, it's nearly always the same thing—thanking the Goddess for the gifts in my life and asking for the strength to appreciate even the hard times.

But there are very rare occasions when the praying becomes more of a confused rambling about what's going on in my life and a desperate plea for calm. That night was going to be one of those rambling praying times. I'd let myself spiral out of control and needed to re-anchor myself. Whenever the mess in my head became unbearable, there was only ever one thing to do—talk to Dad, ask for advice, then pray.

But Dad was gone and he couldn't give me advice anymore. That, more than anything, seemed to make the hard times so much harder now, make even lesser disasters nearly intolerable.

I remember a conversation I had with him when I was a kid. I must have been about eight or nine. We were both barefoot, wearing cutoff jeans and tie-dyed T-shirts, our long hair whipping in the wind, walking along the beach, getting in a little father-daughter time between workshops during some grand gathering of like-minded, new-agey hippies. It was a regular summer event.

He was explaining about the elements and that each of us are connected more to one than the others. He told me to spend time with each of them and figure out which one I loved best. His eyes were alight with passion as he stooped and sifted sand through his fingers, pouring it over my hands, then told me to close my eyes and feel the wind on my face, led me to a bonfire and had me watch the dancing flames lick at the logs, finally leading me to the water's edge.

The water's edge, which had always called me to it.

I came back to the present and noticed that Brandon was watching me now, as we sat by the fire. His fidgeting chased away the memory and I reached out, touching his hands. He stopped.

"Humor me," I said softly, imploring him with my eyes.

A long pause.

"Please?"

A longer pause still.

I sighed. "Okay, you don't have to come with me."

"No, I'll come," Brandon said and shifted uncomfortably. "I just don't want to be in the way or anything. I don't know what to expect or what to do."

"You won't be in the way, and don't worry, I don't know what to do half the time, either."

"Shouldn't this be a private kind of thing? Why do you want me to come with you?"

"Because you're one of my dearest friends and this is becoming an increasingly big part of my life. You want me to share stuff. So I'm trying to share this with you."

His brows furrowed and he finally nodded.

I took his hand and we walked through the damp sand toward the water's edge. To be honest, it was kind of strange feeling his warm hand in mine as the cool, post-storm breeze made me shiver, knowing he was about to witness something nobody had. Not Dad. Not Mom. Not even Alex.

We waded into the water until it was up to my knees.

"It's so beautiful out here," I whispered, staring up at the star-strewn sky, the glittering waves, the full moon casting the few clouds in silver. You'd never have known that a storm had raged the day before. There was nothing but the cool of water and wind and the sound of crashing waves. The warmth of his hand in mine. And the Goddess standing somewhere just out of sight, watching. Hairs stood up on the back of my neck. It happened every time I felt this close to her.

I looked at Brandon and saw a reflected look of wonder on his face.

"The water makes me feel connected." I felt the need to explain. "It's why I stand in the rain when it pours. It's why I take long baths when I'm upset. Water makes me feel closer to her, to him." I hesitated. Brandon knew I meant Dad when I said "him."

"Water is emotional depth. Movement. Change. Healing."

I looked up into his face. I needed him to understand.

"You need the water to heal you."

"I need the water to calm my soul."

"You're confused."

"Terribly."

"You think this will help?"

"Does not drinking and meditating help you?"

He nodded and looked out onto the horizon, squeezing my hand, giving it just enough pressure to indicate he understood.

This was not going to fix my life. Like a single counseling session with a trained professional can't completely heal the psyche, neither can one night's spiritual connectedness. But it can help. That's what I was going to ask for—help. And I couldn't explain why it was so important that Brandon be there with me. I wasn't pushing my beliefs on him. I just wanted him physically close, wanted not to be alone. I almost wished it was Leslie's hand in mine. But that wouldn't have been right. Not with what was going on.

"Do you have to call the spirits or something?"

I laughed. "No, I don't typically do that. I just talk to her."

I took a deep breath, hesitated, and laughed again, nervous. But I closed my eyes and pulled that image of the woman in the forest to the forefront of my mind, doing my best to block out everything else except the feeling of water and Brandon's hand in mine.

"Thank you," I began, as always, "for letting me see the beauty in life, even in the most terrible of moments." I paused for what might have been seconds or minutes.

The ocean by moonlight is timeless.

I opened my eyes and let the moon flood my sight. "I believe that you take care of us all and that you have placed certain people and events in my life for a reason. You have given me such treasures. And I'm sure you are watching over my father as you watch over me and everyone.

"I know I will understand eventually. I prayed that you bring passion back into my life and you have. I prayed for an intense friendship that would help fill the void Dad left in my heart when he died. And you provided. You heard me and you answered my prayers.

"It wasn't quite what I had in mind." I laughed. "But thank you anyway. I just don't know what to do anymore. I don't understand and I'm confused. Lonely. Sometimes happy, sometimes angry. I was doing so good, trying so hard. And now..." My voice cracked, as I knew it would. "I miss Alex so much and don't understand what's happening. Why is she doing this? Why did she speak with such accusation in her voice, sound so... disappointed or angry? And my feelings for Leslie..."

“I’m not ready. This can’t be happening. My heart felt so heavy this morning. It’s not okay. I don’t want the passion you’ve given me, which I’ve just begun to discover, to take away a friendship I’ve come to treasure so much.

“I trust you. I believe in you. I know you have your plans. I just wish I understood, wish you could show me the way. I’m not going to stand here and demand proof. I’m just asking you to please give me the strength to not lose myself again, not when I’ve just dug myself out of a deep, dark hole.” I paused again and squeezed Brandon’s hand. He squeezed back in gentle encouragement and remained still.

“And you know that when things get rough, I just want to talk to Dad and he’s gone. I just wish he was here. I just want to talk to him one more time...” Tears were unstoppable now and I gave a great sob. “I miss him so much. There’s not a day that doesn’t go by that I don’t think about him. If only I could see his face one more time. And Mom doesn’t want to talk about it. She’s completely broken and I can’t help her.

“I just... I just... Damn it, I just need him. He’d know what to do. He always knew what to tell me when I’m like this. I feel so lost. Please take care of me. Take care of him. He was such a good father...”

“Dad, I hope you’re okay. Can you hear me? I love you...”

And just like that, I lost it, let the sobs wrack my body until I was shaking violently. I hadn’t allowed the grief to surface like this in a long time. Brandon held me, let me sob and cry and curse. The salty tears on my face mixed with the salty sea breeze on my cheeks and dripped onto Brandon’s shirt and into the ocean.

There’s relief in crying—really crying—in letting your emotions explode outward until they surround you and everything around you, until they burst and shine and cleanse the soul.

The moon was high by the time we broke apart, when I finally quit alternating between wailing and mumbling about my life to whomever was listening, sometimes speaking directly to Brandon, sometimes addressing my father, wherever he was. When I did release my friend, he looked down at me with such concern in his eyes I had to turn away. I felt emotionally strung out and exhausted. But there was relief there, too. A tiny bit of calm under all the settling dust.

I dipped my fingertips into the water and touched my lips, licked the salt and swallowed, taking the ocean into my body.

“I need a cigarette.”

“You need sleep,” Brandon whispered tenderly.

“And a cigarette.”

He shook his head, chuckled, and led me back to the campsite, his arm around my shoulders. Our fire was little more than a small pile of embers now. He added some pieces of wood and stoked it until a few flames appeared.

“Thank you,” he said after several long minutes of silence.

“For what?”

“For letting me be there for you and not shutting me out. You were right. You shouldn’t have to be alone for that.”

I just nodded.

“What are you going to do?”

I sighed heavily.

“I don’t know. Talk about it—with Alex, with Leslie, with Mom. The only thing to do is talk. I know Leslie will let me talk about us. That’s what we do. But the other two... I don’t know. It’s not like I can force them.” I sighed again. “I haven’t truly dealt with his death, Brandon. I don’t know how. That bomb that blew him apart blew apart my whole life. How do you get over something like that?”

“You don’t,” he said soberly. “You learn to accept and forgive. But it’ll always be there. And it will always hurt when you think about it. I don’t think your Dad would have wanted you to let it break you, though.”

Brandon had lost his mother when he was ten years old to a car crash. He knew what he was talking about and I took it very seriously. Let the words sink in while the fire crackled before I spoke.

“No, he wouldn’t want that.” My eyes stung again. Damn, I thought I’d cried all I could cry that day already. “Losing him just seems to make everything else that happens so much harder to deal with. And he always thought I was so strong... I don’t feel strong at all anymore. I don’t know how to fix my life. I just don’t know. And I fucking miss Leslie. Can’t stop thinking about her, even though I probably shouldn’t.”

“We can leave right now if you want.” He meant it, too. I could see it in his eyes.

I shook my head miserably. “No, we’ll leave tomorrow like we planned. She needs more complications in her life about as much as I do right now. I don’t want to be another complication.”

“Jordan?”

“Yeah?”

“Feeling as strongly as you feel, being so passionate, doesn’t make you weak. What you choose to do about your emotions is what can make a person strong or not. I hope you know that.”

I sighed.

## Chapter Ten

After we packed, we took one last walk on the beach, not knowing how long it would be until the waves greeted us again. I concentrated on the feeling of sand between my toes. Brandon and I played in the water for a few minutes, and I truly felt lighter than I had the night before.

It wasn't exactly the weight of the world off my shoulders, as the cliché goes, but it was enough that I could breathe deeply again without that sickening tightness in my chest, like some of the pressure had been released.

There'd been strange dreams again. Disconnected images and scenery changing too quickly to keep up with. Leslie. Alex. Mom. Mostly it was unpleasant. At some point, my father appeared. It was the first time that had happened in months. He just smiled at me—that charming, lopsided smile—held out his hand, and the shifting, swirling images disappeared. He led me through the mist to a river and told me to sit down and rest. I laid back into the grass and stared at the cloudless sky, listening to the gurgling water. The world disappeared and I awoke, finally, in my tent on the beach in Galveston, feeling like I'd gotten a full night of sleep for the first time in forever.

Heading back to the car, I spotted a perfect shell and picked it up. After the storm, there'd been nothing but broken bits and an excess of seaweed. That undamaged shell made me smile and I pocketed it, knowing exactly for whom I was saving it.

Leslie and I were going to have our talk at the bar that evening. Eight o'clock or so, I'd told her. Brandon insisted on driving home, so I texted in regular intervals which mile marker we were passing. The messages she sent back were deliberately light-hearted, like she was trying to convince me everything was going to be okay without saying so directly.

"I'd love to go to the beach with you. Maybe we could take a trip in a month or so."

"That'd be great. Are you sure I can't convince you to camp?"

"I'm not sleeping on the ground. Are you sure you don't look like a lobster?"

"Maybe a little bit, smartass."

Even through the texts and the lazy drive, my mind was racing again. I thought that perhaps I should make a point to visit Mom more. If I could get her to agree to go see a counselor... But no, then she'd want me to go, too.

"Let's go see a movie next week. I haven't been to a movie in forever."

"Me neither. Sounds good."

I could send Alex flowers to the office. Just to say I'm sorry... No, she hated it when I sent flowers last time, and I didn't want her to get the wrong idea.

"Okay, but no romantic comedies and nothing serious."

I laughed out loud. No shit. Don't think that would be good for either of us.

"How about an action flick?"

Brandon started laughing. "I'm going to start a text tally if you two keep this up. And if it gets to fifty before we get back, I think I'm going to make you buy me dinner just for putting up with it."

"Shut up," I said, but couldn't keep a straight face. "Yeah, yeah."

"You know, it would be so much easier and quicker just to have a conversation on the phone..."

"We text. It's one of the things we do."

“Weirdoes.”

The drive there hadn't really seemed like it took long at all. But the trip back seemed to be taking forever. Between texts, I kept trying to sneak glances at the speedometer. He was going about seventy or so.

“You know, the gas pedal goes closer to the floor than that.”

“That's why I'm driving.”

“Excuse me?”

“I don't much fancy a ninety-mile-per-hour trip back.”

“I didn't drive that fast on the way down here.”

“No, but you have good reason to get home. Don't even try to pretend you're not excited to see her, no matter what's going on in that head of yours, or what kind of conversation you're supposed to have later. I see that look on your face, that little smile every time your phone buzzes.”

I wanted to be annoyed, but...

“She's going to shut me down.” The smile disappeared.

“Is that what you want?”

“Kinda.” Pause. “I want her to tell me I'm too young. That we're both too fucked up emotionally right now. That she's not over Amy, which she certainly isn't. That we can't cross that line.”

“But?”

“But I feel so drawn to her in so many ways, and I just want her to kiss me and hold me tight.”

Brandon sighed. It wasn't a sigh of frustration or exasperation or annoyance. It was the sigh of resignation that I'd learned to recognize.

“What?” I demanded a bit more defensively than I had intended.

He reached out and took my hand. “You know what.”

Now it was my turn to sigh. “Yeah, I know. It isn't right.”

“I'd support your decision if you decide to do something about your attraction, so long as you keep all those obstacles in mind.”

A reluctant nod. He did know me so well. And with everything that had happened over the last year and a half—Dad dying, Alex and I breaking up, my relationship with my mother deteriorating—you'd think I might be a bit more cynical about love. But I'm a true believer. The type who still believes in that “love conquers all” stuff. Brandon didn't want me to get all worked up over a possibility that didn't really exist.

Then, suddenly, a thought occurred to me. “Oh, gods, if Alex found out...”

“She'd flip, right?”

“Maybe. Probably. I don't know. I have no idea what she thinks and feels anymore.” I groaned exasperatedly. “My life is a soap opera.”

“Your life is what you make it.”

“Blah, blah, blah. I've made it a soap opera.”

It made us both laugh in spite of the seriousness of the night before and the conversation or maybe because of it all.

I quit texting. Brandon turned up the volume on the radio. We both began to sing along whenever we knew the words. It was as though we were both determined to make the last couple of hours of our vacation pleasant rather than dwelling on the heavy stuff. There'd been enough of that, and I needed a break before dealing with any more of it.

No matter how many times I wiped my hands on my jeans, they were still cold and clammy.

How many times had I turned down this street, whipped around the corner, and come to a stop in front of the house with the large oak tree out front and the gray door with white trim? It took a full minute before I could force myself out of the car.

The nervousness had set in the second I'd dropped Brandon off. My heart was pounding all the way to Fort Worth. Shit, why had I been so fucking open about my feelings? And yet worrying about it that much was almost ridiculous. We

were such good friends. Surely, we could sort this out and move on. We cared about each other, needed each other too much not to.

My feet were so heavy.

It took an enormous amount of effort to walk toward that gray door. And suddenly, it swung open as though she'd been watching for me.

There she stood.

I will never forget that moment.

My heart lurched so sharply it stole my breath. If I close my eyes, I can still smell the coming rain in the air and the freshly cut grass, feel the light breeze on my cheeks. She was wearing a faded pair of blue jeans and a white linen shirt, the first two buttons down. I noticed for the first time that her dark hair wasn't really black, that bits of it looked more richly brown in the setting sun, and that streaks of gray had started just above her ears and forehead.

And how blue her eyes were, even from a distance. How her cheekbones framed the eyes just right, how kissable her lips looked.

We stared at each other, her piercing eyes locking on mine. And then we both took several steps forward—she away from the door and I onto her front porch. She reached for me, pulling me in, crushing me against her chest and burying her nose against my neck. The sounds of the streets faded away. I closed my eyes, focusing hard on the feel of her body against mine, my throat so tight with emotion I could hardly breathe. Affection and dread swelled up in me, and I felt wetness on my neck and knew that my eyes were leaking, too.

“Jordan,” she whispered, her voice as shaky as mine when I answered.

“Leslie.”

We stood like that for a long time, out on her porch, just holding each other. When we finally pulled apart, she cupped my face with both hands and looked into my eyes. “Let's go,” she whispered and let go, wiped her eyes, locked the door, and held out her hand.

It was so soft and felt so good in mine. She led me back to my car.

The silence pressed around us on the drive to the bar. It was strange, just sitting there, driving, not knowing what to say.

We found our table and she sat down. I went to the counter to get our beers. My hands were still clammy and I wiped them on my jeans again. Surely, she'd noticed when she took my hand.

While the bartender poured my favorite beer from the tap, I thought of all the nights we'd been here. The way she'd cried and been so real. The way she'd listened to me talk about Alex and Dad and Mom. How much I'd needed that and needed it still. I could not fuck this up. I could not lose this woman.

Grimly determined, I turned with beers in hand to head back to our table. Our eyes met across the room and I hesitated at the smile on her face. It was affectionate. And sad. Encouraging. Worried. A sign that we'd surely be okay because we had to be, damn it. And I returned it the best I could, forced my legs into action, and found my seat.

For a few minutes, all we did was drink—slow, deliberate sips.

“I just want to say a few things about this,” I started, but she cut me off.

“You don't have to say anything.”

“Yeah, I do.” I wanted to reach out and touch her hand for emphasis like I'd done a thousand times before but hesitated now, no longer knowing if it was appropriate. Her face was unreadable, but those honest eyes betrayed a knowing look. She moved her hand closer to me, letting me know without words that it was okay. I touched it and she smiled.

“Okay,” she said softly.

I couldn't say what I needed to say while looking into those eyes. I stared at her hand instead and drew a deep breath.

“You need to know that I haven't been there for you all those times just because I wanted...” Words failed. I cleared my voice, tried again. “Just because I have feelings for you. This is a much more recent thing.”

“I know that.”

“And I understand that this is the worst damned timing in the world. It feels like it just kind of came out of nowhere.” I forced a laugh. “But I care about you so much, Leslie. And I don’t want this to make things weird. I don’t want you to think you can’t talk to me anymore about Amy or anything you need to talk about.” I hesitated again but needed to get it out. “I don’t want things to change. Like this,” and I indicated my hand on top of hers, “is okay, you know? I don’t want it to be awkward. If we can just talk about it...”

“Hey, it’s going to be okay.” She hooked a finger under my chin and forced me to look at her. “We’ll be okay. This is not a do-or-die kind of thing.”

Her face was so close to mine. The table between us was too small. I swallowed hard but didn’t look away. “I need you to tell me why we can’t do this. I have to hear it.”

She leaned in closer still. Our foreheads were touching. We were breathing each other’s breaths. It took all my willpower not to close the gap between our lips.

“You’re not over Alex. I’m not over Amy.” She paused for emphasis and pulled back a little. “I know you’re not Amy, but I don’t think I can trust another twenty-nine-year-old. The age difference between us is a big deal for me, and it should be a big deal for you. If it’s not, you haven’t thought about it enough.” I opened my mouth to object but shut it at the fierce look in her eyes. “Neither of us is in a very good place to start anything right now. I’m so attracted to you... You’re a beautiful, amazing woman, and I care about you very, very much. But we can’t do this. I don’t want to lose you.”

“I don’t want to lose you, either. I don’t even want to think about that.”

She leaned back in her chair. It wasn’t exactly a smile that crossed her lips, but it was something soft and tender, a touch playful. The look said it was time to lighten the tension.

“You know, I’ve been wondering what your intentions were for a couple of weeks now.”

I picked up my beer and took a long swallow. “What do you mean?”

“Lingering kisses in the parking lot.”

“I didn’t realize I was doing it. And when I did realize, I noticed you were doing it, too. I’m not going to let you think it was all me.” And now the laugh that followed wasn’t forced.

Her eyebrow arched, half bemused, half surprised. “Really?” she drawled.

Yeah, we’d be okay.

“Really,” I dead-panned. “Hands caressing my face. And you nuzzled my neck.”

She laughed and the smile reached her eyes.

“You know we’ll always flirt.”

“Yeah.” And this time, the sigh was a happy one. She’d shot me down, just like I needed. Maybe not wanted, but definitely needed. We were not going to let this happen. We would focus on getting better, continue our talks, continue to be good friends, lift each other up. Help the best we could.

Our conversation eased back into a comfortable place. We talked about the beach and made plans to go. We made plans to see a movie. She told me about her weekend and I told her about mine. She asked a lot of questions about Brandon and I teased her about it.

Two hours and four beers later, she yawned and told me she’d better get home, that she had an early meeting. I closed out the tab and she put her arm over my shoulders while I waited. We walked out to the car arm in arm.

I pulled into her driveway and killed the engine, turning to face her.

“Have a good day tomorrow.”

She was looking meaningfully into my eyes again.

“We’re okay, right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Of course we are.”

“I don’t want you to start playing that game of not knowing if it’s okay to text or call. You just text or call whenever you feel like it.”

“Okay.”

She leaned in a little more. Our faces were too close. Her eyes looked almost violet in the dark. She smelled so good. I'd noticed it earlier on the porch. It had to be a mix of her shampoo, the laundry detergent she'd used to wash her clothes, and something richer that was just her. I wanted to inhale deeply and wrap that scent around me like a security blanket.

"You're sure we're going to be okay?"

"Yes." The certainty in my voice was fading with each inch of distance closed between us.

Our lips suddenly met. It was so unexpected, I almost jerked back. To this day, I couldn't say whether I closed the rest of the distance or not. But it was not a friendly peck.

Her mouth opened slowly and her tongue touched my lips tentatively. My body overruled whatever confusion was in my head and my lips parted. It was the most tender, gentle kiss I've ever had. I cupped her face without thinking, deepened the kiss, wanting more. But it was not sex or passion I was after at that moment. My emotions were driving my actions.

Then, quite abruptly, we both froze mid-kiss and broke apart. Her eyes were wide and so were mine. She forced a smile and said, "Okay, good night," opened the car door, and fled. She nearly ran up the walk to her door, fumbled with the keys, and slipped inside without a wave goodbye.

For a few seconds, I couldn't move again.

Finally, I forced myself to turn the ignition switch and put the car in reverse. I pulled out of her driveway and had already rounded the corner when it burst from my lips.

"What the fuck was that?"

## Chapter Eleven

The camping gear was strewn haphazardly all over the floor. I didn't give a shit, was way too geared up to even think about putting it away.

I told myself not to touch my lips, which were still tingling.

I told myself not to think of Leslie undressing and crawling into bed, naked.

My cigarette lit, I took a deep drag, touched my tingling lips and thought of her undressing and crawling into bed. She must look like a goddess under those faded jeans.

"Fuck," I whispered and continued pacing.

My phone buzzed and I knew it would be her. For several seconds, I let it be, refusing to look at it, pacing my living room. Then another cigarette and a glass of wine. Finally, I couldn't take it and checked the message.

"You are a good woman."

It stopped me in my tracks. A good woman, eh? It didn't really feel that way right then. I was a woman with shit for willpower or consideration—here I was, thinking of what she looked like naked; there she was, trying to be the good friend and telling me I'm a good woman.

"So are you." I didn't want to contradict her, not for selfish reasons, but because she didn't need to think I was scoffing her compliment, which would probably require an explanation.

"Good night, Jordan."

"Sleep well, Leslie. Dream something beautiful."

"I'll dream of the beach."

"The endless sound of ocean waves crashing into the sand."

"Salt in the air and moonlight overhead."

"Standing by the water's edge, seeing how beautiful the world is."

Right. We weren't going to do this. Except we were going to text romantic messages to each other and kiss deeply in her driveway.

Sure. We weren't going to get involved.

The thought of being in a dark movie theater with her suddenly terrified me. I turned off my phone to end the messages, downed the wine, and headed toward my easel. It was time to start painting again.

The only thing that would flow from my brushstrokes that night was a beautiful woman with watery blue eyes and dark hair, sitting on the beach, the moonlight playing on her bare shoulders and chest.

All night, the paint flowed. It was supposed to be therapeutic painting, something to draw the desire out of me and onto the canvas, like expressing emotions in letters you never intend to mail. But it did little more than fuel my growing feelings and passion. I was making love to her body with my paintbrush, with titanium white and pthalo blue.

Sometime around eight o'clock in the morning, I remembered I had a client meeting that evening and had better get some sleep. So it was time for bed and I found my phone, turned it on to set the alarms, and discovered three text messages.

“Finding that someone who’ll appreciate the setting. Someone romantic and passionate, like we both want so badly.” That was the first one.

The second was hours later. “Having trouble sleeping. Are you awake?”

Then, from ten minutes before, “Breakfast?”

Shit. She’d needed me and I hadn’t responded.

I called.

“Hey,” she said, sounding sleepy. “You wanna go to IHOP?”

I stretched and yawned, deciding that I’d tell her I was too tired and needed to go to bed, but heard myself say, “Yeah. Right now?”

“I’m about to leave. I’ll be there in ten minutes, the one near your duplex.”

We hung up and I stared at the cell phone.

“What the fuck was that?” I demanded for the second time in less than twelve hours.

And despite the weariness, the worry, the confusion, and all of it, a stupid grin slid across my face that I couldn’t get off no matter what dark things I tried to think of to make it go away.

She’d gotten us a booth in the far corner. We’d never had breakfast together, had rarely ventured anywhere but to a bar. She had that day’s newspaper already spread out.

“You look like hell,” she said when I slid into the seat opposite her.

“Thanks,” I said sarcastically and picked up the menu.

“No, really. You look like you haven’t slept at all.”

“I didn’t.” The two words were just matter-of-fact. And when the silence stretched, I looked up at her across my menu.

“You didn’t?”

“No. There was a painting in my head that had to come out. I was just about to go to bed when I got your text.” A pause. “I’d turned my phone off, which is why I didn’t answer the earlier ones. Sorry.”

“What did you paint?”

Shit. I should have known she’d ask. That woman had expressed more interest in my work than anyone I knew. Anyone else might just have left it at knowing I’d been busy.

Apparently, my hesitation had gone just a few seconds too long. A sly smile curled her lips as though she had some idea. I tried to head her off.

“I painted the beach by moonlight.” Well, that was sort of true.

“And was that the main subject or just the background?”

Damn her. The thought of her seeing that painting... My cheeks began to burn.

“The background.”

She smiled wider and opened her mouth to ask more questions, but our waitress arrived. I gave her my order quickly. “I’ll take the two-egg breakfast and a coffee with cream. What do you want, Leslie?”

Her laughter was low and mischievous. She gave the waitress her order, then pinned me with her eyes again, putting the newspaper aside.

“I’ll tell you what I want, Jordan. I want you to tell me what you painted last night.”

I took a deep breath, debated lying to her, and dismissed the idea. She’d know. I’m a terrible liar. And why bother, anyway? She’d just want to see it. I let the breath out slowly.

“I painted you.”

The teasing smile softened around the edges. “Can I see it?”

I shook my head. Maybe a little too quickly. Her left eyebrow arched, but I kept silent, willing her to drop it and talk about something else.

“Why?”

“Just no, okay? I’m not...not ready for you to see it.”

She grinned again and handed me a section of the newspaper. We read in silence until our food came, then chatted about what we'd be doing that week. I'd kept my schedule fairly light. Had a meeting with the Cornwells that evening and would start working on a mural in their house on Wednesday. Tuesday was just shopping for supplies. She didn't have many plans, either.

"What about tonight?"

"After the meeting?"

"Yeah. What are you doing?"

"I don't have any plans. Thought I'd go to the gym and work out."

We finished breakfast and paid the bill.

"Text me later?" I asked.

"Of course."

The sky was gray, and it was drizzling outside in the parking lot. How strange to stand talking with her out in the daylight when it was usually so late and dark when we said goodbye. For a second, it seemed like she was just going to get in her car and leave. She hesitated, then stepped forward and gave me a long hug. But there was no friendly peck goodbye, no nuzzling of the neck or kiss on the cheek. She squeezed my shoulders, said, "Talk to you later," and headed out. She didn't flee like she'd done the night before, but it was the quickest goodbye we'd had since the day I'd met her on that first double-date.

I didn't know if I was disappointed or relieved.

"How quickly can you get it done?"

I tried not to groan in annoyance. We'd had this talk already. About a dozen times in e-mails and over the phone. If they hadn't been referred to me by a good client who sent many gigs my way, I might have upped my price just to get them to give up and go away. I hate high-maintenance clients. The ask-a-bazillion-questions types who try to negotiate the price and time to death. The kind who will make me come back ten times to fix this little dot or that little line.

"For what you want, it'll take me a week."

"That's a long time," Mr. Cornwell said, rubbing his chin. He'd been rubbing his chin all through the meeting. Maybe he thought it made him look sophisticated. I just found it distracting and annoying. "Barbara's due date is two weeks from now and we need time to set up the room."

"It's not my fault you didn't plan well," I wanted to say but chose a more diplomatic approach. "I'm sorry you don't have much time, but I can't rush it. The pictures you've shown me are incredibly intricate and involved."

He sighed. I sighed. He glanced down at the pictures on the table—shots of the rainforest, luscious greens and flowers, birds and other exotic animals. Yeah, I wanted to paint it because it looked interesting. But like hell I could get a fourteen-by-eleven-foot room done in three days. Not unless I put in twelve-hour-plus shifts or had help. I'd suggested hiring a helper, but that would cost more. He didn't want to pay it.

"Okay." He drew the word out. "Can you start working on it tonight?"

"We haven't bought the paints."

