

REVENGE. IT'S A DISH

BEST SERVED COLD



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BEST SERVED COLD

Emma Hart

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BEST SERVED COLD

Emma Hart

CHAPTER ONE – RAELYNN

Chase Aaron was a douchebag of the highest degree.

If I sat here behind the counter of my failing ice cream store and told you all the reasons why I knew that to be true, you'd be here all day. Not that being stuck in an ice cream store all day was a bad thing, but I digress.

No, he was a douchebag because he was the reason my business was failing. The no-good asshole had taken all my plans, all my dreams and my ideas, and he'd opened his very own ice cream store.

Right. Next. Door.

Why had I told him all my plans, you ask? Well, the first answer was simple: I, Raelynn Fortune, was an idiot.

The second answer was, at the time I told him, he was my boyfriend. He'd been my boyfriend for two years, and I was excited. I'd planned the overhaul to my family store, the one we'd run for generations, and I couldn't wait.

Best Served Cold had finally been mine.

And, one month after I'd broken up with Chase, he'd handed me a sundae full of revenge on a silver platter when he rented the space next to mine and opened his own damn store.

The Frozen Spoon was everything Best Served Cold was not.

It was fresh and modern. It was bright and airy, and the modern diner-style set-up was eye-catching for everyone who walked past. The neon sign literally screamed at you to come and get the best ice cream in Key West.

Of course, I'd never stepped foot inside the traitor's store. You'd catch me swimming naked with sharks before I ever walked into the place that was full of my ideas.

In contrast, Best Served Cold was tired. Antique, my grandparents called it. A classic.

I preferred to call it old and dated, but whatever.

Put simply, it wasn't as bright as it used to be. The sign at the front was at least thirty-five years old—a decade older than *I* was. The writing was chipped and broken, and the bulbs that lit it up in the darkness, well. Only one

of those suckers worked.

Hence my plans to liven the place up.

Plans that would have been in place if it weren't for Chase.

I hated him.

Hate was a strong word, and not one I used lightly. It was reserved almost entirely for my ex-boyfriend—and brussels sprouts. That was how serious my feelings toward him were.

I hated him. More than I'd ever hated anyone or anything.

I blew out a long breath and slumped against the counter. A glance at the clock told me to give up. Nobody had been in here since one-thirty, and even then, it was the older generations in town who refused to change who they went to for their sweet treats.

The bell above the door dinged. Unfortunately for me, it wasn't a customer. Fortunately, it was my best friend, complete with her four-year-old niece.

"Hey," Sophie said, shutting the door behind her. "I was going to ask if you were free, but..."

I rolled my eyes. "You're so funny."

Her niece, Jessica, bounded up to the counter. She had to stand on tiptoes to see over it, but that didn't stop her from leaning against it, gripping it with her little hands. Sparkly pink nail polish adorned her tiny fingernails, and on her head, she wore a unicorn headband.

I see that obsession was still going strong.

"Hiya, Rae!" she said brightly. "Can I had an ice cream, peas?"

I leaned forward on my forearms, so I was down to her level. "I think I can do that for you. What would you like today? A cone? A little sundae?"

"Little sundae," she replied, making a circle with her hands. "Can you make a unicorn one?"

I glanced at Sophie, but she shrugged.

"A unicorn one, huh? How would I do that?"

"I dunno," she whispered. "Mix the colors?"

I pursed my lips. "Why don't we take a look at the ice creams and you tell me how to make it?"

She nodded and bounced over to the ice cream display case. It was full of tubs of different flavor ice creams, everything from mango to blueberry to cookies and cream. Most of them were untouched since the old people in town tended to shun anything more exotic than chocolate.

“I fink strawberry, booberry, and...” She tapped her finger against her nose. “And backberry.”

“Blackberry?”

“Uh-huh. Pink, purple, and boo. That’s unicorn colors.”

I guessed it was. “All righty then.” I turned and grabbed a plastic pink sundae dish that I kept especially for kids. “One scoop of each?” I asked Sophie.

She shrugged again, a small smirk on her lips. “I only have her ‘til five. You give her ten if you want.”

“Three it is,” I said before Jess got any ideas.

I rinsed the scoop between each flavor, then added her regular toppings. Strawberry sauce, complete with multi-colored sprinkles and pink stars.

“There you go,” I said, setting it on the table with a shiny silver spoon.

“Fank you!” Jess scrambled up onto the chair and got stuck right in.

“That’s cute,” Sophie said, perching on one of the old leather stools at the bar that nobody ever used.

Because nobody ever came in here, and if they did, they’d need a hip replacement by the time they left if they used those stools.

Yeah. That was where my business was at. I’d probably make more money renting it out as a damn bingo hall.

Which was very, very sad.

“You know what you need to do?” Sophie asked, jumping up and grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge behind the counter.

“Start making you pay?”

She rolled her eyes. “You need to redecorate it. You were going to do it before that buttmunch moved in next door.”

“He stole my idea, remember?” The only thing more bitter than my tone was a basket full of limes, and even then, only just.

“I know that, Rae. But it’s been two years. You haven’t spoken to him, and the only ice cream you serve is to the old people who haven’t tried a new

flavor in twenty years.”

I hated that she was right.

“We live in Key West. If you can’t make an ice cream store work here, you’re a special kind of stupid.”

“If Chase hadn’t—”

“Stop blaming him for all your problems. You know as well as I do that you haven’t done as much as you should.” She folded her arms across her chest and pinned me with her dark blue eyes. “Raelynn Fortune, you don’t need to be better than Chase. You just need to be competition. You’re better than him anyway, but your store and marketing freaking sucks.”

“Wow. Hit me where it hurts.”

“It only hurts if you’re in denial.”

I sighed and leaned back over the counter. “I’m not in denial. I know what I need to do, but he took my perfect shop from me, Soph. My dream store is right next door.”

“I’m trying to be sympathetic here—”

“No, you’re not.”

“But it’s really hard when the answer is right in front of you, but you’re too busy feeling sorry for yourself to see it.”

I scowled. “Why are we still friends?”

She shrugged. “Every brunette needs a blonde, so you got stuck with me.”

“I want a refund,” I muttered. “What do I need to do, then, oh great one?”

“Get a new dream store.”

“Am I supposed to conjure that out of nowhere?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Have you heard of this thing called the Internet? It’s really great. There are even places you can see other stores to get inspiration from!”

I was going to kill her snarky ass one day.

“Funny,” I drawled. “So you recommend I drag my butt to Pinterest and come up with a new store.”

She nodded. “You have the loan from the bank you paid off. It’s been

sitting there for two years. Use it.”

“Auntie Sophie? I’m done,” Jessica said, licking her fingers.

“Okay, Jessie. I’m coming.” Soph looked back at me and rapped her knuckles against the counter. “Think about it, Rae. You have nothing to lose.”

I said goodbye to Jessie and waved my best friend out. The chime above the door dinged, but as soon as the door shut, the echo of it made the store seem emptier than ever.

Sophie was right. Two years ago, before I’d broken up with Chase because of my own reluctance to settle down, I’d gotten a loan from the bank to redo the store. Then we broke up, and he took those ideas for his own.

Ten thousand dollars had been sitting in my bank account since, all fully mine since I’d long paid off the loan and the interest.

I’d spent so long being bitter over what Chase had done to me that I’d lost sight of my business. Best Served Cold desperately needed a revamp, and like Soph had said, I had nothing to lose.

If I didn’t change it, I’d have to sell the store anyway.

I grabbed my keys and my purse and headed for the door. As soon as I stepped outside, the noise from The Frozen Spoon grated on me. I flicked the sign on my door to “Back in ten minutes” and shot the store next door a dirty look, imagining it going all the way back to my ex-boyfriend.

He’d had his revenge—and now I’d get mine.

But first, coffee.

Grandma leaned against the kitchen counter and tapped one blood-red nail against her lips. “What are you going to do?”

I shrugged, typing the address for Pinterest into the web bar on my laptop. “I don’t know. I still want to do what I originally did, but I can’t be even close to similar to The Frozen Spoon.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” she said. “I never thought those plans were very *you* anyway.”

“You didn’t?”

“No, sugar. Too bright and garish. They fit Chase perfectly because he’s

an extrovert. You're not. Not really."

"What do you mean?"

She pulled out a chair and sat next to me. "Think of it like this. Red is my color, yes?"

I nodded. Red nails, red lips, red shoes—red was Grandma.

"When I think of your grandfather, I think of yellow and beige because he's always covered in sawdust."

That was true. And let me tell you—sawdust got everywhere.

"When I think of you, I think of pastel colors. Soft pinks and purples and greens."

I frowned. "You do?"

"Don't ask me why. Baby blues, peaches, lemon yellows." She reached out and tucked some of my hair behind my ear. "When we took over Best Served Cold, we made it our own. Something that reflected who we were as people. I think you need to do the same."

"That's different," I said quietly. "You didn't have anyone to compete with back then. Now, I do, and he's right next door."

"Doesn't matter. Doesn't mean you can't make the store fit you, sugar. If you're worried about him, you need to come up with something that makes you unique." She smiled. "Something that sends you viral on that latergram or whatever it's called."

I choked back a laugh. "Instagram."

"That one." She patted my shoulder and stood up to check dinner. "Marketing one-oh-one, sugar. Give them a reason to want to come to your store. Not just because they want ice cream, but because they want something specific."

I rested my elbow on the table and my chin in my hand. "You mean how like Dad used to do those epic chocolate sundaes? The really huge ones he did for the eating competitions?"

"Exactly like that. People went to the store just to try to conquer that sundae. Few ever did."

"That's because it weighed like one hundred pounds and was so sickly you wanted to vomit halfway through."

"Slightly an exaggeration." Grandma tossed a smile over her shoulder as she opened the oven door to check the lasagna. "But that's what you need."

A hook to pull them in.”

That made sense. But in theory, it’d be a lot harder to pull off. I could resurrect the eating challenge my dad had started, but I wanted it to be unique. It had to fit me and what I was trying to do.

Owning a business was hard.

Nobody ever taught you that in school.

I began my search on Pinterest. The more I looked, the more inspired I became. I created a new board and saved all my favorite ideas to it, but it wasn’t until I came across ice cream lights that attached to the wall that my stomach fluttered with excitement.

I clicked the accompanying link. They were adorable—in shades of peach and light green and cream, colors Grandma said made her think of me. They were a little pricey, but it wasn’t like I needed to rip out the floor or buy new appliances.

“I like those,” Grandpa said from behind me. “Are you finally renovating the store to make it more Raelynn?”

“I think so. I’m looking for ideas. They’re quite expensive, but I think they’re cute.” I tilted my head to the side.

“Buy ‘em,” he grunted. “You’ll regret it if you don’t.”

My finger hovered over the trackpad for a second before I hit “Add to basket.”

Grandma peered over. “Cute.” Then she looked at Grandpa. “Samuel, you need to clean up before dinner.”

He was covered head to toe in sawdust. “I’m not done yet.”

“But your dinner almost is,” she said. “And how can you not be done with that table? It’s been weeks.”

“I finished that two weeks ago,” he answered. “Get off my back, woman.”

Grandma swatted at him with her towel and smiled affectionately. “Get out of here.”

Grandpa winked at me.

“Hey, Grandpa? Before you go?”

“What’s up, buttercup?”

I clicked back onto Pinterest and brought up tables that looked like ice

cream cones. “How hard would these be to make?”

Squinting, he leaned down and pursed his lips. “I don’t see ‘em being that hard or taking that long to make. Why? Do you want ‘em?”

“I think so,” I said slowly. “I’d pay you. And I can paint them!”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort.” He snorted. “Pay me my ass, girl. Buy the supplies, and I’ll make the tables for you. How many d’ya want?”

“Six?” I winced.

He nodded. “I’ll find the materials. You buy ‘em. I’ll make ‘em. Done.”

“Wonderful,” Grandma said, interrupting us. “Samuel, clean yourself up before I send you to eat in the garage.”

“Better eatin’ in there than being moaned at out here.” He shot me another wink then trundled off to the stairs.

I had no idea how those two hadn’t ever killed each other.

Even if it was kind of adorable.

CHAPTER TWO – RAELYNN

I laid the piece of paper out on the floor of Best Served Cold and uncapped the thick marker I'd swiped from Grandpa's desk.

CLOSED FOR RENOVATIONS.

Big, bold and black, it would explain why I'd be shut for the next two weeks. I didn't need all the tables, just a couple. The little ones I had known would be perfect with a lick of paint. In fact, the mix would probably be nice.

After dinner last night, I'd spent the evening emptying my bank account purchasing all manner of things. I'd never spent three thousand dollars so quickly in my life. New chairs, new lights, new fixtures, new storage jars, and display boards. I'd even ordered a huge new display board for behind the counter for the menu. I planned to send it to the sign shop in town for them to finish up.

I held the sign against the window with my elbow while I fumbled with the roll of tape. Of course I couldn't find the end—that was how it always worked, wasn't it? Damn tape. I hated tape. Couldn't I just find something to tack it there with?

Ugh.

I leaned my ass against the sign so I had both hands completely free to wrangle the tape.

The door to the store opened, the damn chime clanging.

"Oh, I'm sorry, we're—" My words died on my tongue when I looked at the man standing there.

Chase Aarons, with his stupidly thick dark brown hair and bright blue-green eyes. With his stupid stubble over his chiseled jaw and his stupid white t-shirt that showed off his tanned muscles.

"Need a hand?" he asked, nodding toward the poster with a twinkle in his eye.

Not from you, I wanted to say.

I said nothing. Just stared at him.

"What? You can't even accept my help for the five seconds it would take to tape that sign on the window?"

No.

No, I couldn't.

I went back to finding the edge of the tape. After a few seconds, I found it. The cracking of the tape as I peeled it back filled the horrible, tense silence. I turned to hold the poster in place, but as I did, it slipped out in a second and landed just in front of Chase.

He picked it up, then came over and held it against the window for me. The scent of his cologne was deep and earthy, and my stomach panged at the familiar scent.

"You can tape it. I'm not going to drop it just to piss you off." Laughter tinged his tone, and I pursed my lips.

I ripped the tape off with my teeth and stuck the poster against the window as quickly as I could. This time, I folded the edge of the tape so it wouldn't take me half an hour to find the end the next freaking time.

"Renovations, huh? Are you finally bringing this place into the twenty-first century?"

I wasn't going to bite. I hadn't intentionally said a word to the man for six months, and except for the "thank you" I knew I had to offer up on his way out, I wasn't going to start today.

Chase twisted his lips to the side. "Still giving me the silent treatment, huh?"

I assumed that was obvious, but he had always liked to state it.

I folded my arms and stared at him.

He was done.

He could go now.

He sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "One day, you'll talk to me again."

That wasn't likely. Not that I told him that.

A piece of his hair stuck up where he'd messed it up, and I almost reached out to smooth it back down. I knew that piece of hair well—it'd stuck up every time I'd run my fingers through his hair when we'd been together.

Apparently, old habits really did die hard, even when you hated the person they were associated with.

Ugh.

“All right. I know a lost cause when I see one.” He shrugged one of his wide shoulders and made for the door.

“Thank you,” I said, trying not to sound like it was forced. “For the help.”

He turned back to me and reached out, chucking me under the chin. “See? That wasn’t so hard, was it, Rae?”

I glared at him.

Laughing, he winked and pulled the door open. “I’ll see you.”

Not if I could help it.

He pulled the door shut with a click after him, and I rushed over to turn the key in the lock. I wasn’t going to have any more unexpected visitors stop by, thank you very much.

Door locked, I tugged on the blinds and pulled them all down so nobody could see in. The beige blinds showed their age, and I grabbed the notepad I had on the counter and scribbled ‘new blind’ down on my list of things to buy.

Unfortunately, for me, gussying up the store was only one half of the battle. I now had some kind of a plan for that—new paint on the walls, the ice cream lights, the cone tables, stools made out of macarons stacked on one another—but I had nothing for the point Grandma had made.

Make them want to come.

Customers needed a reason to come to me and not The Frozen Spoon. Sure, when word got out about the renovation, nosy regulars and interested tourists would keep me in business for a couple of weeks, but when the shiny new toy got a little older, I’d be struggling again.

I sunk onto the nearest stool and looked out at the store. I could almost visualize how it’d look in two weeks. Multi-color pastel stripes on the wall behind the counter. Ice cream cone lights on the walls. New tables, fresh paint, new storage—but I couldn’t see the It-Factor.

There wasn’t one.

I sank my fingers into my loosely curled hair and slumped forward. I needed to get the It-Factor. I needed to find my uniqueness that would turn this store around. I had to believe it existed and that there was something I could do to change it.

Ice cream had been my whole life. My earliest memories were of helping my grandparents and my parents in this building. I could make ice

cream before I could tie my shoelaces on my own. It was all second nature to me.

I didn't know how to do anything else.

I blew out a long breath and sat up straight. Sitting here moping wasn't going to get me anywhere. I had a to-do list as long as my arm, and I needed to make a start on it before time caught up with me.

I couldn't afford to shut the store longer than two weeks. It really wasn't that long in terms of time, but financially, it was almost too long. I only justified it by knowing the loan was there for me to dip into if I needed it.

And, let's face it. I wasn't exactly breaking any records with my profit margin now, was I? Assuming I even had one, and I expected my accountant to call me any day informing me I didn't.