"We're going tomorrow. Can you start tomorrow?"

And there goes my movie night with Leslie, I thought miserably. I ran my fingers through my hair, thinking fast. Was it worth losing the gig to be in a dark movie theater with Leslie, where we'd likely be inappropriate and get ourselves in trouble?

"When can you come with me to the store?"

"After work, about five o'clock."

"I'm sorry, but I have plans tomorrow night about seven. And I can't cancel them." The look on his face was infuriating, like whatever plans I had weren't important. "It's a family thing," I said and didn't know why the lie had shot to my lips.

"And if I could meet you at Home Depot on my lunch break?"

“Fine,” I finally relented, mentally calculating how much money I still had in the bank and the time until my next gig. It wouldn’t hurt to lose the money Mr. Cornwell was supposed to pay me that Monday. But it wouldn’t help matters, either. And if I wanted to go to the beach... “How about noon at Home Depot? I can bring the supplies back here, prep the walls, and lay the base colors. That’ll give me a head start on Wednesday.”

“And get it done a day or two earlier?”

“Yes.”

He nodded reluctantly, as though his sacrifice of his lunch break was greater than my sacrifice of my whole afternoon.

“Can you have it done by Thursday?”

Damn it, that only gave me three days to paint it.

“Sir, I’m sorry, maybe I haven’t made myself clear. I can’t possibly...”

“I’ll give you an extra two hundred dollars. Surely, you can work longer hours.”

And then I couldn’t have a single evening open until Friday. What if Leslie expressed an interest to hang out? More than that, I had about a dozen more paintings in my head that were aching to burst free and onto canvases. They needed to be painted. All day, I’d been fantasizing about an art show. That painting I’d done of Leslie was acting as a catalyst, reviving old dreams that I’d squashed so long ago.

I stifled a groan of annoyance. Did everybody think you could just buy your way? I’d quoted six hundred dollars for a full-time assistant and he was only going to pay me two hundred? It was ridiculous.

“Four hundred and I’ll get it done by Thursday evening. I’ll have to be here late into the night.”

“Done.”

I left feeling mostly annoyed. But there was a little flash of excitement, too. The check I had in my hand was for twelve hundred dollars. None of that money would go to cost, save the gas it took me to drive the twenty-mile trip back and forth to the Cornwells’ house in Grapevine. I’d been online earlier, looking at beachfront hotels in Galveston.

The text shot from my fingers before I could stop it.

“Are you serious about going to the beach?”

Seconds later: “Yes. I haven’t been in years. Love the beach. Need to get away.”

“Give me a date.”

The pause was longer now. I was halfway home when she texted, “August 24-27 if you can take a long weekend.”

“I’m going to book us a room. Just got a bonus on a gig. You can take care of the rest.” I paused, then added, “Unless you’ve changed your mind about camping.”

“Come over.”

Thoughts of going to the gym were forgotten. Those two words erased all my plans in one swift move. The paintings were thrust on the backburner.

“Come over,” she’d texted, and I wondered what her intentions were.

I typed, “Okay,” and changed lanes to take an earlier exit, hit the back roads to avoid traffic and get there faster.

She probably just wanted to pick out the hotel with me, then I’d go home.

In seven weeks, we’d go to the beach. A lot could happen in seven weeks. What if we did something stupid and things fell apart? Then she surely wouldn’t want to go with me anywhere, certainly not to a hotel room at the beach, where gods only know what could happen to the sound of crashing waves filtering in through an open window...

“Stop it,” I said loudly, trying to sound severe. But a giggle rose up in my throat.

“Seriously.” The giggling turned to outright laughter.

“What about this one?” Leslie pointed to a picture of a hotel on her computer screen. She sat at her desk and I hung over her shoulders, squinting at the screen. My contacts were a little fuzzy after not having been taken out for over twenty-four hours. I never got around to taking that nap.

“I can’t see too well. Let me sit down.”

“Just come over a little closer.” She reached over her head and pulled me down by the shirt. My chin was now resting on her shoulder. She moved her hand back behind my neck and left it wound in my hair, while I willed my heart to quit pounding and my eyes to focus on the task at hand.

“Looks a bit fancy-shmancy.”

“I can help with the money.”

“I told you already, this is my treat.”

She sighed. She’d argued furiously with me for half an hour about my insistence to pay for the hotel.

“I’ve been broke forever. I don’t even know how many times you picked up the tab at the bar. And all those tips when I was still pouring the drinks... I can handle this now. Please let me,” I’d insisted, and she finally relented, stating categorically that she was driving, I wasn’t to even think about paying for gas or any other expenses that came up during our trip. And if she wanted to take us out to an expensive restaurant, then so be it.

“It’s not the money. It just looks like some McLuxury Hotel, and I’d like something with a little more character.”

She scrolled down, pulled up another. Same problem.

“Hey, pull up a search engine and type in ‘lesbian hotels.’”

She did. We searched through locations and found a hotel in Galveston. It was small, quirky, a touch overpriced, but looked interesting. We found a number and placed a call. While I asked about rooms, rates, and availability, she went and got us a couple of beers from the fridge.

“We’re usually booked well in advance,” the clerk told me, “but we just had a cancellation on a room for the weekend you’re inquiring about. It’s our best room. It has a view of the beach, a private balcony, a king-size bed with six hundred thread count sheets...”

The woman lost me at king-size bed.

I should have thought about that before I called. Of course a lesbian-run bed and breakfast would cater primarily to couples. And mentioning the king-size bed to Leslie would result in another long conversation.

It was the only available room. Feeling a little reckless, I asked how much. A hundred and fifty bucks a night, breakfast included. Beautiful.

“Book me,” I said, just as Leslie came back into the room.

I pulled out my wallet and read off my credit card information. My friend watched me curiously, sipping her beer. When I hung up, she smiled broadly.

“We got us a room?”

Laughing, I nodded and we clinked bottles.

“So what now?” I asked, wondering if I should head home, trying not to yawn. It was only eight o’clock.

“You’re going to be busy tomorrow night, right?”

“Yup. Sorry. I really did want to go see a movie with you. Maybe we could do that on Friday.”

“Sure. Or we could do it tonight.”

But a search revealed that the only movies we were interested in were starting in a couple of hours, way too late for Leslie, the morning worker.

She rummaged through a stack of mail on her coffee table and pulled out a red envelope. “I got this one in the mail and haven’t watched it yet. I should probably watch it before I send it back.” She held it up, a hopeful smile on her face. “I have more beer,” she added helpfully.

“Yeah, okay,” I said slowly and sat deliberately in the easy chair, leaving the couch for her. Maybe it was my imagination, but the look on her face seemed to be more than a little bemused at my choice.

We’re always going to flirt.

Things are not going to get weird.

I’m just going to book us a room at the lesbian love shack with a king-size bed and view of the ocean.

She’s going to have me watch a movie at her place, where we don’t even have to worry about other people catching us kissing.

Jeez.

We were a train wreck in slow motion. I could almost see it happening. It was like seeing the end before we even got started. The thoughts frustrated and scared me, so I shoved them back as far as they'd go and buried them. Put a few boulders on top for good measure. Yeah, they'd rise back to the surface, but hopefully that wouldn't happen for a while.

The movie started. No romantic comedies, she'd said. Nothing serious. This movie was neither, thank the gods. I sipped my beer and laughed at the dumbass humor—all idiotic stunts and stupid jokes. I kept looking toward the couch where Leslie lay wrapped in a blanket, under which she was wearing only boxers and a T-shirt.

It was the first time I'd caught a glimpse of those runner's legs. The ones that had carried her through a couple of marathons. Strong calves and pronounced quads. Tight. A tattoo around the ankle and one on her left calf.

She'd gone and changed, said, "What? It's my house," when she caught me staring at her before the movie started.

I shivered. It was cold in the house. I swear the air conditioning was set below seventy and kept blasting on my bare arms.

"Hey," she said to get my attention and lifted the blanket, patting a very small sliver of space next to her. The boxers had ridden up a bit and exposed a nicely tanned thigh. Fuck.

I was curling up next to her before my mind could catch up with my actions. She wrapped her arms around me and snuggled in close. I sighed and closed my eyes, concentrating on little more than the feeling of her body pressed against mine.

"Watch the movie," she whispered in my ear. "We can hold each other. This is okay. I just need to feel close to you right now."

I nodded and tried to watch the movie. But if you asked me what the title was or even what it was about, I still couldn't tell you. There was only Leslie. The smell of her. The feel of her. The feel of us and the bittersweet knowledge that we would probably cross that line eventually, and it would definitely be a train wreck.

At some point, I must have fallen asleep. My eyes opened to find a pair of eyes the exact shade of mine watching me. She smiled softly and kissed me—gently, exploring my lips with her tongue—then got up and held out her hand.

"Time to go home," she said and walked me to my car.

## Chapter Twelve

That early July week was a blur. Impossibly long hours. Aching back and arms and legs. My head spinning from all the paint fumes when sleep finally claimed me. My eyes so tired, contacts sticky when I pried them from my eyes. Exhausted, dreamless nights.

The only two things that helped get the job done on time were listening to my iPod and forcing myself to remember that the deadline pressure would pay for a hotel room at the beach.

The beach, my refuge. The beach, a hope and dream.

Vines and giant trees blossomed under my paintbrush. So much concentration was needed to push myself like this. There was no time to think about Leslie. To savor that second gentle kiss. To worry about us. To think of Alex or Mom or Dad.

There was only viridian hue. Ochre medium. Autumn yellow. Phthalo blue. Masking tape. The two-inch brush or the one-inch brush? Mr. Cornwell standing over my shoulder, sipping a martini after work, talking about the weather, commenting on this brushstroke or that. Mrs. Cornwell telling me how she wanted her baby girl to be an artist, too. And finally, it was done and they were satisfied, shook my hand heartily, and bade me good night.

I had a forty-ounce Miller Light on the way home from Grapevine Thursday night and to hell with the open container laws in Texas. Sleep wrapped me up beautifully, quickly, and without confusing dreams or anxiety about getting the room done.

I slept till one o'clock in the afternoon Friday and continued to lie in bed for an hour or so, reluctant to leave the warm sheets after so much hard work. I was kind of proud of myself, hadn't been one hundred percent sure I'd be able to make the deadline. But I'd done it.

Sometimes, the best days start with something as simple as your body being allowed to rest fully—waking up without the damned alarm blasting you from sleep, that luxurious feeling of snuggling in the warm covers while the mind reboots at a comfortable pace, knowing with certainty that there's no rush, no plans, no immediate obligations. And if you wanted, you could stay in bed all afternoon.

Lying in bed, I finally allowed myself to think about going to the movie. We had plans at seven o'clock. Leslie wanted to have dinner first. Dinner and a movie. It was sounding more and more like a date but wasn't.

Five hours of freedom. What would I do?

I could go to the gym. I could go down to the river and meditate. I could Rollerblade. Or read a book. Could possibly start a new painting, one of the many now floating around in my head. There were e-mails I should probably check and respond to that had been neglected for over a week between that rough gig and the beach. Call Mom? Worry about Alex? Talk to Brandon?

In the end, it was a trip to the mall, of all things.

I hate shopping. And I hate the mall. The only reason to go there is during a desperate scouting trip on Christmas Eve or if there's a particular important item that can be procured nowhere else. And then it's always a get-in-get-out kind of frantic quest. The faster, the better.

But I'd gone through my closet and had tried on a bunch of pants, a dozen shirts, discovering, to my chagrin, that nothing fit right anymore.

Guess what they say is true. The breakup diet really does make you lose weight.

"This is not a date," I'd said loudly, firmly, had repeated it several times, sighing at my reflection in the mirror. Those faded blue jeans were my favorites. But damned, my ass just about disappeared in the now-baggy rear. "You do not need a new outfit just to hang out with Leslie, your *friend*."

I got dressed. My hands grabbed my keys and wallet. My feet carried me to my car. My car drove itself to the mall, and I'm just going to pretend that I blacked out so I don't have to admit that I spent three hours there going from store to store, looking for the perfect outfit and accessories because I'm not a girly-girl and never, ever act like one.

I'm a tomboy who likes her jeans and T-shirts. Sort of a neo-hippie, who'll wear the flowery shirts and sandals and sometimes—on very special occasions—put a couple of flowers in my hair. Just for fun. I don't go to a body products store to buy a complete set of sandalwood-scented stuff. Like hell will I go to the trouble of visiting twelve stores to match a sky blue blouse to a pair of faux-faded gray jeans and new black boots with slight, one-inch heels.

But all that stuff was in the backseat when I parked my car at the duplex. Whoops.

And if it's there already, why not give it all a test run? There's nothing wrong with that or with preceding said test run with a long, hot bath and spending about an hour to get ready, blow-drying and taming my hair with anti-frizz gels to get it just right and taking the time to apply eye shadow that just so happens to match my eyes and my shirt, right? Right.

I'm hopeless.

It was six thirty when I finally finished up. The phone rang and I grabbed it eagerly, thinking it would be Leslie.

But it was Alex. Damn it. Does that woman have a built-in radar or something?

"What's up?" I asked carefully, trying for a politely inquisitive tone, trying not to sound rushed as I gathered up my car keys and new purse. Yeah, I'd bought a purse. Gray, to match my outfit. Don't tease me.

"Hey."

Silence. I wasn't going to interrupt it. She called, so let her speak.

"I'm sorry about last week."

Something tight eased in my chest.

"Me too."

"Things have been rough here. I mean, I like Phoenix and my job." She paused again and the silence stretched awkwardly. She'd always been a bit on the quiet side and getting her to open up had been a challenge. "I'm just having a tough time making new friends, fitting in. The people at work are nice, but they're not you and Amy and everybody."

The mention of Amy made me suddenly angry, more so than it ever had before, but I kept my mouth shut. We weren't going to do this again. "I'm sorry it's so tough" came out instead of the angry response I'd choked back. I was proud of my diplomacy. Really.

"I just wanted to tell you I'm sorry."

"Yeah, let's try not to do that again. It really upset me."

"Me too."

Traffic blocked my path toward downtown. I was going to be late again and muttered at the other drivers under my breath while she babbled, only half listening. Sometimes I'm a terrible friend.

"...and then she said I'd have to wait and see."

Shit. What the hell was she talking about?

"That sucks." I said, relieved that she continued her story without much pause.

She didn't ask how my week had been. She didn't ask how I was doing. She didn't ask how my trip turned out, how Brandon was, or how anybody else in my life was.

"...so I guess I might see you in a month or so."

"What?"

"Next month. Visiting my parents. Just told you." She sounded annoyed now.

"Right. Sorry. Traffic's hell right now and I was momentarily distracted."

That was not the time to have another argument. It was supposed to be a good night, and asking her why she wasn't bothering to ask about me was not going to keep me on track for having a good night. So I let it be. For now.

"We'll see. When are you coming? I'm going out of town next month for a weekend."

"The week of August twenty-eighth. Didn't you just go out of town? Are you going alone?"

Shit. Me and my big mouth. I remember how she'd reacted the last time I brought up Leslie and answered with great apprehension. There would be no lying to Alex, just omission of information.

"Yeah, I did just go out of town. I liked it so much I thought I'd go back next month. Just made good money on another gig. I'm working hard and think I deserve it."

"Galveston again?"

"Yup."

"And you're going alone?"

Damn it. Just can't talk around that one. "No. I'm going with Leslie."

"Oh. Okay." A rather long pause. "Guess that's why she said she'd be busy that weekend." She paused another beat. "She just didn't...never mind. I'm sure you'll have fun." And I knew, with certainty, that she was avoiding saying something.

You can't be with someone for six years and not hear what they're not saying between sentences. And what I heard was: "Neither of you wanted to tell me you were going on vacation together. To the beach, no less. Where we always wanted to go. You'll share that with her but not with me. You'll do that for a friend, but not for a lover."

She didn't say it, but it was abundantly clear nonetheless. She'd always been jealous of my friends, thought I gave them so much more than I put into my relationship. It was one of the things that we'd argued about many times before it was over.

"You know what's going on in her life. She needs to get away."

"Yeah."

"I'm not stealing your friend."

"I know."

"Look, honey..."

"Don't call me that."

"I call everybody honey."

Silence.

"I want to see you when you come to town."

She picked her words more carefully now. "Sure. We can have coffee or something."

And that translates roughly into: "I'm not sure I can trust either of us to spend any amount of time together and get along properly, enjoyably, so having a cup of coffee in a public place puts a time limit on the visit and provides an exit plan that doesn't involve getting tossed out of the duplex." Great.

"Okay" was all I could say.

"I'll talk to you later." Which meant she wasn't going to call again for a while.

What a beautiful fucking way to start what was supposed to be a good evening.

Still grumbling about the conversation with Alex, I strode up to the restaurant. My first instinct, just as it had always been with Leslie, was to walk up, hug her, and immediately tell her what had just happened. So, rather distracted and harassed, I walked up, hugged her, stepped back, and opened my mouth to speak but nothing came out.

She was gawking. Her eyes roved up and down my body, and that look erased whatever had been in my head moments before.

It was a hungry look. There was no mistaking it—so blatant and obvious it was almost a leer. I might have been offended if the sight of her eyes glued to my chest didn't make things tighten deep inside. No one had ever been able to make me wet with a look. But she certainly had, and it scared me.

I hadn't gotten wet no matter the circumstances in a damned long time. It was unnerving how quickly it happened. Hell, it was unnerving that it had happened at all. And quite wonderful, actually.

If she was gonna look me up and down like that, then so could I. And if she teased me about it later, there'd be hell to pay.

Black cowboy boots, a little scuffed, obviously well-used and well-loved. Faded blue jeans hugging those strong legs and curvy hips.

A V-neck green linen shirt that showed just a touch of cleavage. Her breasts were the perfect size—not too big or small—like they'd fit in my hands just right if I were allowed to touch them. That's how I'd painted them, too.

A gold necklace set beautifully against the tan skin of her chest, sparkling in the sun.

Those kissable lips, slightly parted, wet, as though she'd just licked them. That beautiful face with the high cheekbones and sexy eyebrows that could express so much with an arch or a playful waggle.

Those eyes that were so honest, that looked so sensuous now. And again those lips... It was hard to tear my eyes away from them. So full and soft, especially now that I knew what it was like to be kissed by them.

She'd done something to her hair. It was shorter, clipped tight against her head, the kind of hair you can ruffle a thousand times and it would still hold its shape and look fantastic. It wasn't a butch cut. Not really. More androgynous, yet somehow making her look more feminine, exposing her neck and ears, both of which I wanted to softly bite.

The way she held her body—confident, strong, weight shifted slightly over the left leg, the jeans just tight enough to show the quad working to hold up the rest. One hand tucked casually in her pocket, the other rising up, slowly, reaching for mine. I followed its movement, took it, and our eyes met.

We'd caught each other and both grinned sheepishly.

"You look really nice today."

"So do you." I touched her hair when she pulled me in for another, slower hug, her hands running up and down my back. "It's different. Shorter."

"Do you like it?"

And without thinking, "Very much. Kinda like a sexy, lesbian George Clooney look."

She chuckled against my neck.

"Lesbian George Clooney look. I like that."

She released me and strode over to the door and opened it for me, and I let her do it.

There was something about her that was definitely starting to bring out the girl in me. The shopping, the clothes, the body products... And wasn't I the one who always held the door for my dates?

Except this wasn't a date.

We'd just dressed up for the fun of it. Because...uh...we felt like it. Because we were just two friends who had incredible sexual tension and emotional connectedness between us and were just...err...hanging out. Yeah.

Ooh...this night had trouble written all over it.

"We need to set some boundaries, that's all," she was saying between forkfuls of Caesar salad. She swallowed and arched an eyebrow at me. It was highly likely that I was pouting. Only moments before, she'd asked me to lean closer, just a little closer, just a little more—and it was then that I noticed she was trying to look down my shirt. I'd pulled it out a little for her, as much a surprise to myself as to her, so she could get a better look. Her eyes had gone wide, then heavy-lidded with appreciation and I'd smirked.

I never knew my breasts alone could cause such a look.

Boundaries, indeed.

"Okay," Leslie said and set down her fork. She glanced left and right, then lowered her voice conspiratorially, grinning. "Boundary number one, the dildo cannot be longer than seven inches. Boundary number two, you have to let me be the top at least fifty percent of the time."

I burst out laughing. Yeah, Leslie sure knew how to lighten the mood. Guess that was an example of the "we'll always flirt" thing.

“Fifty percent of the time? I’ll give you twenty-five. Tops. No pun intended.”

She sniggered and picked up her fork to resume eating. After a minute or so of chuckling, she continued, “Boundaries, though, seriously. We’ll be fine so long as we can set some of those.”

“Funny thing about boundaries is that they only work if you want to follow them.”

Her eyes widened, and she just looked at me across the restaurant table.

“Okay, so how’s this for a boundary?” I started, her hand in mine, as we walked down the aisle to find a couple of good seats in the theater, pausing momentarily to watch her ass as she led the way and guided us to some excellent seats.

We’d ditched my car after dinner and gone to the movie tavern where you can watch a movie and drink beer. She arranged our pitcher and glasses and began to pour, giving me a half-amused, half-encouraging look. I swallowed hard and forced myself to continue. “No hands in new places.”

Okay, so that was a little selfish. Yeah, I wanted boundaries. But no, I didn’t want those kisses or embraces to stop. Gotta draw the line somewhere...uh...acceptable.

Leslie gave me a look like she knew what I was thinking and laughed. She set the pitcher aside, settled in her seat, and took my hand again. She raised it slowly to her lips, and I realized a split second before what was about to happen happened and didn’t even try to stop it.

“And does this count?” she asked, her voice low, as she slid my right index finger into her mouth, sucking it in until her lips were grazing my knuckles, her tongue running its length.

I’d been strung tight all evening. A straight line of heat shot down my hand, through my arm, and lower. Much lower. And I was instantly wet again.

“Uh” and a gasp was all I could manage.

My finger was trapped between her teeth, not that I was tugging too hard to get it loose. My eyes closed involuntarily, and she chuckled around my finger. My mind shut down and my body focused on the sensation of her tongue. I couldn’t help but wonder if it would feel this good if it were on my clit.

“Fuck,” I whispered and tugged a little more enthusiastically. She finally relented with a lazy, sultry laugh before sucking the next one into her mouth.

Now, I can’t put the next series of events entirely on Leslie, though I’ve tried to convince myself that it was mostly her and little me. Nah, I was a willing co-conspirator. Definitely an enabler, egging her on with my sighs and smiles.

Just after the lights went low, way before the previews ended, we were kissing again. And it was not the gentle exploration sort any longer. It was raw. Heated. A meeting of desperately needing lips and tongues. The type of flaming desire that is born part from neglect, part from intense attraction and sexual chemistry, and part from deep affection.

My hands on the back of her neck.

Her hands on my shoulders, wandering lower, touching my breasts.

Shocked, nervous, and delighted sighs in the dark.

Then we’d break apart, take long sips of our beer, watch five or ten minutes of the movie, then hands would wander and tongues would meet again.

I was soaked. So fucking wet. Hot, like I’d never been before... Alex hadn’t been bad, but she’d been hesitant and inconsistent. Not at all like this woman pinching my nipples, seeming so sure that she wouldn’t be refused.

Comparing the two was completely inappropriate, but my mind wandered there regardless. I couldn’t stop it.

“What the hell is this movie about?” Leslie whispered between hungry kisses.

“Fuck if I know,” I hissed back, shutting her up with my lips.

Her hand wandered into my lap, ran up between my thighs, grabbed my groin over my jeans. Those damned jeans that were in the way. No hands in new places... I spread my legs, twisted, and tried to stifle a groan.

Later, weeks later, she’d refer to the movie tavern as the dark place we go to get drunk and fool around.

“Now what?” Leslie asked, a new swagger in her step as we made our way back to her shiny blue sports car. Her tipsy strutting was amusing the hell out of me. “The Red Door?”

“Hmm,” I said noncommittally. What I wanted, of course, was to go to her place. But that wasn’t really an option. So she lived alone. That didn’t mean we could just go there and cave in.

I wanted it to be just a lust thing. An uncomplicated thing that could be easily sorted out. That wish spawned a jumble of thoughts—was it so bad if we fucked? Yes. But the way she made me feel... Would it be worth risking the friendship? No. How often do you find that someone who just sets your body on fire, though? No idea. Should I just ask her to take me home and ignore what happened in the theater? But how could I bury that? How, when my body was practically humming with unquenched desire?

“There’s this other place I like...” She must have caught the expression on my face because she trailed off mid-sentence, grabbed me, and kissed me thoroughly. “Yeah,” she said when she broke off, her breath a little heavy and eyes glazed. “We’ll go there.”

She raced across Fort Worth toward downtown. I had no idea where she was headed. And I might have been worried about her ability to drive if I hadn’t been so damned tipsy myself.

She parked the car. We got out. The place was giving last call. We walked back to her car, debating on where to try next. There was another place. We got back in and the reckless driving continued. She stopped on some tiny-ass street and hopped out, raced around the car—laughing and smiling—and opened the door for me.

“This one will be open late for sure,” she promised and took my hand.

We entered an alleyway behind the bar. Fort Worth is not exactly a dangerous city. In most areas, that one included, the worst that’ll happen is that you might find your windshield bashed in and the radio missing. When hands grabbed me from behind, though, I was scared shitless for about a second before finding myself slammed up against a rough brick wall with Leslie’s full body pressed into mine, her lips crushing into me like I was the air she needed to breathe. There was no time to gasp in surprise, only time to react to her touch.

My hands grabbed her shoulders hard and pulled her in tighter still. I whimpered into her mouth, surprising myself, and felt my knees go weak. If she’d wanted to unzip my pants and fuck me in that alleyway, I would have let her—willingly, gladly, begging for her to just do it already. The tension had been so unbearably thick all night...

But abruptly, she released me, stepping back as though surprised. I wanted to shout at her, tell her what she’d just done was not okay—not because I didn’t want it, but because she’d gotten me all riled up and had stopped. Damned, it was hard to let her move away without trying to draw her back in.

Again, we broke boundaries at the bar, her fingers trailing and playing with the waistline of my jeans as the bartender poured our drinks, her lips on the back of my neck, nibbling seductively as I tried to hand the man a twenty. Leslie grabbing and kneading my ass as I waited for the change.

We sat at a tiny table, sipped our drinks, and tried to carry on a conversation. At first, we communicated more in knowing grins and heavy-lidded eyes. But soon we slipped back into easy talking. It was what had drawn us together. It was what we did and what we liked so much about each other. It was safe, much easier than dealing with the way we’d been touching and kissing all night.

She asked about Alex. I finally told her about the conversation. She seemed genuinely concerned. We moved on to Amy and how Leslie was still having trouble with what she’d overheard at Starbucks. How things had been so hard for her, how she was thinking about this time last year. How the two of us couldn’t get involved. How much we cared about and needed each other.

We were so drunk.

Last call came too quickly and we headed out to go pick up my car. Once in the parking lot in proper downtown, we told ourselves we were only going to Leslie’s place so I could pick up a book she’d wanted me to read and to say goodbye. I wanted a cigarette so badly on the way to her place but resisted the temptation because another temptation was far stronger, and I wanted her to like kissing me one more time.

I’ll say again that we were so drunk. And that’s not an excuse, just a fact and an influence.

She beat me there and stood on the front lawn, waiting.

“We’ll say good night inside,” she said simply. The book was completely forgotten.

I hesitated for a second, nodded, and took her hand as she led me inside.

Leslie fumbled with the keys and unlocked the door. As soon as we were both inside, as soon as she'd shut the door, she grabbed me by the shirt and threw me up against it like she'd done in the alley. Only this time, there was no abrupt breaking apart.

She drove the length of her body into mine. Her lips were on my mouth, bruising my lips, her tongue demanding entrance. I let her in, eagerly, moaning, my hands kneading her shoulders and neck. She released the hold on my lips only to dive into the crook of my neck to nibble and bite and suck, her hands finding my breasts under that new blouse, sneaking under the bra, pinching my nipples.

She slipped a leg between my thighs and the pressure was exquisite.

"Fuck!" burst from my lips. I cried out again when her hand wedged between her thighs and cupped me.

Suddenly a blur.

She spun me around so that my face was pressed into the plaster by the door now, hands on the wall, her hands on my hips, grinding her groin against my ass.

"Oh, Jordan," she hissed and groaned, moving as though she were truly fucking me. She tugged and tore at my fly with clumsy fingers until she could make her way inside and found my clit—staying above the panties, though I didn't want her to.

"Yes," I moaned, and tried my best to grind my ass harder into her pelvis, reaching behind to grab as much of her as I could reach.

Another blur.

Her lips were back on mine. We were clawing at each other until it suddenly stopped. Her or me, I don't know. Our breaths came out in ragged gasps.

"We can't do this," she said, her hands cupping my face, forcing me to focus on her eyes. They were filled with tears. Panic gripped my heart.

"I know, Leslie. I know," I whispered and cupped her face just the same.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"I don't want to hurt you, either."