I jumped off the stool and walked through to the back. The kitchen that had once been my solace was now a place of fond memories and sadness. I couldn't remember the last time I actually enjoyed pulling ingredients together to make ice cream. It'd been so long, and I'd almost reached the point of buying it in just so I didn't have to wake up early to slave back here for no reason.

I threw out more than I sold. All my friends were very well kept in ice cream, as were my grandparents.

And me.

Hips don't lie.

At least mine didn't.

I emptied the dishwasher, walking back and forth as I put the scoops and dishes back where they belonged. There were only a handful of things to be washed from yesterday, so I filled the sink with hot water instead of running the dishwasher.

My arms were elbow-deep in suds when I picked up the plastic bowl I'd used when Soph and Jessie had come in yesterday. Smears of blue and pink and purple decorated the sides of the pink bowl, and remnants of sprinkles were stuck to the dried-on ice cream.

Unicorn ice cream.

Jessie's request screamed at me.

Unicorn ice cream. That's what she'd wanted. Something girly and pretty and fantastical.

My grip on the bowl slipped, and it dropped into the water with a splash that sent bubbles over both the wall and me.

I didn't care.

A goddamn four-year-old had just given me the biggest inspiration of my life.

What if my specialty was unicorn ice cream? Colors and glitter and magic all in cones and sundaes and bowls?

Was it possible? Was that what I needed to do to save the family business?

I tossed off the rubber gloves I'd put on to protect my nails. They splashed as they hit the water, but I still didn't care. I could clean up the mess anytime I wanted.

That was not right now.

I ran to my phone on the counter and opened my Pinterest app. I typed the term into the search bar, and a shiver ran over me when hundreds of results popped up. And not an, 'Oh, shit, someone just walked over my grave' kinda shiver.

It was an, 'Oh, shit, this is a real thing, and I can do it' kinda shiver.

Hoads of images of multi-colored ice cream and decorated cones popped up. Blues, purples, and pinks all mixed together in a galaxy-looking mix. There were several different versions of the ice cream, and my heart beat a little faster in anticipation of every single scoop being totally different.

Mixed in were images of cones dipped in chocolate then in sprinkles. Ice cream sundaes had cones sitting on top as a unicorn horn. One ice cream image showed pinks and greens and yellows mixed together with tiny candy stars. Sundae glasses that were dipped in white icing and then in hundreds and thousands of sprinkles.

There was even ice cream nachos. A plate full of wafers topped with ice cream and sauces and toppings.

That was the perfect first date or post-shopping treat.

I put my phone down and stared at the coffee machine behind the counter. The milkshake maker was right next to it, and the chrome finish of both had the overhead lights glinting back at me.

That was it.

Unicorn ice cream.

I didn't know of any place nearby that did it. It would draw people here to see it, and as Grandma said, it had the potential to get online attention.

I dragged my hand down my face.

Oh, my God.

I had it.

I knew what I needed to do.

I tossed my phone to the side and ran into the kitchen. A large metal pan was empty on the shelf, so after I rinsed it, I pulled out all the ingredients I needed to make ice cream.

The colors I had weren't the brightest like the photos seemed to indicate, but that didn't matter. This was only a test. I needed to see how well I could make this work.

After making the initial mixture, I split it into three different bowls and added the food colorings. Pink, purple, and blue. They each mixed into the white mixture, and when it was done, I took my time adding each spoonful into the pan.

I would mix everything in a minute. It didn't need to be perfect.

Ten minutes passed until I'd gotten the whole mixture into the pan, complete with multi-color sprinkles. It looked like a horrid mess of color, but that only got worse when I grabbed a metal skewer. Over and over, I made a figure of eight in the mixture, drawing it all into a marble-looking pattern until the colors all mixed together except around the very edges.

With a deep breath, I put the pan in the walk-in freezer.

And I hoped like hell it'd worked.

I didn't want to think about what would happen if it didn't.

CHAPTER THREE – CHASE

She was insufferable.

I knew that, though. She always fucking had been. Headstrong and stubborn, Raelynn Fortune was a force of nature. In fact, I'd say she was an unnatural force. She was a hurricane of unstoppable proportions, which meant the fact that she'd spent two years losing business to me without screaming at me was confusing..

Rae had a temper. She always had. She was a snap-your-fingers-and-scream girl. She was unable to hold anything back.

Yet I'd been here two years, and she couldn't even talk to me.

She'd pretty much choked on her fucking thank you this morning.

Jesus, she had no idea. No matter what the rumor mill said, I hadn't stolen her ideas. I'd been inspired by them, yes. But this store was a last-ditch attempt to make her talk to me. It'd been a stupid fucking idea, yes, but we weren't over.

I knew that the moment she cried when she'd broken up with me.

We weren't over. Something lingered there. I still fucking wanted her even though I could count on one hand how many times she'd spoken to me since she'd walked out of my apartment.

All I wanted was for her to talk to me. To look at me and not see through me. To not pretend that I didn't exist when she knew as well as I did that there was unfinished business between us.

Maybe I was delusional. There was always that chance. Maybe I was seeing things that didn't exist because I couldn't get over that goddamn woman. If that was how it was, then fine. I'd accept it, but I needed to hear it to my face.

I needed her to give me a real reason for why she'd broken up with me.

I didn't believe her reason.

"I don't love you anymore," she'd said.

She hadn't even looked me in the eye.

She'd lied. I didn't need to be a fucking body language expert to see

that. I knew Rae inside and out, upside and downside.

CLOSED FOR RENOVATIONS.

I tapped my fingers against the granite counter. I'd never opened before midday, but now I wished I did. Her sign had occupied every free space of my mind.

Was she finally fighting back? If she was, it'd taken her long enough.

Renovations.

What was she doing to the place? I knew what that store meant to her. I hated that my stupid, ill-fucking-thought-out attempt at revenge had hurt her.

I didn't have to be a billionaire CEO to see that my business was killing hers. All I wanted was for her stubborn ass to talk to me. I was dumb.

In more ways than one.

I'd opened this fucking business.

I'd fucking hurt her.

And she still had to choke on her own spit to thank me.

I collapsed forward onto the counter and clasped my fingers behind my neck. That goddamn woman would be the death of me. Two years and I still couldn't shake my feelings for her. I wasn't the demon the rumor mill had made me out to be.

I didn't care about this store. I wanted to march into hers with a toolbox and ask her how I could help. I wanted to do everything it took to make her business a success. All I wanted was for her to be happy—with or without me.

But that still didn't change the fact I was still totally fucking in love with her.

Call me pathetic, call me a loser, call me lame. Whatever. I didn't care. I knew how I felt. You didn't get over someone overnight—and getting over someone you loved more than life itself wasn't something that happened easily.

Closure wasn't something Rae and I had ever had. Her excuse for breaking up with me had been bullshit, and she knew it. Still, she'd long refused to talk to me unless she absolutely had to.

Like earlier, with her thank you.

At least she hadn't looked like it was physically painful to speak to me

this time.

For the most part.

I sighed and stood up. The freezers whirled as I walked through the back. The sound grated on me—I'd never found it as comforting as Rae had. I hit the button on the radio to drown it out. There was nothing remotely comfortable about the sounds of a freezer.

I got it. Some people could listen to white noise. Some people needed it to sleep.

I needed it to fuck off.

There was nothing more unsettling than constant, repetitive noise.

I pulled out tub after tub of ice cream, ripping the stickers off each one as I went. While I didn't think my customers gave a shit that I didn't make it, something inside me felt dirty that I was buying it. Probably because Rae made hers from scratch.

When we were dating, nothing made her happier than standing in the kitchen with four ice cream machines going to speed up the process. For her, new flavors had always been important. One a month, at least.

She'd stand there, covered in sugars and sprinkles and fruit juices, oblivious to the outside world. Flavors and colors were everything to her. Getting it *just right* was an obsession.

I'd gone downstairs in my house and found her mixing flavors at two in the morning. I'd woken to sprinkles coating the floor more than once. I'd found torn up recipes stuffed in kitchen drawers more times than I could count.

She was a visionary, and I was a fraud.

But it felt like that was how success went to a higher level. The people who imagined stuff and created it all got no credit, while the people who stole it got all the credit and the success.

That was how she viewed me.

She was wrong.

I hadn't stolen her ideas. I'd been inspired by them, but not stolen.

The neon barstools she'd wanted in her store were primary colors in mine. The floor was black and white, but mostly black. There were no vintage posters like she'd wanted. The tables were white and simple, the chairs metal and painted white with multi-colored cushions to sit on.

It was nothing special.

It was nothing close to the neon, psychedelic vision she'd had.

But she'd never know that. She'd never step foot in here.

I didn't need to be Einstein to know that.

The woman I was in love with hated me with every bit of her soul. And I didn't blame her at all.

If I were her, I'd hate me, too.

CHAPTER FOUR – RAELYNN

It was a glorious mess of colors that all mixed together in a weirdly magical, galactical display.

Pink and purples and blues and even greens. They mixed together like marble, and when I ran a scoop through the colorful mix, it made something even more amazing.

Unicorn ice cream.

I'd made it.

It was my fourth attempt, sure. It'd taken more than one try and a few trips to the store to replenish the ingredients, but I'd made it work.

Finally, I'd found the magic ingredient.

And that was not giving a damn fuck.

Make the ice cream, but not care about the colors. Throw them in like you'd throw a chip packet in the trash. Give them a careless mix and freeze.

It was the laziest way to make ice cream ever, and I loved it.

I put a scoop of the ice cream onto the chocolate and sprinkle dipped waffle cone and looked at it.

I wasn't an Instagram fiend. I could barely take a selfie that didn't include my worst angle, an extra chin, or a blur. But if I was, would I Instagram this?

Maybe. It needed work.

I set it down in the holder and looked at it. Every ice cream cone that used this ice cream would be different. That was what was so fun about it.

I grabbed a cone I'd decorated with edible glitter and scooped ice cream into it. Setting it down next to the other, I quickly grabbed my phone to snap a picture and send it to Sophie before they melted.

Then I ate one.

What? It was quality control. That was what I was telling myself.

Also, it was lunchtime, and I was hungry. The quality control thing just sounded more professional. Not that I had to justify my eating it to anyone,

but still.

Sometimes you needed to justify things to your future self. Like wearing white pants or leaving home without a tampon.

Both of which were stupid ideas, for what it's worth. Especially if you did both on the same day.

Sophie's text came back pretty quickly.

Sophie: OMG. UNICORN ICE CREAM. YES. DO IT.

Well, that was that, wasn't it?

I texted back a smiley face and put the lid on the tub so I could put it in the proper freezer. After doing that and tidying up, I grabbed my phone and purse and headed out to get some lunch.

Daley's Café was at the other end of Main Street. It was a quaint little place, one that was truly worthy of social media obsessions, but I was glad it wasn't. It meant I could walk in there right now and get a sandwich and a coffee and move on with more renovations during the afternoon.

I pushed open the door and welcomed the blast of air conditioning that came at me. Summer was almost right upon us, and I was already over the thick, humid air that circled every inch of the island.

I closed the door behind me and walked right up to the counter. It was busy with barely any tables left empty, but I was lucky that everyone was already sitting down.

Jenna Portman flashed me a smile, her eyes crinkling. "Raelynn. How are ya, honey?"

"I'm good, thanks, Mrs. Portman. How are you?"

"Truckin' along, honey. I'm all right. What can I get for ya?" Her ruby-red lips spread into a wide smile that made her coffee-brown eyes sparkle.

I peered at the sandwiches she had available. "I'll have the tuna-cucumber baguette, please. And a latte."

"You got it, honey."

I swear, not even bees used the word 'honey' as much as she did.

Husband? You were honey. Stranger? You were honey. President of the United States? You were honey.

Hell, the Queen of England would be honey to her.

She handed me the pre-wrapped sandwich and turned to make the latte. “So, I hear you’re renovatin’ that shop of yours.”

I guess news traveled fast when you put a big sign up with “CLOSED FOR RENOVATIONS” in Sharpie.

“Yep. Decided it was finally time to bring it into the twenty-first century.” I rested against the side of the counter.

She shot me a look over her shoulder. “Nothin’ to do with that ex of yours bein’ next door?”

“If it was, I’d have done it when the asshole opened two years ago.”

“Tell me how you really feel about him.”

“If I didn’t think I’d scare off your customers, I would.” I smirked and handed her my card.

Her tinkling laugh rang out through the café, and I smiled as I took back my card and grabbed my lunch.

“Thank you,” I said.

“You’re welcome, honey. There’s an empty seat over the back there.” She nodded, and I glanced over at the spot she’d motioned toward.

I gave her another smile and “thank you” and headed for the empty table. After I got settled, I unwrapped my sandwich and brought up the Etsy site on my phone to browse through stuff for the store.

I munched my way through my sandwich and contemplated buying fairy lights. But since I had the ice cream lights, did I need them? Was there such a thing as too many lights?

The lights were cute, though. Maybe I could string them along the high-top counter and the ordering counter. That was an option. Since I was going pastel colors and unicorn ice cream, I wanted a dreamy, fairytale-style store.

There was nothing more magical than fairy lights.

Except, you know, fairies. Not that there was any proof of their existence.

Which circled back to my original point, but I digress.

I added them to my basket just in case I decided to buy them later.

“Mind if I sit here?”

I froze.

“I’m gonna sit anyway,” Chase said. “There’s nowhere else empty.”

Jerking my head around, I glared at him and motioned toward the empty chair opposite me. I barely paid him any attention as he sat and I turned back to my phone.

I was going to buy the fairy lights. Too much sparkle be damned.

Was there such a thing as too much sparkle?

Why was I so worried about things being too much? If they were, I could take them down.

Damn it. I was overthinking literally all of this.

Business was hard.

“How are the renovations going?” Chase asked.

I glanced up. “Haven’t started.”

His lips curved into a half-smile. “When are you starting?”

“Soon.”

“How much are you changing?”

“Lots.”

“How long until you’re open again?”

“Not sure.”

He pushed his coffee to the side and leaned forward on the table. His toned arm muscles stretched against his black t-shirt, and his bright blue-green eyes sparkled with amusement. “Wow. That’s the most you’ve spoken to me in at least a year. And you graced me with two linked words? I’m honored.”

I glared at him. He was getting on my nerves. I was sure he only sat at this table because I was here—I’d watched him for months as he’d taken his lunch back to the store. He had to walk past Best Served Cold, so I knew he’d done this deliberately.

“Come on, Rae. You can’t keep ignoring me. You broke up with me, remember?”

I did remember. All too vividly.

“I would understand this if I’d broken up with you. This doesn’t make sense.”

“Doesn’t make sense?” The words escaped me through gritted teeth. “You open an ice cream store next to mine and almost put me out of business, and you think I should be happy you sat your dumb ass down opposite me and want to talk to me?”

He actually flinched. “All right, when you put it like that...”

“Put it like what?” I snapped, tossing my phone in my purse. “There’s no other way to put it, Chase. You opened your store to get back at me in some petty tirade and almost ruined my life. Excuse me if I don’t give a fuck if you want to talk to me.”

I stood, grabbing my half-drunk coffee and finished sandwich. I tossed the wrappers in the trashcan behind me and stalked for the door. All I’d wanted was to eat, but now I felt as though I wanted to throw the sandwich up.

How dare he?

How fucking dare he sit opposite me like he hadn’t ruined my life? I hadn’t broken his heart for malicious reasons. My grandparents had dumped the store on me, my parents had left town, and my aunt had been dying.

I hadn’t had time for a relationship. Not one as serious as ours had been getting.

I hadn’t been ready.

“Rae.”

I ignored him and continued my stomping up the sidewalk to Best Served Cold. He said my name again, but I didn’t care. I was all out of fucks to give where Chase Arons was concerned.

I rifled through my purse one-handed to find my keys. My fingers circled the hard, cold metal, and they clinked as I tugged them out. Finding the key to the door was a struggle since there were so many on there, and I was more than aware of Chase getting closer and closer to me.

Finally, I tucked my coffee carefully between my forearm and my stomach to free up my other hand and located the key. I unlocked the door, shoving it open so I could lock it from the inside and stop this stupid conversation before it went any further.

Of course, life didn’t work that simply.

I tripped on the frame, sending my coffee cup flying. A squeal escaped my mouth as the cup slammed into the floor, the plastic lid snapping off and sending coffee spurting all over the tiles and the front of the main counter.

I tried to steady myself on my feet, but failed, and the only thing that stopped my nose from slamming into the floor was the fact I threw my arms out in front of me and broke my fall.

I missed the hot coffee by inches.

I closed my eyes and dropped my head, taking a deep breath.

God. Fucking. Damn. It.

“It might be a little late to remind you of this, but there is a slight step there.” Chase’s tone held the slightest hint of laughter.

I jerked my head around to stare up at him. “Really? I had no idea.”

“We’re making progress in the conversation department, I see.” He held out both his hands for me to take to get up.

I shrugged my purse strap off my shoulder and got up by myself, then grabbed the bright pink strap to haul it onto the counter. “You can leave now.”

“Let me help you clean up.” He stepped fully inside and stepped toward me. “That’s a mess.”

“I can see that it’s a mess!” I dumped the purse and went to the back to grab the mop. I’d clean it properly later, but for now, I wanted it up off the floor.

“Let me help you.”

“I’m fine!” I snapped, shoving the mop into the hot mess of coffee and moving it back and forth a little too vigorously. My cheeks were burning with annoyance and, yes, embarrassment.

It wasn’t the sassy walk in and door slam I’d hoped for, that was for sure.