"Then we can't do this. It's not right. I couldn't give myself to you right now."

"Yeah." The tears were in my eyes now, too. Seconds before, I had wanted nothing but for her fingers to penetrate me. But it was as though ice water had suddenly rained down on us, quenching the unbelievable heat. I was scared we'd fucked it up too much already.

"Don't," I whispered, squeezing her cheeks. "Don't you dare run away from me."

"I won't," she said and sounded miserable. Gods, I just wanted to take that misery from her voice and swallow it. Guilt suddenly overwhelmed me. She was still hurting and I'd let this happen, had pushed, even.

"Promise."

"I promise I won't run away from you." Tears trickled down her cheeks, and it made my insides hurt to see it. "I need you, Jordan. Please understand."

"I do," I whispered and truly did understand. Even if I didn't like it.

Seconds or minutes passed. We held each other, crying, like we'd done a thousand times before. We were mourning circumstances and something lost, something scary coming on the horizon. When we broke apart, her eyes probably mirrored mine—shock, uncertainty, loneliness, longing.

We said our good nights, slipped into kisses again, though gentler. She walked me to my car and I left.

She couldn't give herself to me completely. It was true. But it was the only way I wanted her. Completely. A love that goes all the way.

I cried all the way home.

## Chapter Thirteen

One of my favorite authors once wrote in a fiction novel that events come in packs.

They come and overwhelm you, thrust you into unknown territory, and can bury you if you let them. He was abso-fucking-lutely right.

Events do come in packs. They terrorize you and don't let you get a moment of rest. And when it's over, most of the time it doesn't seem nearly as bad as it did in the thick of it. How you handle those kinds of pack events, in my opinion, can define you as a person.

So here was my pack of events:

It started with that shit with Leslie, that conversation with Alex, and being so damned over exhausted from the gig at the Cornwells. That Friday night bled into a highly unpleasant Saturday afternoon with my mother, during which I attempted and failed to get her to talk about Dad.

It had gone something like this:

Coffee at IHOP. A trip to Target to pick up some dog food and cleaning supplies. "Mom, I need to talk to you about something." The look on her face closed tight with apprehension.

"I don't want to talk."

"You don't know what I want to talk about."

"Just no, okay?"

"Not okay, Mom. Please." A long sigh. That look of disapproval I knew so well. Me pushing forward anyway, trying not to feel hurt that she didn't even ask what it was I wanted to discuss. Finally, I just started talking, telling her about Leslie and my confusion and about the dream I'd had where Dad showed up and told me to rest by the river. Her not meeting my eyes while I spoke.

"Can we just not do this?" she'd asked, her voice low and nearly desperate.

"No, damn it. I have to talk about this. You need to talk about this. We need to stick together, you and I. Don't you get that? I know it hurts like hell, Mom..."

"Do you?" Her voice rose an octave and cracked. "Do you understand truly?"

"Fuck, Mom. He was my father."

"And the love of my life and my soul mate." Angry splotches of red covered her cheeks and nose. "You have no idea—none at all—what it's like to be part of a half and have it cut from your life, from your soul, ripped away in a single second."

"Oh, come on, Mom. He was part of me. I'm hurting, too, damn it."

Her eyes, once so sharply bright with intelligence and now so dead-looking, finally met mine. "You have his eyes. It's so hard to look into your eyes." And then the tears fell from those green eyes of hers. She swiped at them angrily, as though crying was a deep shame to be hidden. "Don't make this harder for me. Just don't."

"But, Mom..."

"We're going home. Now. And you're going to leave."

"Come on..."

“I love you, but I need to be alone.” Her face was contorted now, a terrible sight, scary, bitter, and hollow. “I half hope you’ll understand one day, so you’ll experience this kind of deep, soul-binding love.” She sobbed, hiccupped, and swallowed hard. “And I half hope you never find a woman who’ll capture you like your father captured me so you never have to feel this kind of pain.”

She didn’t speak another word to me after that, though I tried until I was practically thrown out of her house. To say it was awful would be a terrible understatement. I loved her, as any daughter would love a good mother. But it was Dad I’d been close to—your adoring daddy’s girl. He’d been our middleman and now there was no middleman. Gods, it hurt so much to see her grieving and be grieving for the same person myself and not even be able to talk about it with my mother.

So I called Leslie and cried to her on the phone. She listened and comforted as best she could. But there’s really not much to say about things like that, except to express that it will hopefully get better at some point, which she did.

Leslie also had news of her own.

She’d run into Amy on the street downtown that day. Apparently, they’d both stopped, frozen, staring. She told me Amy walked up to her and told her she looked great. There were tears in both of their eyes. And Amy promised to call Leslie sometime the following week. I didn’t know how to feel about that at all. It was a confusing mess that was mostly lingering anger at how Amy had hurt my dear friend and how dare she give her even the tiniest shred of hope that there’d finally be some closure when I was so sure she’d just fuck it up and make things worse for Leslie. And then there was a touch of jealousy buried under the honest concern.

An hour after that conversation, I got a phone call from a cop in Hurst. Brandon had been in a serious car accident and they’d pulled my number from a scrap of paper in his wallet. Could I put them in contact with his next of kin? Yes, it was very serious. No, I couldn’t have details because I wasn’t related.

I spent the night at the hospital with his dad. We bought coffee from the vending machine and tried to carry a conversation, but it was hard and I was so confused and scared.

Brandon. My poor, poor Brandon.

We prayed, his father and I. He held my hand while I cried and didn’t call Leslie—couldn’t somehow bring myself to tell her what had happened, like saying it out loud would make it more real. Fuck, I couldn’t lose him. Not now. Not like this.

And then we were finally allowed to see him.

Tubes everywhere. A machine pumping air into his collapsed lungs. So pale. The discolor of bruising already marring his handsome face. Cuts on his arms and hands. Those arms that had so recently held me and comforted me at the beach. I could still hear his ringing laughter in my ears, see that look he kept giving me when I mentioned another text from Leslie.

Leslie had texted around nine o’clock in the morning, wanting to know if I was okay. She said she’d had a bad feeling. I texted what had happened. Then I ignored the following six text messages she sent me because I just couldn’t handle it. Not at least until the doctors finally found his father and me and told us Brandon was going to be all right—he’d need physical therapy and gods only know how many surgeries, but he would make it. And the doctor gave us a look that emphasized how lucky Brandon had been. No brain damage. No lasting, easily visible scarring. Just a shattered wrist, a concussion, and a few fractured ribs.

Like scars would have been the worst of it...

I came home, feeling completely strung out, to find several messages on my answering machine.

The first was from Mom. “Jordan, I’m sorry. Give me more time. We’ll talk about it eventually. I’m going to see a counselor on Wednesday.” A very lengthy pause. “I hope you figure out things with your friend. Go with your heart. The age doesn’t matter. Like Daddy used to say, it’s all about the connection.” The word “Daddy” sounded so strained.

The next one was from Alex. “I think I need more time before I see you again. I don’t know. It’s rough. We knew it would be hard. It’s just harder than I thought it would be. It kinda crept up on me, didn’t really hit hard until I moved. What do you think?”

And then, “Miss Coones, my name is Andrew Baker and I’d like to speak to you about a project. You come highly recommended from several friends, and I’ve been looking for an artist for some time now. Please call me as soon as you can.”

I wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed and shut out the world before going back to the hospital to be with Brandon's father, Lee. But doing anything productive and non-drama-related suddenly struck me as something that might be just what was needed to get me through the rest of the day without breaking down. So I forced a pleasant tone into my voice and called Mr. Baker.

I would get a chance to get the biggest damned job to date—murals on several outside walls of a new resort development southeast of Dallas. We set an appointment to meet on Monday and I was in shock for several minutes after the call ended. A job of that magnitude was the kind that would get me some real exposure, something I'd been desperately seeking for ages.

It would be a commute. It would also pay a hell of a lot. It was the bizarre sort of good news in a mountain of mess. Awesome and shit.

Yay for the big job. Crap for needing to update my portfolio and prepare to meet with a bunch of hot-shot developers. He said he'd make it worth my while. He'd better. Especially since I had to be productive and positive during all this disaster around me.

Events come in packs. Drama. Heartbreak. Terrible accidents. Too much work.

I remember hanging up the phone and walking straight toward the kitchen, ripping open the refrigerator door, uncorking a half-finished bottle of dark red wine, and downing it in less than five minutes. Then I sat on the floor, leaning against the counter, my head buried in my hands, while the weeping wracked my shoulders and made my throat so raw it sounded like I had a head cold for several days after.

That's when Leslie knocked. That's when she came in the unlocked door despite my ignoring her knocking. That's when she scooped me into her arms, sitting on the kitchen floor with me, and let me cry into her chest like a lost child.

So if moments like that define you as a person, like I believe, then what I learned was that yeah, I can function under pressure, can comfort those in need and still carry on with my life, making the phone calls and landing the gigs.

But I didn't have to go it alone and rely on just myself. I couldn't, even if I wanted to.

I learned that it's okay to lean and cry myself hoarse. It's okay to push a little when it's necessary, no matter how much hurt it may cause. And I learned that Leslie could catch me when I stumbled. Now whether I'd let her catch me was an altogether different matter. I let her catch and keep me afloat that time and appreciated what she did for me. But I'd learned, too, by not calling and texting, that in my heart of hearts was a strong streak of pride, and that would have to be humbled if I were to try and let her in all the way.

It was not going to be easy. And I wasn't even sure if doing so would be a good idea, considering circumstances and obstacles—whether it was to continue building a lifelong friendship or something else. It all just seemed so damned hard, and I was so, so tired, lying in her arms that Sunday afternoon, crying my eyes out.

## Chapter Fourteen

Two very, very long weeks.

Two weeks of hospital visits and daily phone calls with Lee, of time spent in the intensive care unit trying to keep Brandon company while he was out of his mind on morphine and who knows what else, babbling incoherently, not knowing where he was or who I was until the last couple of days.

Two weeks of driving an hour each way every day to meet with this developing guru or that public relations guy, of being enormously pleased with myself for having signed a contract and taken home a first check of six grand. My first corporate advance.

Two weeks to get wrapped up in my head about the emotional messes I'd helped create. Two weeks of listening to Leslie talk incessantly about Amy—when they were going to meet, where they'd have a beer and talk, when they finally did meet and nothing much was said, how they'd try to be civil and keep in contact, how deeply all of it upset my friend. After those long, frustrating talks, we'd kiss passionately, almost desperately, in her driveway until we reached the point where she'd bolt and run to her door, locking me out again.

Two weeks of no contact with Alex, during which my head spun with what-ifs and regret again, like I'd made little or no progress at all.

Yeah, it was a damned rough two weeks.

Brandon had been released from the hospital at the end of those two weeks. It was a Saturday. His father had taken him home and hadn't been gone for more than five minutes when Brandon called me.

"I need a drink," he'd said and I'd laughed, thinking he wasn't serious. But he was. I argued with him. He got pissed off. Finally, I relented and agreed to come pick him up and take him to a bar, where he had not one but four drinks and was really drunk by the time I drove him back to his apartment.

The texting started on my way home. It was innocent enough at first, but I couldn't seem to keep a handle on my emotions. It was like my brain was frayed along the edges where logic takes over.

I'd texted just how hard it was not to reach out and kiss her and how little willpower I had when it came to her. Honesty can get you into so much trouble. Before, I'd hoped that telling her that I was attracted would help me put it behind us. But since it was a mutual thing, it seemed like the talk had only opened the floodgates rather than strengthen the dam. We both knew we were playing with fire and didn't seem to care.

She'd written, "I'm only going to say this once and I want you to erase after you read it. I want you to explode in my face. I want to fuck you until you beg me to stop. I want you on your knees."

That message had stopped me cold. There I sat, at a traffic light that was green, with cars honking behind me, reading and rereading the message.

I finally pulled into a parking lot.

"My knees just went weak," I typed. "I want to taste you and slip my fingers inside of you. I want to hear you scream my name."

"Are you wet?"

"Yes, so wet. And knowing you know I'm wet is making me wetter."

“Fuck.” I could almost see her hesitating before continuing. “I want to bend you over a chair and pound you. I want to make you come hard and fast. Over and over again.”

“I want to feel your naked body on top of mine. I want you inside of me.”

Barely a minute was passing between each text. They were more and more graphic. I was touching myself, in my parked car, when the texts finally seemed to cease. Sighing, after fifteen minutes with no buzzing to indicate another message, I pulled my hand from my pants and hit the road again, intent on getting home as quickly as possible so I could properly masturbate.

I dumped my shit on the floor, tore off my jeans, and crawled into bed. I reached into my panties, groaning at the wetness I found there—so slippery and swollen it was amazing.

My phone buzzed. I snatched it up eagerly. “Yes, honey, send more inspiration,” I whispered before flipping it open.

“Will you come hold me?”

Shit. What the hell was that?

“Are you at home?” She’d texted earlier that she was out with friends.

“No. I’m in Paris. Where the hell do you think I am?”

“Okay, smartass. Just thought you might still be out.”

I stared at the display for several long seconds and made my decision. “Yes. I’ll be there in fifteen.”

“Hurry.”

I was fully dressed and in my car in less than a minute. The drive took longer than I ever remember it taking. My fingers drummed on the steering wheel, my foot tapped a matching rhythm on the floorboard. When I finally did pull up to the curb in front of her house, I didn’t waste time contemplating my actions, allowing the nerves to creep in and make my hands sweaty. No, I jumped out of my car, slammed the door, and marched straight up to her porch. I hadn’t even been able to knock twice when the door flew open.

She smiled softly, tentatively at me. Her hair was ruffled as though she’d run fingers through it repeatedly in agitation or nervousness, tufts of it sticking up on one side of her head. That smile was so sexy it made me weak with need.

Leslie was wearing a pair of white boxers and a matching tank top, which did very little to cover her sexy body, instead accentuating the curves and muscles. I could see candlelight flickering down the hallway behind her. All the lights in the house were out. And just barely, above the hammering pulse in my head, soft music wafted toward us.

She held out her hand.

I stepped through the door and went straight for her, throwing my arms around her neck, kissing her thoroughly. Her lips parted, and she responded for a few seconds before pulling back.

“I just want you to hold me,” she whispered, giving me a gentle look.

My whole body was throbbing, pulsing with longing, and I had to clear my throat twice before I thought I could say a word. In the end, I just nodded. She took my hand and led me to the bedroom—that twelve-by-ten-foot space that I’d forced myself so many times not to think about. It was sparsely decorated. A dark chest of drawers, an armoire, a tiny nightstand, and matching bed low to the floor. No pictures. No artwork. Just warm greens on the wall and candles throwing shadows across her golden sheets and face and body.

“Sit down and I’ll get us a couple of beers,” she said, indicating the bed. I sat, somewhat dumbfounded, and took off my shoes, waiting.

When she came back, she stopped in the doorway for several long seconds while we just looked at each other. Finally, she strode over, sat beside me, and handed over a bottle. My fingers began to pick at the label before I’d taken a single sip.

My brain finally kicked in and whirred to life, analyzing the situation and possible scenarios, trying to figure it out. Maybe something had happened again with Amy and she really did just need some comfort. But then... what kind of “comfort” did she have in mind? And could I be okay with being there for her in a sexual way, just to comfort?

No, a tiny voice broke through the whirling thoughts, I couldn’t be just a comfort, a rebound, a friend with benefits. And yet... I was hurting, too, still, and wouldn’t it be nice to have a warm, sexy body surrounding mine—the body of a dear friend who cared about me very much and wouldn’t hurt me? No, I wanted more. Always wanted more.

More passion. More romance. More intimacy. More love.

The candles continued to flicker in the silence.

Gods, she was beautiful by candlelight. No woman I'd ever been with had appreciated just how the colors grow rich by that yellow light, how they make a room smaller, more intimate, warmer. Or how the shadows cut across a face, revealing the tiniest creases, heightening expressions, making them more visible, thereby making a person more transparent despite the lower light.

"So," I said, feeling incredibly awkward after those messages we'd been sending all night. "What's going on?"

"I just need you to be here with me tonight."

"Okay."

"Just to hold me."

Long pause.

"Sure."

She took the beer from me and set it on the nightstand. Her soft hands cupped my face and she dove in for a kiss that left me shaking and breathless. She moaned into my mouth, and I shuddered at what her small noises were making so tight. When we broke apart, we both laughed nervously.

"Will you hold me?"

"Yes." It was my turn to whisper now. This was definitely dangerous territory. My mind was telling me that I'd be able to just hold my friend who needed me. But I was growing increasingly wet, too, and knew it was unlikely that my hands could remain still.

She slowly stood and took off her shirt, then dropped her boxers and stepped out of them. My lips parted at the sight of her—that tan body, those strong legs and arms, those breasts as perfect as I'd imagined them, nipples hard and tight.

Fuck.

Hold that and not taste it?

"Does this bother you?" Her face showed mostly concern, but there was a hint of a smile tugging at her full lips. Not necessarily a teasing smile, but she'd definitely caught the look on my face as I stared at her naked body. I shook my head a little too quickly.

She slipped between the sheets and reached for my hand.

"Will you take your clothes off?" She squeezed my hand encouragingly. The question was so soft, so tender, she might have been asking if I'd make love to her.

Nothing good could come of this. Just the thought of my naked breasts touching hers, of my naked thigh being pressed up against hers was making my breath come a little quicker. My throat and lips felt so dry. But as though I were watching someone else, I saw my hands reach for my fly and unbutton my jeans, pull them down my legs, and toss them aside. My shirt and bra followed, then my panties.

Her eyes were sharp but heavy-lidded, as though she were struggling to maintain control but not wanting to look away. Slowly, deliberately, I pulled aside the sheet on my side of the bed and slipped in beside her.

She rolled on top of me and we both groaned. Her face was buried in my hair, my hands kneading her shoulders. We weren't kissing or rocking our hips, but just having the weight of her body press me deeper into the sheets felt incredibly erotic. She might as well have slid between my thighs and entered me.

And then she pulled up, slowly, resting on her elbows on either side of my head, looking down at me, her eyes violet in the candlelight.

"I needed this," she said, lowering her lips to mine, kissing gently.

"Mmm."

"Sometimes I think we should just sleep together and get it over with."

I chuckled, half nodding, half shaking my head. "Me too. But you know we can't."

She sighed. Yes, she did know. I could see it in her eyes. "It would be incredible, though, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, yeah..." I couldn't keep the sigh out of the words, the noise a woman makes when she needs.

My hands crept up the back of her neck and pulled her in for another kiss. But when our lips met, it was not gentle or comforting. It was hungry, desperate, like that time we'd kissed furiously against the door after going to the movies. She slipped a thigh between my legs and pressed in tight. I tore my lips from hers, gasping, moaning at the pressure.

"Oh, Jordan," she hissed, and I knew she'd just discovered how wet I was. She pulled back, breathing hard, rolled onto her side, and pulled me close.

"Fuck," she moaned and rubbed her face, her other arm wrapped around my shoulders. For several minutes, neither of us spoke.

It was Leslie again, who broke the silence.

"You are so beautiful."

"Oh, Leslie. So are you."

"I want you."

"I want you, too. I am so hot for you right now."

"I know, I could feel it."

She chuckled then, took a deep breath, and reached for my hand.

"I want to show you something."

Red flag. Red flag. Red flag.

She drew my hand under the sheets and between her legs, pushing my fingers between her swollen lips before I could protest. She released my hand, and I ran the length of her without thinking, delighting in how slippery she was, how hard her clit was. My mouth moved to form words, but nothing came out.

She groaned and let me explore a bit before grabbing my wrist to stop me.

"That doesn't happen too often," she said between clenched teeth. "Just thought you should know that."

"You're so wet."

She laughed then, a bright, delighted laugh, and rolled onto her side so she could look me in the face again. Our lips met. We couldn't seem to stop kissing, stop reaching for each other, despite the constant assurances that we both knew we couldn't do this.

"I wish you were ten years older."

"I wish you were over Amy."

"And you over Alex."

"I wish we'd met at a better time."

"Yeah, our timing is terrible."

"You're so fucking hot."

"Damn, Jordan, you have the most beautiful blue eyes I've ever seen. And your breasts... I fucking love your breasts, can't keep my eyes off of them."

She dipped lower and took my nipple into her mouth, nibbling, sucking, flicking her tongue across it while I writhed and moaned. I wanted to scream at her, grab her hand, and thrust it between my legs, shout, "Just do it already!" but couldn't.

Damned fate and timing and age differences. My cunt was beginning to ache with a need to be filled up. Images of her face half hidden between my thighs shot to the foreground of my brain and I nearly cried out.

"Mmm." She pulled back. "Thank you."

"Fuck, Leslie." I tried not to let my hips rock in anticipation for something that wasn't coming.

"You want me to touch you?"

"Gods, yes," I said and laughed. It was just so absurd, like trying to stop an inevitable train wreck by standing on the tracks and explaining to a conductor, who couldn't yet see or hear you, that it was a bad idea to make the scheduled trip that day because it would end in disaster. Like assuming he'd understand from afar that he'd better stop. Like telling my body that despite the heat raging between us, nothing would happen and it had better stop producing wet, slippery sex right that instant, even though the constant touches almost promised release.

Leslie's hand slid from my breast down my abdomen, through that patch of wiry hair, and dipped into my folds. She groaned when she hit moisture and didn't bother with swirling her fingers along the length of me or dancing across my clit. She penetrated me in one smooth thrust and my hips shot up to meet her.

"Like butter," she groaned into my ear, pulling back, thrusting in again and again.

Her hand disappeared.

"I shouldn't have done that," she said, her voice husky but full of apology. I couldn't answer. It was hard enough trying to catch my breath and try to mentally erase the sensation of her fingers sliding in and out of me.

Red flag, indeed.

Minutes passed to the sound of ragged breathing and rhythmic dance music. We eventually sat up, she passed me my beer, and we tried to hold a conversation, tried to recapture the intimacy of honest talks. And we did. We talked as we always talked, brutally honest. A few times, the tears came. For both of us.

Our losses. Our disappointments. Our pain.

Our longing and dreams of passion and romance. Talking about hypothetical lovers who'd look at us the way we looked at each other with hunger in their eyes and passion fueling their bodies.

The conversation was punctuated by slow, lingering kisses that grew hot and eager. It was hours of pulling back, leaning forward, lingering just a little too long, caving in, letting our bodies rule our actions, fingers and lips exploring necks and shoulders and nipples, then breaking apart, trying to talk about life and what we needed, shadows flickering across her face, golden light sparkling off her dark, shiny hair and those moist, kissable lips that kept calling me.

She was on top of me again, sucking on my nipple, easing lower.

Leslie stopped and looked into my eyes, settling herself deliberately between my thighs. "If I've only got one shot at this..." She trailed off and lowered her lips to my clit.

My whole body felt like it would explode. I was so close. Her tongue was doing things I'd never felt before, and a moan was ripped from my throat as she slid a finger inside and brought me right up to the edge before pulling back. She grinned up at me and I launched myself on her, flipping her on her back, diving between her legs to share the sensations she'd just given me.

She grabbed my hair and yanked up, pulling at my shoulders until my face was inches from hers. We thrust fingers into each other at the same moment, cried out, our hips grinding and rocking desperately until it felt like I was about to come.

"No," I said suddenly. "No, no, no..." and withdrew abruptly, just as she did. I meant to pull away, to get up and run, but she wrapped her legs and arms around me.

"I know," she whispered. "I know, I know. Shh. It's okay."

It was definitely time to go. And no, she didn't know. She didn't have any idea why nearly reaching orgasm with her had made me nearly lose it.

It wasn't that I didn't want it to happen. It was that I didn't want it to happen like that. Not in a coming together of too much hurt and unhappiness. Not with the ghosts of other women watching us in the bedroom because we hadn't banished them.

No, I'd wanted to whisper things in her ear while I made her come. And those words had stuck in my throat, lodged so tightly I felt like I'd suffocate.

With a blinding certainty, I knew that what I wanted was Leslie. In my bed. In my heart. In my soul. And it wasn't right. I might still be having issues with my past relationship, but she'd truly been burned by hers and that takes so much longer to heal. She wasn't nearly there yet.

Fuck, I was falling for a woman who'd never be able to give herself to me.

"We have such a strong bond, you and I," Leslie had said so seriously. She'd placed my hand on her chest above her heart. "Can you feel it?"

Affection swelled up so suddenly and strongly that it seemed to pump into me straight through her chest and into my hand. My body sang with it. "Yes, I can feel it," I'd admitted and hesitated for a few seconds before adding, "I'm so glad you're in my life. I need you. I don't ever want you to go away."

“I won’t.”

I had to get out of there. I had to put this behind me. As soon as possible.

I stroked her face, looked into those eyes that held such regret and concern. I touched her cheeks and kissed those lips as though I’d never be able to kiss them again. Because at that moment, I’d decided they were forever off-limits.

It took a long time to say goodbye, as though neither of us wanted to end the moment that must end and could not happen again. Her hug goodbye was crushing, a clinging embrace that promised everything would be different the next time we saw each other.

I left feeling frustrated, empty, and impossibly sad, clutching my pentagram tightly in my fist. Tears burned at the back of my eyes and poured over before I’d reached the end of her block. Damn, I’d cried a lot lately. Everything just seemed so hard and overwhelming, and I needed another break away from it all. But there’d be no break.

I thought of the beach hotel and cursed under my breath, my throat raw, and cried harder.

It wasn’t regret for our actions that was making me cry like that. There was no regret. What had happened was intense and beautiful, if complicated and confusing. It was one of those moments in life that made it richer despite the pain. I’d never forget the feel of her body on mine, the taste of her sex, the way she smelled at the base of her neck... Never had I experienced a connection that intense and powerful. It was exactly the sort of thing I’d prayed for so many times and I could appreciate it for the small wonder that it was.

No, something much more dangerous was drawing the tears. And for the first time in months, I tried to reopen that black box somewhere inside where I used to stuff things I couldn’t deal with. I searched and searched for a place to bury the growing affection.

But that black box wasn’t there anymore. It had exploded. My ability to hide, stash away, and numb out unwanted feelings had died with it.

“Goddess, I am so tired of feeling tired,” I whispered as I drove home.

## Chapter Fifteen

“You fucked up.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. You fucked up.”

I’d wanted—needed quite desperately—to say it all evening, but it was harder than I’d imagined. And then I’d spit it out, just like that, and felt relieved for about a minute.

Alcohol can make you much braver than you really are. Some might call it stupid, though. I guess it depends on the situation.

She opened her mouth to say something, but I cut her off.

“No, really.” Damn, I was drunk and just didn’t care what came out now that it had started. “Couples break up. It happens all the fucking time. There are almost always good reasons. You can justify just about anything when it comes to breakups. And sometimes...” I took a drag off my cigarette and exhaled the smoke quickly before she could interject. “...sometimes, just not feeling great with somebody can be a good enough reason. But you gotta do it right. If it’s not so serious... Well, then it doesn’t matter so much. But three years, Amy. Damn it, you owe your lover after three years. And a fucking text message? What the hell is wrong with you? That’s what I mean when I say you fucked up.”

She blinked at me, took a sip of beer, and put it back on the bar slowly, deliberately, as though trying not to slam it down. “You have no idea what was going on.”

“Maybe not.” I noticed my words were slurred. It was the first time I’d seen her since the breakup, and I’d started doing shots the moment we got to the bar. She’d asked if it was a heavy drinking night. I’d laughed and said, “Hell yes,” though she had no idea why. Guess she assumed it was still old stuff about Alex. Part of it was.

“Maybe I don’t know shit,” I continued drunkenly. “But I do know this: You should have had a face-to-face conversation. Breaking up with her in a text message was the coward’s way out.” I paused for emphasis. “And hell yes, I’m calling you a coward.”

She took another sip of beer and said, “You’re drunk.”

“So what? Doesn’t make what I’m saying any less true.”

“Can I say something?”

I couldn’t imagine what she could possibly say in her defense. “Go for it.”

“Do you have any experience with depression?”

I laughed. It was borderline hysterical laughter, accentuated by a very pointed look. “Oh, no,” I told her with my look, “no experience whatsoever. I’m just your average happy-go-lucky blonde girl who skips through life with a grin on her cute little face.”

Amy frowned, then a look of comprehension formed on her face. “Oh, right,” she almost whispered, blushing with embarrassment. “I guess you do. Then you should understand that I did what I did because I was incredibly depressed and just couldn’t face her. At that time, it took all my strength just to get through the day. I did love her. And it hurt me, too, okay? I know you two are friends...”

“Yeah, I...” Can’t say that. “Yeah, we’re friends. Good friends. She’s a damned good woman. She’s awesome and amazing.”

“And she’s incredibly complicated. Good in some ways but bad in others. You have no idea. It was hard as hell for me—not to love her, that was easy, but to stay in love with her with all the complicated messes... I don’t know, Jordan. I got my heart broken a lot. And I did some of the breaking, too.”

“And she’s generous and kind and...” What she’d said caught up with me and stopped the words of defense. “What?” The taunting smile and attitude faded. Was I about to hear something I hadn’t heard? Something I may not want to hear? I almost told her to shut up so I could just go on being angry with her. But I didn’t.

“I said it was damned hard. She has issues. We had a lot of false starts. We broke up more than once.” She sighed heavily and sipped her drink. And for about half a second, I thought that maybe I’d been a little insensitive. But the sentiment evaporated as quickly as it had sprung up.

“And what? It was just too hard for you? Too much of an effort?”

“Yes.” Her always unreadable expression was suddenly very readable. There was honest hurt there. And anger. Or maybe I was just drunk and was seeing what I wanted to see. Regret flitted across her face, then her expression was unmoving again. She sipped her drink. “It was too much. She was too much. She has issues, you know, and I hope that when I’m her age, I have my shit together more than she does right now.”

The anger in my chest flared again. But I didn’t speak or try to defend Leslie. Curiosity won that round, and I wanted Amy to continue.

“She doesn’t let go. She doesn’t commit. She can’t understand that the past is the past and you can’t live in it or pine over it forever.”

“What are you talking about?” I finally asked.

“She’s still cut up over her last heartbreak. She never got over it. I was always second best. And trust me, you get tired of that real quick.”

Amy looked at me hard then. It felt like being clinically X-rayed. Her eyes locked on mine, and I tried my best for a look of mingled anger and polite interest, just so she wouldn’t see what I thought must be showing there.

“Be careful,” she said in a low voice that wasn’t threatening at all but very urgent. “She’ll sweep you off your feet. She’s easy to fall in love with. Her passion is amazing—but ultimately too much to handle because it’s wild and uncontrolled. Like I said, she’s hard to handle.”

I grunted, took a sip of my beer, and muttered, “Right. I’ll bear that in mind, not that we have anything going on or that it’s any of your business.”

“Just don’t fuck her.”

I nearly spat my beer out, swallowed hard, and laughed into her face.

Don’t fuck her. Too late. Leslie’s fingers had already gone there.

And even though I still wanted to slap her, to continue my rant against her and defend Leslie, I spent several hours with Amy, just talking. It was the first real conversation we’d ever had.

She’s not a horrible person. She’s interesting. She’s smart. She’s cute. I could see what others might see in her, even if she wasn’t my type, especially considering what I knew she’d done. In my opinion, her biggest problem was her inability to understand that certain obligations must be fulfilled no matter how much strength it might cost, whether you’re at your weakest or not.

I’m not trying to sound like I ride the high horse. Everyone makes mistakes. Bad ones. I’ve done some pretty hurtful things to others, too. I’m certainly not innocent. But I like to think I’ve grown and learned—painfully, the hard way—to be a little better than that. The way I ended things with Alex was acting responsibly and out of love. That’s the way it should always be, never hiding behind fear, which will only make things so much worse for everyone.

We talked about Leslie. We talked about Alex. I didn’t want to hear half of it, even though it was probably good that I did. Some of the anger could slip away now. I don’t like being bitterly angry. It’s just not good for the soul.

It was four o’clock in the morning when I left Amy’s apartment. Yeah, we’d made our way back there to continue the conversation when the bar shut down for the night. The conversation we’d had kept swimming around my head, and the

line, “It was hard as hell for me—not to love her, that was easy, but to stay in love with her with all the complicated messes,” repeated over and over.

So that was Amy’s side of the story. Surely not all of it, and it still didn’t excuse the way she’d ended things, but the mess began to make a little more sense.

A lot of false starts. They’d broken up more than once. Amy had been depressed. She’d pulled that stunt because she hadn’t thought she’d be strong enough to truly end it if she had to see Leslie’s face and those honest, raw eyes.

Shit.

And, “Just don’t fuck her.”

I don’t respond well to orders. I especially don’t respond well to orders that come from dubious sources and whose judgment I already think is suspect.

I sat out on my porch until the sun came up, debating on how much of the conversation I could share with Leslie. Amy had specifically asked that it stay between us. And even though we were far from being close friends, a part of me insisted that I should respect her wishes.

But Leslie knew I’d been out with her. She knew we’d talk. And I knew she’d be relentless in demanding information because she’d gotten so little over the past year.

Leslie was a woman starving to death who just needed a tiny bit of something to keep her going. And I had a whole feast of knowledge in my head but couldn’t give her more than a few bites. Fuck.

Leslie was in Corpus Christi with her friends on a planned birthday weekend getaway. She’d left two days after we’d shared that night in her bed. As was becoming more regular, there’d been drama right before she left.

Alex had called her the night before her trip in tears, needing to talk to a friend about her heartbreak. I couldn’t imagine how Leslie had felt after what had happened...

So she didn’t text me the whole next day. And it was so strange, not getting a single text from her after so much incessant contact over the past several months. I’d sent her two, then had given up. I didn’t want to push or cling. Maybe we needed a break.

The next day, she called. It had been about two hours before I was to meet up with Amy at the bar. We’d texted nearly all day, and I’d been so relieved when the first message popped up on my phone. The texts went naughty so fast it surprised me. After about five of those messages, she’d called.

“We have to stop this, it’s driving me crazy.” She sounded drunk or on the verge of tears. Maybe both. “We can’t do this. We both know it. It’s so messed up. I care about you so much, and I miss you like crazy. I don’t want to miss you this much. I don’t want to care this much. Please...”

I’d sighed heavily, feeling guilty again. I wanted to say, “You started those messages,” but didn’t. That would have been childish and tactless. Instead, I said, “Okay. We’ll stop. No more dirty texts.”

She sniffed over the phone. “Thank you.” A long pause. “What are you doing tonight?”

And it was my turn to hesitate. “Going out to the bar.”

“With who?”

I knew she was just curious, but I wished she hadn’t asked.

“Amy.”

She was silent so long I had to ask, “Are you still there?”

“Yeah, I’m still here. Are you really going to tell her she fucked up?”

“Definitely.”

“Good.”

“Text me later?”

“Sure.”

She hung up without a goodbye.

I’d kept my word and had told Amy she fucked up. It didn’t make me feel better or like I’d done Leslie a service of sorts, especially after the talk we’d had. I wasn’t her “champion” at all.

So I sat on my porch until dawn and tried to imagine conversations with my friend and rehearsed the best ways to dodge questions. She didn't need to know half the stuff that Amy had said. More than half. Actually, most of it. Shit. She was going to pester me and I couldn't lie to her, was quite terrible at that when it came to her.

And it made me feel sleazy to agree that a conversation was between me and another, then to sit there and debate divulging details to a third party, no matter how badly that third party might need to know certain things. Any and all of it would hurt my dear Leslie. She'd had enough hurt. Could I not just say we hadn't talked about it?

No, I couldn't. She'd know.

Damn it, she should be hearing it from Amy, not from me.

"I need to ditch town again," I mumbled, sipped my wine, and rocked in my chair on the porch, feeling more weary and tired than I had in a long, long time. How much more tired and weary could I possibly feel?

Don't answer that.

A conversation with my Dad when I was eight or nine:

"...but my teacher says if you don't have anything nice to say, then don't say anything at all."

We were walking along the beach. For some reason, when I try to remember conversations with my father, we're always walking along the beach. I suspect that we were only walking along the beach half the time but that my mind always supplied that imagery because it's so comfortable and meaningful to me.

Dad stopped walking and frowned down at me, rubbing his beard with one hand, the other held mine. "For some people, that might work. And I'm sure your teacher is a smart lady, honey." He paused, and his forehead wrinkled like it always did when he was thinking hard. "But I think you should always say what's in your heart, especially if it's important."

"How do you know if it's important?"

He smiled indulgently. He knew each answer would spawn another question. That's exactly how he'd raised me.

He went down on one knee and placed a hand on my chest, just over my heart.

"If you feel a pounding here and your hands are sweaty, then you'd better say what's true and what's in your heart." He tapped a finger against my forehead. "Your brain will sometimes tell you that something is not important." Then he again touched my chest. "But if your heart feels really heavy and tight, then it's important no matter what your brain tells you. Do you understand?"

I nodded, frowned, then shook my head. "Kinda."

"Okay." He stopped and grinned. "If your mother asks if a dress makes her look fat, what do you say?"

"Mom's not fat!" I cried indignantly.

Dad laughed heartily—the full-body shaking kind of laugh. "What if she was?"

I closed my eyes and tried to picture my mother the size of a whale. My heart did not speed up and my hands didn't get sweaty. "Uh, maybe I'd tell her she should go for a run on the beach."

"Now, that isn't nice," Dad said and frowned. "But it's honest. I guess you could say that. It might hurt her feelings, though. And she would be very sad."

Then my heart began to hammer. I didn't want to make Mom sad. I didn't want to hurt her feelings. The picture of my giant mother morphed into an image of her weeping uncontrollably. My hands began to sweat.

"Do you want that?" Dad asked quietly.

"No," I said softly and wiped sweaty hands on my shorts. "I don't want her to be sad, Daddy. I just want her to be happy all the time. I don't like it when she's not happy. It makes me feel sad, too."

"And that," he said triumphantly, "is an honest and real thought, honey." He grabbed my hand and felt the pulse on my neck. "Your hands are sweaty. Your heart is beating really fast. You know what that means?"

"No."

"It means wanting Mom to be happy is really important to you and you can tell her that instead of telling her to go running on the beach."

My mouth formed a large O of understanding.

“So I need to say honest stuff if I feel like this?”

“Always.” And he looked very serious now. “Your teacher says if you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything. Well, that will only ever make people think you’re polite and quiet. I say you tell people the truth if it seems really important. That will get you much further. You’ll have better friends who love you for being real.”

I just nodded. “How else do you make a better friend?”

“Well, you have to love them, too, honey. And...”

The rest of the memory fades.

My hands were sweaty again as I hung up the phone and thought miserably about the conversation I’d just had with Leslie. She’d been relentless, just as I’d predicted. And I’d relinquished bits of the conversation, just as I knew I would.

Be honest and real. Shit, I’d told her too much. I shouldn’t have given her another few snippets of information to obsess about for the next month or however long it would torture her. But when she asked, repeatedly, seemed so desperate for a clue as to why it ended the way it did... I’d caved in, just like always when it came to her.

Despite my best efforts to distract myself with work and friends and drinking, I couldn’t help but feel relieved when Sunday night finally came. It meant Leslie was home. She’d already called and had asked if I’d like to go have a beer when she got in. Well, she was home and yes, I definitely wanted to go have a drink with her.

I also wanted to kiss her.

“Do not kiss her,” I ordered myself as I parked my car. “Do not tell her how much you missed her. Do not wrap your arms around her like she’s a lifeline. Do not kiss her...”

The door flew open as I strode up the walkway, still repeating my mantra.

She smiled warmly and held out her arms. I dove in gratefully, inhaling her scent, wrapping it around me. And then I pulled back quickly, extremely proud of myself for not kissing her.

“Let’s just have a beer here. Is that okay?”

Red flag. Red flag. Red flag.

“Okay.”

She sat on the couch and I picked the easy chair. She didn’t look as though the move surprised or bothered her. We drank our beers while she told me about her trip. She tried to ask about that visit to the bar again, but I shut her down. Then an uneasy silence filled the room. She fumbled with the remotes for a few minutes and picked a channel, got us another couple of beers, and we relaxed.

An hour later, I said goodbye and headed for the door. We embraced again and it seemed to go on forever.

“I missed you,” she whispered with much feeling behind the words.

My heartbeat picked up speed and my cheeks flushed hotly. I thought of Dad and that conversation, argued with myself, then whispered back, “I’m so glad you’re home.”

Our lips met. It was tentative again and warm—so gentle we were barely touching.

We broke apart abruptly with a “good night” and a “talk to you later.”

I picked up a forty-ounce beer on the way home and guzzled it down. I was alternately smiling broadly, touching my tingling lips, and frowning deeply, worry lines creasing my forehead.

How do you quell this kind of heat?

I suppose that’s like asking how to stop the tide from coming in.

## Chapter Sixteen

The moon controls the tide. It's a gravity thing.

No power is strong enough to affect global weather except the sun, unless you watch a lot of sci-fi movies. It's a physics thing.

No power is greater than the sun. So they say.

And since we haven't figured out how to truly tap into the power of the sun and the moon, we can't affect or stop the tide. It's little more than a dream or an idea.

There are no emotions more powerful than love. In the world of emotions, love is the sun. Hate might be a damned strong emotion. Revenge and grief, too, are powerful. Those emotions, though, are typically fueled by love. Would you truly hate someone if they hadn't hurt you or those you love? Would you want revenge without that same hurt? Don't you grieve out of love?

I believe that love drives the world. You can trace everything back to it—whether it's love for another or self-love, whether it's a love for your country, your god, for your family, or for your ancestors. Love is all-powerful, like the sun, like the goddess.

The goddess is love. And she is the sun. She gives so much out of the love that she embodies and takes very little. She is not petty. She does not play games. Sometimes, it's hard to understand why she does what she does, but looking back, with lessons learned and obstacles overcome, it can become very clear what she intended with those bizarre twists and sharp, harsh turns in life. Those blows like losing Alex. And Dad.

She was restoring my faith in romance and magic by pushing me emotionally far out of my level of comfort. Yeah, I longed for the fireworks and epically beautiful moments. I just didn't think it was going to come with so many complications and strings attached.

Love has so many demands...

And if you want passionate, fierce love, you gotta realize that the intense happy moments come at the price of equally intense, terribly sad lows, making for a very rocky rollercoaster ride that's hard to hang on to. Most people get scared and get off the ride. Me, I'm a stubborn bitch and refuse to give up.

Some people say a love that grows slowly, steadily over time—like the acorn that takes decades to grow from tiny seedling to small tree and decades more to reach that glorious, rich, full height of a magnificent oak—is the better kind of relationship love. I'm assuming they say that because it's slow but steady. Safe and strong. Sturdy. Comfortable. You get a companion who's a friend. You have your routines. Your private jokes. Your long history as a couple.

Those same people will say that the other love—blazingly passionate, almost desperate, sparkling in its heat and intensity and pure romance—will either lift you up to something amazing (rare, indeed) or will burn down everything in its path until there are only ashes.

Ashes, as in total destruction.

I'd had the acorn love with Alex. It could have possibly gone on forever if we'd only bothered to cultivate and nurture it a bit more. If we'd talked about the changes in our lives and made some compromises, maybe we'd still be together.

Maybe I could have pulled myself back from caving in to my fantasies about a different kind of love. Maybe we wouldn't have fallen out of love with each other. But we quit watering the seedling and it shriveled up.

There is no life without water and the determination to survive.

Passion was blazing in my heart now. And it was the fiery, scorching type that could burn and destroy if I let it get out of hand. Already, my mind was rejecting and ignoring logic. Amy's "It was hard as hell for me—not to love her, that was easy, but to stay in love with her with all the complicated messes" still played in my head, but dimmer, like a distant voice that could be made to shut the hell up. It was easy to write off as a statement coming from someone who just didn't understand passion. True or not.

Sometimes, I'm the justification queen—"She couldn't possibly understand so I don't have to listen to her." Yeah, that worked out beautifully in my head.

I could no longer look at Leslie without seeing her beautiful body under whatever clothes she chose to wear. I could not see her face without losing myself in those eyes, without longing to touch my lips to hers. I tried my best not to think of a future and succeeded often but not always.

I'd told myself her lips were off-limits. That gentle kiss after she got back was to be the last. I was lying to myself and my body knew it.

Sometimes, feeling reckless, I'd tell myself this stop-and-go shit was stupid and melodramatic. We should just make love already and we'd be okay. We needed it. Yeah, and it wouldn't burn us down. We could share that as friends and be done with it after.

When those thoughts came, I'd close the distance between us, murmur in her ear, tell her how attractive she was, tell her how much I cared about her, then kiss her furiously. My hands would wander. Clothes would disappear.

We'd decide to "go see a movie" and get lost in each other before the previews ended. Four or five days would go by and we'd behave. Then we'd end up in her bed or mine, naked bodies writhing and grinding until sweat pooled between our breasts and slippery sex coated our inner thighs. But we always pulled back. We'd be so close—so close to coming and screaming—and pull back with tears and drama and long sighs.

It was infuriating.

Too many times, "We can't" or "I'm not ready" or "I don't want to lose you," from her and from me.

I started masturbating again on a regular basis, and Leslie was my fantasy. I couldn't think about anything or anyone else when I touched myself.

"I'm doing so much better than I was," Leslie told me one night on the way home from the bar. "And you're a big part of that." It made me smile and worry at the same time.

It was getting harder and harder—nearly impossible—to be just a friend. To play that part, one of my many roles with her. After that first fruitless drink and conversation with Amy, Leslie seemed to alternately withdraw from me and push for more. The mixed signals were driving me crazy. She started talking about a need to explore her feelings. Then she'd tell me how beautiful I was and would caress my thighs and run her fingers through my hair lovingly.

She needed a shoulder to cry on, someone to simply listen. But it was hard to listen when a sexy naked body was wrapped around your own, pressed in tight, fingers stroking and hips grinding.

Sometimes, I didn't care under what circumstances we were fooling around. It felt too good and was hard to turn down or not initiate myself. Sometimes, it was humiliating to be in bed with a woman while she talked for hours about another.

I'd learned so many things that year already. One of the most important things I learned was that I am not a good friend with benefits. I can be a good friend. And I can be a good lover. But I do not know how to objectively separate the two when a deep emotional attachment's already there. I do not do well with the in-between stuff.

Our souls had touched. More than once. I was falling. I was jumping and trying not to jump, frozen in mid-leap from the point of no return, stumbling, shuddering, laughing, and crying. My Leslie, my dear, dear Leslie. Damn, the whole thing was wearing.

It was a Tuesday night, or was it Wednesday? We'd been out again, another movie I'll never remember the name of, when we stepped into her house. We kissed in the entryway. She shoved me against the wall in the hallway. I straddled her on the couch and tore her shirt over her head, bent low to suck her nipples into my mouth.

Within minutes, her fingers were inside me and I was riding her, my breasts swaying, my head forward, my back arched, my arms braced on her shoulders while she groaned and said fuck a lot.

I was almost there and she withdrew. My whole body screamed at the loss of her inside me, a shiver running the length of my spine, my lips still parted in a moan.

Not again.

My eyes met hers and they were watery. They held such sadness that it made me hurt for her. Oh, Leslie... "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry."

I wrapped my arms around her neck and kissed her cheek. "Talk to me."

"How will I ever be able to trust again?"

And that stung more than it should have, considering the circumstances. I wanted to simultaneously shout my frustration and comfort her. I didn't want my cunt to still be swollen and tingling with the sensations of unquenched need and the ghost of her fingers sliding in and out for that kind of talk.

"You have to." The words came out breathy and urgent. "You have to have faith. You want romance and passion and love. You can't get that without trusting and letting go."

"I don't know if I'll ever get over it. I've been hurt too many times."

"I believe in you." I really did. I had to. "You deserve love. You are a lovable woman. You have so much to offer. You're strong. You're a survivor."

"I'm so tired of just surviving."

"You have options."

She looked away then, and I knew I'd pushed her too far.

It was like so many other nights. There was a spark that led to a fire and one of us had snuffed it out. The time before it had been my fault.

Minutes passed in silence as she absently rubbed her hands up and down my back.

"I need you, Jordan, I..." She stopped and cleared her throat. "You mean so much to me. You know I adore you, but..."

"I'm too young and you're not ready."

She nodded and finally looked up again. "There's so much about you that I want in a lover. I do still dream. I just can't seem to move toward any of my dreams anymore. I feel stuck."

"Yeah." I sighed. "Me too." I let another couple of minutes pass in silence. Outside, thunder rolled again. It was the summer of rain and storms in Texas and always seemed to coincide with our heated touches. "It could be amazing if we could let go."

"If we could let go," she repeated and almost smiled. "Part of me is letting go and it scares the shit out of me."

Before I left that night, I reached into my jeans pocket, hesitated, then handed her my gift.

She looked at the seashell on the necklace I'd made for her with a question in her eyes. I took it from her and put it around her neck.

"I picked it up on the beach in Galveston—the only unbroken shell I could find after that storm pounded the beach. It made me think of you because I know you're strong enough to weather this."

She smiled broadly then, the first time in hours, touching the shell around her neck.

With all my heart, I wanted her to be happy. In love. No longer tortured by being wrapped up in the past and in her head all the time. Free at last. I truly wanted that.

I was just beginning to wish she could have that with me.

So the sleepless nights started again. It was no longer guilt that tortured me like it had for months before. It was the dream of a dream that seemed impossible to reach.

## Chapter Seventeen

It was the third week of August, and in Texas, that typically meant hot, sticky, muggy summer days—stifling, sweltering heat that bakes the energy right out of you. But in a bizarre weather twist, a thunderstorm had rolled in and brought with it a minor cold front, dropping the temperature into the high sixties. Unheard of. Record setting. And after all those hundred-plus-degree days, it seemed damned cold outside.

I shivered and shuddered as I stepped into the windowless, smoky bar—yes, wearing a light jacket no less—and let my eyes adjust to the dim light, looking for Brandon. Surely he'd beat me, just like he always did.

I'd taken a rare early leave from my latest project that day, but traffic was always a mess in the Metroplex, hence my being late. Again. Sometimes, I swear, it was almost like fate was conspiring against me to make me perpetually late.

The developers had hired a couple of art interns for me and they were doing prep work on the east wall of Building D, filling in blocks of colors in the outline I'd sketched with black paint. It was Wednesday and I'd put in nearly thirty hours already for the week.

My hands were stiff from the cold weather and I'd decided I deserved an early break. We were ahead of schedule, though my new boss wasn't entirely happy that I was about to leave for four days. But the trip was negotiated into the schedule. I'd refused to relent, explaining that my room was already booked and paid for and I was going no matter what.

It felt good to get out of there. I was ready for an escape, was tired of dreaming about painting all night long. Tired of my stiff back and sore arms and legs from climbing up and down ladders all day. And while it was a big gig, it wasn't exactly challenging or interesting, though I tried to make it so. The developers wanted Southwestern-themed murals. Cacti. Cowboys. Vaqueros. Wildlife. Deserts. Native Americans. Horses and dead bull skulls. Tributes to Texas heroes. That kind of stuff.

Ack and eek. So I'd ditched out and was glad for it.

Sure enough, Brandon sat in the corner booth—our old booth—a half-empty beer already in front of him. His hair had gotten a little longer over the last month. It was mostly neglect. Patchy stubble covered his chin and said quite plainly that he wasn't trying to grow a beard, was instead too unmotivated to shave properly.

Having this new/old Brandon around was unsettling. It had been a long time since we'd been drinking buddies. And I was truly worried at his return to alcohol.

Okay, so I wasn't exactly one to talk about drinking problems. I was plenty good at having enough of those on my own. But Brandon... he was supposed to be the one to lecture me, not the other way around. Could I trust him to be okay? Could we have a good time without the bingeing and the mean drunk poking back out from behind his big brown eyes?

"Hey," I said and slipped into the booth.

He looked up and grinned at me. "It's fucking cold out there. What's up with the weather? We're still in Texas, right?"

And that was another thing. He was starting to drop the F-bomb all the time, starting to be worse than me. Which was saying a lot. He caught my contemplative expression and looked away.

On the surface, although unkempt and ruffled, he would probably appear mostly fine to a stranger—with his big smile and relaxed posture. Just another guy having a beer. No scars. No casts. No bruising. You'd never have known that he'd almost died.

But whether he liked to admit it or not, whether he tried to hide behind the goofy grin and barking laugh, he was an emotional wreck.

His girlfriend had dumped him after the accident. They hadn't exactly been serious, but he'd cared about her. Throughout the ordeal, though, he'd lashed out in his frustration, hadn't been kind at all, and it had just become too much for both of them. No matter the circumstances, some things said can never be excused or taken back. He never gave details, but I knew he felt guilty about it. Lonely too.

He was also having a hard time focusing on his job and his writing. He was miserable with the physical therapy exercises he had to do, said he constantly felt weak and unbalanced. More bothersome than that, I wondered if the docs had been entirely correct in saying he didn't have any brain damage—the way he talked about words skipping on the page and blurring together when he tried to read.

"Supposedly, that shit's gonna go away," he'd told me the doctors had told him.

I made sure to compose my face as best I could before he looked back up at me. We didn't need to have that talk again. We'd just argue. He was a big boy, and trying to play mother hen wasn't going to do anybody any good.

"So," he drew out the word, looking at me suspiciously, making sure I wasn't going to say anything he didn't like. When I didn't interrupt, he continued. "Is she coming?"

"After the ball game."

"In about two hours?"

I nodded.

"That's enough time to get you good and liquored up."

It was my turn to narrow my eyes at him. "There will be no getting 'liquored up' before she gets here. I don't want to make a fool out of myself."

Brandon snorted and drained his glass. "And you think she's not going to be drinking at the ball game?" He laughed and waved for the bartender to come over. "That's the only reason to go to those games. It's not like the Rangers are any good. You go to the game to drink beer, eat hotdogs, and have a good time with friends."

I thought about the picture Leslie had sent to my phone—showing a hotdog and a big cup of beer—with the title, "Breakfast of Champions." That had come about eleven o'clock that morning. It was now two in the afternoon. The bartender asked what I wanted.

"Vodka and Diet Coke," I said, and Brandon giggled.

Gotta get the drinking thing under control again, I thought, but maybe tomorrow. No, tomorrow we were going to the beach. Maybe the following week. Yeah, that would be the time.

Shit. We were going to the beach and I still hadn't told Leslie about the king bed situation.

Where was my drink?

"So what kind of stories can I tell her?" Brandon broke through my thoughts.

"You better not..." A thought occurred. "Don't you dare tell her all that stuff I told you about us. I mean it." He grinned again and looked mutinous. "Brandon, seriously. I need you to keep a lid on it. Please. It's complicated enough."

"Jordan, seriously, I'm going to go with the flow like I always do. And I'll probably keep my mouth shut unless you two bring it up."

I sighed with relief. "We won't." I took a long sip of my drink, made a face, and almost gagged. "Damn, that's strong." Took another sip. "Shit. I'm not used to this anymore."

"Hey, Eric," Brandon shouted over his shoulder. "Don't let her glass get empty."

"You got it."

"Crap," I muttered and took another sip, already feeling my tongue loosen and my toes tingle. It wasn't so cold anymore, even though we sat by the door.

Once, I'd read a romance novel in which the characters played a game of trying to see how long it took to spot each other from across a room—kind of like seeing if they could sense each other, I guess. In the book, the characters always caught each other's eyes within seconds, even if they didn't know they'd be meeting.

I'd laughed, reading it, thinking how silly it was. A nice thought, sure, but really quite impossible and corny. Don't get me wrong, I love romance and reading all that sappy stuff about soul mates and the love of one's life. But that was just too much, way too over the top.

In that same book—gods, I'd read it a dozen times even if it was just a silly story—the characters had such a strong connection that they could also tell who was calling before they answered the phone. It was like they just knew.

My phone rang and Brandon snatched it off the table.

I didn't even bother trying to wrest it from him, said simply, "It's Leslie."

Brandon pretended like he was going to answer the call, a wicked smile on his face, but just then, I turned and knew Leslie would be walking through the door at any second.

The door swung open and she strode in, her cell phone up to her ear.

Our eyes met within seconds. She grinned.

I choked on my drink and laughed.

I needn't have worried about Brandon over-sharing. Leslie and I didn't last five minutes without giving our attraction away.

She'd snuggled right up next to me, the whole sides of our bodies pressed tightly together, her arm wrapped around my shoulders because it was "kind of chilly outside" and she needed to "warm up." Sixty degrees isn't exactly a snowstorm, but okay. I'll take that excuse to be close.

I'd leaned into her, sighing happily, and said, "Hey, honey," with a sloppy grin on my face. Brandon just looked at us across the table, shook his head, and chuckled.

"Already?" Leslie asked and pulled back enough to look at me.

"Game's up," I said and giggled. "He knows already anyway."

"Hi, I'm Leslie," she said with a touch of laughter in the words. "I'm friends with this one."

"Brandon," he said as they shook hands and shared a look. "I'm also friends with that one. Though I think you might be a closer friend." He stressed the word "closer," making it sound almost naughty.

Sometimes, there's no point in trying to argue. I wanted them to like each other. It seemed incredibly important. It suddenly seemed equally pointless to continue arguing with myself, trying to convince myself that her lips were off-limits and what we had wasn't going anywhere. Screw it.

I turned to her and leaned in until our lips met. She didn't pull back or resist but returned the kiss with feeling. She murmured things in my ear that made my heart skip. I was melting again. I was a puddle on the bench.

Brandon cleared his throat, and I was forced to un-puddle myself.

We tried to carry a conversation and succeeded for minutes at a time before Leslie's lips would find my ear or my hand would wander into her lap. We'd kiss, pull apart, laugh, and look back over at Brandon, who sat there rolling his eyes.

"This," I said at one point, trying not to slur my words, not wanting Leslie to think I was only kissing her because I'd been drinking again, "is payback for all those times I sat across a table from you and some other girl."