It didn’t happen like this in the movies.

No. In the movies, the girl escaped her annoying ex, slammed the door in his face, and locked it while flipping him the bird.

I almost fell flat on my face, spilled coffee, and mopped it up.

Girl power to the max.

Pfft.

With the coffee now soaking into my mop, I bent to grab the empty cup and lid. Chase didn’t move as I did it. He didn’t even move as I tossed the cup in the trash and put the mop behind the counter.

I folded my arms across my chest. “Why are you still here?”

“You haven’t really started in here, have you?” He met my eyes. “Nothing has changed.”

“I can take a hammer to you, if you’d like. That’d be a welcome improvement.”

His eyes shone. “You’re more than welcome to try, babe.”

“Call me babe again, and the next conversation you’ll have will be with a doctor explaining why I knocked your teeth out.” I put my hands on my hips. “Again, you can leave now.”

He held up his hands. “Are you all right? You hit the ground pretty hard.”

“I’d like to hit you pretty hard.”

“I’m trying to be nice to you.”

“Don’t bother. I don’t want you to be nice to me. That’s pretty damn obvious, don’t you think?”

Chase sighed and ran his hand through his hair. “Can you really not take two minutes to hold a real conversation with me?”

I glared at him. “The fact you need me to answer that really pisses me off. You’re not stupid.”

“Depends how you define stupid.”

“I define it as my ex, who tried to ruin my life, standing in front of me and not getting the hint.”

“I define it as my ex, who’s so blinded by misguided hatred, standing in front of me and not talking to me.”

“There’s my definition, and then there’s the wrong definition.” I folded my arms across my chest, never taking my eyes off him. “And there is nothing misguided about my hatred. Unless the reason you’re still here is to get on your knees and beg me for forgiveness just so I can tell you where to shove it, the door is right there.” I nodded toward it and turned away from him.

It wasn’t fair that someone who was such a monumental asshole was so handsome.

“Did I just see Chase leave here?”

The soft, feminine voice jolted me out of my thoughts. I peered to see

Sophie standing in the doorway with her thumb cocked over her shoulder.

“Finally,” I muttered.

She looked over her shoulder and back at me. “Is there something I should know?”

“Yes. He’s an insufferable, disrespectful, ignorant pig who needs a smack.”

“Ah. You spoke to him.”

I snorted. “Under duress.” I spent the next few minutes recapping my stressful lunch and the accident after.

“Ohhh.” She closed the door and nodded. “I wondered why it smelled like coffee in here.”

My groan was loud as I slumped onto the counter. “What am I doing, Soph? I can’t do this renovation. I’m holding onto a dream I can’t reach.”

“Yeah, here we go. One conversation with Chase Aarons and you’re all woe-is-me. Why don’t you just admit that the reason he hurt you so much is that you’re not over him?”

I bolted upright and held up a finger. “I am so over Chase.”

She shook her head, her blonde hair flying. “No, you’re not. You never got over him. You went from heartbreak to hating him. That’s not how you get over someone.”

“There are literally hundreds of romantic comedies that show that as a perfectly acceptable way to get over someone.”

“You’re not in a Hollywood movie. You’re in Key West.”

“I don’t get what you’re trying to say. I’m tired. I’ve had the lunch from hell. The only good thing to come out of today is the ice cream, so if you’re going to try to tell me all the ways you think I still have feelings for that royal douchecanoe, then you can follow him out the door.”

Soph narrowed her eyes. “Are you due for your period? You’re a right miserable bitch.”

I sighed. “I think I am. Sorry. I know you’re trying to help in your own weird way.” I paused. “Wanna try the new ice cream?”

She put her purse on the counter. “Only if it’s in one of those new cones.”

I nodded and pulled a waffle cone with chocolate and sprinkles from

the holder. Two scoops of unicorn ice cream later, I handed the bubblegum-flavored mystical-looking treat to my best friend.

She wasted absolutely no time trying it. Her moans of delight had me biting the inside of my cheek. “Rae, this is fucking amazing. Where did you get the idea?”

“Jessie.” I shrugged. “She wanted unicorn ice cream. It’s unique and quite a lot of work to do. Grandma said I needed to give people a reason to come to the store.”

She admired her half-eaten ice cream. “And this will attract all kinds of little girls and teens and people looking to get the best Instagram.”

Another shrug.

“That’s brilliant. Don’t you ever tell me you can’t do this again.” She waggled a bright green fingernail at me. “We need to get you an Instagram for this place!”

I blinked at her. “What? Why?”

“To get the word out! You can chronicle your renovations and get people interested before you even open. It’s the perfect time to do it!”

“I can’t take photos for anything, Soph. And who the hell wants to see me renovating this—what are you doing?”

She’d put her ice cream in the holder while I’d been talking and had her phone open. “Making you an account.”

“I didn’t—I don’t—”

Looking me dead in the eye, she said, “Do you trust me?”

I nodded.

“Do you want to crush Chase?”

I wasn’t entirely against it... “I want people to know I’m better than him.”

“Then listen to me. I’m making you an account.” With a flourish, she said, “Ta-da! You’re officially on the ‘Gram!”

“What do I do with it?”

She pressed her hand against her face. “It’s a good thing I have the afternoon off. Come on. We’re going to the store to get some paint, then I’m gonna teach you how to use this thing.”

Oh, goodie.

CHAPTER FIVE – RAELYNN

By the time lunchtime rolled around the following day, I'd cleared out all the old furniture in the store—including the rickety old stools I had hated—and I'd taken them to the junkyard to get rid of them.

The store felt empty, but after I'd been to buy paint with Sophie, I'd thought about my conversation with Chase.

He'd been right when he'd said I hadn't even started.

It'd do me no good to have all the amazing light fixtures and tables if the walls still looked like the paper on them was older than me.

Armed with a steamer that Grandpa insisted would get the paper off and a trash bag, I stood in the middle of the room and looked at the paper. It was peeling in places, and the bright-blue color it'd once been had faded more than I'd thought before.

The paper by the windows was lighter where the sun had hit it directly. The shape of jars and canisters were still perfectly bright where they'd sat on the shelf, and the sun hadn't been able to get through them.

It wouldn't be out of place in an antique manor house or something.

The problem was, I had no idea how to use this steamer. I'd rented it from a company in town, but my bravado had gotten the best of me, and I'd said I'd used one before.

The biggest machine I'd ever operated that wasn't a car was a vacuum cleaner.

How long did it even take to remove wallpaper?

The guy at the store had said the steamer was ready to go, so I pressed the On button and grabbed the flat plate I assumed went on the wall.

Steam was coming out of it, and I kind of waved it in front of the wall. The steam was going on the paper, and that was how it worked, right?

I put it down and grabbed the scraper. The paper didn't budge.

Nope.

That wasn't how it worked.

A light chuckle came from the doorway, and I readied myself before I

turned around.

“That’s not how it works.” Chase’s lips tugged to the side.

“Really?” I drawled. “I couldn’t figure that out.”

He laughed again. “Try holding it right against the wall.”

I picked the steamer back up. It looked too hot to do that, but clearly, my way hadn’t worked, so...

I pressed the hot plate against the wall.

“Make sure you move it.”

“What?” I turned, pulling it from the wall.

“It’s like a straightening iron. You’ll burn the wall if you keep it in one place.”

“Oh. Like...Side to side?”

“Want me to show you?”

Yes.

No.

Maybe.

“Don’t you have to work?”

He shook his head. “Marnie’s in there. She helps me out on weekends and school breaks now.”

Right. His sister. She was eighteen now. That made sense.

I looked at the old paper and back at him. “Sure.”

He stopped as if I’d just thrown a curveball at him.

I guess I had.

“Are you gonna stare at me like I’ve grown another head or what?”

He snapped out of it. “I must be in the twilight zone. Either that or you got abducted.”

I clicked my tongue.

Chase took the steamer from me and turned to the wall. “See how the bit you did is peeling?”

I nodded as his blue-green eyes met mine for a hot second—a stupid, hot second that sent a buzz down my spine.

“That’s what you want. You probably only just saved the plaster by pulling it off. A straightening iron is the best way to explain it to you.” He paused. “You know how you do one bit of hair three or four times, but you move the iron really fast?”

“Yeah. You used to ask me why I didn’t just hold it there until it was straight,” I muttered dryly.

“And you told me it was because you’d burn your hair off. Then showed me a video of someone doing it with a curling iron.” His lips were pulling up at the edges.

I remembered it.

And it took everything not to smile back—he’d looked absolutely horrified as the girl in the video had lost a huge chunk of her hair and was basically bald in that spot.

“Right. I remember.” I met his eyes, and it was a mistake.

His smile reached his eyes, and there was something in his gaze that made me swallow. It was warm and familiar and made my heart clench.

I looked away then up at the wall. “So it’s like that? Move it over several times?”

“Yeah.” His voice was rough, and he cleared his throat. “Like this.” He pressed the steamer against the wall, held it there for a couple seconds, then moved it to the side. He stayed within the confines of the piece of paper, slowly moving it back and forth, then moving it down after he’d done it a few times.

I watched as he did the whole sheet of wallpaper. The very top was already curling away from the wall beneath it, but my eyes were on his hand as he moved the steamer.

On him.

They flitted back and forth. From the hands I knew were big and strong and soft to the profile of the man I’d loved when he’d been little more than a boy once upon a time.

My stomach fluttered as he rolled his shoulders and got on his knees to do the very bottom of the paper. His light-wash denim shorts hugged his ass unfairly well, and his t-shirt pulled up just enough that I could see the dimples at the base of his back.

I snapped my eyes away before he was done.

What was I doing?

I hated him. He'd almost ruined my life and my business. Why was I ogling him just because he was helping me? I didn't need him to do any more than what he was doing.

"Now," he said, "If you grab the scraper, it'll peel right off. You might get a few stubborn bits in the corners, but you can use some hot water with a sponge to get right in there. See?"

He grabbed the scraper and reached up. He was tall enough that he could reach the top of the wall without standing on anything—unlike me. The scraper against the wall was a cringe-worthy sound up there with nails on a chalkboard, but he was right. The paper peeled right off, apart from one or two spots in the corner near the window frame.

He peeled off the final bit at the bottom of the wall with a flourish and dropped it on the floor in front of him.

I picked up the trash bag from the counter and handed it to him with a raised eyebrow.

Laughing, he bent down and put the paper in the bag. "Get the big bits off first, then go around after for the little bits. Otherwise, you'll get all caught up in it. And if you're still using this bag after strip three, then I'll eat my socks."

I snatched the bag from him and rolled my eyes. "We're not all messy like you. Some of us need trash in the trash bag, not all over the floor."

"And laundry in the basket, and shampoo in the basket, and toothbrushes in the cup, and—"

"It's basic tidiness. It's not my fault if that's always evaded you." I sniffed and put the bag down. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He handed me the scraper with a wide smile.

I stared at him.

"You can smile at me, you know."

"I think being nice and not stabbing you with this scraper is enough for today."

His smile turned lopsided, and he actually reached out and flicked my hair. "Ah, there's the Raelynn everyone knows and loves."

"You're within stabbing distance."

"Modern day Wednesday Addams," he continued, moving too quickly toward the door.

I twirled the scraper in my hand and almost dropped it.
He turned to leave, the sound of his laughter all he left behind.
And, god fucking damn it, I smiled.

Stripping wallpaper took a really long time. Like, longer than you'd think. It didn't help that I did have to go around some of the furniture that was attached to the wall, and that meant a lot of sponge and hot water treatment, then I had to be careful not to scratch anything.

I was more than a little grateful when Sophie showed up after work with pizza and coffee and a willing pair of hands.

"So you let him in to help and didn't yell at him?" she asked for the third time.

"Yes!" I was exasperated at this point.

"Wow." She moved the steamer over the wall next to me. "I'm shocked."

I got enough paper off the wall to grab it with my hand. "He offered to help, and I didn't know what I was doing. I would have asked the devil himself to help at that point, and it'd only been five minutes."

"It's a good thing you never tried to work with kids. Your lack of patience would kill you."

"I don't have the patience to attempt it, never mind do it." I peeled the paper right down and sighed happily when it came off in one long strip.

"So satisfying," Soph muttered.

"Like popping zits or peeling off dead skin after a sunburn," I agreed, getting the scraper back on the wall. "It's not a big deal. If Marnie hadn't been in the store, there's no way he'd have stopped to help me. He was just being nice."

"And you, in turn, didn't kill him."

"That's a fair trade to me." I peeled off more paper.

"And me."

I dropped the scraper. The handle landed on my foot. "Fuck!" I leaned

against the wall, grabbing my foot. “Don’t you knock?” I snapped at Chase.

His eyes sparkled. “If I knocked, I wouldn’t be able to eavesdrop on you.”

“Chase.” Sophie fought a smile as she looked at him.

“Sophie.” He returned her smile.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded, still holding my foot. “Aside from trying to make me chop off my own toes.”

“Better yours than mine.”

Sophie coughed a laugh, and I glared at her.

“I just finished cleaning up and wanted to see how you were doing, that’s all. You’re almost done.”

“You sound surprised.”

“And you gave up on the trash bag. How many strips of paper did you last?”

“Five.” I raised my chin defiantly. “I want to see you eating a sock tomorrow.”

He laughed, rubbing his hand over his five-o’clock shadow. “You’d tell me you lasted longer no matter how many I said.”

I folded my arms, resting my foot on the steps we’d been using to reach the top of the wall. “Maybe I would. Maybe I wouldn’t. I don’t have cameras in here. You can’t prove anything.”

“Neither can you.” His smile was too smug.

“You’re getting on my nerves.”

“Yeah, but you’re talking to me now, aren’t you?”

I opened my mouth then stopped.

Damn it.

He was right.

He leaned against the doorframe, tucking his hands into his pockets with a shrug. “You can stay quiet now, but it’s not going to change the fact you’ve had two whole conversations with me today and only threatened me once.”

“Watch it,” Sophie said, setting the steamer down and reaching for her coffee. “She may be pretending her foot doesn’t hurt, but she can’t put weight

on it.”

She was so fired as my best friend.

Chase’s eyebrows shot up. “Really?”

I swallowed and looked away. “It hurts. I’m giving it a minute.”

“It’s probably broken. That scraper is solid wood,” Soph said, picking it up. “Yep. Ouch.”

“I’m fine,” I insisted.

“Then put your foot down.”

“Fine.” I put it down gingerly, watching as it touched the floor. Pain shot through my second toe, and I squeaked as I put weight on it.

Soph looked triumphant. “Yep. I bet you broke it.”

I glared at Chase. “If it’s broken, I’m going to kill you. I can’t have a broken toe!”

He walked into the store and around behind the counter where we were. “Let me take a look at it.”

“No.” I jumped back. “Ow! Shit!”

“Rae. Let me look. At the very least, let me help you sit down. If it’s broken, you can’t walk on it right now.”

“Jesus,” Sophie said. “Do it, Rae.”

I stared at him. He was not touching my foot. No way. “You’re not a doctor.”

He was silently laughing if the shine in his eyes was anything to go by. “No, but I’m the oldest of four, remember? I’ve seen more broken bones than you have.”

“The answer is still no.”

“Fine.” Instead of walking away, he bent over and launched me onto his shoulder. I screamed, kicking my legs. “If you keep kicking, you’ll hurt your toe again,” he warned firmly. “You need to sit down, you stubborn woman.”

“I’ve got stronger words for you, you fucking—” I stopped at the sight of his sister standing in the doorway.

Marnie Aarons blinked, her dark hair falling in her eyes. “I’m sorry. Did I step into two-thousand-and-sixteen?”

“No. Put me down!” I knocked my fists against Chase’s back. “Now,

you animal!”

He set me down on the window seat. “There. That wasn’t so hard now, was it?”

“First you break my toe, then you manhandle me, and now you talk to me like a child?”

He met my eyes with one eyebrow. “Don’t act like a child.”

“You are so lucky Sophie has the scraper, or I’d ram it into your dick right now!”

“Sophie’s here?” Marnie walked in and peered over the counter. “Hey, Soph!”

She looked back. “Hey, Marnie! How’s school?”

“Crap. Boys are assholes and girls are bitches. I’m glad it’s over forever.”

“Words to live by.”

Marnie snorted and walked over to me. “He broke your toe?”

“Technically,” Chase started. “She broke her own with the scraper.”

If looks could kill, he’d be on his way to the morgue. “And why did I drop the scraper, Chase?”

“I might have been in the doorway and shocked you.”

“Might have been?”

Marnie rubbed her hand over her forehead. “I preferred it like, two days ago, when you didn’t talk to each other.”

“So did I! Ouch! You—” I jerked my attention back to Chase as he pulled my shoe off.

He grinned up at me. “It’s broken. Sprained at the very least. It’s already bruising and swelling.”

“I’m going to kill you. As soon as I can walk without wanting to cut off my foot, I’m going to cut off your hair with a scraper and stab you in the ass with a screwdriver. I’m on a time limit here! How am I supposed to do this with a broken toe?” I waved my finger at him. “If I didn’t know better, I’d accuse you of doing this deliberately! You open next to me to get back at me and now you sabotage my renovations!”

Marnie snorted. “Actually, he opened next to—”

“Finish that sentence, and I’m telling Mom that the weed she found in your room belongs to you and not Amber,” Chase said firmly. “She needs this on ice.”

She shrugged. “I don’t have ice.”

“Gee, Marnie. I wonder where you can find that in an *ice cream* shop.”