He gave me that wicked smile again. "Leslie, dear, we should talk."

Shit.

"Yes, we should." She stuffed a couple of one-dollar bills in my hand. "Why don't you go play something on the jukebox?"

Reluctantly, I slid out of the booth, stopped, and lingered until she slapped my butt and told me to "go on."

I checked my phone at the jukebox. It was seven o'clock. Had we really been there for five hours? Damn. We hadn't done that in years. I decided to only order waters from that point on. And I decided I'd give them five minutes before demanding to retake my seat.

Fumbling with the jukebox, I began to mutter to myself. Said a lot of, “If he tells her about...” and “What the hell are they talking about?” and “He’s gonna get me in trouble...”

It was a long five minutes. At exactly 7:05, I went back to the table.

“Go away, we’re not done,” Leslie ordered, and I frowned at her.

“That’s not nice,” Brandon said, also frowning.

“I mean, please, give us another couple of minutes.”

I turned and walked away.

It was definitely trouble—the grins on their faces, the way they had their elbows on the table, leaning in, at the edges of their seats. Worrying made me start to feel a lot more sober all of the sudden. I decided they’d had enough time and wandered back over to the booth.

“I’ve gotta go to the restroom,” Leslie announced and took her leave.

Before I’d even sat down, the words burst from my lips. “What the hell were you talking about?”

“You.”

“Duh, so what about me? What did she say? What did you say?”

He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Only that she’s crazy about you.”

I blushed, grinned, and gestured for more information.

“She told me she was scared of getting hurt again. I told her you wouldn’t hurt her, that you’re a good friend who cares very deeply and you’d never, ever treat her badly.”

I was momentarily distracted from trying to find out more, touched by what he’d said. “What else?”

Leslie’s voice cut across Brandon’s. “He told me you’re in love with me.”

My heart lurched and I couldn’t breathe or look away from Brandon for several seconds, so scared of what I’d see on her face when I did look up.

I was frozen, a block of ice, my chest so tight it hurt. How could he tell her that?

“I never said...” I mumbled, still not looking up, knitting and un-knitting my fingers.

“But you do,” Brandon said quietly. “I know you.”

Of all the damned moments to pick to be that forthcoming...

“Hey,” Leslie murmured, and I finally looked up to meet her eyes. Those beautiful blue eyes that were watery with emotion. “I love you, too.”

The tightness in my chest loosened instantly. A slow smile spread across my face, so wide I could feel it all the way to my blushing ears. She knelt down in front of me and took my hands in hers and kissed me. And it was different somehow, that kiss. Less hungry, more meaningful. I was light-headed, dizzy with the shot of fear replaced so suddenly with a shock of delight and wonder.

It was time to go home. It didn’t feel weird or awkward to be sitting in the booth with her arms around me while we waited for Brandon to take care of the tab.

We said goodbye in the parking lot, and she whispered urgently in my ear so Brandon couldn’t hear, “I don’t want to talk about this. I just want us to have a good trip, a happy weekend. I’ll pick you up at ten, honey.”

I just nodded, not knowing what to say, and let her leave.

Just because she’d said the three magic words didn’t change the complications or circumstances. It didn’t make me ten years older. It didn’t make us both suddenly over our ex-lovers. I wasn’t kidding myself.

And that certainly was not the way I’d envisioned telling her I loved her. Brandon was right, I did, but my plans had included keeping my damned mouth shut about it and praying that it would go away.

I don’t believe that love is a choice. If it were a choice, there’d probably be a lot more happily-ever-after stories. Alex and I might have even worked out if she’d chosen me.

Leslie would not have chosen me. I knew that. Nor would I have picked her. Too many complications. Too much baggage.

No, love is a force that selects and binds without regard to circumstances or timing. At that moment, standing in the parking lot in the circle of her arms, her lips on mine, it seemed like there was no stopping it between her and me. We were struggling against it, would continue to struggle, and I couldn't help but believe that the effort was pointless.

She'd said she loved me. It had put a temporary sticking smile on my face. That connection we had, that bond she'd spoken about, it seemed to flare to life and shine.

I didn't want to talk about it, either. Gods, no.

Like her, I just wanted to have a beautiful, happy, wonderful weekend with my dear Leslie, whom I was so much in love with it was scary.

## Chapter Eighteen

I didn't know what to do with myself for the rest of that restless evening. My stuff was already packed. Nothing needed picking up from the store. My car didn't need filling up because Leslie would be driving. I certainly didn't need to drink any more alcohol.

It took all my willpower not to text her. Surely, she'd be awake, but a text had so much potential to spoil what had just happened.

I wrapped a blanket around myself and sat out on the porch. No wine. No beer. No cigarettes. Just me, the bugs, and lightning flashing overhead. I could taste the rain at the back of my tongue, smell it in the air. Any minute now, the storm would break.

How perfect.

"Did you hear that?" I whispered to the night air and closed my eyes. "She loves me. You were right about magic not being dead."

A car drove slowly past. Somewhere a dog was barking. Then it was silent again until thunder clapped loudly, almost startling me.

"Dad, I'm out of my depth here..."

No answer. I never even expected it anymore. I'd been so sure he'd find a way.

"I'm scared," I whispered. "I wanted this passion, but it scares the shit out of me. Not because it burns too much to handle, but because I'm scared I'll grow to need it and it'll disappear." I stopped speaking abruptly. There'd be no crying over this. Not that night.

Rain began to drizzle onto the edges of my porch. A breeze swept across my face and through the trees, along the grass and bushes and down the street.

It had always been water for me, but it was wind for Dad. It was nice to watch them mingle, letting me pretend that we could be close even though he was gone.

A shiver ran down my spine, raising the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck. I felt a pressure on my shoulders and closed my eyes. It almost felt like two hands—larger than mine and stronger. It was what he'd always done when he knew I was troubled or just needed to feel closer when he was alive.

I'd reach back and place my hands on his and our fingers would intertwine. I took a deep breath, relishing the feel of that pressure, smiling, and slowly, tentatively reached back.

I touched my own shoulders.

The smile didn't fade. I hadn't expected to find anything there.

"Thank you," I whispered, my throat tight. "That helped a lot."

Sometimes, I let hours slide by out on that porch. That was definitely an evening to let the hours drift away. My mind wasn't racing at all. I wasn't analyzing. I simply sat and watched the raging storm beat down on my neighborhood, marveling at its beauty.

"Your power is awesome," I said and continued rocking, wondering how best I could paint a storm and if I could even do it justice. Then I remembered the painting I'd done of Leslie and the soft smile broadened.

There'd been so many rough moments over the past year. So much heartbreak. I wanted to appreciate the beauty in even those moments, but I was damned glad to have been finally given one that was almost happy—that look on her face was so beautiful.

I wanted to give Leslie something that was personal and real. The urge to do so was too strong to ignore. I'd made a digital image of that painting, just like all the others, and went inside to print out a copy. I went through a dusty box in the corner of my closet and found a nice frame that would fit. Silver, to go with the moonlight. The picture went in my suitcase and I refused to think about how she'd react.

It was time to just let go. To quit analyzing everything to death. To let events unfold and hope for the best. Let's see how that worked out before going back to the picking things apart dealing mechanism.

Yeah, just let life be intense and powerful if not happy.

Let it shine.

The trip to Galveston was quick and easy. It seemed to go so much faster than it had with Brandon. Leslie and I talked non-stop, discussing past events, talking about our childhoods, reminiscing about our favorite beach memories, and discussing what we'd do once we got there.

We didn't broach the subject of the night before at the bar. So all was well.

I still hadn't told her about the room. At that point, it was easier to just let her see it and see how she reacted. This was a vacation, damn it. There shouldn't have to be worries or drama. So all my anxieties got put on the backburner to be dealt with later.

Leslie's reaction couldn't have been more perfect.

She opened the door, glanced around the room, spotted the bed, turned, and grinned mischievously. She dropped her suitcase, I dropped mine, and she grabbed me and threw me on the bed, crawled on top of me, and kissed me passionately, furiously, wildly until we were both gasping for air.

And then she was just as suddenly gone, standing off to the side, tearing off her T-shirt to reveal her swimsuit beneath.

"Come on," she said urgently. "Beach now. Bed later."

Our feet pounded up and down the surf. We giggled and chased each other, tossing seaweed and racing through the crashing waves to try to make the other stumble. She grabbed me around the waist and shoved me underwater. I lunged at her ankles and toppled her. We came up sputtering, laughing, and splashing water. We played for an hour or more, I'm not sure, until my legs felt heavy and tired.

I'd never seen Leslie so relaxed, so vibrant and free, not even before the breakup when she was still with Amy.

The deep crease between her eyebrows that was constantly tight with sadness and regret was completely relaxed—almost seemed to have disappeared. She looked younger and happier, more assertive and confident. This was the weariless Leslie I'd never met. And I didn't pretend that it was me that made her so. It was the beach, the vast ocean that eases the soul and gives so much peace. She was so beautiful it was amazing.

She waded over to me, promising a truce. Like two kids, we shook on it and she smiled, pulling me in for a hug. I licked the salt off her neck and tasted it on her lips and tongue. The hot sun overhead sparkled in her sky blue eyes that were so open and affectionate. Her hands wound into my saltwater-matted hair and we explored each other for half an eternity, the water lapping at our waists. I felt incredibly lucky to have such an incredible woman touching and kissing me like that.

Leslie and I walked along the shore hand in hand, scouting for unbroken shells, laughing delightedly when we found good ones. For all the world to see, we might have been a happy couple. A little unconventional perhaps, but together and committed.

Happily in love.

A straw-blond toddler in a pink swimsuit with ruffles and a matching bow was splayed in the sand, struggling to fill a bucket to build her sandcastle. She might have been three years old, tops. Her wide-eyed smile was so broad and

infectious that I knew my face mirrored hers. I'd stopped walking to watch her for a few minutes. When she spotted me, she looked momentarily surprised, then waved and got clumsily onto her feet.

"Castle?" she said and pointed to a mound of sand she'd piled onto the shell-strewn beach. "See my castle?"

"I see your castle. It's a very good one."

So open and proud. That might have been me, years and years ago.

She beamed and her tiny hand reached for mine. She led me over to the castle and handed over the bucket full of sand, then pointed again. I could only guess that she wanted me to help, so I tipped the contents onto the pile and she clapped, giggling and smiling.

I'm not the type of woman who's felt the biological clock ticking. I've never put a deadline pressure on myself, didn't grow up playing house and dreaming about the white picket fence. You know how some women are—"I'm going to have my first child before I'm twenty-six," or any other specific age. And when relationships fall through and plans don't work out, they start getting desperate. Pushing hard in those relationships that are far too young to withstand that kind of pressure. Searching madly for the perfect father, or mother, as the case may be.

Not me.

The subject of having children had come up from time to time with Alex, but I hadn't been able to picture it clearly and had dodged the issue as best I could, giving her a "maybe" or "we'll see." She wanted the kids. That had been another point of contention between us.

If a child was in my future, then so be it. But especially at that point in my life—being single with no realistic prospect of a life partner in sight—I wasn't going to dwell on the subject or seriously worry and obsess about it.

Moments like those with that little girl on the beach were the closest I ever came to thinking about it seriously for more than a few seconds before laughing it off.

And even during that brief encounter, the furthest I got was to decide that if I ever had a kid, all our vacations would be on the beach, just like my parents had done.

But after I shook off the thoughts and came back to the present and said goodbye to that little cutie, I turned to find a look of such tenderness and longing on Leslie's face that it made my heart melt.

There'd be no drama. No long talks about our feelings and what we could and couldn't do. I'd promised myself to banish anything in my brain that even remotely resembled any kind of hypothetical future with Leslie.

But that little girl... And the look on Leslie's face...

They planted a seed.

It wasn't my biological clock finally kicking in. It was just a vivid picture of Leslie and I on the beach with just such a little girl who was ours, whom we'd both surely adore. Our family. The vision was so real I could hear the little girl giggling and babbling, calling Leslie "Mommy."

I tried to block it. But it was like trying to stop an eighteen-wheeler on the highway by stepping in front of it and holding out your arms. Impossible.

Leslie wrapped her arm around my shoulders and whispered so low I barely heard her, "If we were together, I'd want a child."

The words tugged at something deep inside that I'd never acknowledged.

Yeah, if we were together, I'd want one, too.

Sure, we were jumping the gun. We were talking about something that we shouldn't even be close to talking about—if ever. We couldn't even talk about dating, let alone making a family.

Sometimes, strong emotions have the power to more efficiently impair judgment than any amount of alcohol.

And so, even though I knew it would hurt later to think about, it was too tempting and nice to shut down the thoughts at that moment. I allowed the picture to blossom and grow. I could pretend. Just for that weekend. I'd be able to let it go once we got back.

"I love you," she whispered in my ear and kissed my cheek.

"I love you, too," I said with feeling and kissed her passionately.

The ocean breeze was stiff against our backs as we sat on the silver beach in the dark, listening to the endless crashing of waves against the sand. A borrowed blanket was wrapped around and under us as we snuggled together and sighed happily. It had been such a good day.

Only moments before, we'd been dancing slowly, rotating on the spot to the sound of Leslie humming the music that was nowhere, our cheeks pressed together, our bodies tight. It was impossibly romantic—the sea, the moonlit night, the sparkling stars, and racing hearts.

We'd been talking before, but the words had drifted away. The ocean demanded simplicity, and words were unnecessary to appreciate it. We'd talked so many times of our longing for romantic intimacy, for a lover who didn't mock the gestures and who craved such moments. That weekend, we'd found it in each other.

The air was rich with salt and that metallic smell that promises rain.

We might have sat there five minutes or two hours, our fingers laced together, my head on her shoulder.

Soft thunder sounded in the distance and dark clouds rolled in on the horizon, blotting out the silver light and dulling the sparkling waves. A light drizzle began and I sat up straighter.

The shift in weather pulled me from my lazy reverie—a storm seemed to have sneaked up so suddenly it was a touch unnerving. I hadn't forgotten the last time it had stormed on this shoreline.

Leslie nibbled my neck and I sighed, instantly distracted. It was extraordinary how easily she could make the world disappear, how the cool drizzle seemed to evaporate off my skin from the heat between us.

This was not just a physical thing. Yes, I wanted her. Badly. And I was definitely wet and willing, could have spread my legs immediately without shame. But if she'd just sat there and continued to hold me, rubbing her cheek against mine, that would have been just as welcome because damn, it felt good to be held, felt like it had been forever since the last time an embrace made the world safer and warmer.

"I love this." She half moaned against my neck. "Holding you, kissing you, being with you." And it was another one of those moments when she'd said exactly what I was thinking. That had been happening with more and more frequency and still surprised me every time.

I turned my head and my hands crawled up the back of her neck into that short dark hair, her hands reaching up to cup my face.

When our lips met, it was hungry. Searing. Like we were both drowning and were each other's air to breathe and survive. She sucked my lower lip and I whimpered. But the kisses grew gentler, softer, more tender. She moaned into my mouth, and I felt my whole body go weak and tight at the same time.

And then Leslie's arms were pushing me into the blanket on the sand. She settled her body between my legs, slowly rocking her pelvis into me. We broke the kiss—gasping—my lips finding her neck and sucking the salt from her skin.

"Fuck," she murmured.

"Mmm-hmm."

"I want you. Here. Now. I want to be inside you."

Those last six words triggered an immediate response—a tightening inside that seemed to grow from my clit to deep in my gut, a sensation that made me ache for need of being filled. It was all I could do not to beg for release. No pulling back. No tears. No drama. Just passion exploding between us.

"I want to taste you again," I whispered. "Now."

"Oh, Jordan." She made the words a low groan. I could barely make out her face in the dark, the clouds were so dense now. But her eyes seemed to shine. "I am so hot for you."

Without warning, she dove in for another series of dizzying, wet kisses and ran her hand up my thighs, kneading, massaging, drawing small noises from deep in my chest. She knew exactly what she was doing, as though she'd done it a thousand times before.

If she reached into my shorts, where her hands were clearly headed, she would find slippery lips begging for her touch. She broke the kiss abruptly and pulled back just far enough to fumble with the fly.

It only took seconds.

She made it past the barrier and went straight for my hard clit, her other hand kneading and pinching my nipple. I nearly cried out with relief, the sound cut off by surprise when she slid two fingers lower and penetrated me hard and fast.

This time, she wasn't going to stop and apologize. I could hear it in her breathing, feel it in the urgency of her thrusting.

"Oh, gods, yes," I hissed. "Please, Leslie. Do it. Finally. I need you so much."

But she withdrew, ran her fingers across my throbbing clit again, and abandoned my shorts. I nearly howled in frustration and grabbed her face, searching her eyes in the darkness. I couldn't think straight. I was aching and needed her.

"Slower" was her only explanation. "I don't want us to come with our clothes on."

A smile curled my lips. Of course.

The drizzle turned to steady raindrops. I felt them hit the top of my head and didn't care. I pulled her in for a sweetly passionate kiss, tried to pour as much emotion into that contact as I could, tried to melt everything away but that one point of contact and the sound of crashing waves.

Rain was falling harder by the time we pulled apart. Lightning flashed above, illuminating that sexy body. She pushed me back onto the blanket and I lay there, looking up at her, willing her to see the fire in my eyes.

"Looking into your eyes," she whispered, "is like looking into my own eyes."

And again it was exactly how I felt. So perfectly put.

"Come here," I whispered and drew her down on top of me. I wrapped my legs around her waist and she crashed into me, thrusting her hips against me, grinding her groin into mine. Gods, it felt fucking good. I loved the feel of her weight on my body, being able to gaze into her face while she made me writhe beneath her. To look at the lines on her face, the blazing fire in her eyes, to truly see how beautiful she was and let the emotions explode in my chest.

Again she stopped. She dropped her head to nuzzle my neck and, breathing heavily, said, "It's good."

"Really fucking good."

"Mmm. Incredible." She sighed, shifted, and pushed herself off of me. "Take off your clothes."

For a split second, I couldn't help but wonder if we were really going to do this without the start-and-stop mess. It seemed so impossibly dreamy or unreal and yet felt so right. I had always wanted this—the fiery heat and epically romantic settings.

Yes, it was right that it should be raining and storming while we made love, the element of water swallowing us up in our deep-running emotions. It was perfect. It was right that we should make love on the beach, grounded by the earth and lifted up by our passion.

I swallowed hard and lifted my hips, pushed my shorts to my knees where she took hold of them and slid them down the rest of the way until I was bare and free to the sky and her hungry eyes. I sat up and tore off my shirt and bra, tossing them behind me as she removed her own clothes, and I lay back with my naked body, hips raised, eagerly awaiting her kiss.

She made love to my cunt like she made love to my lips. I felt her breath hot on my clit before she sucked it into her mouth and ran her tongue along its length.

"Leslie," I cried into the howling wind. "Oh, gods, that's good."

It was lightning-hot, and the sky above reflected the raging storm building deep inside me. Rain was pounding down on us—into my open eyes and mouth and I sucked it down, shivering with heat against the cool water, my thighs trembling as she clamped her arms around them to keep them steady. She swirled her tongue around my entrance, dipped lower, returned to my clit and did purely amazing things to me with her mouth. I cried her name again and again, thrashed, grabbed handfuls of sand like a lover would grab handfuls of sheets, dug my heels into the ground, and thrust myself against her, begging shamelessly for more.

Tiny explosions were building fast, becoming more intense, spreading to my fingers and toes, tingling all over my body. "Don't stop," I pleaded. "I need to feel you inside me." And she slipped her fingers inside in one smooth thrust, began sliding in and out—faster, ever faster.

Spots began to dance around my peripheral vision. I wound my fingers into her hair as she went deeper and harder. So fucking close. And then suddenly, blindingly, the storm in my body exploded to meet the storm in the sky, and I screamed—so loud my ears rang with it.

She crawled up my rain-slick body and kissed me deeply—her mouth tasting of my wetness. The taste of myself on her lips brought a shudder from my body and I quivered, growling, demanding more. But it was her I wanted and I rolled her over, diving into her with two fingers before her shoulders were flat against the sand.

“Oh,” she moaned into my ear as I continued the hungry kisses, thrusting harder and faster. I wanted to make her come for me before I went lower to feast on her. I knew she was fucking close. I could feel the muscles begin to contract around my fingers.

“Look at me, Leslie,” I demanded, breaking the kiss, grabbing her hair with my free hand. And she did, those incredible eyes fiery in the flashing lightning. She grabbed my face, her hips thrusting to meet me as I crashed into her.

“Jordan, Jordan, Jordan,” she cried, her voice high-pitched in desperate need for relief. She wrapped her arms around my shoulders and dug her nails into my back. She screamed and I felt her grow tight around me, trapping me, trying to keep me there, but I didn’t stop. Again. I wanted her to feel it again.

But I needed to taste her, too, so I slowed the pace and withdrew, inching backward until I was on my stomach in the sand. I lowered my face and dipped into her musky cunt, the smell and taste of which I knew I’d never forget, which I instantly loved so much and already began to crave like nothing I’d ever needed before. I licked her slowly along the length of her folds, sucking at the lips until I reached her swollen clit. I surrounded it with my lips and pulled it in with my tongue.

She was so hard for me. That knowledge alone was enough to make me ready again, to start the build-up without being touched. I rubbed my face in her, coating my chin and my cheeks and nose, delighting in the low groans and murmuring I could elicit. It would take longer because I had fucked her first, and that’s just the way I wanted it because then I could spend more time down there.

“So good,” she mumbled, and it made me moan.

I loved her body so much. The way it moved and responded to my touch, the way she felt inside when I slid my fingers in, the way her hands reached out, then reached for me, the way we fit together so wonderfully.

My free hand met her hands halfway up her stomach, and she gripped me hard, not letting go—hanging on to me through the pounding and sucking and explosions building. The way her voice could cry my name and the way her hips raised up when she hit the edge and toppled over... Fuck, it was amazing.

I crawled up next to her and kissed her slowly, tenderly, before resting my head on her shoulder. We let the sky rain down on us until we both started shivering—this time from the cool wind and rain. I was still breathing heavily when we got up and forced our soaked clothes over our bodies.

She was smiling that beautiful smile of satisfaction when she pulled me in for a long embrace, just holding on to each other, taking comfort in one another.

“I love you,” I whispered into her ear.

“I love you, too.” There was a long pause as neither of us moved. “I’ve dreamed of holding you all night long. Let’s go take a shower and go to bed.”

“Mmm. Me too. It’s going to be so nice.”

We pulled apart and looked at each other, amazed at how raw it had been, momentarily exhausted with satisfaction.

“You are amazing,” I whispered, and the sound barely carried above the storm.

“It was incredible.” She smiled. “I’ve never had this—a lover so full of romantic thoughts. I don’t want to overthink it. I just want to enjoy it.”

And those words were bittersweet, nearly spoiling the moment.

I wanted so much to share with her what I’d never experienced, either—being with such a passionate, insatiable lover and incredible woman, for whom I cared so deeply. And I didn’t want to overthink it, either, or push her away.

“Yeah” was all I could say. “Incredible seems like such a weak word to describe what just happened. I did enjoy it very much. And you.”

It took an hour to shower because hands kept wandering and lips nibbled and explored. We curled up in that king-size bed, our bodies wrapped tightly around each other, and I listened to her deep, regular breathing that let me know she'd drifted off.

I hated that I thought of Monday and what would happen when the trip was over. But still feeling filled up by Leslie, the vision of those honest eyes looking at me with such sincerity while we made love, I couldn't even fathom lingering on anything unpleasant for long.

My lips were kiss-bruised and curled with wonder, my skin still tingling, my body feeling well-used and tired. I went to sleep with the thought of her lips on my lips and the sensation of her fingers inside of me. I dreamt of calmer seas and gentle rain beating on our bodies.

## Chapter Nineteen

Waking up as dawn broke with light filtering through the blinds and Leslie's arms around me, puffs of her warm, soft breath on my naked back and neck.

Dozing, feeling safe and loved.

Awakening again some time later with a start to find her fingers sliding in and out of me. Reaching behind to grasp the back of her head—the only part of her that I could reach. Moaning. Groaning. Screaming her name as she made me come in seconds. My breathing calming. Sleeping again.

Yellow-gold mimosas in bed hours later, better than straight champagne on ice. Leslie's smile so big and playful and infectious. Cuddling and kissing. Caressing lovingly. Exploring at length, teeth on neck and skin.

Finally leaving the comfort of bed to go for a walk on the beach. It was eight o'clock in the morning, and we were alone on the surf, walking arm in arm.

Sometimes, life is impossibly, wonderfully, amazingly beautiful.

"Let's go dancing tonight."

"I don't dance."

"Sure you do."

"No, really, I suck at it. So I've been told."

"You danced fine on the beach last night."

That drew a reluctant grin.

"Anybody can slow dance."

"You'll dance with me."

"You seem so sure."

"I am. You'll dance with me, Miss Jordan, because you want to be close to me and you can't get enough of me."

I burst out laughing. She was so, so right.

Nobody was on the dance floor. It was too early. Apparently, Leslie absolutely loved to dance. And she wasn't about to wait around for an hour or two till the club started hopping to get out there. Not when a good beat was vibrating through her body and chest.

I hadn't even had a drink yet. The DJ played "Let's Get It On," and she took my hand. My knees were weak with nerves and I almost stumbled.

But she didn't have to drag me. In that moment, while we walked out onto the empty floor, I knew she'd be the one who could lift me up like no other. She'd encouraged me in all that I wanted and loved and dreamed about. She'd helped me fight my inhibitions. She'd helped me battle my fears.

No single person can make you happy. Only you can make yourself happy. But a special person can add so much happiness to your life, make it more colorful and rich if you dare let it happen.

I'd always imagined faces staring at me while I danced. That's why I'd always danced with my eyes closed. But I didn't want to close my eyes. I wanted to see Leslie, and I wanted to be in her arms.

In private, secretly, I loved to dance. It was just something similar to stage fright that had kept me on the sidelines for years, sipping a beer, wishing I were brave enough to be showing off some moves like I could do by myself in my apartment.

My eyes were wide open as we danced and sang along, sometimes slow dancing tenderly, kissing, and sometimes, for lack of better phrasing, getting our groove on.

It was with great reluctance that I left the dance floor after half an hour so we could go get a couple of glasses of dark red wine. When Leslie heard a song she loved and practically slammed her glass down on a table so we could run out and dance to it, I was grinning broadly, eager to move with her.

“You’re a good dancer. I don’t know what you were so worried about.”

“Me neither.”

“Here’s to your first big gig.” Leslie raised her glass and clinked mine, looking so serious but smiling broadly. She took a sip of the champagne and so did I. “I’m so impressed. You’re following your dream and I respect that so much. Your art is beautiful.”

I blushed all the way down my neck.

It was Saturday and she’d decided to take me out for a fancy dinner because “you never got a chance to celebrate landing that gig and you should. Let me take you out.”

I set my glass on the table and cleared my throat, needing to share what had been on my mind for over a month.

“I’m thinking about doing an art show. A real one. Trying to get my work in a respectable gallery.” I paused to gauge her reaction. She was leaning across the tiny table, listening intently, that crease between her eyebrows drawn in concentration. “It was a dream I gave up long ago... But now, after painting for months just for myself, not for work and not to please anybody, I think I might have grown enough as an artist to be ready to give it a try again.”

She opened her mouth to say something, but at that moment, I pulled the picture frame from my purse and handed it over.

Her lips remained parted as though she was caught between a thought and couldn’t articulate what she was thinking. Then she expelled a long sigh. Her blue eyes grew watery and her voice cracked. “It’s beautiful, honey, like seeing myself through your eyes. So real.”

Our hands met in the middle of the table and didn’t part until our food arrived.

The second Leslie called me “my Jordan,” I began to think of her as my baby.

The longing to be with her seemed to increase with every minute we spent together. What we had was intense and uncontrollable. How had I ever believed I could shut it down?

Every day was a step in the wrong direction for both of us. It was wrong. We both knew it. And we didn’t care.

And each month had made the complications more complicated and more real.

We were quiet that Saturday evening, both lost in thought. I couldn’t tell you exactly what she was thinking. But she looked confused. She kept pulling out the picture and looking at it as we picked up the room that we’d wrecked in our few days there, packing so we wouldn’t have so much to do the following day before checkout.

I was dreading the coming morning but didn’t want to linger on the dread that would spoil the rest of the night. Let it go, I repeatedly ordered myself, and wrapped my arms around her waist from behind, kissing her bare neck and shoulders, running my hands over her abdomen, cupping her breasts, pinching her nipples.

“Touch me,” I whispered in her ear, and she jumped.

I’d finally penetrated her thoughts. She turned and embraced me. We were up half the night until we lay panting in the sheets that were tangled around us and damp with sweat and sex.

“It was such a beautiful weekend,” she said, standing in my driveway, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

We’d already carried my stuff inside, had kissed goodbye a dozen times. Yet we were lingering, stalling, running out of things to say that could keep her standing there.