“Right. How much do you need?”

“Just bring out what you find and a towel to wrap it in.”

Dutifully, she went to the back of the store to get it. Sophie set down the steamer and followed her, leaving us alone.

I caught his gaze. “What was she going to say?”

He shook his head, crouching on one knee and putting my foot on his thigh. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Then why didn’t you let her finish?”

“It’s not important.”

“It clearly is, or you wouldn’t have stopped her.”

“Don’t you have bigger issues than what my crazy little sister was about to say?”

‘Not when it was obviously something you don’t want me knowing,’ I wanted to say.

“Thanks to you, so telling me what she was going to say is the way to apologize to me for being the reason my toe is now probably broken.”

Chase slowly shook his head. “No, it’s nothing. Just Marnie being Marnie. Do you have any painkillers here?”

“No. What was she going to say?”

“Jesus, you’re like a dog with a bone. I’m not telling you.” He glanced over his shoulder. “I’m gonna see what’s taking them so long.” He gently put my foot on the window seat, shifting me around with it, and walked back into the kitchen.

Wasn’t today just going fucking fabulously?

CHAPTER SIX – CHASE

“I can’t believe it,” Sophie said as soon as I walked into the kitchen. “Couldn’t you send her flowers or something instead?”

I glared at Marnie. “You’re fucking dead.”

She held up her hands. “She told me she’d tell Mom about the pot if I didn’t tell her what I was going to say.”

“Don’t tell her.” I met Sophie’s eyes. “Please.”

“Don’t tell her you made the stupid choice of almost ruining her just to get her to talk to you? Don’t worry—I have no intentions of doing that. You can do it yourself when you grow a pair of balls big enough.”

Marnie snatched up the towel on the top of the freezer. “I’ll take this to Rae. And no, I won’t say anything.”

She disappeared out of the kitchen, and I went to follow her.

Sophie grabbed my arm and yanked me farther away from the door. “What were you thinking?” she hissed in a low tone.

“I wasn’t, all right?” I replied just as quietly. “I wasn’t fucking thinking, Soph. I gave her time, and she didn’t talk to me even though I’d done nothing wrong.”

“Then why didn’t you close when it became obvious that she was done with you?”

I tried to speak, but nothing came out. I closed my mouth and swallowed instead, running my hand through my hair. Nothing I said would justify my actions in any way, and I deserved all the crap she and Rae could throw at me for what I did.

It was damn selfish. And I wanted to do nothing more than make it up to her.

Unfortunately for me, my silence told Sophie everything she wanted to know. She touched her fingers to her lips, blinking at me, and then whispered, “You still love her.”

Scratching my nose, I looked away. “I’m not having this conversation.”

“Oh yes, you are!” She grabbed my shirt and stood in front of me.

“You’re still in love with her.”

“I thought she’d talk to me. I thought the longer I stayed, the angrier she’d be with me and that she’d talk to me. I didn’t think she’d give me the silent treatment for as long as she has.”

“Yeah, neither did I,” she muttered. “Did you know she almost had to sell?”

I shook my head. “I swear, I had no idea how bad it was. I never meant to hurt her.”

Sophie folded her arms across her chest and looked at me. “I believe you.”

“You believe me? Why?”

“I just do. I don’t believe you’d ever deliberately hurt her. I think you’re a fucking asshole for opening that store, but I don’t believe you did it to wreck her.”

I let out a long breath and leaned against the fridge. “Yeah, try telling her that.”

“Not my job. That’s yours.”

“I’ll wait until she stops threatening me with bodily harm.”

“If you’ve broken her toe at the beginning of her renovations, that might be a little while yet.”

I glanced out at the doorway where I could hear Rae and Marnie laughing together. Marnie had always loved her—having three brothers wasn’t easy. To her, Rae was the sister she’d always wanted.

“Does that steamer still work?” I asked Sophie.

She nodded. “I just turned it off for a bit. Why?”

“Grab it. Let’s finish the wallpaper.”

“What?”

“What?”

Sophie frowned at me. “You’re going to finish the job with me?”

“Yeah. It might surprise you, but I’d give up my store if it meant she could have hers back.”

A small smile crept across her face. “Noted. Let’s go.”

I followed her out to the front and slipped past her. Rae glared up at me

as I dug in my pocket and pulled out my keys. "Here." I held them out to Marnie. "Drive my car home."

"How are you gonna get home?" She looked at them.

"I'll drive Rae home in her car and walk back." I jangled my keys, and she finally took them. "Don't be a dick, do the limit, and if you stop off to buy pot or see that jerk you've been dating not so discreetly, I'll kick your tiny ass."

"You're a dick," she shot back at me. "I'm going straight home. Don't you worry." Before anyone could say anything else, she waved goodbye to the girls and disappeared through the front door.

"Why aren't you going?" Rae looked at me.

"Can you strip wallpaper?" I raised an eyebrow. "No. I didn't think so. I'm going to help Sophie finish and then take you home."

"Why can't Sophie drive me home?"

"Because then your car would be on the road and you'll probably get a ticket," Sophie said. "Stop being so awkward and arguing for the sake of it. Besides, I don't want to take your moody ass home."

Rae huffed. "I'm putting an ad out for a new best friend."

"Make sure they have the patience of a saint. They're gonna need it."

Rae flipped her the bird, but Sophie just grinned.

"What am I supposed to do while you two do the paper?" Rae asked, wincing as she adjusted and moved the ice on her foot. "Sit here and do nothing?"

"Basically," I said, walking around the other side of the counter to join Sophie. "There's not much else you can do, is there?"

She muttered something under her breath and looked out of the window.

Sophie gave me the kind of look that said, 'You're not going to get on her good side like that,' but I ignored it and got to peeling off the paper.

I knew Rae.

And I was getting under her skin just by being here.

Although being the reason she probably had a broken toe wasn't necessarily my best move.

One hour and thirty minutes later, we were done.

Just as well, because the pain was finally getting too much for Rae. She'd definitely broken it given the rainbow of blues and purples that were now forming on her second toe.

"I hate you," she said, leaning on the window as I locked up. She hadn't even put her other shoe on because it hurt too much, but she didn't want anyone to see me carrying her down the street, so she had decided to hop down to her car.

I handed her back her keys. "Just let me carry you. Get on my back. You can't hop all the way down the street to the parking lot."

"I can do whatever I like," she muttered.

"Except get your shoe back on."

She smacked me. "Fine. I'll get on your back, but I don't have to like it."

How did I know she was going to say that?

I bent down for her to climb up. It took a couple of attempts, but I finally was able to grab hold of her thighs and pull her up. She wrapped her arms around my neck, and as her breath tickled across the back of my neck, I couldn't help but remember the last time she'd been on my back.

We'd been at the beach, and she wanted to go deeper into the water, but she was deathly afraid of jellyfish. I mean three-year-old-afraid-of-the-dark afraid. I'd never known anyone to be so scared of them before. She'd never gone higher than mid-calf in all the time I'd known her. It didn't matter that I'd reminded her that jellyfish didn't live on the sea floor, and if there was a jellyfish in the water, it was going to get her whether she was on my back or not.

That day, as she'd giggled into my shoulder, I'd taken it as she just wanted to be on my back.

Today, she wanted to be anywhere but.

"See? That wasn't so hard, was it?" I stopped next to her car. "Nobody saw us. Your reputation is intact."

She snorted. "Let me down."

Carefully, I lowered her to the ground where she leaned against the side

of the car. It beeped when she hit the button on her key fob, and she let me help her get in the passenger side without causing too much of a fuss.

I went to the other side and got in. I'd driven this car a hundred times, and it was still as impossibly neat and tidy as it'd always been. "Let me guess—your papers are still in an envelope in the glove box, there's still a tub of gum in the center console, and a pair of spare flip-flops behind the passenger seat."

Her eyes lit up. "The flip-flops! I can walk in those!"

I sighed and reached back. Sure enough, my fingers closed around something that felt like foam, and I pulled out a pair of barely-worn flip-flops.

"Yesssss." She threw them on the floor and gingerly put her bad foot into one of them. "Freedom."

"Freedom from what? Being carried around?"

"Yes. I'm not a Disney princess. I don't need to be hauled about because of an injury you caused. Besides, you're no Flynn Rider." Her eyes sparkled and, holy shit, her lips curved into a tiny smile.

I raised my eyebrows, and she dropped it, then cleared her throat. I bit back my laughter at her slip—she was so fucking desperate to hate me it was funny.

I started the car and pulled out of the parking lot, turning toward her grandmother's house. It was an easy ten-minute drive, but I didn't want it to be in silence.

"How's your toe?" I asked.

"Feels like I want to punch you." She shot me a look.

"Fair enough. What are your plans for tomorrow?"

"Apparently, visiting a doctor, icing my toe, and binging a TV show on Netflix."

"You won't do that. I know you."

"You knew me."

All right. That stung. "You haven't changed much."

She turned and looked at me. I felt her gaze as it traced my profile. "How do you know that?"

"Papers in the glovebox, gum in the center, flip-flops under the seat."

"People can change their personalities without changing their habits."

That's usually how serial killers get away with it for so long."

"And you're apparently still obsessed with serial killers."

She shrugged. "I picked up a few tricks. Carry on annoying me, and I'll demonstrate them."

I rolled my eyes and took a right. "All right. Since you're being awkward, what were your plans for tomorrow?"

"Painting the base coat. If I tape my toes and use a long roller, I can probably get most of it done. I can rest my foot on the steps."

Fuck, she was ridiculous. "Why don't you let me help you?"

"Why would you help me?"

"I'm the reason you broke your toe. Think of it as my apology. I can help you stay on track until you can walk again."

"What about your store?"

"Marnie can do it. It's not like she's doing it for free. She's already out for the summer before she goes to college. She can get some real-life experience in. It won't kill her." I shrugged a shoulder. "She knows what she's doing. I can go in in the evenings and do whatever work I need to do. Toes heal pretty fast."

She side-eyed me. "It's a broken bone, Chase."

"Potentially. You'll be fine in a week. You're stubborn." I pulled into the drive behind her grandfather's truck. "Let me help you inside."

"I can walk. I'm fine." She grabbed her purse and pushed open the door, getting out and putting her weight on her good foot. The second she put weight on her right foot, she hissed out a curse and gripped the top of the door, immediately hovering on one foot.

"How ya doin' over there, Miss Independent?" I slammed my door shut and pushed the key back into the fob. "You've gone far."

She took a deep breath and looked at me. "Can you please help me?"

"Did you just ask for my help *and* say please in the same sentence?"

"You're kind of a jerk, you know that?"

I handed her the keys and wrapped my arm around her waist. "Yeah, but you are, too. Here." I guided her back so I could close the door. "Put your arm around me, and I'll help you up." I switched to her right side so she could lean on me.

She hesitated, but she put her arm around my waist and used me to help her up the path to the door.

Which swung open before we had a chance to open it.

“What the hell did you do?” her grandma asked. “And since when did your ex-boyfriend bring you home? Since when did you talk to him?” Her eyes glittered with the questions as she focused on me.

“Good to see you, too, Nora.” I grinned.

“What’d she do?”

“Broke my toe,” Rae ground out. “Can someone please let me inside so I can sit down?”

Nora stepped to the side, eyes still sparkling as she moved deliberately out of Rae’s reach, so I had to bring her in.

I shook my head. She might have been old, but she didn’t miss a trick, that woman.

I guided Rae into the living room. The buzzing of a drill or a saw came from somewhere to the left, and I knew that was her grandfather in his workshop—AKA the garage.

Slowly, I steadied Rae as she sat down and lifted her leg onto the coffee table. Letting her go sent a chill across my skin, especially when her fingers drifted over my forearm, but I masked it.

“What happened?” Nora said, shuffling to the other side of her and looking at her foot. “Hooey,” she continued, removing her flip-flop. “That’s broken all right. I’ve seen black eyes whiter than your toe.” Leaning right in, she examined it. “Not a bad one. I’ll get the medical kit and tape it. Did you ice it?”

“Right after.” I nodded.

Rae sighed and leaned right back. “I hate you so much. So, so, much.”

“I know.” I stuffed my hands in my pockets and shrugged. “You’ve got an even longer list of reasons now.”

She glared at me. But still, there was something akin to amusement in her expression. She was definitely hiding how ridiculous this entire situation was. It was almost as if she was resigning herself to the idea that I would be the one to paint the store tomorrow.

“Here we go.” Nora came back in with a first aid box, a bottle of water, a small bottle of Tylenol. “Take two of those and drink that. Chase, explain.”

“It might be my fault,” I said slowly. “She was scraping the paper off the walls while Sophie steamed, and I didn’t exactly announce that I was there.”

“What he’s trying to say,” Rae said, pills in the palm of her hand. “Was that he butted in mid-sentence, scared the ever-loving crap out of me, and made me drop the scraper.”

“And it just happened to land on her foot.” I shrugged a little sheepishly. “That was an accident.”

Nora sighed as she taped Rae’s second and third toes together. “You know she’s skittish. Like a squirrel.”

Rae choked. “I’m not skittish! He scared me!”

“You are kind of skittish,” I agreed.

“You.” She pointed at me. “You’re so far up my shit list you *are* the shit list, so watch your mouth.”

Nora swatted her on the thigh. “You watch your mouth, young lady.” She tore the tape off and gently patted the end down. “There you go. Keep it elevated. I’ll bring you some ice soon.”

I watched as she left then looked down at Rae. She was pinching the bridge of her nose, clutching her water bottle so tight her knuckles were white.

“So. Tomorrow? Is it a yes or a no?”

She sighed, dropping her hand and looking at me with her big, brown eyes. “Fine. It’s your punishment and apology for doing this to me. Also, I don’t like painting walls.”

I laughed, a shiver making the hair on the back of my neck stand up when she fought another smile. “I’ll come to pick you up in the morning. What time do you usually go in?”

“Eight.” She reached up and ran her fingers through her hair. “You don’t have to do this.”

“You’re right. I don’t. But I want to.” I smiled, and the urge to step forward and kiss the top of her head was overwhelming.

It was how I’d always said goodbye to her.

But that was then.

Rae drew in a breath, her eyes flitting down to my feet for a second.

Instead, I stepped back. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Rae.”

She swallowed and nodded. “See you.”

CHAPTER SEVEN – RAELYNN

For a second there, I thought he was going to kiss me.

I thought he was going to walk over, cup my chin, and kiss the top of my head the way he always had before.

And, for a second, I wanted to feel his damn lips flit across my head.

This was why I'd ignored him before. Despite how I felt emotionally about it, despite how much I hated him for what he'd done, history was a hard thing to let go of.

I blew out a long breath and rested my head back over the cushion. My toe still throbbed, and more than that, I was frustrated. As much as I'd blamed Chase for it, it was an accident. Sure, he'd shocked me, but he couldn't have known what would happen.

It was a fluke. An accident. And annoyingly timed one, but one all the same.

And maybe I'd been a little cruel when I'd made a half-assed insinuation that he'd done it deliberately.

In fact, after what Marnie hadn't been allowed to say, I wasn't entirely sure he'd done anything deliberately.

That didn't mean it didn't hurt, though. And that didn't mean I'd stop hating him anytime soon.

"So. Chase." Grandma came back into the room with a mug of steaming tea and sat in the armchair.

"What about him?"

"He brought you home. He's in your store. And a little birdie told me you had lunch together yesterday."

I held up a hand. "We did not have lunch together. He took it upon himself to join me for lunch, then we fought, and I left. So he followed me, and we fought some more."

"And today?"

“He saw me failing to use the steamer and offered his help. I took it, which was my first mistake.” I sipped my water. “The second was leaving the door open when Soph and I were steaming so he could scare the hell out of me. As my toe can attest to.”

Grandma chuckled. “So, you’re talking? And he’s painting the store tomorrow?”

“He says it’s an apology. I call it a punishment.”

“Not everyone hates painting, sugar.”

I shrugged. “Whatever. I’m not having him do it by choice. If I show up and try to do it myself, there’s no doubt he’ll barge in, sit me down, and take over.”

Like he had earlier when I refused to sit down, and he’d thrown me over his shoulder like I weighed absolutely nothing.

I was mad about that, too.

And the piggyback.

Just about everything.

Even the way my skin tingled when he touched me. That was the thing I hated most.

Plus, my poor freaking toe.

“Did I hear him say he was going to pick you up tomorrow?”

“Stop it,” I told her. “Stop picking it apart. He’s making an apology by helping me out since I can’t do it because he scared me.”

“Hmm.”

“Don’t hmm at me. It’s true.”

“I never said it wasn’t. I was merely thinking about the implications of your decision to have him in the store.”

“Which are what?”

“He’s your ex. He’s the only boy you’ve ever loved, Raelynn.”

I ignored that last bit. Mostly. “He’s not a boy. He’s twenty-seven.”

“Exactly.” Her lips twisted into a wry smile. “He’s a boy to me.”

I rolled my eyes and looked away. “Whatever. He’s just helping out one time. It’s not going to result in anything other than that. Take your head out of the clouds.”

Grandma laughed and stood back up. “Here’s the remote control, hopalong. Shout for me if you need anything.”

I huffed and took the controller, but I shot her a smile as she left.

I didn’t know what to think about today, so I wasn’t going to think about it. I was going to sit here, find something to watch on TV, and pretend I wasn’t almost helpless in terms of even getting myself to the bathroom until these pills kicked in.

Yep.

That was what I was going to do.