“I wish it weren’t over.” I meant it more than she knew.

On the ride home, I’d finally allowed myself to think about what we’d done. My mind was exhausted with so much wondering about what-ifs and maybes and shoulds and should-nots. I was emotionally strung out and physically strung tight. More than anything, I wanted to wrap her scent around my body one more time so I could carry it with me always.

Her words were almost a whisper, tentative and shy. “It doesn’t have to be.”

Her forehead was touching mine; her eyes were closed, my hands in her hair, hers cupping my face. We were so close we were breathing each other’s breaths. The weekend was over. It did have to be.

Then comprehension dawned. “Please stay with me tonight, Leslie.”

We went inside, made love, and made love again, finally falling asleep, fucked in the early hours of the morning, went out to breakfast, then inevitably, as it had to happen, we said goodbye, ending our brief escape from reality.

I was confused beyond measure that day when she didn’t text or call before I went to bed.

So had it just been a fantasy we’d lived out, or was this the fighting-for kind of love?

My heart was telling me—no, demanding—to put up a good fight. And I’d sworn to go with my heart. So I’d give it my best.

## Chapter Twenty

“I will not drink.”

Pace, pace, pace.

“I will not go to the gas station and buy beer.”

Pace, pace, pace.

“I will not freak out.”

Pace, pace, pace.

“I will not drive by her house.”

Pace, pace, pace.

“Fuck it.”

I drove to the gas station, bought a six-pack, screwed the cap off the first bottle, and downed it before I was halfway to Leslie’s house. I hesitated at the stop sign where a left turn was needed to get onto her street.

This definitely qualified as stalking. And I’m not a stalker, had never felt the urge to do what I was about to do. The hesitation lasted so long that twin headlights glared in my rearview mirror. The driver honked impatiently.

It was Wednesday and she still hadn’t returned my texts or calls. I’d only tried once the day before and was starting to get angry.

Okay, so we were not together. We weren’t dating. She didn’t have to report to me, didn’t owe me anything. But we were nearly always in contact every day. There was worry under all that frustration, too. And after such a beautiful weekend, after she’d promised she wouldn’t run away from me, her end of the line was suddenly dead.

I grabbed another beer, lighted a cigarette, and turned on the blinker, reluctantly moving forward at a very slow pace.

I would have recognized the clunker in her driveway anywhere. Dented right passenger-side door and rust spots on the rear. Maroon. A fifteen-year-old piece of shit Chevrolet that should have been dropped off at the junkyard years ago.

My lips went numb and the color drained from my face. My hands began to shake and I couldn’t breathe. My stomach lurched and I felt like I’d be sick.

And that, I learned for the first time, is what real jealousy feels like. Not the little flashes of envy that come and go, make you grumble a little before you dismiss it with logic. No, this was the full-blown, what-the-fuck kind of jealousy that’ll make you crazy. I’d always thought jealousy was a wasted emotion and that I’m better than that.

I’m clearly not better than that. I just hadn’t been pushed hard enough yet. Realizing you still have the ability to surprise yourself is supposed to be a good thing. Well, not in this case.

Everybody has her breaking point that makes her unable to act like the mature adult she’s supposed to be.

What the fuck was Amy doing at Leslie’s house?

The living room windows showed the light was on. But so was the light in the bedroom... I drove slowly past, my heart beating irregularly. At least I didn’t stop and stare or get out of my car.

I reached the end of the street, pulled over, and began typing.

“Guess you don’t want to talk to me anymore. I don’t know what’s going on. But I don’t appreciate being blown off.” I hit send and pulled away from the curb.

There. Now I'd done it.

Hi, my name is Jordan Coones. I've suddenly become a drama queen. I still don't want your sympathy. I just don't want to ever feel the way I did that night again. So I'm going to be self-destructive and stupid to ensure that things will fall apart so I can get on with getting over it.

My phone buzzed and I ignored it.

It buzzed again.

And again.

Finally I flipped it open. "Was that really necessary? I'm having a drink with a friend and didn't want to be rude by constantly texting. I was going to call you later."

A friend? Right. If it had actually been a friend of hers, she'd have texted anyway. She always had before. She didn't want me to know she was with Amy.

Is lying by omission really lying? Some might argue that it is. For me, it depends on the gravity of the information not shared. If you're omitting something truly terrible or devastating to the other person, especially if you claim to love them, then you are definitely lying. And you should know better. Just get it over with already, I say, and face the damned music. Take responsibility. There's something to be said about honesty without having to ask for it.

I hadn't told Alex about Leslie, had omitted many things. It wasn't fear that held me back anymore. I was waiting. And yeah, you could definitely say it counted as lying. Perhaps I should tell her Leslie and I had something going on, but it was so complicated I half feared she'd shut down before I finished explaining, and half thought there was no reason to tell her and hurt her unless it became serious. You could say my internal argument on that subject was something along the lines of, "What is there to tell? Are we dating? Are we together? No. So what would I say? We're fucking and we're in love, but..." So crude.

But Amy at Leslie's house after the weekend we'd just shared? After all the I-love-yous and I-need-yous? It was too much. I'd handed her my heart that stormy night on the beach, handed it to her on a fucking silver platter.

Five minutes later, "I guess you're not talking to me now. You just texted. Call me."

My phone rang. I didn't answer, though I knew it would be her.

The third text message read, "Jordan, please...this is really scaring me."

For about a minute, I almost felt guilty for scaring her. The fact that she was texting me even though she had company could only mean that nothing was going on. But the beast in my chest was still growling its disapproval. Like so many experiences with Leslie, this jealous rage was a first. I couldn't handle it.

I began to cry and texted, "You've left me twisting in the wind. And you're not giving an explanation. I'm really up in my head and I think I need to be alone." The text transferred and I turned my phone off.

I drove around for another half hour or so, finished my third and fourth beer, then finally pulled into my driveway.

It hurt. No matter what was going on, it still hurt. I missed her so much, and it seemed ridiculous even to myself that I should freak out after only two days. But it felt like a horrible blow on the tail end of something that had been pure magic. The contrast between the two was what made it so much worse than it actually was.

Here I was, missing Leslie, and there she was, being with Amy.

I knew they were on speaking terms again. It had happened before we left for the beach. Leslie had obsessed about it. And those talks had done nothing but confuse me. I wanted her to get the closure she deserved and needed. But I still didn't think she'd get it, had voiced my disapproval and doubts numerous times. Leslie probably thought I was just jealous and biased. And hell yes, I'd been biased. But the jealousy hadn't raged until I saw that shit car in her driveway.

Amy just wasn't right for her. No matter how much Leslie pined after her. Maybe I wasn't right for her, either, especially after what I'd just done. Fuck, it was a mess. We should have talked about that love thing.

It wasn't that I regretted our weekend at the beach because I didn't. It was the circumstances and wishing we'd waited just a little longer that was bothering me so much.

I finished the six-pack and wished I had another.

Against my better judgment, I turned my phone back on. An hour had passed. No further texts. I debated calling her and decided it was a bad idea. I couldn't think about anything else. As clearly as I'd seen that vision of sitting on the

beach with our little girl, I saw Leslie's face between Amy's legs, wondered if she was fucking her like she'd fucked me, if she came as hard for Amy as she'd come for me. And it made me feel dirty. An hourlong shower wasn't nearly enough to make me feel clean.

All night I tossed and turned. Cried. Cursed myself for letting go, for thinking I should fight for her love. Cursed myself for getting into a situation I knew would end badly, for giving in to my passion instead of waiting for a better time. At three o'clock in the morning, my phone finally buzzed.

"I can't sleep. Are you awake?"

"Yes. Can't sleep, either."

"What's going on? Please talk to me."

"I can't talk about it." I hesitated. There wasn't any way to tell her why I was suddenly so pissed off without admitting what I'd done and seen. "You don't want to talk about it. You said you love me, then you disappeared."

A lengthy pause.

"Don't do this. You know I'm not ready."

"What were you doing yesterday and today?"

"Trying to sort out my head. Doing the right thing."

"And what is that?"

"I'm tired. Good night, Jordan."

I glared at the message for several minutes and decided her sidestep of the question didn't deserve another response. It was a copout. And if I knew Leslie at all, she knew it was a copout, too.

That I hadn't told her what I'd done was an equally big copout. When I said we seem so much alike sometimes that we might as well be the same person, I meant it. And that did not bode well for what would surely happen soon.

The morning brought sobriety. And sobriety brought fear and a touch—only a small touch—of regret. I lay in bed exhausted, had to force myself to get up, and it took an intense internal battle to get moving.

My phone sat quietly on the nightstand. No blinking red light. Nothing.

No "Good morning," like I'd gotten a dozen times before we'd gone to the beach. Not even a "Yawn," which was her abbreviated version of the morning hello text.

My arms and legs felt heavy, sluggish, and it wasn't a hangover that made them feel that way. I held my phone and flipped it open. I'd become so adept at texting that it seemed almost second nature, my fingers typically flying across the tiny buttons. But it took several minutes to text, "Hey. Can you call me?"

Half an hour passed. She was awake. It was early, but she was always up early. She'd surely seen the message. I'd already hit the road for work when a response finally came, making me jump.

"Hey. Not going to call. Don't really want the drama today."

I hit the steering wheel in frustration, cursing myself again.

"Okay" was all I texted back. I turned up the stereo and tried to blast her from my mind so I'd be ready to focus on the job when I got there. It was so important to stay focused and drown her out.

"I can't move on until I deal with it. Not with anybody and certainly not with you."

"So what does that mean?"

"Amy and I have to explore our feelings for each other."

"I thought you said you'd never, ever take her back. She ripped your heart out. She ignored you for a year."

"We're talking. We need closure. Neither of us really moved on."

Guess the guy was out of the picture then.

Part of what fueled my anger, as I texted, was the memory of that conversation I'd had with Amy at the bar. How could she say those things and then... Well, I couldn't help but wonder if she freaked out after we talked because she suspected I might be more interested than I was letting on. Her timing definitely seemed suspect. And no matter how

jealous I was, no matter how much in love with Leslie I was, somewhere under all that hurt was still the friend in me that was extremely concerned that this woman was going to hurt my friend again and set her back so far she'd never recover.

"Define *explore*. What does that entail?"

"Spending more time together. Talking. Dating to see if anything's still there."

The monster in my chest roared and tears burned at the back of my eyes. Dating? It was too much. She was too much. The two of them could have each other.

"So what, I'm supposed to hang around while you date another woman, even though you claim to love me?"

My phone rang. I debated answering her call for three rings, then sighed, flipped it open, and hit the talk button.

"Give me a second. I need to walk away from the site."

She didn't answer or say a word while I hurried around the corner for a more secluded spot where the interns wouldn't listen in on my conversation.

"Okay, talk."

"You knew what you were getting into. I didn't hold a gun to your head. Do you want to be with someone who's in with one foot and out with the other? Is that what you want? Because I think you deserve better than that, and that's why I've got to figure this out." She paused and expelled an exasperated breath. "And I don't owe you a detailed explanation of what I'm doing or who I'm seeing. We didn't make any promises to each other."

"Yeah, you just told me you loved me and had your way with me. Now you're going to sleep with her." And even to myself, I sounded childish.

"Don't make me regret telling you I love you."

Don't think I didn't immediately acknowledge that she didn't deny she was going to sleep with Amy. The omitted words shot straight through me.

"You're going to fuck her, aren't you? You have no idea how much this hurts. We get close, we have a beautiful time, then you run away and now you say you're going to date someone else. Leslie, I've never been in love like this before. How the hell am I supposed to feel? How would you feel if I started dating someone? How would you feel if I let her touch me, let her kiss me, let her..."

"I'd fucking hate it. I can't stand the thought of you being in love with someone else." Her voice cracked and she sniffed. "Jordan, I have to do this. I have to know. I can't get over it if I don't know."

"So it's worth risking losing my love. You're gambling with my heart. You're just going to throw me away."

The silence stretched for an agonizing eternity. Leslie began to sob outright.

"I hate that you think I'm throwing you away. I'm not throwing you away. I love you. I want to be with you but...you scare me so much..."

"So you're gonna run back to Amy because I scare you...I have to go back to work."

"Jordan, please."

"Please what?"

"Can we talk about this later?"

Seconds ticked by. "Fine. Text me later." I hung up.

I leaned against the wall for a while, unable to move, trying to let it sink in. My mind was trying to reject the whole affair. Again, I searched and searched for that black box and couldn't find it and couldn't shut down. Tears ran down my cheeks, and I swiped them away angrily. What the hell was wrong with me? How could I feel this strongly for anybody in such a short amount of time? How could I have let myself go, when I'd been able to see the outcome before it even started? It had been so naïve to think that the connection was all that mattered and love could conquer all in the end.

I'd betrayed my friend, had allowed my emotions to overpower my senses, and had helped land us in a situation that made life harder—not better—for both of us. She was still hurting. But damn it, I loved the hell out of her. And my heart is not a light switch. I can't just turn my feelings on and off. I'd gone down the do-or-die, feel-until-you-burst-or-don't-bother route and this is where it had gotten me.

Fuck.

I knew what I had to do. There was really only one thing to do. No matter how much my heart demanded a good fight, I had to step aside and let events unfold. If it was meant to be, then we'd maybe have a chance.

But it's not that easy. I'm not that selfless. She said she wasn't throwing me away, but it sure felt like it.

I tried to imagine my life without Leslie in it, and the tears fell harder. Even worse, I tried to imagine Leslie in my life but not being allowed to touch or kiss her—always out of reach and with someone else. The tears became a waterfall.

The distance from my car to Leslie's front door was only a few dozen yards. But the walkway stretched forever. My legs didn't want to carry me up to the porch. My arm didn't want to rise and my hand didn't want to knock. Every movement was a chore. She had to do what was right. So did I. For me. It was our friendship, more than anything, that I'd already begun to mourn.

She opened the door before my knuckles made contact with the wood. There she stood again, like that night that seemed so long ago, in those white boxers and matching tank top. But there was no smile on her face. No music or flickering candlelight in the hallway. Her eyes were red and puffy, her hair disheveled.

I forced myself to enter her home.

She took a step toward me, hesitated, then closed the distance between us. Her arms wrapped around me, and I stood forcibly frozen for several seconds before my body overruled my brain and I returned the embrace.

She cried into my shoulder. I tried so hard to choke back the tears but couldn't. How many tears can a person cry in a lifetime? Sometimes it felt like my life's supply should have run out already.

Alex frequently said in that last year of our relationship that I cried too much. I was starting to believe she was right.

Leslie cupped my face and kissed me. I didn't respond. Couldn't. My mind went straight to wondering if those lips had kissed Amy, too, maybe even that day.

I shook my head, sobbing, said, "I can't," and tried to draw away. Her arms tightened around me, and she laid my head on her shoulder, stroked my hair, told me she was sorry. Her cheeks were wet, too.

"You said one time that we love the same way and that it's fierce, that it runs deep and cuts so painfully when it's bad," she murmured. "I've never been loved by anyone like you and it scares me."

"Why?" I asked, miserable.

She ran her hands up and down my back, and I hated that she was comforting me and hurting me at the same time. Maybe she was right. Maybe I was too young for her because I certainly hadn't had enough experience to know what the hell to do with the torrent of emotions blinding me.

"Because I'm scared of getting hurt again, and I could fall so hard for you."

That didn't help. Frustration made my voice crack. "I just don't know what to do."

"We can't do this if it's hurting you this much."

The idea of never being able to kiss those soft lips again tore at me so badly I sobbed. I'd never be allowed to ruffle that short dark hair with the brown highlights that shone by sunset or dance with her freely and uninhibited or feel her naked body against mine again. We were never going to make love again.

My shoulders shook and trembled and I let go. There was no controlling or stopping the breakdown. I'd wanted to live a fuller, more vibrant life. Well, that meant the hurts hurt more, too. And damn, it was cutting deep. Much deeper than I thought. My strength and resolve were dripping out of invisible wounds.

I'd come to tell her we had to stop for good. No more giving in. Better yet, no more seeing each other, either. And that because she'd shown a willingness to gamble with my heart—unacceptable—she couldn't have it anymore.

"Jordan, come on, honey, pull yourself together." Her voice seemed distant and urgent. "I can't stand this. Don't do this. You're stronger than this."

That's what Brandon had said about me, too. Fuck, I didn't feel so strong. But I tried, I closed my eyes and gripped my pentagram, let its edges bite into my clenched fist. I muttered that same prayer again—the one that was written nowhere and that had been born out of desperation. I tried to find beauty in the moment, even though it was terrible. And when I opened my eyes, the only thing my mind would latch onto was Leslie's worried eyes.

Those honest eyes that couldn't lie.

Those eyes that had shone with happiness only days before and held nothing but sadness now.

“Let me hold you,” she said softly as I averted my gaze. I just nodded, let her lead me to the bedroom, lay down on her bed, and felt her curl up beside me, her body pressed into my back.

I’d like to say that she held me for a while and that I pulled myself together, ended whatever we had going on, then went home. I’d like to say that, but it would be a lie.

Holding and crying turned into light touches and kisses. I reached for her the way I did because I was fairly certain it would never happen again. After we made love, we both lay on our sides, caressing each other’s faces until we fell asleep—both of us so damned tired after not sleeping the night before.

She woke me early by being inside of me, her fingers sliding in and out. I reached back and grabbed the back of her head, arching my back, driving myself into her. She moaned as I cried out and tightened around her fingers so quickly. For a few minutes, I basked in the afterglow of orgasm before reality came crashing back.

Leslie seemed to feel it, too—the heavy weight that suffocates.

“Time to get up,” she said, and I knew her alarm wouldn’t go off for another hour.

“Yeah, I need to go.”

She’d already grabbed her pants and was pulling one leg up and stopped in mid-motion. “I’m sorry I hurt you.”

“I’m sorry I hurt you, too.” My face and hands felt numb, clumsy, and the words seemed to topple from my lips like a drunkard’s slur. “We can’t see each other anymore.”

“I know. I have to give it an honest try with Amy.”

The matter-of-fact tone of voice is what brought the tears back again. “Damn it,” I said, furious with myself for crying yet again. It never seemed to end.

Leslie dropped her pants and crawled across the bed and tried to hold me, but I said, “No,” and pushed her away. My hands clutched my head that felt like it would explode. I had to get out of there. I stood, dressed, and cried some more. Leslie tried to hold me again, and I let her in spite of myself.

“Oh, Jordan,” she murmured, and I pulled away.

“I’m going to miss you.” It had to be said. If your heart’s pounding and your hands are sweaty and all that. “And I do love you. But please don’t call or text me.” Then I finally said what I’d meant to say. “I’m not going to wait for you. I can’t do that to myself. I hope you understand what you’re giving up.”

Now she was crying, too. We stood by the front door. She slid down the wall and dropped her head into her hands. “Just go. Go!”

So I did.

## Chapter Twenty-one

Just like that, it was as though our trip to the beach had never happened, like it was just a fantasy of mine that she didn't know about, an experience she hadn't shared with me.

It didn't seem real anymore. Even the pictures I had of us there didn't seem real.

It was a knife that penetrated my gut and sliced up the middle until my head split open and my brains gushed out onto the floor.

I had imagined every look. Every touch. Every word. Of course I hadn't, but it was easier to tell myself that than remember the trip for what it was.

My painter's hand was unsteady, so I stuck to big blocks of color. Thank the gods the weekend would start in an hour.

Brandon would meet me at the duplex. I'd called on the way to work and told him it was over. Whatever we'd had, call it what you will, had fallen apart.

My phone was ominously silent. She'd listened to my instruction. No texts. No calls.

When it therefore buzzed in my pocket, my heart skipped a beat and my breath caught. It wasn't Leslie. Brandon wanted to know if we'd be drinking and if so, could he possibly spend the night. I assured him he could and went back to painting.

I let the colors on the wall become my whole world. Slow, deliberate brushstrokes. I wore a rubber band on my wrist and snapped it every time her face drifted into focus. My wrist was red and raw already. It had been Brandon's suggestion and it wasn't helping much.

I felt so lost and empty. It hurt worse than what had happened with Alex, which was in and of itself deeply troubling. But I wasn't going to let myself fall apart again. You can't go through life constantly falling apart. You'll never get anywhere or do anything but wallow in misery. And that just won't do.

Leslie's eyes are the exact shade of blue I'm using on this section.

Snap.

Will she break down and text me?

Snap.

How do I get over her?

Snap.

Damn, that hurt. I rubbed my wrist and cursed.

This was the price for living with a wide-open heart and no more walls to guard it. No, I wasn't going to bother trying to put the walls back up because those can come crashing down and crush you.

This episode was not going to destroy my newfound faith in romance and passion. If anything, even though the weight of the loss was crushing me, it strengthened my belief. The type of love I wanted definitely existed. I'd just found it in the wrong person. That's all.

It was an obstacle, another roadblock on the path that I had to tackle. Nothing more. It might be a mountainous obstacle, but not impossible to outmaneuver. All I needed was time. So I told myself.

I am who I am. There's no changing that. And I shouldn't have to.

Leslie is who she is. There's no changing that. And she shouldn't have to, either.

The drive home was long and stretched until I couldn't remember if I'd stopped at any red lights on the way. I was that out of it. Completely in shock.

It's amazing how a person can enter your life and take up so much of it, leaving a gaping hole when they're gone. And you have to fill that hole with stuff or just give up.

The art show would fill part of it. My current gig would carry me through the next three weeks or so. Brandon could help a little, had already promised he'd be there for me. And there was Mom, who was slowly starting to open up and talk about Dad.

I just had to get through the next eight or nine hours so that day could be over. Just that one day, I told myself, it would be okay to let the minutes blur together without trying to keep them separate, amazing, and unique.

How was Leslie doing? Was she okay? Was she hurting this much, too? How I wished I could comfort her, my dear, dear friend...

Snap. Snap. Snap. Snap.

Brandon crushed me to his chest and wouldn't let go. I wanted to pull back, to stand straight, to prove my strength and that he was right about me. But I guess even Brandon realized that a blow is a blow, and it takes a while to swallow. He held me until my shoulders slumped and the tears came. And then he held me some more. We stood on my doorstep for a long time.

When he released me, he picked up the six-pack of beer he'd brought. "You need a drink." He popped off a cap and handed me a bottle.

As though a stranger spoke, I said, "No. I don't need to drink. In fact, I don't think I'm going to drink for a while. It's just getting me in trouble and it's no way to deal."

He looked so astonished that he stood frozen for a few seconds. Then he shrugged and took a sip from the bottle.

"What do you want to do?"

"Dunno."

"I guess going to a bar is out."

"Guess so."

He paused, as though at a loss for what to do. Then slowly, he set the bottle aside and smiled sadly. "Maybe I shouldn't drink, either, then."

I returned his sad smile and whispered, "Thank you."

We went for a walk, his arm wrapped around my shoulder. It was so good to have him there.

My head hurt from all the crying. He gave me some pain killers and a glass of water. My stomach rumbled and he insisted I eat. We talked about my feelings of being thrown away. He told me how beautiful and talented I was, tried with all his might to lift me up. He clapped with delight when he managed to make me smile again.

It was impossibly late. I couldn't sleep. Brandon's body was spooned against my back, his arm around my waist. I'd asked him to hold me, had needed the comfort.

"Do you need anything?" he asked sleepily.

"Just having trouble falling asleep."

"I'm here for you in any way that you need."

His arm moved and his hand caressed my arm. "When I hurt," he said, "it helps to feel good, to have someone love you for a night. We've done it before, Jordan. It seemed to help then."

I sighed. It was not an exasperated sigh or one of frustration. Brandon was not trying to take advantage of me. He was not just trying to get in my pants. He meant exactly what he said. He was offering himself as a physical comfort. I tried to think about how his body had felt last time—that single time so long ago. But any thought of sex made me think of Leslie, and my throat grew tight.

"I wish it were that easy," I whispered because my voice had gone so hoarse. "I wish I could, Brandon. I wish it would help. But there's more than me being gay that would not allow me to do what you're offering." I turned in his arms

so I could face him, even though it was pitch-black in the room. “I love you. I do. Very, very much. And I’m so glad you’re my best friend and that you’re here and staying the night and holding me. But…”

“But you’re too in love with her.”

“Yes. I don’t want to be. But you know how I am and that I can’t even think about touching anyone else.”

I felt more than saw him nod. His tone was very much matter-of-fact and he wasn’t masking disappointment when he asked, “But does Leslie feel that way about you? Is she not, at this very moment, considering being with another?”

“Yes.” The word came out strangled. “She’s going to sleep with her. I know it.”

“So it wouldn’t be a betrayal if you did the same.”

There was a long silence before I spoke again, in which I thought angrily that he was abso-fucking-lutely right and that maybe I should take him up on his offer. I put my hands on his chest and scooted a little closer and kissed him roughly, pulling back abruptly, shaking my head.

“I just can’t. I can’t. I can still feel her inside me. I can still smell her in these sheets. I can still…”

“Shh.” Brandon grabbed my face to stop me. The words died in my throat. “Let’s get up and wash these sheets. We’ll go to the Laundromat. We can buy a shitload of candy from the vending machine and talk about something else.” He paused. “Please don’t be upset by what I said about comforting you.”

“It’s okay.” I put my hands over his and gently removed them from my face, rolled over, and switched on the nightstand light. “You meant well. I know that. Now let’s get up and do what you just suggested about the sheets.”

He squinted against the light, nodded, and proceeded to get dressed.

I almost missed my coffee date with Alex. We’d decided to meet in Arlington at the Coffee Haus, the Saturday after that disastrous Thursday, though Alex had no idea how disastrous the day had been for me. All she knew was that I was visibly upset when she turned up and she assumed it was because of our old stuff.

And she was partly right.

There still hadn’t been any texts. Fifty-six hours and counting with no messages from Leslie. Guess she really took my words to heart. It was painfully obvious that she wasn’t going to cave in after all.

That morning, I’d debated whether to call off seeing Alex. It would be nearly impossible for me to keep up a good show of an acceptable level of well-being. She’d know in an instant that something was wrong. We could read each other’s faces so easily, had way too much practice at it that I could hope she wouldn’t notice and wouldn’t ask.

And with so much heartbreak on my mind, it inevitably brought up the other heartbreak of our failed relationship. All morning, I’d been thinking about that time two years before, when everything still seemed to be going beautifully. How much fun we’d had on a trip to the mountains. How beautiful she was. How much I missed our friendship. How lonely I was. How everything seemed to be falling apart in my life. How I couldn’t cope with it anymore. I wasn’t regretting leaving her, but I was regretting that it hadn’t worked out. On that mountain trip, I’d thought for the first time about asking her to marry me. I was going to wait one more year. Then disaster struck and it all went to shit.

She looked at me with those sad, concerned hazel eyes and asked what was wrong. I just shook my head, unable to voice my thoughts. “Let’s get our coffee.”

We sat, coffees in hand, and just looked at each other. It felt like an eternity since I had last laid eyes on her. And she looked good. I’d forgotten how beautiful she was. The summer had put freckles on her nose, had bleached highlights in her hair. I could remember what her hair felt like against my inner thigh and sighed.

The thought just reminded me of more recent drama.

“I wish you’d tell me what’s wrong,” she said cautiously.

“A lot of things have happened lately. It’s been rough. And I miss you.”

It was all true, yet I was omitting again. But Leslie and I were done. Maybe I’d tell Alex someday, but that was not the time.

“I miss you, too. I’m sorry things have been hard. Is there anything I can do?”

Guilt welled up so strongly that my head began to hurt again. Here she was asking if there was anything she could do, still having trouble dealing with our breakup, and there I was, regretting the loss of another woman. It made me feel slimy and I might have been honest if the next bit of conversation hadn't happened.

I just shook my head and asked questions about her life and how she was doing. She talked about her family, her job, Phoenix, a new friend she'd finally found out there. And then, abruptly, as an aside, "Speaking of friends. I guess you already know that Leslie and Amy are dating again. She told me this morning. How weird is that?"

The pounding in my ears was so loud I couldn't hear anything else. My lips went numb again, like they had that night when Amy's car had been parked in Leslie's driveway. I felt the color drain from my face and couldn't stop it. And to have it just thrown on me like that... Leslie should have warned me, damn it. She knew I'd be seeing Alex that day. She had to have known that it would come up.

I didn't react in any other way for too long. Alex's eyes narrowed in suspicion, and I knew that look. Her eyebrow arched and that suspicious look turned into The Look. Shit. "You saw her this morning?"

"Yeah." The Look didn't go away. "She didn't look too good, either." Alex paused. "In fact, I might have thought she'd be happier, but she looked like she'd been crying all night." Her tone had changed from concerned to confrontational. I said nothing.

"I don't know what's going on and you're obviously not going to tell me." She waited for a beat to see if I'd interrupt and continued when I didn't. "I'm not ready to hear it anyway."

"Alex, I..."

"Just don't. I'm serious. I can't handle it. I'm too raw right now. You're not the only one who's grown over the past year. I'm dealing with my stuff, too. And I'm hurting. I miss you and you're..."