I was waiting on the front step by the time Chase showed up. It was already in the eighties despite it being barely eight in the morning. I was this close to sweating when he finally pulled up in his car and got out.

“How’s your toe?” was the first thing he said to me.

“Judging by the way it looked this morning, not good.”

“How does it feel?”

“Not as bad as yesterday, but it hurts to walk.” I tried to get up using my heel, but I couldn’t quite do it.

Chase chuckled and held out his hands.

I had no choice. I wasn’t getting up by myself. I really hadn’t thought this through.

I put my hands in his, and he gently pulled me up. “Thank you,” I said, releasing his hands.

“You’re welcome. You didn’t think that through, did you?”

I dipped my head because that was exactly what I’d just thought. “Not really.”

He smirked. “Can you limp to the car?”

“I think so.” I took a couple steps. “Yep. I’m good. The drugs help.”

His laughter followed me to the car. He did, however, beat me to it. Which wasn’t entirely surprising given that I was about as fast as a turtle. Limping in flip-flops wasn’t easy, for the record.

Chase grabbed the handle and opened the door for me, ushering me in with an extravagant wave of his hand. Shaking my head, I got into the car and set my purse on the floor between my feet.

“What’s with the dungarees?” he asked when he joined me inside.

“This is my, ‘I look like I’m painting, but I’m supervising,’ outfit,” I replied. “What’s with the stool on the back seat?”

He glanced back, then peered over at me. “That’s my, ‘I know Rae won’t sit and let me do it all,’ stool. There’s another in the trunk for your other foot, as well as an extra-long roller for when you get antsy.”

“I don’t know whether or not I should say thank you for the stool or argue about me getting antsy.”

“Here’s an idea, just say thank you.” He pulled out of the drive. “If it’s not too much hassle for your inner asshole.”

“I was going to say it until you said that.”

“Sorry.”

“No, you’re not.”

He shrugged. “You’re right. I’m not. Not even a little bit.”

I rolled my eyes and looked out of the window. He was insufferably irritating. He knew where all my buttons were and how to push all of them.

Was that why I was afraid? Because if he could push my angry buttons, he could push the rest of them?

No. That wouldn’t happen. I had self-control. Sure, my eyes wandered every now and then, but I was human. I was a red-blooded woman whose hormones occasionally took control over my regular brain.

It happened to men all the time, and nobody judged them for poor choices. I was allowed a few every now and then.

“Wanna get some coffee first?” He looked over at me. “I didn’t have any yet.”

“Sure. Can we get breakfast, too?”

“Fine, but I’m not splitting the pastries in two just because you can’t decide. It doesn’t work like that anymore.”

I poked my tongue out at him. “Then I’ll have two pastries. I don’t have anyone to watch the size of my ass for anyone anymore.”

“There’s nothing wrong with your ass.”

“Have you been looking?”

“Have you ever seen your ass? You’re damn right I’ve been looking.”

I turned and blinked at him. “I don’t know how to respond to that.”

He shrugged and pulled into the parking lot I always parked in. “You don’t have to. I know damn well you were looking at mine yesterday when I was steaming that wallpaper.”

“I was not!” My cheeks burned because, well, I had been.

“You looked at me like you’d never seen such a fine specimen of a man.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, ready to rip him a new asshole, but the twitch of his lips stopped me.

He was screwing with me.

He was pushing my buttons to get a reaction out of me.

I smiled my sweetest fake smile and unbuckled my seatbelt. “I’m not falling for that.”

“Falling for what?”

“You. Trying to get under my skin. You might be helping me because you want to, but we both know it’s because you feel bad about breaking my toe.”

“Again, you broke your toe.”

“Again, you—” I stopped and slammed the car door shut. “Nope. Still not doing it. I’m not letting you get to me that way. Nice try.”

I spun away from him as he laughed. My attempt to stomp off was thwarted somewhat by my inability to actually stomp. I couldn’t even step, but I added a huff as he caught up with me for good measure.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Chase fell into step beside me. A very slow step.

“I’d believe you if you didn’t sound like you weren’t trying to laugh.”

At that, he let the laugh go. “It’s not my fault you’re so easy to wind up. You’re like a match. One strike and you explode.”

“Are you saying I have a bad temper?”

“I’m saying you’re easy to wind up. Take from that what you will.” He shrugged. “You’re the one putting words in my mouth.”

“I’m not putting anything in your mouth.”

“You used to,” he replied with a smirk.

I smacked his arm, willing my cheeks not to flush. “You’re painting my walls. I don’t want to hear any of that shit.”

“I’m painting your cheeks red is what I’m doing.” He snorted and held open the door to the café.

My nostrils flared in annoyance, but he was right. Despite my inner plea, my cheeks were burning, and not from the hot sun.

I had once put things in his mouth.

It wasn’t my fault.

He’d always been wicked with his tongue. It was rude not to sit on his face.

I coughed and pushed that thought to the back of my mind.

Note to self: reopen the store as soon as possible and avoid Chase at all costs.

“What’d you do, honey?” Concern marred Jenna’s features as I limped to the counter.

“Dickhead over here broke my toe.” I pointed at Chase.

She did a double-take. “I didn’t know you were back together.”

My eyes widened. “We’re not!” I said a little too loudly right as Chase shook his head with his own denial.

Jenna’s sharp eyes flickered between us. “All right. If you say so.”

I snapped my jaw shut. “We’re not back together. I’d rather walk over hot coals on my hands,” I ground out.

Chase shrugged. “I’d skip the hot coals, but the sentiment is the same.”

“Ooookay.” Jenna smirked. “What can I get for you both?”

“I’ll have my usual, a cream cheese bagel, and a cinnamon roll, please.” I pulled out a chair and took a seat.

“Chase?”

“Coffee and the same. Thanks, Jenna.”

She raised her eyebrows at that, but when he shrugged, she turned and went back to work. “How are the renovations going, Rae, honey?”

“Well until he broke my toe. He’s painting for me today to apologize.”

“I thought you two didn’t talk.”

“We didn’t until he started annoying the crap out of me.”

“Then I broke her toe and here I am, torturing myself with her delightful, happy company,” Chase continued.

I flipped him the bird a little too enthusiastically.

“See?” he said to Jenna when she set the coffees on the counter. “She’s a little ray of sunshine walking around town.”

“I might not be able to walk, but I can still throw things,” I warned him.

Chase snorted and handed Jenna enough money to cover his order. “Yeah, but you have the aim of a drunken squirrel. I’m not exactly terrified.”

I hauled myself up and, glaring at him, handed Jenna a ten from my back pocket. “I don’t need an aim if I use a frying pan.”

Jenna handed us both our change and slid the bagged food toward us. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were in denial.”

“About what? How orange isn’t my color so I shouldn’t murder him in my sleep?”

She rolled her eyes. “Scoot, before you scare off my customers.”

Chase looked around. “We’re the only ones in here.”

She narrowed her eyes. “She might have a bad aim, honey, but I played softball in high school. Don’t play with me.”

I laughed and limped toward the door. “Checkmate.”

“That’d be more effective if you weren’t walking like you had one leg shorter than the other,” Chase said, following me.

“I take it back,” Jenna said. “I totally get the hot coals comment.”

That cut Chase’s laughter off like she’d sliced through it with a knife. His immediate silence sent Jenna into peals of giggles, and I chuckled to myself as I hobbled onto the sidewalk.

“That woman,” he muttered, joining me.

“She’s got your number. A bit like I have.”

“You’re not even close to having my number.” He slid his gaze to me for a brief second. “You might like to think you have, but you’re wrong.”

I snorted, tucking my food between my body and my arm so I could get

my keys. “Yeah, whatever.”

“I’ve got yours, though.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because I’ve got your keys.” He stepped in front of me and unlocked the door.

I glared at the back of his head and followed him inside. I beelined for the window seat where I carefully slid my flip-flop off and rested my foot on it.

“Where am I supposed to sit?” Chase looked at me.

“The floor’s clean,” I offered. “If you hadn’t broken my toe...”

“Yeah yeah, I wouldn’t be here in the first place.” He shook his head. “Whatever you say.”

I opened the paper bag containing my bagel and bit into the roll. I sent a shrug his way as I ate. It was true, and he knew it. “Maybe now you’ve learned not to eavesdrop on people’s conversations, especially your ex-girlfriend’s.”

“I’d love to say yes, but...nah.” He leaned against the counter and picked up his coffee, his old denim shorts tightening over his thighs. “Not gonna lie, you were being nice. I was almost expecting you to say you’d come to your senses about breaking up with me after all this time.”

My mouth was full of food, so instead of justifying that with a response, I pulled my phone out of my purse and opened Spotify.

Seconds later, the opening beat to Taylor Swift’s “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together” burst out of the little speaker.

Chase frowned, pausing with the lid of his cup against his lips. His gaze was fixed on my phone until the chorus hit, and then he lowered his cup, pinching the top of his nose. A tiny smile played on his lips.

“Really?” he asked. “You had to use a song for that?”

I raised my bagel in explanation, still chewing. I even added a nod just in case he wasn’t totally clear on that.

Lord knew he hadn’t taken the hint a couple days ago, so I didn’t expect him to understand that today.

Instead of the snarky comment I expected, he simply rolled his eyes and sipped his coffee. “Hollywood called. They want their drama back.”

There it was.

I swallowed the bagel and said, “High school called. They want their jerk quarterback back.”

Chase choked on his coffee. “I wasn’t a jerk.”

“I can tell you I’m not a moody bitch, but that doesn’t mean it’s true.”

“All right,” he said slowly. “Maybe I was a bit of a jerk, but that didn’t stop you having a crush on me.”

“Riiiiight.” I drew the word right out and put down my bagel. “I never had a crush on you in high school. I seem to remember *you* asking *me* out several times over like six years before I finally took pity on you and said yes.”

He barked out a huge laugh. “Took pity on me? Your brain must stink with all that bullshit inside it.”

“I totally took pity on you!” I pointed at him. “I rejected you like four times in high school because you were a jerk. When you asked me out on my twenty-first birthday, I felt bad for you and said yes.”

“Yeah, you felt so bad you didn’t leave my apartment until the next morning.”

“I—” *did, in fact, stay the night.*

His grin was lopsided. “What’s up, Rae? Don’t have a comeback for that one?”

Fuck it, I didn’t.

Where did he get off being right? That wasn’t how society worked. Everyone knew the woman was always right.

My toe had me off my game. That was my excuse, and I was sticking to it. Like glue.

“Whatever,” I said. “I will never consider for a second that I made a mistake breaking up with you.”

“Really?”

I pointed toward the wall that separated our stores. “Really.”

His eyes met mine. His eyes were darker than usual, but they still held my gaze with an intensity that sent a shiver down my spine. He didn’t look away from me as he sipped his coffee.

“Really,” he said flatly. “We’ll see.”

“We’ll see?” My eyebrows shot up. “What does that mean?”

He put his coffee down and walked over to the door. “Whatever I want it to mean.”

“Don’t you walk away from me in the middle of a conversation!”

He grinned, and did just that, leaving the store and turning in the direction of the parking lot.

I glared at him as he walked past the window.

Jerk.

CHAPTER EIGHT – RAELYNN

My frustration was like a little gremlin that had taken up residence inside me. Don't feed the gremlins and all that.

Fortunately, that was a rule Chase seemed to be following. We hadn't spoken for two hours except for me asking for more paint in my tray.

It wasn't the most elegant paint job I'd ever done. But, hey, I was sitting on a stool with my foot on another and an awkwardly long paint roller.

And this silence fitted me just fine.

That's what I told myself. I'd have given anything for this silence just a few days ago. For him to fuck off and leave me alone, but now he was talking to me and seemingly feeling indebted to me for hurting me, the silence was horrible.

It was awkward and uncomfortable. We had too much history between us, and I hated it. We'd known each other since high school, and our earlier conversation hadn't been wrong.

He had asked me out several times in his senior year and my sophomore one. I'd said no because I wanted to focus on my education. I was that weird kid who was too "pretty" to be a nerd, but too "studious" to be a popular princess, at least by societal norms. I hovered in the middle, but I'd taken the quiet way through school.

I needed it because I knew Best Served Cold would one day be mine. If I didn't get the grades, I wouldn't get into college, and I wouldn't know how business worked. There was only so much my grandparents could teach me, and I'd always wanted the degree.

It shut people up when they came around here to try to buy it off the "young, naïve owner."

I'd always turned Chase down, not because I didn't fancy him—I did—but because I knew he'd be a distraction. I'd escaped when I'd gone to college, but almost as soon as I'd come home without education for an excuse, he'd cornered me at my birthday party and said the magic words.

"Come on, Rae. You don't have an excuse anymore. Go out with me."

Just once. What do you have to lose?”

Of course, if I'd known back then that two years later my life would flip upside down, I'd have said no. I never thought we'd ever be anything serious. He'd never had a relationship longer than four weeks, and I don't even think they were relationships in the traditional sense.

More like fuck buddies.

I thought it'd be that for us. I was wrong, and I'd fallen in love with him in a heartbeat. Despite his asshole persona and ability to keep up with my smart mouth, he was charming and thoughtful and sweet.

When my aunt had first gotten sick, he stopped by her place three times a week with soup, and he brought flowers once a week. He used to hang out with my grandpa in the garage getting his hands dirty on whatever project he was working on at the time. Grandma loved him and sent him home with leftovers whenever she could after he got his own place.

He once told her that he was going to start paying her for them because he didn't have to grocery shop anymore. In response, she told him he knew where the mop was because the mudroom needed a clean.

He'd laughed—and mopped the floor.

I paused and smiled at the wall.

Of course, then everything had changed. My parents—who were running the store at that time—announced they were done here and wanted to move to Michigan to be closer to my dad's parents because my grandma there was really sick. She recovered, but they never came home.

The same month, my aunt took a turn for the worse, and my grandparents informed me the store was now mine.

In hindsight, I could have handled things better. I could have told Chase I needed a break to handle the upheavals in my life. I could have talked to him more. I could have not burned that bridge, but emotion was a funny thing.

Emotion controlled you in ways you didn't understand. Instead of being rational, I freaked out. I put all my energy into running the store, ignoring the fact my parents had left permanently, and my favorite aunt was dying any day. I ignored him until I finally broke up with him, and the rest is history.

When I laid all my thoughts out, it wasn't a surprise he'd opened the store next door. That was his revenge.

I might have done the same.

Hell, I was. I was redoing this store to shove him out of business, and

here he was, helping me. This was my revenge for his revenge, and he was actively taking part in it without knowing why it was happening.

I should have handled things better. I hadn't been sixteen. I'd been twenty-three.

And, even after I'd hurt him, he'd still tried to be nice to me.

And I'd been nothing but a raging bitch to him.

"You're not over him.... You never got over him."

Sophie's words were an echo inside my mind, but I brushed them away. No, I was over him. I knew that. Two years was long enough to get over someone. The thoughts I was having were just because he was back in my life.

It was normal.

It was normal for a situation like this to bring back old memories and the whisper of a feeling. Sometimes the present pulled the past forward, but that didn't mean the past had to be a part of the future.

When I was able to walk properly again, I wouldn't need Chase to help me. He could go back to The Frozen Spoon and get on with his life while I got on with mine and stopped remembering how good things used to be between us.

No matter how hard the memories came, I'd never be able to forgive him for taking my ideas and opening my store. Even if I did have responsibility for not doing these renovations sooner and letting him steal my customers, it still never should have happened.

I rolled my shoulders and moved the roller through the paint in the tray. The urge to peek over at Chase overcame me, and I gave into it.

He was on the counter on his knees, and sometime in the last thirty minutes, he'd removed his t-shirt. His tanned back rippled with lean muscle as he used the roller to get the top of the wall where the shelves usually went.

Back and forth his arm went, his shoulder muscles flexing with each movement he made. A lump formed in my throat as I watched him, and I let my gaze wander down his spine to the spot right above his ass where he had two deep dimples that I just wanted to poke my fingers in.

He was handsome as hell. And why the hell were backs so hot? What right did Chase's back have to be so smooth and tanned and perfectly muscled in all the right places? And if the dimples at the base of his spine blinked at me one more time I was going to explode.

This wasn't fair.

"What are you doing?"

I jerked my attention up to his face. He looked over his shoulder at me, his blue-green eyes shining with mirth, an emotion reflected in the stupid half-smile on his face that I wanted to slap off.

"Making sure you're doing it right," I lied. "Just checking."

"Right. I do the same thing when I ogle your ass. Even when you limp."

"You make it very hard to be nice to you."

"You're the one checking me out like you've never seen me naked before. You're almost drooling over there."

I touched my fingers to the side of my mouth instinctively.

His half-smile became a grin.

Crap. I'd fallen for it.

"You're impossible," I snapped.

He jumped off the counter and put the small roller in his tray. He leaned against the main counter again and reached for his bottle of water. With a shrug, he said, "As I said, Rae, it's just too easy. Plus, you shouldn't stare at me if you don't want me to call you on it."

"I wasn't staring at you." I put my roller down and got up carefully. The sheets we'd put down were soft under my bare feet as I carefully made my way to get my bottle from the counter, too. "I was watching what you were doing."

"Unless my cock was holding the paintbrush, I doubt that."

"It's not that talented."

"You are the authority on its talents."

I grabbed my bottle and, resisting the urge to turn away, looked him in the eye. "You're assuming I remember."

Something flashed through his eyes. "You assume I believe you."