"Fuck, Alex, I miss you, too. I felt like shit for weeks after you moved and weren't calling me. I miss our friendship. I miss talking to you all the time."

Our visit wasn't going at all the way I'd hoped. The tone of the conversation reminded me of the last few months before we broke up when we talked around issues and didn't really share much of anything except how upset we were with each other. I'd hoped we could reconnect, re-establish some sort of communication that was more comfortable. Tears began to burn at the back of my eyes, but they couldn't fall now, she'd think they weren't for her, even though they were.

We stared at each other for a long time. The anger finally seemed to fade from her face, the flush receding. We changed the subject, tried to ease into a comfortable topic. But the things we weren't saying put a damper on the words in between. If she hadn't figured it out, she at least had an idea of what had happened. I almost told her everything, felt nearly obligated to do so. But it was Leslie's friendship to her that I didn't want to fuck up, and that's what kept my mouth shut. She deserved a say-so in what Alex knew.

We parted ways on dubious terms. Still uncomfortable and without a hug goodbye. I tried to get her to agree to a weekly phone conversation. The best I got out of her was, "We'll see how the first one goes and go from there."

I cried again on the way home and fell gratefully into Brandon's waiting arms back at my duplex, where he'd promised he'd be when I got home.

At 8:43 a.m. Sunday, I got a text from Leslie. Seeing her name in my phone made my stomach lurch and heart skip a beat.

"I can't stand this. I feel like I'll go crazy if I don't tell you how much I miss you. I feel empty and lost."

My throat burned and my hands shook. Brandon was snoring in the bed next to me. It had been another long, sleepless night.

"I guess you already know that Leslie and Amy are dating again..." boomed so loudly in my head I was almost surprised Brandon didn't wake from the thought.

There were a number of things I wanted to type. Desperate words. Angry words. Bitter words. Like how, at that moment, I felt easily replaceable and jealous as hell—pissed that she didn't spare me the shock by telling me herself, impossibly sad that she'd done what she'd done. And stupid, too, for having been so shocked at what was going to happen

anyway. It had been the reason why we'd broken it off. Duh, she was going to start dating Amy. But it had happened so quickly.

Yet under all of that, somewhere a spark of hope flared so strongly I couldn't snuff it out. That, too, made me angry.

"It hurts so much. I don't know what to do anymore."

"Jordan..."

"Leslie..."

"I need you in my life."

"It's so hard. I can't stand the thought of you and her together. Alex told me you're dating. You should have told me. I've been crying all night."

Twenty minutes went by before she responded.

"I'm sorry. It hurts me to know I hurt you. You have to have faith in me."

"Faith in what?"

"That I'll figure this out."

"I'm not going to wait for you to figure it out." And I knew I meant it then. "I can't sit around while you're with her."

I hit send and immediately typed another. "You could still fix this so easily. You say you miss me, that you want to be with me. Quit fooling around. Leave Amy now. Be strong for me, Leslie. Prove you mean what you say, so we can be happy and in love."

"I'll have faith for both of us. I love you, Jordan."

The text made the tears finally fall, shook my shoulders, and I could hardly text anymore. I didn't want to send the one I'd just typed. But I made my choice.

"I love you, too. I just can't do this. It hurts too much. Goodbye."

"Now I'm really upset. Please don't. I can't handle any more texts like this."

"Then we shouldn't text." Like I'd told her on Thursday. I should never have responded. I'd obsessed about that text conversation for the next week or two or who knows how long. Shit.

"Remember that I'll always love you. Don't forget that."

I turned my phone off and woke Brandon. We drove down to the Trinity River and walked for hours and hours. I turned my phone back on only long enough to erase every message she'd sent that morning and every message I'd locked and saved from the previous few months. All the romantic texts. Even the one that said I was "a good woman" that marked the first day we'd really kissed.

I took the photographs of her at the beach out of my wallet. They hadn't even been in there for a whole week. I let Brandon snap the rubber band on my wrist when her name came up in conversation.

I made the choice to get over her. And I made the choice to rebuild my inner walls despite my reluctance to do so and fear that they'd eventually crush me again. It would only be temporary—just long enough to pull myself together.

There would be no more boozing and feeling sorry for myself. There would be no more nights pining and regretting and feeling guilty.

The fall would not be like the spring. The fall brings change and the end of the year. I'd roll with the change, embrace it, learn to be okay with it. My love for Leslie was an addiction I'd have to break. And I vowed to do so.

When Brandon and I got back to the duplex, the necklace with the shell was hanging on my doorknob.

Have faith, indeed.

I stared at it for several long seconds before unlocking the door and left it hanging there, unable to touch it.

## Chapter Twenty-two

Tragedies have a way of teaching you so much about yourself.

I was beginning to rediscover my inner strength. Sometimes it takes several survived blows to make a woman believe in herself again. That was apparently the way I was built, and it was a bizarre sort of thing to learn—that pain would lead to more pain, then again, but eventually it would save me. Very weird.

Losing Leslie was not killing me, wasn't destroying me, wasn't obliterating my lust for life. I was no zombie, trudging through the daily grind blindly. No, I was still Jordan Coones—true believer in magic and life's wonders, who stares at sunsets and marvels in the beauty of thunderstorms.

Fourteen days and fourteen nights without texts, calls, or seeing her face. And without alcohol, too. Or cigarettes. I had made the choice to quit abusing my body and soul. There'd be no more self-medicating over women. Period.

Dad had come to me again in a dream. He'd simply looked at me sadly and had asked, "What are you doing?"

"I don't know, Dad. I'm out of control. What should I do?"

"Don't worry about it. Have faith. Pick yourself up. You'll be fine."

He led me back down to the river and laid me to rest, as he'd done the last time.

So that week, I did exactly as he said. I tried my best not to worry about it.

I painted at work, then painted at home. Thirty fresh canvases of various sizes were stacked in my living room, dozens of paint tubes and brushes littered the floor. I'd set up both easels—the new one and the one Dad had built for me, the one that had remained hidden for so long because the sight of it made me sad. No more. It became a comfort. It held the canvases so wonderfully as my brush danced and visions blossomed in ochres and reds and greens. It was not therapy painting. It was not busy work, like all the stuff from the spring. No, this work was different. It was real. It was raw. It was honest. And it would form the beginning of themed pieces for an art show.

Yeah, I'd taken several gigantic steps forward in the matter of a week.

A gallery owner in Dallas was only too happy to meet with me. It came as a big surprise that she knew who I was when I called to ask for an appointment. Apparently, my work at Vintage was giving me more exposure than I'd realized. Not to mention my project at the development (which was nearly completed).

The art crowd in Dallas is tight. People talk. It was an intimidating clique that I hadn't tried to penetrate. But they were talking about me. "Why yes, Miss Coones," Kas Donnelly, the gallery owner, had said. "I'd love to finally meet you. There's quite a lot of talk about your work. I've seen some of it around town. And you're interested in a show? Marvelous. I would love a chance to be the first one to display your private works."

And to think that only a year earlier I was still struggling at the bar, scrounging for gigs. Her words were like a much-needed tonic. Art is in my soul. It's my passion. And to have a chance at doing some real art, at having it recognized—it was like a dream.

I'd taken her samples of my work, brought the painting of Leslie to the gallery. And yes, I got a slot for a two-week-long January showing. I would be starting the new year with the fulfillment of a dream. How perfect. It gave me several months to create my thirty pieces. And I jumped on it immediately.

Yet, it was a dream I could not share with Leslie. Not at that time, though it had been tempting to break the blackout. Leaving the gallery, I'd dug out my phone, had in my elation already flipped it open and nearly hit the speed dial button for her office number when I stopped myself, shaking my head sadly.

But Brandon was eager to celebrate.

More importantly, so was Mom.

She was so flustered she could hardly speak when I told her. The smile on her face actually reached her eyes. It was so beautiful that my hand automatically grasped my pentagram, and a silent prayer of thanks shot to my lips that I didn't voice but thought hard on, hoping to be heard anyway.

The first proper sentence she managed to get out was, "Your father would have been so proud. We always knew you had it in you."

"It's just a small show, Mom," I'd said, immensely pleased and embarrassed at the same time.

"In a distinguished gallery in Dallas! This is a big deal. Don't be so modest." She'd laughed and had gone into the kitchen, returning with a bottle of wine, one I knew she'd been saving for a special occasion. "Ooh...I can't wait to tell the women at the center. They'll all be there on opening night. I can promise you that."

She meant her pagan group, many of which were practically family after all those trips together to the beach. The thought of the quirky group showing up to hang with the art snobs almost made me laugh.

Mom made to uncork the bottle and I stopped her.

"I can't drink right now."

"Oh, but, honey, why? We should celebrate."

"Yeah, we should. But not like this."

Slowly, she set the bottle down. The smile was gone. The excited flush in her cheeks receding quickly. "What's going on?"

So I told her. Everything—the kisses in the parking lot, the heat, the love, the beach, the drinking, the sadness, the loss. She let me talk for a long time, frowning. When the words trailed away, she sat next to me on the couch and took my hand.

"I love you, Jordan. And I'm so sorry you're going through this." She paused, struggling to find the right words to comfort me. "No wonder you've been so crazy lately. First Alex, now this. Oh, honey, I'm sorry we haven't been able to talk because of my," she closed her eyes as though bracing herself, "because of my grief. You were right. We have to stick together, you and I. We're family." Then for the first time in what seemed like forever, she met my eyes and didn't immediately look away, didn't shy from the eyes that came from the man she'd loved so much.

"I guess every mother wants to protect her daughter. I guess we all wish for our children to experience such a deep love but without the pain that can happen when it's over." She sighed heavily and was probably thinking about her own loss. Her eyes grew distant for several seconds before she came back to the conversation. This time, I didn't push. This time, I was beginning to understand what she and Dad had had.

"Don't give up on love."

"I won't."

"I really mean it. There isn't just one single person in life that you were meant to be with forever—one soul mate walking the earth, just waiting to be reunited with you. There are so many people on this planet. I believe you have many soul mates. And you can meet more than one of them in a lifetime—perfect lovers that touch your heart and will always be there. Sometimes you meet the right person at the wrong time. It sounds like that's what happened. You'll find another."

Oh, Mom... How I wanted to believe that.

"And will you meet another?"

Again, she sighed. "I'm sixty-one years old. It's a bit late for that. And I'll love your father forever. He was the right man at the right time."

"Do you feel like you'd be betraying Dad if you found another man?"

She nodded curtly and her lips tightened. “He’s waiting for me.” Another beat. “But you’ll only be thirty at the end of the year. Don’t close your eyes. You don’t have to go looking, just don’t close your eyes.”

“I won’t, Mom. But it’s hard to think about right now. You know that.” And it was my turn to trail off and look distant for a few minutes. “The age thing really doesn’t bother you?”

“There are some things about it that do.”

“Like what?”

“Like the fact that when you reach a certain age, your patterns begin to stick. Permanently. Things won’t change. Growth slows down. And I’m worried that you’re caught up in a pattern. I don’t like anything or anyone who hurts my only child. And I don’t like what she’s done to you.”

“She hasn’t done anything to me. We did it together. We messed it up together.”

“You’re defending her, even though she broke your heart.”

I sighed. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I love her. And because what I said is true. I knew what I was getting into and let love blind me to it.”

“Would you take her back if she came to you?”

“I don’t know.” It was true. “I want to say no, but logic escapes me when it comes to Leslie. I never know what I’m going to do or say.”

“Just be careful, honey.”

She made me promise. I did.

“What is the theme of your show going to be?”

The change in topic was abrupt and made me blink several times. I cleared my throat in an effort to refocus. “Love. Passion. Romance. The three things that are most important in my life. I’m going to show different angles—longing, sadness, elation, lust, tenderness, happiness, magic, all of that. And I’ll show it between two women.”

Mom just smiled. It was the kind of knowing smile that says, “How appropriate.”

I pulled out my sketchpad and showed her what I meant. She looked at the drawings in silence for several minutes.

“This looks a lot like you.”

“Yeah.”

“And is this what Leslie looks like?”

I nodded.

“Do you think she’s going to be upset that your paintings look an awful lot like the two of you?”

I frowned then. I’d wondered the same thing and had tried so hard to draw a woman who didn’t look like her. But all women looked like Leslie now if my art was to show heat and strong emotions. “I don’t know. She’s seen the one. I can only hope that she won’t mind. If I want to make something real, something that matters, then it’s going to have to be like this.”

## Chapter Twenty-three

The Trinity River was more beautiful than I'd ever seen it on the first true day of north Texas's fall. The air was crisp and clear—cold enough to be comfortable in my favorite green sweater as I wandered along the trail beside the river for miles, marveling at the still water and how it changed colors as the blue sky grew golden, then faded into a pale pink, finally darkening until it was nighttime, when I reached my car and was on my way home.

The river had become a place to re-anchor and recharge. It brought me back to earth and out of my head. I'd been so up in my head for months and months. The river and its beauty fueled my dreams and desire to paint.

The river is where I laid my anger over Dad's death to rest.

The river is where I let go of my regret over my failed relationship with Alex.

The river is where I tried to let go of Leslie and failed. More time would help surely.

I took a walk by the river nearly every day. Dad had been so right to take me there in my dreams. It was perfect.

That first crisp day that promised fall was October 1. The development project was done. I'd gotten the last payment on it and wouldn't have to pick up mural gigs for a while if I didn't want to. I hadn't spoken directly to Leslie in over a month, though the texting started up again after the third week of silence. I'd promised myself I wouldn't, but her words tore at me too badly to ignore.

"You're in my heart and soul and I need you in my life. Don't disappear."

"I'm still here. I'm not going anywhere."

There comes a point when too much strength is a weakness. When you are so stoic that you can ignore a heartfelt, honest plea for contact, you've become too hard to be able to experience emotional depth. That's why I responded. That's why I continued to respond. I decided to be honest. Completely. No matter the difficulties it might cause.

The messages were mostly miserable ramblings about how much we missed each other. I'd finally told her about the art show by text and she'd been sad that I hadn't shared it with her immediately. That led to several unpleasant messages.

But there were also the few rare, tender exchanges, typed during times when we both felt a little stronger and allowed ourselves to get lost in fantasies of a life together. It was like taking a drug to escape on a short, bittersweet vacation.

There's something safer in typing the words instead of speaking them. You don't have to fight the cracking in your voice.

"I'd never want to leave her. She'd come with us everywhere we traveled. She'd see Europe from a carrier on her beautiful mama's back."

"You'd play with her at the beach, look for shells with her, and teach her how to fly a kite."

"You'd spend hours with her and her crayons."

And so on.

That particular text conversation lasted a whole day. Seventy-six messages received. Seventy-two sent. The following day, the texts took another sharp turn downhill. It got so bad I turned my phone off again and had to go meditate afterward to calm myself down. Good days and bad days.

The night was getting cooler and now that I'd left the comfort of the calm river behind, I couldn't help but begin to wonder again, like so many other times, what Leslie was doing. I didn't allow myself to think about her and Amy anymore. That beast in my chest needed killing and I was working on it, hunting it, stalking it. Soon, I'd catch it.

My phone buzzed. My heart lurched when I saw her name—the same reaction every time that happened.

"I told Amy I'm in love with you. Just thought you should know."

"Why? When?"

"Last night. I've been visibly upset. She says I smile when I talk about you."

"And?"

"And she says she understands."

My heart began to pound hard in my chest. Hope flared so suddenly that my cheeks flushed and my hands began to sweat. I could feel giddiness bubbling up inside but forced it back. Just because she told Amy didn't mean anything at all. And with the forceful shove came the anger rushing back. I'd been her dirty little secret all that time.

"Okay..." I typed, unable to type anything else.

"What does that mean?"

"Means I don't know what to say."

My phone rang and I jumped so badly my hands jerked the steering wheel. I was just able to avoid a wreck. It was time to pull over. I took three seconds to compose my voice.

I must not sound upset, or happy, or anything else. Let's try neutral.

"Hi."

"What do you mean, you don't know what to say?"

Even with the hostility, it was damned good to hear her voice.

"Means exactly what it sounds like."

Silence.

"This is a big deal for me."

"Okay."

Silence.

"Would you please not talk to me with hate in your voice?"

I sighed. "It's not hate, Leslie. I don't hate you. This is me having tried to shut down. This is me trying to deal with us."

Silence.

"Will you come over? Please? I need to see you. I miss you. I can't stop thinking about you."

I hesitated, argued with myself. My hands were shaking. Gods, I wanted nothing more than to wrap my arms around her and never let go. The prospect alone was enough to undo me, to undo every little bit of progress I'd made over the past month.

"Okay."

"Now?"

"I'm on my way."

She hung up and I changed lanes, pulled a U-turn at the next light, and headed down the road that would take me to her house, the one I'd avoided for four weeks.

And that's what you call love addiction. It's a very real affliction. It can impair your judgment like any drug on the market. You'll sacrifice to feed the addiction to the detriment of everything around you. Type the words "love addiction" into a search engine on the Internet and a bazillion articles from reputable sources will pop up. It's all there.

If the love's going well, then people refer to fueling it as "nurturing" and "caring" or "investing in the relationship." But when the love's bad, they say you're "obsessing" and "hanging on to the past or an idea of love that doesn't reflect reality."

I think we were somewhere in between the good and the bad—leaning more one way or the other, depending on our moods and circumstances.

I'd been going through withdrawals for a month. From alcohol. From smoking. Most of all, from her. The smell of her. The feel of her lips on mine. Her laughter. Her stories. Her insight. Her tenderness. Her support.

Fuck, I was crazy on the way over there, a million thoughts running through my mind that all blurred together, racing as fast as I could, not giving a damn about the consequences. One more hit. I just needed one more hit.

Leslie was waiting for me on her porch. I slowly got out of the car. She met me halfway across the front lawn. She dove into my arms and crushed our bodies together fiercely. You might have thought we hadn't seen each other in years.

We somehow made it into her house, where we stood in the front room, holding each other, Leslie sobbing.

She felt good. So fucking good. Her smell was so... Leslie. I drew it in deeply, memorizing. It took all my strength to keep the tears inside. I didn't want to break down again like I had the last time we saw each other.

She pulled back and kissed me and I tried desperately not to respond. But her lips were so soft on mine, felt so tender and loving, and I wanted that contact.

It was slow and tentative, like we had to re-explore mouths and tongues. We both whimpered when I let her in, then my tears finally fell and mingled with hers, making the kiss wet and warm.

"Oh, Jordan, my Jordan," she whispered, kissing my eyelids and cheeks, winding her hands into my hair.

"Leslie, my Leslie."

She stopped stroking my hair and looked into my eyes. She looked so tired. Worn. Lost. Empty. It hurt me to see her eyes so full of sadness and to know my own likely mirrored hers.

Leslie took my hand and led me to the bedroom. We lay down on the bed and she spooned against my back. I cried and cried, couldn't stop once the floodgates were opened. It was as though they'd all been saved up while I was trying to get better and now they came bursting out again.

"Jordan, my Jordan," she whispered again and again. "I'm going to figure this out. And when I do, I'll come back for you. I'm going to be relentless. I'm going to make you my wife."

And I cried harder.

I'm proud of us for not spending that night together. I'm proud of us for not letting passion get the better of us again. We held each other, we cried, then I went home, more confused than ever because of the things she'd said. The fact remained that her "figuring things out" meant dating Amy.

I'd decided to get over her. And with two sentences, she'd undone my resolve.

"I'm going to be relentless. I'm going to make you my wife."

So was she the right person at the right time after all? Or was she still the right person at the wrong time and I just needed to wait? I might be waiting forever...

I lay awake in my duplex, staring at the ghostly image of the temperance card—symbolic of patience, among other things—on my wall. The one I'd painted so many months before. Have patience, indeed.

We texted half the night. They were tender texts, romantic messages about making love on the beach. I had great trouble sleeping.

Before I'd left, we'd talked about my jealousy. She said nothing was going on, that she wasn't sleeping with Amy or anyone else. She got defensive, like it was none of my business even if she were.

The next night, we watched a movie at her place and got carried away. I'd been so proud of us, but there was no stopping the heat. Neither of us had any willpower when we were together. The sex was fierce, clawing, hungry, animalistic passion, and I came when she screamed that she loved me.

The next day, she told me she was going to visit Amy and promised there would be no "hanky-panky." She was sad again as she said it.

"Nothing? No kissing? No touching?"

"None of that. I promise."

I asked if she regretted having slept with me, dreading her answer. But she cupped my face and told me she never regretted making love to me. It was the circumstances she regretted.

I forced myself to believe her promise and let it go, didn't protest her visiting Amy. One day, and I'd already thought of us as together again. My heart alternately fluttered with delight and dropped through my stomach with fear.

Oh, yes. I was scared out of my mind. It was my turn to be on the verge of bolting. Because those two sentences had gone straight to my soul and settled there, and I was already having doubts as to how seriously she meant them. The instant she'd uttered those words, I realized it was exactly what I wanted more than anything. More than the art show. More than wanting to see Dad again. I wanted that life with her that we'd texted about with the little girl at the beach. I wanted to have Leslie's child, could see myself pregnant and in her arms, her hands caressing my big stomach.

I'm a thinker and a dreamer and my head was full of dreams about a life with her.

Fuck, I was in way over my head and that's what scared me.

I painted us that night, while she was out with Amy. There were no texts. No calls. Nothing. And the painting went on all night.

## Chapter Twenty-four

Sleep was beginning to come easier. Another week had passed. I managed to sleep through the night for the first time in weeks without waking a dozen times in the middle of the night, missing Leslie like I had, grumbling over the complications and why our heads couldn't seem to work it out, even though our hearts clearly had. There was a desperate hunger in our souls that couldn't be denied. We'd see each other, try not to touch and kiss, and fail.

I blinked against the sunlight filtering in through the blinds, pulled the covers back up over my head, and stretched like a cat, yawning spectacularly, refusing to let my mind go to any dark places. I ordered myself to focus on the physical. For now. And to hell with the confusion.

A full night's sleep had done wonders for my mood that morning. I just felt more alive. Really and truly alive. For the first time in half a dozen weeks—forever, it seemed—I closed my eyes and touched myself, running my right index finger along the length of my cunt, just to see how wet I was. Nearly always, I'm wet, ready, and eager. Only extreme upset or illness will prevent me from waking up wet. It's just the way my body is wired. I'm a morning-sex kind of woman. Ready at first waking. Wanting. Needing.

And damn, I was wet that morning. It was such a relief. And it was much more so than usual, like my body had saved up the wetness over those long, hard weeks and poured it out that morning. Swollen, throbbing, dripping, so bothered I could have fucked without foreplay. I didn't even bother, instead driving two fingers inside as hard and fast as I could. A low groan built in my chest and burst from my lips. I planted my feet and arched my back to better fuck myself awake—start the day off gloriously right.

It took less than a minute. The explosion came hard and ripped through my body, leaving me collapsed and panting in the warm sheets, my legs and hands shaking, my toes curled.

"Fuck," I whispered and laughed, delighted that I'd been able to masturbate again without getting upset, grinning sloppily.

I could have done it again. And again. And probably again. Lying there, giddy with relief, I thought I might, argued with myself for a couple of minutes, and decided to reach for my phone instead. This was something that should be shared. It would be the first time I shared a morning orgasm with Leslie like we used to do. I wondered briefly how she'd take it and immediately dismissed the thought. Too heavy.

"Yawn, stretch," I typed and hit send. Then I waited, fingers crossed that we could be playful instead of melodramatic. I was so tired of tears. It was time for us to have a little fun again. I so loved it when she talked dirty. I loved it even more when she texted those naughty words.

"Mmm... roll over. Put that sweet ass up against my pussy."

Thank the gods! We were indeed going to play that game. I love it when we're on the same page.

"Damn, you feel good. Love the way you hold me, how you grind your hips against my ass."

"Biting your shoulder, baby. Know how you like that. Reaching between your legs, running my fingers over your swollen clit. Fuck, you're already wet. You're always so fucking wet."

"Leslie... I want to feel you inside me."

“Sliding my fingers slowly in and out... Grinding my hips. God, I love fucking you.”

“Oh, baby... Harder. Faster.”

“I want you to come all over my face. Flipping you over, crawling between your quivering thighs, sucking your pussy into my mouth.”

Typing was becoming increasingly more difficult. I could almost feel her tongue on my cunt, could almost feel her inside of me. She could work my body like no other, even from afar. My pulse was hammering in my head. One hand held the phone, trying to type; the other abandoned my nipples to slide lower and dip into my slippery folds.

Every text from her brought with it a memory, visions of the last time we'd had sex or the many times before that. I could see her head between my thighs, her pale blue eyes rolling up to meet mine while my hands wrapped around the back of her head and held on tight.

“Moaning. My breath is ragged. Don't stop, I'm so close...”

My insides were tightening. I shuddered and whimpered. The phone clutched so tightly in my hand the edges were biting into my skin. It buzzed and I jumped.

“Come for me, baby. Scream my name. Explode. Now.”

“Shit. Fuck. I'm gonna come...”

And I came, screaming, with my fingers—her tongue—on my clit, rubbing furiously. Damn, we were being nasty that morning.

“Oh, honey, that was good. Just came really hard. Fucking exploded. For you.”

Rolling over onto my side lazily, I curled up and waited for her response, grinning. My eyelids felt heavy, my body sated and ready for a nap.

And as though she knew, “Go back to sleep and think about my lips around your clit, sucking it down my throat. And my tongue licking the come from your inner lips.”

“I'm going to have beautiful dreams.”

And I dreamt of her body wrapped up in mine, her fingers deep inside, those blue, blue eyes locked on mine, that sexy, smug smile on her lips. In my dreams, we were making love on the beach again like we did in the storm, slowly building speed until it was all desperate, frantic thrusting and grinding.

Two hours later, I yawned and finally got out of bed, still in a good mood. Even though we hadn't had actual, physical, one-on-one sex, I felt well-fucked and extremely happy. It was going to be a damned good day. I just knew it. So long as I focused on the physical, how well we crash together in need, and didn't think about anything else, my good mood would last.

I padded across my duplex and drew a hot bath, slipping into the water with a satisfied groan.

My phone buzzed, indicating another message. A couple of minutes passed. It buzzed again. Opening my eyes in mild irritation—the hot water felt so good—I reached for the damned thing, which sat on the side of the sink next to the tub. Grumbling, I flipped it open to discover another text message.

“Still horny, baby?”

The grumbling stopped. A dirty grin slowly spread to replace the frown.

“Always.”

“Where are you?”

“At home, taking a bath.”

“Fuck.”

I laughed, imagining her imagining me naked in the bath and growing increasingly frustrated because she couldn't exactly touch herself at work. Not unless she was in her office. Maybe if she closed the door. There was a desk that would obscure the view. She could pretend to be on the phone so nobody would come knocking. Better yet, she could be on the phone with me...

My cheeks flushed at the thought and I was hot again. Damn, I needed her in me. For a few seconds, it truly bothered me how easily she could make me want her, how much power I'd given her, how addicted I was to her touch. But I viciously shut the thoughts down. Don't fucking go there. Focus on the physical.

My hands trembled but steadied as I began to text, "In the bath, thinking about you, wondering if you're wet."

What seemed like forever passed with no response. I checked the time I'd sent the last message. Fifteen minutes had ticked by. Twenty minutes. Thirty minutes. The water was getting cold. Maybe she'd been interrupted and had important matters she needed to attend to. A little disappointed, I set the phone aside and began to wash myself.

I'd toweled myself dry when there was a knock at the front door.

"Damn," I muttered, wondering who the hell was interrupting my lazy afternoon. For a few seconds, I stood frozen, torn between racing for my clothes and ignoring whoever was at the door. Another knock, louder and more insistent. I looked down at my nakedness. Giggling under my breath, I tiptoed over to the door and looked through the peephole.

My heart stopped. It was Leslie, looking damned sexy in her faded blue jeans, sunglasses, and white linen shirt.

Standing on my doorstep in the middle of her workday.

And I was naked, wet, my insides tightening at the sight of her.

I ripped the door open, grabbed her shirt, yanked her inside without greeting, and slammed the door shut. Her hands found my breasts and pinched my nipples before our lips met a split second later. She shoved me against the wall and moaned into my mouth, her tongue running the length of my bottom lip before she broke the kiss with a gasp. She peeled the sunglasses from her face and tossed them aside, revealing dilated, heavy-lidded eyes.

"You make me fucking crazy," she groaned, her voice low and confident, rough around the edges with desire. "I've been thinking about this," and she slid a hand between my legs and cupped me, "all damned day. And I'm going to fuck you, then you're going to give me some head."

She thrust two fingers inside before I could answer, and I cried out, surprised, "Fuck, Leslie!"

"Yeah, that's what we're doing," she said, nuzzling my neck. She withdrew and added another finger, slamming back into me. "Oh, God, you're so open..."

"I've wanted this... Needed this..." I panted, my fingers digging into her back. "So...sexy...Leslie."

"Do you wanna come?" she growled into my ear.

"Yes," I hissed. "Please."