"Believe what you want." I uncapped my water and didn't let up on eye contact, even though my heart had just skipped a beat. "It has been a while. I don't remember what I ate last week, never mind what talents your cock has."

He stared at me for the longest moment. The unrelenting intensity of

his gaze as his blue-green eyes stayed fixed on mine sent yet another shiver down my spine, and my heart was now not skipping a beat—it was going double-time.

I wanted to swallow hard. Turn around. Pretend I was serious. Not give him a chance to see right through me.

“Nice try,” he murmured, only inches from me.

More accurately, I was mere inches from his bare chest. From his lean abs and the hint of a ‘v,’ I knew for a fact disappeared right under the waistband of his shorts.

“What do you mean?” My voice was steadier and more confident than I felt inside.

Inside, my stomach was quivering with butterflies from being so close to him.

From, for a quick flash, feeling the way I had once upon a time.

“You’ll have to do better than that to push my buttons, Rae.” He barely even blinked as he spoke, and he reached out and wound a small lock of my hair around his fingers. His gaze dropped to his finger, then hovered on my mouth, then found its way back to mine. “And you know it.”

I held his eyes for a second before straightening and saying, “Do I?”

Chase smirked, pulling his finger out so my hair sprung back into place over my shoulder. “Why don’t you try it and see what happens?”

“Maybe I will.” I stepped away from him, taking the water with me. “And you’ll regret ever saying that to me.”

“I don’t know.” He grabbed his roller and met my eyes for one last time. “Even ice melts over time, Rae.”

“What does that mean?”

His lips twitched. “If you keep playing with fire, even *your* heart will melt.”

I blinked at him, then threw the remaining few mouthfuls out of my bottle at him. The droplets splattered across his back, and he tensed as the cold liquid ran over his skin.

He glared at me.

I shrugged a shoulder. “There. I put out the fire.”

He kept glaring at me for a second before his lips twitched and he lost

control. He laughed hard, and I turned, flicking my hair as I went.

Chase, nil. Rae, one.

Maybe.

CHAPTER NINE – CHASE

I pulled away from Rae's house. She hadn't spoken a word to me since this afternoon when I'd caught her staring at me.

Well, that was a lie. She'd muttered a quiet "thank you" as she'd gotten out of the car a minute ago, but that didn't count. That was her not being completely rude.

I say not completely rude because she could give the silent treatment with the best of them, and she was goddamn good at it.

But it'd worked for me today.

Today had been nothing more than a reminder of how things used to be. How it was before she broke my heart for no fucking reason. Throwing back to high school and the day she'd finally agreed to go out with me had clenched at my damn heart.

And she made it sound worse than it was. I hadn't stalked her or anything. I'd just tried my luck a few times at asking her out. She says it like I asked her every week for three years or something.

It wasn't. Once a year for two years until she left for college, then the day of her birthday.

When she said yes.

If you asked me now if I'd have still asked her out knowing how it ended, my answer would be yes. I would have asked her out. I'd do it all over again, too.

She wasn't the bitch she came across as sometimes. Hell, she admitted she could be a bitch. I didn't have rose-tinted glasses on and I wasn't looking at her through some fucked-up veil of love.

She could be a bitch, but she could also be the best person I'd ever known. She didn't think with her head, she thought with her heart. She acted impulsively and didn't always sit to think about the consequences of her actions.

If she did, maybe she wouldn't have ignored me for a week before she broke up with me with some lame-ass excuse about not being ready for a serious relationship.

We'd been together two years. I was going to ask her to move in with me. We were hardly just hooking up.

She had flaws. She wasn't perfect. I didn't want her to be perfect. She may have appeared that way to anyone who didn't know her, but that's because they didn't see who she really was.

She was rough around the edges, and so was I. Find me a human who wasn't a little rough around the edges on the inside. All I hoped was that she'd wake up and realize that her rough edges fit right into mine.

Because today I'd realized the one thing I didn't want to admit to myself.

I fucking missed her.

I thought I was over missing her, but I wasn't. I wasn't over missing her smile on a morning or her over-dramatic eye rolls. I wasn't over missing the way she looked at me or the way she hummed as she did the most mundane tasks.

I wasn't over her.

That was almost more startling than knowing I was in love with her. They weren't one and the same. You can love someone and still move on with your life. You can love someone and be over them and your relationship. They're the kinds of loves that will always be there no matter what you do or where you go or who you meet—like your first true love.

Then there are the kinds of loves that punch you in the gut and knock you down.

That was how I felt about Rae.

Even after two years, even knowing she hated me, even knowing she was only talking to me because she had to, I still felt the way about her as I always had.

I still fucking loved her so hard it knocked me over. Slammed into me like a goddamn sucker punch that would leave a bruise I knew I'd never get rid of.

I wasn't over her. I'd never had closure to have a chance at getting over her.

And no matter how many times she told me we were never getting back together, I knew she'd never had closure either.

How the hell did you move on from something when the door was still open? You wouldn't walk away from your house with the door ajar. Why had

I allowed her to walk away from me when our door had never shut?

Oh yeah, because I'd fucking cared about her. When she'd made it clear two years ago she was done with me, I'd listened.

I'd been an idiot. And my actions since then had done nothing to endear her to me. Nothing to make her think that I still care about her.

No. I'd just hurt her over and over, no matter how unintentionally.

I pulled up outside my mom's house and got out of the car.

Marnie opened the door and grinned. "How goes seducing the ex?"

"Fuck off," I answered, stepping past her into the house.

"Chase." Mom appeared out of nowhere, hands on her hips as her floral skirt swished. "Don't speak to your sister like that."

"Then tell her to stop annoying me."

"That's what sisters are for," Marnie sang, wandering into the kitchen and grinning at me again.

I hit her with a hard look. "And you know what big brothers are for."

She stilled instantly. "I'm going to call Amber," she said, running out of the room like I'd lit a firework up her ass.

Mom watched her go then raised her eyebrow at me. "Are you still using the weed thing?"

I shrugged and pulled water from the fridge. "She doesn't know you know. I'll take my entertainment where I can get it."

She laughed. "She has to know I know she's lying."

"Sure she does. But as long as nobody tells her for sure, it's bonafide blackmail for me." I leaned against the edge of the counter. "And coming in real handy this week."

"Mmm. I heard you and Rae are talking again." She raised one eyebrow, her blue eyes full of questions.

"I wouldn't say we're talking..." I trailed off. "I'd say I'm talking, and she's mostly bitching at me, which isn't entirely undeserved, so..."

She waved her spoon at me. "Child, I told you that store was a bad idea. You know she was havin' one hell of a time when she broke up with you. If you'd bided your time, you'd have had her back in a hot minute."

"Thank you for that, Yoda."

She shot me a look that told me to watch my mouth.

"I know that now, Mom, but I didn't back then. I made a mistake, and now I'm paying for it. But at least she's talking to me now."

"Jenna told me you broke her toe."

"The scraper broke her toe!"

"Blaming it on a scraper isn't going to get back in her good books."

"Nothing will get me back in her good books. I could shut the store and give her all my money and apologize on my knees for the next six months and it still won't work."

"And whose fault is that?"

"I'm twenty-seven, not ten. You don't need to teach me about taking the blame for things."

"Good. Then accept the blame, admit to her you were wrong and that you didn't open the store to ruin her business, and maybe you'll get somewhere with her."

I snorted and took a seat at the island in the middle of the modern, open kitchen with black cupboards and white-granite countertops. "I'm almost certain her hatred is real. Any residual feelings she may have are just that. They're purely there because we're talking. I'm not going to kid myself into thinking Rae has any genuine feelings left for me. She made that quite clear when she told Jenna she'd rather walk over hot coals on her hands than get back with me."

Mom laughed. "To be honest, Chase, if I were her, I'd rather walk over hot coals on my hands than get back with you, too."

"Thanks. That makes me feel tons better."

She dropped the spoon on the counter and turned to look at me. "What do you want me to tell you? She's wrong for feeling the way she does? 'Cause that ain't gonna happen. Was she wrong for breaking up with you how she did? She sure was, son. Don't get me wrong. But you took it like a big ol' baby. She's justified in her feelings until you man up and tell her everything, and that includes telling her that you still love her."

"But—"

"No buts. I don't care if that but is, 'But she doesn't love me,' tough. You invited that the moment you stuck an ice cream parlor sign on the shop next to hers. You saw a way to talk to her—she saw you whipping the rug out from under her feet."

I sighed and rubbed my hand through my hair.

“I’m saying this as your mother because I love you, and love is tough sometimes.” She put her hands on the island and looked me in the eye. “If you love that girl—and I mean you really love her, Chase, then you’ll do whatever it takes to make her believe you again. And that includes telling her the goddamn truth, whether she loves you back or not. You got that?”

I swallowed because, yes, I got that.

“I said, you got that?”

I nodded. “I got it.”

“Good.” She straightened. “Remember this, son. There’s a fine line between love and hate, and sometimes, it ain’t even hate at all. It’s *hurt*.”

Rae had texted me late last night and told me not to pick her up the next day. Apparently, all she needed to do was sign for a delivery, and Sophie was taking her to the store.

Which was why, after I’d checked in at The Frozen Spoon and placed an order for the things we needed, I left Marnie in charge again with her best friend and went to the café.

Luckily for me, Jenna was heaving this morning. Tourists were starting to dribble into town, and I’d deliberately cut the opening hours of The Frozen Spoon. Instead of ten ‘til seven, we were now open until three. This meant I didn’t have to stand and talk to her and explain why I was ordering two coffees, four donuts, three slices of pie, and two bagels.

Not that I needed to explain. I saw the way her eyebrows had shot up at my order. I had a feeling that saying they were for my teen sister and her friend wouldn’t have been a believable story.

Jenna had packed each pastry into its own individual bag, the donuts into one bag, and each piece of pie into a small triangular box. She’d put them all into one big bag, so all I needed to carry was the coffee tray and rest the bag handles over my arm.

The door to Best Served Cold was shut when I got there. I could hear music inside, and there were lights on, so I knocked before I opened the door.

Rae was up on the counter wearing tiny denim shorts, a tight tank, and

a paintbrush in her hand. She turned her head and as soon as she saw me, her eyes widened. “Um.”

“What the hell are you doing up there?”

“Painting?” she offered, holding up the brush. “I put the steps there, look.” She pointed down with the brush, and a glob of paint fell onto the floor. “Whoops. Shit.”

With a sigh, I put down my peace offering and went to grab a cloth to wipe it up. “Again, what the hell are you doing up there?”

“Oh my God, it’s a broken toe. I didn’t dislocate my hip. I have long legs—I can reach the steps if I’m careful.”

I knew she had long legs. They were distracting me right fucking then.

“Three days ago, I watched you trip over your own doorstep. Do you know how to be careful?”

“I practiced five times and only slipped once.” She put the brush in the tray. “This is why I told you I only had a delivery.”

“You lied?”

“No, I had a delivery, and then decided to do another coat of paint.” With not a lot of finesse, she flattened her hands on the counter and without fucking looking, reached her left leg back and down toward the steps.

She missed them by an inch.

I darted forward and grabbed her waist, stopping her from falling flat on her back on the hard floor. “See,” I said into her ear. “This isn’t careful.”

Both feet firmly on the floor, she shivered. She stepped away from me, flattening her hands against her stomach. “Um, thank you.”

“For saving your life? You’re welcome.” I grinned at her. “Aren’t you lucky I stopped by?”

“Define lucky.” She sighed and met my eyes. “Why did you stop by?”

“Because I knew you’d do something stupid like that.” I motioned to the counter where she’d been painting. “Also, I brought food.”

She perked up like a puppy would at the mention of “walkies.” “You brought food?”

I rounded the counter to my bag of goodies. “And coffee.” I pulled her coffee out and slid it over to her. “I figured it was lunchtime, and if you were here, you’d be hungry. And, well, it’s a peace offering.”

Her dark eyebrow quirked up. “Peace offering?”

One by one, I pulled the boxes and bags out. “Bagels. Pie. Donuts.”

She narrowed her eyes. “What kinds?”

“Cream cheese bagels.” I motioned to the bags. “One cherry pie, and one apple pie, and four different types of donuts.” I nudged the boxes to her and put the carrier bag on the floor.

She looked from one bit of food to another. “And it’s all for me?”

“Well, one of the bagels is for me. It is lunchtime.” I slid it back with a grin. “But if you wanna eat the rest, go ahead. It’s a peace offering.”

“What exactly are you making peace for?”

“For breaking your toe? For making you trip on your own doorstep and spill your coffee? For bugging you at lunch when you didn’t want to be bugged?”

She considered this for a moment, tucking her hair behind her ear as she examined the donuts through the clear window in the box. “All acceptable reasons.”

“Also, I wanted to actually say sorry for breaking your toe.”

“What?” She jerked her head from the box so hard her hair fell back from behind her ear.

“I never said sorry for breaking your toe. We just argued instead.” I reached over the counter and pushed her hair back, letting my fingers linger for my apology. “So, I’m sorry I scared you and am the reason you broke your toe.”

Rae swallowed, her fingers moving to the spot mine had just been and hovering there for a moment before she ran them through her hair as if she was brushing my touch away. “It’s okay. I mean, it’s not, but it was an accident. It’s not like you slammed a wooden pole onto my foot.” She shrugged a shoulder and looked down, toying with the edge of the bagel bag. “You didn’t have to do this. It’s sweet.”

“The way to your heart is through your sweet tooth.” I half-smiled, one that grew to a full, wide smile when she blushed.

“Well, thank you. And—” She paused, once again looking up. “Thank you for helping me after my toe. I appreciate it.”

“Anytime.”

“Like right now, anytime?”

My eyebrows raised. “Why? Are you finally admitting you’re not superwoman and you can’t do it all?”

“Not quite.” Her lips twitched, but her eyes were laughing. “I’m admitting that my toe really hurts, and I forgot to bring any painkillers with me this morning.”

I pretended to sigh and dropped my head forward before looking back up at her. “So, you’re asking me if I can run to the drugstore for you.”

She bit her lip and nodded.

“That’s a whole fifteen minutes away.”

She was still biting her lip. If she was doing that to manipulate me, it’d be working even if I weren’t messing with her.

“I know,” she said, finally releasing it. “But I can’t drive. I can’t walk there. And Sophie is working. I don’t want to ask you, believe me, but—”

“Do you have any idea how much I don’t trust you to get back up on that counter and start painting again?” I pointed to the counter she’d just been on. “Who knows what kind of trouble you’ll get yourself into in the next thirty minutes?”

She opened her mouth, then pursed her lips as realization flashed in her eyes. “Here I was, thinking we’d reached some kind of truce, and you’re still fucking with me.” Then, she bit her goddamn lip again like she thinks I’ve forgotten how she always used that instead of puppy dog eyes.

I leaned forward, smiling ever so slightly. “Rae, me fucking with you is some kind of truce, especially if you don’t stop acting like you don’t know how much you biting your lip like that turns me on.”

Surprise flashed in her eyes, and she released her lip like it burned her.

“You fuck with me; I fuck with you.” I cupped her chin gently and dropped my gaze to her mouth just long enough for her lips to part—for her to tell me without words that even if she hated me, I still affected her. “Now, I swear to God, if I get back here and you’re on that damn counter, and you’re painting, I’m going to kick your tight ass, understand?”

Apparently having lost complete control of her tongue, she nodded, eyes still wide and lips still parted.

I wanted to kiss her more than I ever had in my life.

And, as her gaze dropped to my mouth, I wondered if that feeling was even just a little bit mutual.

“Good. A broken toe I can cope with, but I’m not sitting in the ER for five hours with you because you’ve broken your ankle.” I grinned and let go of her chin, winking before I turned around and headed for the door.

When I turned around before I shut it behind me, she was still staring at me, except this time, her cheeks were warm, and there was more than a little curiosity in her beautiful dark eyes.

Good.

CHAPTER TEN – RAELYNN

He was up to something.

I wasn't sure of many things all the time, but I was sure of this.

Chase Aarons was up to something.

I was a little scared of that. Our conversations until this point had been mostly us fighting. Even when we weren't, we kinda were.

Bickering, really. Not fighting. Aside from the first couple where I'd shouted at him, but that was all his fault for pissing me off. Ever since he'd helped me with the steamer, I hadn't had much of a choice but to be nice to him.

He was clearly passing me an olive branch, and if I wasn't ready to forgive him for the store, I could be civil, right?

Except I didn't know if it was possible.

The plastic on the seat of my new bar stools crackled as I adjusted my position, keeping my right foot up on another. The pie he'd brought was good, and I wasn't ashamed to say that I was on my second slice after the bagel, and I was still eyeing up the donuts. Apparently, pain made me hungry.

Was it possible to be civil to Chase? He was the first person I'd ever loved, and man, I'd loved him. Was it even remotely possible to be friends with him after that?

I knew the answer was no. Certainly not as long as I reacted the way I did when he touched me. Most definitely not as long as my heart skipped a beat when his eyes met mine.

That had happened earlier. His gesture of lunch and pastries had been so kind, so sweet—so the Chase I'd fallen in love with. Because he was right. I had a sweet tooth, and it was the fast-track route to my heart.

The honesty in his eyes when he'd told me he was sorry about my toe and took responsibility for it had taken me back. I never expected him to do that, especially since we'd been arguing over it since it'd happened, but he had.

He'd said it, and he'd meant it. How could you be angry with someone over something they genuinely felt bad about?

That's right. You couldn't. That would be unfair.

I sighed and slumped on the counter the best I could. My toe hurt, and now I felt bad for being mean to Chase.

Not for biting my lip, though. I hadn't forgotten how that had always turned him on, and even though I was just messing with him in the hope he would buy me some painkillers, the heat that had flashed through his eyes when I'd done it was literally haunting me.

Nobody had ever looked at me the way he had. Not before him, not after him. Let's face it—I hadn't really seen anyone since him. I'd dated, but never more than one date. I wasn't going to settle for anything less than mind-blowing, but it seemed like that was a pipe dream as long as the memory of Chase Aarons lived within me.

And now I had a new memory of the look in his eye as he'd cupped my chin and told me he knew I was messing with him.

That'd been our relationship in a nutshell. Messing with each other, teasing each other constantly. That was how we'd always done it until we'd ended up in endless laughing fits that almost always ended up with us kissing and falling into bed together.

Laughter was sexy. There was nothing more attractive than someone who could make you laugh until your eyes leaked and your stomach hurt.

Chase could make me laugh with a snap of his fingers. He didn't even need to try, and screwing around with him earlier had reminded me of those times.

How many times had I fought laughter since he'd walked through that door and offered to teach me how to use the steamer?

Too many times to count, even if I didn't want to admit it. My cheek actually hurt from biting it so many times to keep laughter inside.

Even when he pissed me off, I wanted to laugh at him.

And that just pissed *me* off.

The bell over the door rang, and I looked up to see Chase walking in with a brown pill bottle in his hand. "That place," he said, shutting the door behind him, "is the most overpriced building I've ever been in."

"Okay, so you should never go to Vegas." I smiled. "Thank you," I said when he handed me the bottle. "Who knew something so small could hurt so much?"

"Okay, so *you* never got bullied in school." He winked at me and

grabbed his coffee. He took one swig before he choked on it and disgust wrinkled his face. “Shit. That’s gross.”

I bit my lip to hide my smile then covered it with my hand. “My machine is still hooked up. Do you want me to make you one?”

“No, it’s fine. Rest your foot until the ibuprofen has kicked in. I can do it.” He grabbed his bagel and walked behind me to see if he could figure it out.

I had fifty bucks that said he wouldn’t be able to.

I took another forkful of pie into my mouth right as he said, “How the fuck do you work this thing?”

Laughing, I swung my foot off the stool and took the few steps to the machine. “Well, this fancy thing here is called the ‘on’ button.” I hit the button that held the universal symbol for ‘power.’

“No shit,” he drawled.

“Then you check the coffee beans, which are half full and okay because I filled them a couple days ago,” I carried on, checking the settings and talking him through that, too. “Then, you put a cup under, hit this button, and voila. A cup of coffee.” I pressed the button triumphantly, and the machine sputtered to life, spitting hot liquid into the mug I’d set there.

Chase slowly turned to me. “That is the most complicated coffee machine I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“How is it complicated?”

“It just offered me twelve different types of coffee! What is it, a walking Starbucks?”

I touched my hand to my chest. “Twelve? And you think I’m dramatic? Oh my God, it makes four types. Americano, espresso, cappuccino, and latte.”

“It may as well ask me if I’d like vanilla syrup or whatever the hell that shit is they put in to ruin perfectly good coffee.”

“Would you like vanilla creamer in it?”

“You serve that crap?”

“Have you ever tasted it?”

“No,” he said slowly. “Why would I ruin perfectly good coffee with it?”

I blinked at him. “It doesn’t ruin coffee. It makes it pretty good,

actually. And it's not my fault if my coffee machine is in the twenty-first century while yours is in the stone age."

"I don't have a coffee machine."

"How don't you have a coffee machine?"

Chase shrugged. "I serve ice cream, not coffee."

I stopped him before he could grab his coffee. "Next you'll tell me you don't even do milkshakes."

"Why the hell would I serve milkshakes? It's not like I can make them like you do."

"Dear God, what kind of ship are you running next door? Is it controlled by pirates? That's the hot mess that's been stealing my customers?" My jaw dropped.

"Hey!" He gently jabbed me in the side of the stomach. "Pirates steal. It's not my fault I'm winging it."

"I can't believe people have left me for a disaster that doesn't serve coffee or ice cream!" I grabbed a dishtowel and whipped him with it. "You're running a joke of a store! Oh my God!" I whipped him again with the towel.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" He darted backward with his hands up, moving farther into the store. He crossed into the kitchen much faster than I could, and by the time I got close to him, he had a towel of his own and had it poised to whip me back.

"No, no! Don't you dare!" I hobbled back, turning so I didn't trip and felt the sharp sting of the towel as it snapped across my ass. I yelped an, "Asshole!"

"Payback!" He caught me again before I could turn around.

I was quicker than him this time, catching across the middle of the stomach, and I couldn't stop my laughter. I couldn't imagine what we looked like, him chasing me and me hobbling backward through the store.

Thank God the blinds were down.

Chase shot the towel out at me and missed me by an inch, his smile briefly turning to a grimace of frustration.

"Ha!" I shouted through my laughter, whipping my towel at him.

I missed, but he didn't.

He grabbed hold of the towel and pulled me toward him. I almost

caught my toe, so I finished on a hop, making me wobble. He reached his arm out around my waist to steady me, and I took a deep breath as my body rested against his.

My hands flattened against his chest, the towel still wrapped around my fingers, and he was still holding the towel, too. His breath was hot and fluttered my hair, making my heart beat faster.

His was doing the same. My fingers were resting right where his heart was, and I could feel it pounding against his ribs.

Chase slowly released my towel. He brought his hand up to the side of my face where he pushed my hair back behind my ear with two fingers, leaving a blazing trail of heat across my cheek and along the edge of my scalp.

I tilted my chin up, and our gazes met. There was laughter in his eyes, but it was mixed with a swirl of emotion and hesitancy that clenched my heart even harder.

I wanted to reach up and rub my thumb across his jaw. I wanted to feel the roughness of his stubble against my skin.

I wanted to feel it against my jaw.

I wanted him to kiss me, and it was wrong.

But he was Chase.

“Rae...” His voice was so gentle, but it was his eyes that killed me. They were raw and open and warm, and the lump in my throat was so thick I couldn’t even swallow it.

He leaned down, and I took a deep breath, my fingers twitching against his chest.

A loud bang sounded outside, and we both jumped, coming apart as if we’d just been caught in the act. I pressed my hand against my stomach as Chase went to the door and opened it.

“It was just a car backfiring,” he said, closing the door again.

Our eyes met.

He moved his foot, and for a minute, I thought he was going to come over and finish what had almost just happened. Instead, he shuffled back, lifting his hand to his hair. He ran his fingers through it, so it was all messy and sticking up in all different directions, then rested his hand at the back of his neck, rubbing it slightly.

“I should go.” He wrapped his fingers around the door handle, and it squeaked as he twisted it.

As much as a part of me wanted him to stay, I knew this was bad with a capital B. My stomach clenched with butterflies and my heart was going insane, so I simply nodded.

He opened the door and left.

He didn’t even look back.

I covered my mouth with my hands and fell onto the window seat. My hands literally shook as I leaned forward and buried my whole face in them instead of just my mouth.

Holy shit.

What was I thinking?

CHAPTER ELEVEN – RAELYNN

I mixed.

And I mixed.

And I mixed.

It was a good thing I had a ton of ice cream makers, because I'd given up painting after Chase had left two hours ago and I was creating it on a nationwide scale. I had no idea what I was going to do with it all when it was done, but I didn't care.

I had unicorn ice cream. Mermaid ice cream. Princess ice cream.

Best Served Cold was going full-fairytale.

The unicorn ice cream was the mix of beautiful pinks and purples and blues. The mermaid ice cream was purple and greens, a la Ariel, and the princess ice cream was white and red and pink.

Each tub came out differently. I threw sprinkles in one. Stars in another mix. Edible glitter in another.

I was winging it. Some people winged their eyeliner; I winged ice cream. I had time to practice and taste and make sure everything was right—make sure I had the mixing down. Make sure that, by the time the store reopened, I could do it all perfectly with my eyes closed.

That, and I needed to not think about Chase.

I couldn't think about him or what had happened. There was no way to describe what had happened, so I simply wasn't going to. I was going to ignore it. Pretend it never happened.

It didn't happen.

It was as simple as that.

Nope. Never. Not once.

I poured green, purple, and lilac ice cream mixtures into one tub and, grabbing a metal skewer, used it to swirl them all together. The colors mixed and swirled like marble until it was a psychedelic mix that would look

amazing on a cone or in a bowl.

Oh. In a bowl.

I pushed the lid onto the tub and set it into the freezer. After quickly clearing off the countertop, I pulled out a tub of the unicorn ice cream that was already frozen and set it on the stainless-steel surface.

I didn't have to go far to get anything since I'd moved everything from the main store through to the kitchen before I'd started decorating. I grabbed a sundae glass from the shelf above where I was working and, after a quick rinse, set it down.

It was like a goldmine in here with everything laid out. I grabbed glitter and sprinkles, candy stars and white chocolate. A wafer cone and strawberry sauce completed my collection.

I sprinkled the inside of the sundae glass with edible glitter, then scooped three balls of unicorn ice cream into it. I kept it chilled while I melted white chocolate in a glass bowl over hot water on the stove, then dipped a cone into it. In turn, the cone went into a bowl of candy stars, and I drizzled a small amount of the cooling chocolate over the sundae, sprinkling it with glitter and stars in turn.

Then, I added the cone on top, giving it a unicorn horn.

Stepping back, I surveyed my handiwork.

It wasn't the best I'd ever made, but the idea was there. It just needed some work. The cone was too big, for a start, and it could really do with some ears.

I wondered if I could buy the ears. They'd have to be icing, and that wasn't something I was great with. I grabbed my phone and made a quick note to search online for those later when I was home.

"Hello?" Sophie's voice came from the other room.

"Hello?"

So did Jessie's.

I limped through to the store and grinned. "Just the little girl I was hoping would drop by. I have something I want you to try."

She looked around the store, horrified. "Where is everything?"

"I told you Rae is redecorating." Sophie guided her in and pushed the door shut behind her. She looked at me. "What did you make?"

I held up a finger and grabbed the sundae—plus spoon—from the back.

“Here. What do you think of this?”

The expression of wonder that crossed her face was something equal to how I imagined I’d look if I were ever able to meet, I don’t know, Joe Kenda from Homicide Hunter or something.

What? I’d be dead if I met him.

“Is dat a unicorn?” Jess never took her eyes off the sundae.

“Sure is. I just made it, and I want you to try it with me. Think you can do that?”

She glanced back at Sophie. “Auntie Sophie? Can I?”

Soph nodded. “Just this once, and not all of it, because your mommy will be mad at me if you don’t eat your dinner tonight.”

True that. Sophie’s sister was strict.

Sophie was not. God help her kids when she had them.

I put the sundae up on the tall counter, and Soph lifted Jess up to sit on one of the still-covered stools. She took the spoon enthusiastically and dug right into the dessert.

Her squeal of delight as she stuck the spoon in for a second mouthful was all I needed to know.

I’d nailed it.

“What is it? Is it a unicorn?” Sophie moved closer to me as I stepped back, keeping a careful eye on her niece.

“Technically,” I said slowly. “But it needs work.”

She nodded. “It’s cute, though. You’re definitely moving in the right direction. Here, give me your phone.” She held out her hand.

“Why?”

“Instagram. Get a picture of Jess hiding her face and tucking into one of your new test sundaes.”

“It’s in the kitchen. Won’t your sister freak at her face being on the internet?”

Sophie came back out with my phone in her hand. She typed in my passcode and answered with a shake of her head. “It’s all about the angle. See?”

I leaned in behind her as she took the photo. Jessie’s face was

completely obstructed by her hair, but you could see the sundae perfect.

“Now, we edit...” She edited it so it had a blur around it, concealing Jess even more, but putting full focus on the ice cream. “The lighting isn’t great, but we can explain that.”

She was talking a foreign language. I was going to hire a translator.

“Here.” She shoved the phone back at me. “Read that caption. Seem okay?”

I took the phone and looked down at what she’d written.

The first TOP SECRET taste test for our new menu is happening today at BEST SERVED COLD mid-renovation! Who doesn’t have a four-year-old as their test audience?

She added a few hashtags that she’d obviously researched because when I posted it at her push, the account already had over one hundred followers.

“How the hell did that happen?” I asked, looking up at her.

She shrugged. “Social media. You need to post a few times a day. I saved the hashtags into your Notes. Copy and paste them on every new post, okay?”

“Finished!” Jess spun and grinned as she slid off the stool with a thud to the floor. The area around her mouth was a mess of purple and pink, and the dish was completely empty.

“Oh, Jesus,” Sophie said. “Rae, you’ve gotta learn how to promote this place. Do it for me, because I’m about to get my ass kicked.”

I tossed her a cloth from the sink and walked over to the empty dish. “Should I take a photo of this? To say the test went well or something?”

Sophie winked as she wiped Jessie’s face. “Now you’re getting it. I’ll make a marketer out of you yet.”

I rolled my eyes and angled my phone to take the photo from above. The remnants of the ice cream was melted and mixed with the chocolate. A few stars were left floating, and there was a tiny piece of the end of the waffle cone sitting there, too.

It was a melted unicorn.

I giggled, then stopped.

Holy crap. I had its name.

“The Melted Unicorn!” I shouted, spinning and pointing my phone at Sophie. “The Melted Unicorn! Look!”

She peered into the glass and burst into laughter. “Perfect. Now you can announce the name publicly!”

I took the photo, finally, and edited the lighting. I added the caption of, “*The first taste test went well! The Melted Unicorn, coming soon to BEST SERVED COLD!*” then added the hashtags and posted it.

“There ya go. You’re getting it.” Sophie took Jessie’s hand. “We have to go and work off some of that sugar, but keep going. You got this, Rae. Broken toe and all.”

I waved them goodbye. The second the door clicked shut, I took a deep breath. Today had been a roller coaster ride, but it was amazing how something could click into place so easily in just a second of inspiration.

And inspiration was now something I was full of.

I headed to the back to do some more research without a single thought of Chase and the almost-kiss crossing my mind.

CHASE: You have an Instagram for the store?

The text popped up as I was halfway through trawling the internet for mermaid tail molds. It was that, or I’d have to up my game and make waffle bras for the sundaes, and that seemed like a lot of screwing around.

Or I could make them tails in banana split dishes. Hmm...

I grabbed my phone to text him back.

ME: Me and my coffee machine.

CHASE: Ha. You’re so funny. You should have been a comedian.

I agreed.

ME: You don't have an Instagram?

CHASE: This isn't like your coffee machine. You only got one this week. You can't pull that card on me.

ME: That's a no.

CHASE: I don't want an Instagram. I have enough on my plate.

ME: Like buying a coffee machine?

CHASE: Yes. That's my priority. Buy a coffee machine.

ME: And learn how to make milkshakes before my new store puts your ass out of business.

He didn't reply right away, and I wondered if I'd gone one text too far. I was ready to go back to my browsing when my phone lit up with his next message.

CHASE: I have lots of skills. I'm sure I'd survive.

I frowned at the screen. What the hell did he mean by that?

ME: What does that mean?

CHASE: It means that if your milkshake brings all the boys to your yard, then I'm okay with that.

ME: I don't have a yard.

CHASE: You don't have to be so literal.

ME: You have to be marginally accurate if you're telling me you won't be my competition anymore.

CHASE: I'm only your competition because I stole your ideas.

Holy shit.

He admitted it.

I never, ever thought I would hear him say those words. I never thought

I'd ever hear him say that he'd stolen my ideas. I knew he had, but that didn't mean it was true. I mean, I'd never technically looked at his menu. All I knew was what Sophie told me.

My heart pounded against my chest. This was the admission I didn't actually think I wanted.

It hurt more than I thought it would.

To know, for sure, one hundred percent, that he'd taken all my plans without a shadow of a doubt really fucking hurt.

I might have broken his heart, but his betrayal had gone deeper than that.

ME: I don't think I can talk to you right now.

And it was the damn truth. Just when I thought we might find a civil middle ground, the universe proved me wrong. Just like it had when I thought I'd found someone who I could trust with my dreams.

CHASE: I didn't—shit.

CHASE: Rae, I'm sorry.

I closed my laptop and tossed my phone. It slid off the bed onto today's dirty clothes, but I didn't care. It could stay there. I didn't care if he had more to say. I didn't want to hear it right now. Not another damn word.

Instead, I rolled onto my side and stared at my closed curtains.

What the hell did I do with this information?

CHAPTER TWELVE – CHASE

I replaced the empty tub of peach ice cream in the front display counter and pulled off the lid, throwing it in the trash.

Twenty-four hours.

It'd been just over a day since I'd told Rae that I'd stolen her ideas. When she didn't reply to my apology, I decided to leave it. She wasn't going to accept it. She was stubborn, and after the moment in her store, I knew I was done for.

Now, there was no way she'd ever forgive me.

I moved my way along the counter, refreshing the strawberry tub before moving to the decorations and sauces. I went through the motions on autopilot until everything was full and fresh and perfect ready for opening.

Which was still an hour away.

I sighed and slumped against the counter. Marnie was back cleaning the storeroom and kitchen, and she'd yell if I went back there to try to help.

I didn't know what the fuck I was supposed to do now. I thought Rae would accept the admission and move on. I was so fucking stupid where she was concerned.

She could hold a grudge better than anyone I knew.

Which was why I didn't trust the fact she was standing in front of my glass door, knocking on it.