She thrust deeper and harder until she found that spot—the one that would make me scream and writhe and thrash for mere moments before I reached the edge. She hit it expertly. And again. And again. I felt the orgasm building. My cunt was tightening inside, making her seem longer and thicker and hotter until I suddenly exploded, screaming her name, clawing at the back of her shirt in abandon.

Leslie didn't slow her pace or withdraw. No, she picked up speed and pounded harder. I came again in seconds. And still she didn't stop. I came again and my knees felt weak. Damn, she always felt so good.

When she finally slowed to a stop, her breath was hot and ragged against my neck, her forehead sweaty against my cheek. "Fuck," she said over and over, trying to calm her breathing.

"Did you come inside me?" I whispered, running my fingers through her short hair.

She chuckled and I could feel the smile against my neck. "Oh, yeah." A pause. "That was really, really good."

I grabbed a fistful of hair and yanked her head back so she could look at me. Her blue eyes swam unfocused for a second or two before she closed them and dove in for another kiss that ended with a nibble along my lower lip and my hands releasing her hair and pushing at her chest.

"What?" she asked, her strong hands finding my nipples again.

For a moment, I couldn't think. She smiled wickedly and pinched hard.

"No," I said and gasped involuntarily as the sensation shot straight to my still-throbbing center. "No," I repeated as she refused to stop.

I grabbed the bottom of her shirt and pulled. She got the hint, stepped back, and ripped it over her head in one smooth move, tossing it aside. She undid her bra and dropped it next to the shirt. I reached for her fly, but she unbuttoned the sexy jeans for me. The sound of the zipper coming down shot straight through me and quickened my breath. She revealed wiry, dark hair, no underwear. My mouth watered in anticipation.

I realized then that there are few things in this world I like more than running my tongue the length of her. She tastes and smells so good. Spicy, rich, a touch of citrus in the aftertaste. If she'd let me, I'd do it for hours.

Leslie placed a hand against the wall on either side of my face, bracing herself. I didn't need encouragement. We hadn't been able to let go like this for a while—just be naughty and fuck without the desperation. I slid down to my knees eagerly and knelt before her, ready to please.

"I love this," I said in a hoarse whisper, inhaling her musky scent. She sucked in a sharp breath when I blew hotly on her hard clit. She moved automatically, spreading her legs wider to accommodate.

I placed my hands on either side of her cunt and stretched the skin upward, exposing her hard pink clit, admiring her hard-on for a second before wrapping my lips around it. I sucked it into my mouth and flicked my tongue. Oh, yes, my Leslie had given me much power, too.

"Oh, fuck," she moaned and ground her pelvis into my face.

I ventured lower, coating my tongue, tasting her, circling the entrance before returning to lick hard across her clit and suck it back into my mouth. Holding it there, I gently bit down, just enough to make her gasp.

"Suck it," she demanded huskily, one hand winding into my hair and holding me firmly in place. I sucked harder and she cried out. "Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me..."

She was as wet as I felt. I penetrated her with two fingers, then three, her clit still in my mouth, working it furiously with my tongue. Her cries became louder and louder, more frantic, urging me on. I fucked her as hard as I could, driving myself into her, loving the muscles clenching around me, feeling how hard she was for me in my mouth.

She was close. Tiny contractions began to build around my fingers. I was waiting for the words, those magic words that would nearly always bring me back to orgasm.

"I'm gonna come," she groaned, her voice high and frantic. "Fuck, I'm gonna come."

It was over in a matter of seconds. She screamed my name, I came again, her cunt muscles clenched hard around my fingers, pulsing, and a shudder ran the length of her body. I thrust a few more times, slowly, drawing out the orgasm, and licked her clit tenderly until she cupped my face with her hands and pulled upward. I pulled out and she gasped.

She wrapped her arms around me and we stood there for several silent minutes, hanging on to each other, the only sounds those of our heavy breathing and a soft chuckle here and there. Finally, she pulled back to look into my eyes.

"Damn," she said simply and grinned, shaking her head.

I smiled back at her, trying not to lose myself in those watery eyes, trying to focus on the feeling of my swollen lips. I could still feel her sliding in and out, and damn, it was good.

"I had to have you," she said huskily, running her hands up and down my back.

"I needed you," I whispered back. "So much."

She glanced at the clock on the wall, sighed, and released me, reaching for her clothes. I'm sure I was still grinning stupidly, in spite of everything or perhaps because of it all. She'd fucked me well.

"I have a meeting..."

"I know. Go. I'll see you later."

"We're not done here," she said as she buttoned her fly and adjusted her shirt. She pulled me in for a deep, slow kiss that drew a moan from her throat and a whimper from me. "I'll see you later tonight."

"Later, yeah." I sighed.

"We fuck well." A pause, during which our eyes met. "Later, we'll make love."

I wrapped my arms around her neck and kissed her hard. It was all I wanted.

She said goodbye and headed back to work. I sat on the floor, nearly unable to believe what had just happened and how damned good it had felt.

Fucking good fucking, as we called it. The thought made me laugh.

And later, she'd said, we'd make love. Yeah, it was going to be an even better day than I'd thought it would be. I sat for a few more minutes, my eyes closed, savoring the lingering feeling of her inside me, smelling her sex on my face, and finally got up in search of my phone. There were a few choice things I wanted to text. Even though she'd just been there. It seemed so important.

My cell sat abandoned on the bathroom floor. The red light was blinking. I flipped it open and read, "You are an amazing lover. So beautiful. I can still feel you."

“We’ll make tonight special.”

“Soft kisses and loving touches. Bringing each other to ecstasy. Intimate conversation by candlelight. Falling asleep and waking hours later to start all over again.”

My throat felt tight and my heart leapt at the words. I couldn’t stop the reaction. She knew how to get to me. She did it so well.

Yeah, I wanted us to be serious. We needed so much to get over the damned hang-ups and heartbreak. If we handled our emotional shit as well as we handled making love, we’d be champs in the relationship department.

But that lazy Monday, I decided not to let the drama of our whirlwind romance spoil the mood. Not again. Screw the baggage. I’d pretend we were perfectly happy. In love. Together the way I wanted, that she was mine and I was hers and there was nobody else.

Gods, we loved each other so much. And all the pretending wasn’t healthy, I knew that, thank you very much. But looking into those blue eyes... Give me a break, okay? Those lovesick eyes of hers don’t lie. And I needed a few really, really good days.

I texted that I could hardly wait for the evening to begin and hit send.

## Chapter Twenty-five

The following month went by quickly. It was a series of days spent alternately with Leslie, then holed up in my living room, pouring my passion onto the canvases. I hadn't allowed Leslie to come back over to my place. She wanted so badly to see my work, but it wasn't time yet. The thought of her seeing it scared me. It was more revealing than any of the stuff I'd painted on the walls.

My art show was going to be like a long, brutally honest love letter written for Leslie, only she didn't know it yet. I'd eventually have to show her. But I just needed a little more time. I needed to fix this arm and that hand, this moon and that ocean wave. Brandon saw and oohed and ahed, made suggestions, watched over my shoulder as I painted, critiquing. He might not be an artist, but I respected his opinion and was grateful for his help.

Speaking of Brandon, he wasn't too happy that I was seeing Leslie again. While he appreciated the raw passion in my art, he was extremely concerned. He pulled skeptical faces when I told him how she'd taken me out for a nice dinner. He frowned when I told him how often she reassured me that she loved me deeply.

"I don't trust it," he said more than once. And I didn't want to hear it. When I got defensive, he'd argue and finally back down with an "I just don't want to see you hurting again. I think you're fooling yourself, but go ahead. It's your life. I know you want us to like each other, but she hurt my best friend, and I don't forget that kind of thing."

And he said that, no matter how many times I told him that it takes two and all that.

But when I was honest with myself, I had to agree—at least in part—that he was right about a few things.

I deserved a lover who wanted me all the way and for every part of my being. It's what my heart needs. Someone who loves me like Leslie but is committed and not on the verge of running all the time.

That's why I'd ended it with Alex. There were so many places she couldn't go with me and vice versa. I'd decided to go after what I wanted with all my heart.

After another argument about Amy, I'd confronted her with those two sentences that had stuck with me and changed my mind. She freaked out. She'd jumped off the couch, where we'd been cozily snuggling until the talk turned too serious for her. "Are you always going to hold my feet to the fire about everything? I'm getting frustrated with having to reassure you all the damned time, feeling like I have to report to you every time I spend time with Amy."

Oh, it pissed me off. I yelled at her, could hardly make my words comprehensible through the outrage and tears of anger that fell. Hell yes, I'll hold anyone accountable for serious stuff like that. I won't hold a grudge over every little thing. I'm not going to repeat every word you ever say back to you. But the big stuff—yeah, it's worth keeping in mind.

We didn't speak for two days after that. The yelling at her made me feel terrible. Hurting her like that always did. I quit asking if she'd fooled around with Amy.

I didn't tell Brandon about it because we made up before I saw him again, and I didn't want to give him more ammunition, even if he was trying to help.

The return of my self-confidence—the steadily building momentum that had reached a very high high when I got the gallery deal—brought with it a newfound sense of self-worth. I deserved to get what I wanted so long as I made the effort. I had big dreams. And I wasn't going to settle for less. My patience had a limit. And that limit was quickly approaching.

Leslie sensed it. That much was obvious. She kept talking about the pressure getting to her and how unbearable it was. How I was pushing her too much and too hard.

And she was still seeing Amy, whom I'd begun to call "your other girlfriend." I felt like her dirty little secret again and hated it.

Every time she saw Amy, she'd grow so distant I could hardly reach her. The last few times had been particularly bad. She'd cried.

More and more frequently, I began to think about giving up, that I'd had too much heartbreak over the last year and that enough was enough. I also kept telling myself I'd give it another week. Just one more week. Let's see how this weekend goes. Let's see how a trip to the fair goes. Let's just see. Trying to be patient. Slowly losing faith.

And then it happened.

I'd been up late three nights running. Painting. Caught up in a wave of creativity that couldn't be stopped or denied. Not even for Leslie.

She'd encouraged me to ride it out—paint till I couldn't paint, get it all out before it drifted away. She was so good at that, supporting me, nudging me, making sure I got the time I needed.

"My bed is so empty without you in it," she'd texted two nights before. It was the first time she'd sent a wrenching text like that in a while. Yes, we'd argued. But the texts had slowed down with the increased time we were spending together again. It made me stop and puzzle over the message. What was wrong?

I almost called her. For that matter, I seriously debated driving over to her house to see if she was okay. But she might think I was pushing again, so I texted instead, "I miss sleeping in the circle of your arms."

She never texted back.

The next day was filled with a very loud silence.

When I finally caved in and called late at night, she was very curt—lots of monosyllabic answers to my questions. Maybe she was just tired. I asked if she was okay and she said she was, then quickly said her goodbyes.

What I didn't know was that while I was holed up in my living room, painting my heart out, she'd ended things with Amy. Two days had gone by and I didn't know it. She'd been masking because she thought I'd be upset with her for being upset about losing Amy again, by her choice that time.

Things hadn't been going anywhere. They agreed it needed to be over like Alex and I'd agreed it needed to be over. They finally had their closure talks. It had died. It was over.

When she told me, while I held her as she cried, hope flashed in my heart for about two shining seconds, then abruptly fizzled out.

I'd thought I wanted her to ditch Amy and be with me. Had texted so. Had yelled so. Many, many times. I'd wanted her to choose me. Had naively fantasized that it would make everything okay between us. But in the moment when it actually happened—gods, I never thought it would, had practically given up—reality slapped me in the face, and it was as though I'd finally woken from a really long and strange dream.

Leslie is my dear, good, wonderful friend. She is the woman I call to celebrate and commiserate with. We'd gone through so much, had held each other up, had tried to heal each other. For all the recent drama over the summer and early fall, she'd been there for me so many times when I cried about Alex and cried about my father.

She was hurting. And she needed me. As a friend. Not as her lover. And I had to be the friend or not be in her life at all. If I couldn't catch her, then I didn't deserve her.

I'd have to suck it up and hide my own sadness and be strong for her.

Just because it was over with Amy didn't mean all of our problems were miraculously fixed. We both still had trust issues where love is concerned. It did not suddenly make me ten years older to erase the age-gap dilemma. We were both still scared of each other. And now she'd be mourning her loss again and would need more time.

More time.

Fuck.

Life is so damned hard sometimes. It can make you feel like you're going mad. Like no single person should have to feel so many things at once, like they should explode with so many emotions tearing them in every which way.

She had her closure and it was killing her. There was nothing to do but hold her. I loved her. How could I not try to help? She needed me, came to me, asked for my comfort. So I gave it as freely as I could, trying not to let her tears sting me. This was her tragedy and very real. She'd pined after that woman for so long and now it was done. She said she had to know. Now she knew. And the truth of it was awful for her.

It was not as hard as you might imagine. Kind of ironic, actually, that in the moment I thought we'd at last have a real chance, I was finally able to separate friend from lover and be strong again like the Jordan everyone had been telling me about for months.

Our hearts and heads are so fucking weird sometimes.

Days spent sending reassuring and comforting texts. Long walks by the river, shared, not alone any longer. Her tears, falling frequent and sobs so heartbreaking. She was real, like the Leslie I'd initially admired for her raw and honest emotions. I wanted so badly to erase her hurt and not for my own benefit. It broke my heart to see her in so much pain.

There was nothing I could do except be there. She wanted me there. She clung to me in the night and we did not make love. My body was mourning the loss of her touch, but it was necessary to refrain from reaching out in that way. If I truly loved her, I had to let her be. Pushing now would be tantamount to taking advantage of her. So I kept my mouth shut and just listened.

We had a few tiffs. I think she was paranoid that I was going to push. She had reason to be like that after all the pushing I'd done. It still hurt, though, when she accused me of such when I was trying so hard to keep the lover in me locked up tight, if only temporarily.

I cried when she finally kissed me after weeks drifted away from us.

When we made love finally, it was truly making love—not just the saying that people use instead of using the words “fucking” or “having sex.”

She moved slowly over me, held my gaze. We lost ourselves in each other's eyes. Moving in and out of me, she told me how much she loved me. Over and over again until my eyes grew wet and I told her the same.

“Let's make a baby,” she whispered, thrusting harder.

“A baby, yes, a baby,” I cried as I reached my peak.

It was a glorious morning. We'd made magic that night. Leslie had to go to work, but I didn't. She let me lay in her bed while she bustled around, getting ready. She handed me her key, told me to let myself out, make myself some breakfast or whatever before I left if I wanted. She asked for me to come back over before she got home, that she wanted to come home to me. Then she kissed me sweetly and was gone.

Daydreams of our lovemaking kept me lounging in bed for a while before I finally stretched, yawned, and dragged my lazy butt into the shower.

I wandered around her house naked, checking my e-mail on her computer, making a breakfast of bacon and eggs in her kitchen. I'd been over so often lately it almost felt more like home than my duplex did.

Leslie is a very clean person. But given enough emotional turmoil, even the cleanest person will let things slide a little. Her house wasn't a wreck, but it wasn't exactly tip-top, either. I decided that one of the ways I could help out—other than listening and holding her—was to pick up a little.

I made the bed. Then I swept and mopped the floor. I picked up some old newspapers and put them in the recycling bin. Small things. I thought I might do some of her laundry as it was taking over the laundry room. I did a load of whites. I surfed more on the Internet. I switched the laundry and went to start another load, smiling as I realized some of our clothes were mixed together in there.

And that's when I found them.

Them, as in more than one.

Tiny, skimpy thongs that were too small for me and definitely too small for Leslie, who seldom wore underwear and never thongs.

They were just about the right size for Amy.

Amy, with whom Leslie said she wasn't sleeping.

And it would be one thing if it had been just one thing. I might have chalked it up to a last goodbye fuck. But there were three.

They didn't go on a trip. Those things could not have "accidentally" ended up in Leslie's suitcase. There was no other explanation that I could think of that they would be there in that house.

I'd quit asking and hinting at needing reassurance that nothing was going on. I'd trusted her. I'd believed her. I'd slept with her and she'd been sleeping with Amy.

Ewww.

Seriously, fucking ewww. I screamed my frustration and shoved the damned, disgusting things back into the basket. I covered it with other clothes. I showered, scrubbing myself furiously, and got the hell out of there.

"You just lost me, Leslie," I muttered as I stormed out to my car and slammed the door, peeling away from her house.

I knew a guy who knew a guy. And I got myself some.

I sat down by the river and smoked pot for the first time in ages. I thought the beast in my chest was dead. Obviously, it was still alive, roaring, screaming, driving me mad. My whole body felt numb. And finally, beautifully, so did my heart and brain the more stoned I got. The cold air felt good on my nose and cheeks. My legs were weightless, my body one with the earth on which I was sitting. The river gurgled to itself as it passed me by. The only thing missing was fire.

And the fire, I realized, muttering to myself, was in my soul.

Now I'm not advocating doing drugs to deal with your problems. What I did was the weakling's way to cope. I know that.

But in a strange sort of way, it did help—only in that it calmed me down much quicker than I'd ever have been able to otherwise. The calm, more than anything, is what finally allowed the logic to take over after so many months of emotions driving my actions.

That mental picture of Amy and Leslie together solidified. It was no longer an imaginary fear. It had become a reality. It felt like betrayal. We might not have been serious, but the same way our initial "breaking it off" had felt like a true breakup of a relationship, so too did this feel like she'd cheated on me. And it hurt like hell. But in that calm state, I was able to take those pieces of bitterness and anger and put them aside, separate them to sort things out, to decide what to do now that I knew my paranoia had been justified.

Sometimes it really sucks when your gut is right, and your gut was telling you something bad was going to happen, then it does.

I had a choice to make. It was an important choice. One of the biggest choices I would have to make that year. And there were only two paths down which I could go with that one.

I thought of Leslie's beautiful eyes and strong, tender arms. I thought of the love I saw the night before while she said, "Let's make a baby."

There would be no tears that afternoon while I made my choice.

Hours passed slowly, lived in memories. I was not overanalyzing. I was agonizing.

If I confronted her, she'd probably say that A) I was going through her things, which wasn't really true. I'd been trying to help, but it wouldn't look that way under the circumstances, and B) say that we weren't together and likely something along the lines of "What the hell did you expect?" That last bit almost made me angry.

But the river was my anchor. My center. I was in my calm place. My safe space.

I could not confront her, especially not when she was vulnerable. It would be tantamount to kicking a woman while she was down. And I couldn't wait till later to confront her because I'd have to pretend everything was okay, letting my anger and bitterness stew until it exploded. I would not do that to myself. It would make me more crazy than I already was. And she'd know anyway.

I made the choice to forgive her. Say what you want about that.

It was hard as hell. The thing about forgiveness is that you can't forgive someone halfway. You have to let it go. All the way. It's a strength of will and heart kind of thing. Anything else is not truly forgiving.

So I saw what I saw. And it tore at my insides and made me feel sick. Her betrayal was brutal, yes. But it was also over between them for good. So she said and I had to believe it or stop loving her. “Have faith,” she’d told me so many times. My trust was shattered to bits, and if I were to forgive, I’d better start picking up the pieces and putting them back together. And fast. She wanted me there when she got home.

It came down to this: Technically, she didn’t cheat on me because we weren’t officially together, no matter how together I’d felt with her in the past. So was I going to let her indiscretion destroy any chance we might have? Was the jealous beast in my chest more powerful than my love? That strong, magical love that was supposed to cross the great divide between us and conquer all in the end.

No, the love was stronger than the jealousy.

As I had laid my anger and my regret to rest at the river, I laid to rest my jealousy that day and banned myself from ever again allowing mental images or feeling angry.

Like I said, you have to forgive all the way or not at all.

Amy had her shot.

Now it was my turn.

When—no longer if—we got together for real, I’d just make it as clear as I damned well could that I would not tolerate fucking around. Ever. She already had her fuckup and would not get another. Only I might phrase it a little better than that. I’m a one-woman woman. I don’t want other women in my bed.

I just wanted to be Leslie’s one and only and have her be my one and only without worrying. The worrying will kill you and your relationship. So I let it drift away like the fallen autumn leaves that the river carried south.

My choice did not change when I sobered up. I was quiet that night and didn’t push Leslie at all. She had no idea how close she’d come to losing me.

Let her heal, I thought, repeated it again and again in my head. Then please choose me. She’d be as lucky as I.

## Chapter Twenty-six

I'd like to skip ahead and say we had our happily ever after ending. Nothing would make me happier. But the story's still going on and who knows where we'll end up. I'm trying to rein myself back in, think in terms of months, not years.

I still can't get the image of me pregnant and Leslie caressing my full belly out of my head, though. That one sticks. That and the fantasy of a ceremony on the beach. I do not allow myself to go there often. When it pops up, I grab hold of the most recent lovemaking we'd had and focus on that instead, allowing it to warm my body and fill my senses with the feel of her weight on top of me, the smell of her, the sensation of her lips on mine, of her fingers sliding in and out of me. I think about the way she holds me at night, her warm breath on my back, how safe it feels. It helps. Usually.

We make plans in terms of months ahead now, not days or weeks. That gives me some hope. She tells me she loves me all the time. Deeply. And to be patient and have faith.

That spring, I'd been so angry with people for not understanding that I was on my own schedule for getting over the woman I thought I'd spend the rest of my life with. My dear Alex, who would never be mine again, how I'd agonized and been torn apart by it, even though I didn't regret my choice.

It wasn't fair for me to expect understanding from others, to begrudge them their lack of getting me and my pain, then turn around and demand that Leslie hurry up with the healing process. It was not fair at all. The hypocrisy of it finally slowed me down. I'd give her time. Not forever, but much longer than I'd thought I could stand.

It might even be worth it in the end.

We'd gone to a bar with Brandon, who reluctantly agreed to behave and not attack her when she showed up. She met us up there and he was civil, even warmed up after a while. He bought her a beer and got me a soda. I still wasn't drinking, had decided that I wouldn't until my birthday, which was coming up quickly.

Brandon grudgingly admitted, when Leslie was in the restroom, that he could see the adoration in her eyes. He told me later that she'd told him fiercely how much she loved me and that she wasn't really an asshole when it was my turn to go. When it was Brandon's turn, she said, "He's a good friend. He cares about you very much. I'm glad you have good people in your life."

"Me too," I'd said, looking her in the eyes.

She is a good woman. She's just emotionally a bit messed up, kind of like myself.

We continued to make love. It was no longer just a coming together in a need to heal and comfort. It was making love. Soul-binding. Earth-shaking. Toe-curling passion. I truly believe that if we don't make it, I'll never find another who could match her in that department. I'm spoiled for life.

Mom and I went to Lake Grapevine not too long after my soul-searching river episode. I told her everything, every detail, not even skipping the fact that I'd smoked pot. Of course, Mom is not your typical mom and the news that I'd gotten high wasn't exactly the end of the world. She said she didn't think she could have made the choice I did, but she could kind of understand it and would stand behind my decision.

"If this goes on much longer, you know you have to bring her around. That's not an option. I want to meet this woman who has captured your heart like this." She paused while we sat on the cold sandstone and shivered against the icy wind and watched the sailboats. "You know, if you ever get serious, it's going to take a while for me to warm up to her. The

most I can promise is I'll try. I'll give her a chance. But she's not going to have it easy. Not after all the stuff you told me."

"Don't make me regret being open with you, please."

"I won't. But I've a right to be worried."

She did, so I dropped it.

We waited for the sun to set. When it did, it was a full moon night, we took off our shoes and stepped barefoot into the icy water, only to our ankles because that's all we could take. We were with the goddess then, together, because I learned—after so many years of not knowing much about my mother and being a daddy's girl—that we had something in common. The water called to her, too.

And we stood in the wintry water and talked to Dad, who only ever answered in my dreams. But it was good for Mom and me to do this. The water was healing us.

Alex called more frequently. Our weekly phone conversations became twice weekly. The more we talked, the more comfortable it became. That break had been good and bad—good, because we needed to get away to get over it; bad, because we were growing so much and in different directions that it was hard to keep up and made things incredibly awkward until we kept in better touch.

I think she was seeing someone. I heard some stuff through the grapevine, though I couldn't tell you anything about this mysterious somebody. I didn't press her for details, nor did she press me. Neither of us was really ready to tell the other anything about any potential or ongoing relationships. It was still too soon. And Leslie was still worried about telling her so I didn't. The time would come someday. Hopefully soon, I hated hiding things from the people I care about.

Kas was getting anxious about the show. She made a special trip to my duplex to reassure herself that I was indeed making the promised thirty pieces. Her jaw dropped when she saw some of them. At first I thought she was shocked by the sexier pieces. But she began to chatter excitedly and went on for hours and hours. Yes, she said, it was going to be a good show. I still hadn't let Leslie see it yet and two others now had. It was time.

She stared and stared. I'd arranged them all over the room, was holding my breath, waiting for her verdict, knitting and un-knitting my fingers. The longer the silence stretched, the more scared I got.

"Oh, my God," she finally whispered. "It's us."

She turned to look at me, and I slowly nodded.

"But..." She stopped and shook her head. "I mean, it's a little different. It's not necessarily obvious... Damn, there's so much honesty in these. That one," she pointed, "just about breaks my heart to look at it. You look so sad and alone, by the river."

"Sad and torn."

"Torn how?"

"You don't want me to push, so I'm not ready to talk about it."

"Oh." She fell silent again.

"It's good. It's really good." She paused. "I'm glad you're doing this. Tell me everything about these paintings. I want to know what you were thinking..."

It was instant and pure relief, reminiscent of the first time she'd stepped foot in my duplex all those months earlier. A weight lifted off my shoulders. She was touched, saddened, puzzled, pensive.

She stayed in that room for a good hour, just looking, seeing us through my eyes.

I realize that Dad's loss is going to hurt me for the rest of my life. And yes, it will make other things harder to bear. That would never change. I am that rippling water in the calm pool after you toss a stone in. Eventually, my soul will calm. I have already let go of my bitter anger. That's progress. I am looking forward to the day I can simply remember him and smile, enjoy those precious memories without wanting to cry.

Life is full of surprising twists in the stories and tough choices. The best choice I ever made was to open my eyes to its beauty and let go. It's scary. It hurts. But it's fuller and richer in color than when you walk around with thick walls, scared to have those leaps of faith. Every minute is precious, and wondrous, and that year, I finally found the wonder and let it shine.

## Epilogue

The walls were too white, too simple to tolerate. They glared bright in the full sunlight, glowed, mocked me as I stood there, fantasizing about colors and paintbrushes and what mural I'd cover all that white with. It said, "You can dream but don't touch."

Leslie put her arms around my waist, pressing her body against my back. She rested her chin on my shoulder and murmured, "Dreaming of painting that wall? You've been staring at it for a while now."

I just nodded.

This was Leslie's sanctuary, her house. Not the one I'd come to know so well. A new one, her own, one she'd bought. It was a big step. It was moving forward. Progress.

She'd been much more lighthearted lately, smiling a lot, like she had at the beach in August. The light was back in her eyes. She was excited about a great many things, was rediscovering herself as I'd been doing all year.

She caressed my stomach. No, I wasn't pregnant. That was the fantasy. But the caress was so like that of my dreams... I let my head loll back and she nibbled my ear.

"I love you," she whispered. "I really, truly love you."

"I love you, too. So much."

"It still scares me."

"I know."

"You're not scared?"

"I am. But I've made my choice."

She said nothing.

The sun was setting and a shaft of orange-golden light suddenly pierced an upper window and splayed a pattern of brightly colored shapes on that big, white wall. We turned our heads to search for the source at the exact same moment, finding the small window, and I felt her jaw drop.

"Did you know that was there?"

"No, I didn't. I never noticed it. Not even when we went through the house, picking it apart. I can't believe I missed that."

We looked away and found the image on the wall. Beautiful greens and yellows and browns and blood reds. An impressionistic picture of the tree of life, beautifully crafted by obviously loving hands.

"It's beautiful," I couldn't help but whisper. "I'll never paint this wall."

Leslie chuckled, and I realized what I'd said. Of course I wouldn't. It wasn't "our" house. We were still figuring things out. I opened my mouth to say something, but she beat me to it.

"Life can grow here," she said tenderly, her hand still on my stomach, caressing lightly. She left it at that, then laughed. "And no, you'll never paint that wall. I'm going to look forward to seeing that every sunset from now on."

We stood there until the light faded and darkness fell, the image finally evaporating with the dimming dusk. And then we made love in her new house for the first time.

## **About the author**

Kimberly LaFontaine can typically be found with her laptop down by the Trinity River in Fort Worth, hashing out the plot for her next book. Writing is her passion, her therapy, her hobby, and her favorite activity.

She was born in Mobile, Ala., in 1979. She spent her childhood in Germany, where she discovered her love for writing fiction. She has grown to love Texas and the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, though she makes frequent trips back to Europe.

Visit her Web site at [www.geocities.com/fiction\\_escape](http://www.geocities.com/fiction_escape) or contact her at [kimberlylafontaine@yahoo.com](mailto:kimberlylafontaine@yahoo.com).