Slowly, I got up and walked over to it. The key clicked in the lock as I twisted it, and I pulled it open, looking at a very fresh-faced Raelynn Fortune with a high ponytail that swung when she looked up at me and smiled. "Can I come in?"

"You can," I replied slowly, stepping aside. I shut the door and locked it again. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Sweet as pie with a smile that could rot teeth, she said, "I came to see just how much you stole from me."

Ouch.

"I deserved that." I put my hands in my pockets.

“You did.” Her tone was short, sharp, and clipped, all pretense of niceties gone. She was over that already, and I should have known the ice queen would have rebuilt her fucking castle.

She walked around the store without limping, apparently now able to put some weight on her toe. I noticed that she chose to rest on her heel whenever she stopped, and she was still in flip-flops with those toes strapped.

Knowing her, she was putting herself through pain for the sake of pride.

“Color scheme. Menu. Decorations.” She turned, pain flashing in her brown eyes. “Sophie told me, but I didn’t want to believe it, you know? I didn’t actually want to think you’d do this to me, but you did.”

What the fuck did I say to that? Sorry wasn’t going to cut it.

“Every last thing, Chase. You knew I had the loan sitting in my bank. You knew what I was buying. I guess the only thing you didn’t copy was the furniture.” She took a deep breath and looked away for a second. “Why? How? How the hell could you do that to me?”

I shifted, but she spoke again before I could.

“Actually, you know what? Fuck that. There isn’t a single reason you can give me to justify what you did.” Her ponytail swung when she shook her head. “And you can’t even give me one, can you? You don’t have a reason. Did you really want to hurt me that bad?”

“I never wanted to hurt you,” I said softly.

Honestly.

“Then why?” Her voice was getting louder, and it shook now. “Why did you take everything I’d planned for Cold and use it yourself? Did it make you feel better that I’d broken up with you? Did you feel good about kicking me when I was down? I always knew you had, but for you to admit it to me? No. Screw this. Fuck you, Chase.”

She stalked toward the door and pulled it, keeping her head down. It rattled but didn’t open since I’d locked it, and it took her two more harsh tugs to realize that and turn the key.

She yanked the door open then stopped, one foot on the sidewalk. “I hope the next time I see your face is when you’re closing this place down.”

She didn’t even look at me as she said it.

The door slammed with a finality that echoed off the cold, tiled floor.

My heart sank to my stomach, and I wanted to throw up. I felt

physically fucking sick at the pain I'd seen in her eyes. I hated myself for how her voice had cracked on the final words she'd said.

I slumped forward on the counter and ran my fingers through my hair, my forehead resting on the cold marble.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Well," Marnie said. "I can't say you didn't deserve that."

I jerked up and pushed off the counter. "Don't, all right? You think I don't know that, Marn? Of course, I deserved that. I deserved more than that, but I don't need you to fucking tell me that."

All trace of teen attitude disappeared, and she walked up to me and hugged me tightly. I took a deep breath and hugged her back, fighting to keep all the emotion bottled up inside me.

Marnie let me go. "You may as well tell her why you really opened the store now."

"What good could that possibly do me right now?"

"Absolutely none," she admitted. "But think of it like this: It can't get much worse now, can it?" She smiled wryly and headed back out to the kitchen, leaving me standing in the middle of the store.

She was right.

And Mom had been, too.

There really was a fine line between love and hate, and the line Rae was walking on was most definitely hurt.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN – RAELYNN

I slammed the door behind me a lot more gently than I had Chase's.

I didn't know what had come over me. I couldn't actually explain why I'd gone into his store except for this: I had to.

I had to know what it looked like. I had to know how closely he'd followed my ideas. I wanted to know if they'd been an inspiration or if it was a carbon copy.

It was a mixture of both, but close enough that it hurt.

It really, really fucking hurt.

Hot tears burned the back of my eyes, and it took everything I had to keep them inside. I didn't want to cry. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of making me cry, whether he'd know it or not.

I'd know. I'd know that he made me cry, and that would be enough.

I locked the door to the store and pulled the blind over the window that covered the top half of it. Leaning back, my butt almost hit the handle as I covered my mouth and nose with my hands.

I shut my eyes to stop any tears.

Why the hell did it hurt so much? I didn't even care about that design anymore. It had never truly been me. It had been something I thought people wanted, and as right as I'd obviously been, I'd never really loved it.

Not how I loved my new ideas.

Why did the tears still sting my eyes? I was over him. I wasn't over this, but I was over him. I didn't care if my body reacted to him. I didn't. I didn't want it to. I didn't like him. I hated him.

Did I?

Yes.

I did. That's why I was crying. I was angry. They were angry tears. Big, fat, hot angry tears that dripped right off my chin and onto the floor.

Shit. When did that happen?

I swiped over my cheeks and walked into the restroom for customers. The tissue dispenser was still stocked in the ladies' room, so I pulled out as much tissue as I could and went to the mirror.

Yep. I was looking like a raccoon.

I cleaned up my makeup as well as I could, then blew my nose and threw the tissues in the trash. I could sit here and cry on the floor all day long, or I could wipe my tears and get the hell on with it.

My foot was sore, sure, and there were a million things I needed to do, but right now, I just wanted to see if my idea for a mermaid banana split would work. I needed to focus creatively.

Mostly, because if it worked, it would be a big fuck you to the idiot next door.

Maybe that wasn't the best reason to be creative, but personally, I didn't see a little revenge being served up creatively as a bad thing.

I got revenge and an emotional outlet. Win-freaking-win.

I flicked my ponytail over my shoulder and gathered the ingredients. The mermaid ice cream had turned out amazingly, with different greens blending together with thin streaks of purple and yellow. I'd never been so proud of anything.

I didn't allow my mind to wander as I fixed the mermaid banana split. One banana, three scoops, whipped cream. Sprinkles. Edible glitter. White cotton candy and a glazed cherry finished it, but the wafers were the real finishing piece. I'd dipped them in chocolate and then covered them with a magical mix of green and purple glitter.

I positioned them at one end of the dish, creating the illusion of a mermaid's tail. A sprinkling of the glitter over the entire thing, and hey—it looked pretty damn good.

I took five seconds to take a picture of a portion of the split, making sure to include a hint of the tail for Instagram before Sophie killed me.

Then, I grabbed a spoon.

And I ate the whole fucking thing.

I didn't regret it one bit. It tasted good. The ice cream was vanilla, which seemed so plain for such a beautiful scoop, but it worked.

See, if I'd been really smart, I'd have opened up a boozy ice cream store. Maybe I could do a Starbucks and put a secret one on the menu.

Rose-fairy ice cream.

Did rose wine freeze? Why didn't I know that? I felt like I was missing a trick there. Parents everywhere would thank me.

I knew I was already thanking myself for considering the idea and I didn't even have tiny dictators running around my ankles every day.

I grabbed my phone for a quick Google search. *Can you freeze rose wine for ice cream?*

The search popped up a dozen results on the first page alone, and you know what? I fist-pumped. I needed a little freaking good in my day.

Grandma had said to give people a reason to come here.

I had one—but now I had an even better one.

I'd have to look into licenses and other stuff, so maybe it wouldn't be a reopening idea, but something to introduce down the line.

Jesus, three weeks ago I'd been thinking about selling, and now I was considering the possibility of getting myself a liquor license to sell boozy ice cream.

I don't know about anyone else, but I counted that as winning at life. And until such time I got a license—if I needed one, and I was sure I probably did—I'd make it and eat it all myself.

Holy crap. I was going to get tired of all these good ideas if I didn't slow down soon.

With a snort-giggle at myself, I accepted I was currently the victim of a sugar high and wrote the idea down before I forgot it. My days were nothing short of roller coasters lately, between ex-boyfriends and admissions and broken toes and new ideas.

Yet, in the weirdest freaking way, I had the feeling this was exactly how it was supposed to happen.

Sometimes you needed just a little bit of hurt to put a whole lot of things in perspective.

And, as I looked at my half-painted store, perspective was something I most definitely had.

“What’s that?” I said as soon as Sophie walked through the door the next day with a small envelope in her hand. It was no bigger than a birthday card.

She handed it to me without a word. The scrawling writing on the front was instantly recognizable to me as Chase’s, and I threw it in her direction without a word and went back to painting.

“I saw him in the café, and he asked me to give it to you. I’m not conspiring with the enemy or anything.”

I sniffed and rolled the white paint onto the walls. “You should have told him to shove it up his ass.”

“I did consider it,” she said, perching on one of the stools. “When is the plastic coming off of these?”

“When they won’t get paint on them anymore. Aren’t you supposed to be working?”

“I went to get lunch.” She held up a small white bag and moved to put her purse on the high counter.

“Don’t put your purse on the—” I stopped as she put it down. “—Counter.”

“Why?”

“I just painted its base coat.” I sighed.

Soph jumped up quicker than I’d ever seen her move before. “Holy shit, Rae! You should have said!”

“I tried,” I said dryly. “The paper towels are in the back. Go clean it up before it stains it.”

She dropped her lunch on the same counter, cursed, and grabbed it again. I had to bite back a laugh as she ran with her beloved Coach purse into the kitchen to clean it.

I took the paintbrush over to the counter and repainted it. Luckily for her, I’d only done it less than twenty minutes ago, so it was easy to cover up her mistake.

With that done, I went back to the other wall and stopped when the envelope from Chase almost had me slip up on it.

I grabbed it and threw it over the counter to the other side. I didn’t want to see it. I didn’t want to think about it. I didn’t want to know what the hell it said.

Hell, it could have been a photo of him in a mankini with a mustache and I still wouldn't want to see it.

Well... maybe.

I'd send it to his mom for future girlfriends.

I ignored the teeny tiny pang the thought of him with another woman induced. I needed to pick an emotion and stick to it, and the one I most definitely wanted to stick to was never-ending hatred.

Because, well, hatred was no good if you stopped hating people. Thinking up ways to torture them was half the fun of hating people.

How did I know? I'd been a teenage girl once. I'm pretty sure I killed a few bitches in my dreams.

Killed a few assholes, too.

More than a few, actually.

What? Just because I didn't date didn't mean I didn't have bad experiences.

"Why is the letter on the floor?" Sophie asked, going to the window seat with her now-clean purse.

"I couldn't see the trash from over here." I got on my knees, dipped my brush into the tin and continued on, making sure I didn't get any on the bottom of the counter that I intended to paint a dreamy blush or lavender. Maybe both.

Sophie unwrapped her food. "I know you don't want to hear it—"

"Which is your cue to shut up."

"—But I don't understand how you don't want to know."

She was one of the bitches I killed in my dreams.

"I just don't," I said firmly, sitting up and whacking my head on the lip of the counter. "Ouch."

She dipped her head as she ate and hid her smile.

"I don't know why that's so hard for you to understand. I've been in the store, Soph. I've seen it. It doesn't matter that I don't want that store anymore. I have mine. I have this new dream, and it's amazing, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't still hurt what he did."

"I don't—"

“He took the one thing that, at the time, was all I had left. My vision of this store was the only thing I had, and he took that away from me. It might be dramatic, but I’d just lost my parents, I was losing my aunt, and I’d gained this hot mess of a store. Those plans were the only things in my life that made any sense, and he took them from me.” I swallowed hard. “I don’t know if I can ever forgive him for that. He took the one thing I cared about more than anything in this world, and he can never, ever give that back.”

Sophie took a deep breath and set her prawn sandwich on her lap. “That was two years ago, Rae. Can you really not move past it?”

I shrugged a shoulder. “Maybe I can’t. Maybe it just hurts to know that the person I loved more than I’ll probably love anyone else in the future could do that to me. That’s a lot of forgiveness to move past that.”

“Yeah, but the problem is, you’re the only person you’re really hurting from that. How long do you want to carry that pain around with you? Forgive him, even if it’s just for you.”

“Since when did you become a walking fucking Bible?”

“I watch too much TV.” She shrugged and flicked her hair over her shoulder. “I just think you should read the letter. I don’t even know what it says.”

“Ah, here comes the ulterior motive.” I snorted and went back to painting.

“Hey, I’m nosy, and I own it. I wanna know what he said.”

“Be my guest. It’s all yours.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Wait!” I hit my head on the counter again. “Owwww!”

She was over there picking the letter up before I’d had to move out and scramble up.

“I didn’t mean for you to actually read it!” I almost tripped on the dust sheets and only just managed not to hit my toe again. “Sophie!”

She made a number of faces—pursed lips, a frown, an ‘ooh’ shape with her mouth.

I watched her circle the expressions until I snapped. “Fine! What does the jerk want?”

Sophie looked at me with a sly glint in her eye. “He wants you to meet him by the spot on the beach where you had your first date at eleven tonight.”

My mouth dropped open, and I snatched the letter from her.

“Ow, paper cut.”

Ignoring her, I looked for myself.

True enough, that was what it said. Meet him where we’d had our first date at eleven o’clock. I knew that meant under the cluster of palm trees where the water came up a little higher, because we’d sat there for an hour waiting for the tide to come in and tickle our toes, drinking beer and falling in love.

I tossed the letter on the counter. “Absolutely fucking not.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” I said quite simply. “Going out on the beach by yourself at eleven at night is the quickest way to get your ass murdered.”

She frowned. “But you won’t be alone. You’ll be with Chase.”

“Exactly. I’ll probably murder the asshole and send him out to sea, then won’t you feel bad about convincing me to go?”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN – RAELYNN

I watched TV.

I knew how this ended.

A single woman walks toward the beach in the dead of night, alone, with only her phone to guide her.

There were two endings, actually. One was a murderer determined to stab her and leave her for dead. The other was a snake slid across your feet.

Both resulted in death.

I hated snakes. Hated them. With a passion. Which was probably why I didn't get along with most girls in high school.

Why was I here? I didn't know. I didn't owe Chase Aarons anything. I had no reason to be walking toward the beach like I wasn't dealing drugs or something. I had no need to be here and no reason to listen to what he wanted to say to me.

But, just maybe, I did for me.

Maybe I owed myself the answers I wanted. I didn't even know if I'd get what I wanted. I doubted it. I doubted he could give me anything close to any kind of explanation that would make me want to be civil to him, never mind friends.

But I owed it to myself to try.

I slipped my flip-flops off as I reached the edge of the beach. The sand was cold beneath my feet, and the moon sent an eerie yet weirdly soothing glow over the sea. A warm feeling of comfort washed over me at the soft sound of the waves crawling up the beach. The clear night sky illuminated my walk across the beach, and before I knew it, the cluster of palm trees where we'd had our first date was right there.

I stopped and looked at them. They cast long shadows across the beach where the moon was hiding behind them, and just off to the side, a little closer to the line of the shore where the water was higher, was a person.

Chase.

He had to know I was here. He had to know I'd come even though I didn't know myself until I got in the damn car and parked a block away.

He didn't turn around, though. He sat there, knees bent with his arms around them and his fingers locked in front of him. His gaze was focused on the ocean, and he didn't move a bit.

One foot after another, I moved forward and closer to him.

"I didn't think you'd actually come," he said, still not looking at me.

"Neither did I." I had no reason not to be honest. "In fact, I thought I'd turn around a moment ago."

"So did I."

I didn't have a response to that. I knew he knew I was here.

"Sit?" he offered.

"I don't know." I shifted. "Do I have a reason to run away? Is there a serial killer in those trees? Am I going to be jumped if I sit down and lose my only route of escape?"

He laughed, dropping his head. "You have a broken toe. A snail could catch you right now."

I hated that he was right.

"Shut up." I sat down with a sigh and put my flip-flops to the side.

He finally turned to look at me. The moonlight glinted off his eyes, making the color of them almost ethereal. "How is your toe?"

"Better," I answered. "I can walk now. It's a miracle."

"Good. I'm glad. How's the store?"

"Painted. No thanks to Sophie and her purse on my bar counter." I tucked my left foot under my right thigh, leaving that leg stretched out. "You wanted to talk to me?"

"Yeah..." He trailed off, then met my eyes with a small smile playing on his lips. "Would you believe it sounded way better in my head this afternoon? And now I have no fucking idea what to say to you?"

"A text half an hour ago would have solved this problem."

"You're such a smartass."

"It keeps people on their toes."

"I know. That's why you're here right now." Chase blew out a long

breath. “I didn’t think you’d read the letter.”

“I didn’t. I was coerced into it. Sophie read it and made all these faces like she was the lead in a fucking Broadway musical, and there you have it.” I leaned back on my hands. “She had me hooked.”

His laugh was gentle. “She’s a pain in the ass.”

“You’re not that far off being one yourself.”

“Neither are you.”

I side-eyed him. “Touché.”

He smiled.

“Are you going to tell me why you called me here when I have to get up at the ass-crack of dawn tomorrow or can I go home now?” I raised my eyebrows at him. “Because as lovely as the view is, I can see this without the stress any day I’d like.”

Any traces of amusement left his face, and his shoulders slumped forward along with his head. He rubbed his hands across the back of his neck, his fingers linking and unlinking as his hands moved together.

I wanted to be patient. I did. I was a lame-ass twenty-five-year-old—I was literally here right after my bedtime, so I was okay to leave. I didn’t even know why I was freaking here.

I waited another two minutes. The waves crashed against the beach, coming closer and closer to us. The surf was only a few minutes until it touched our feet, and if he wasn’t going to speak...

The sand sank beneath my fingers as I pushed up to standing. I paused only a second to grab my flip-flops before walking away.

“Rae, wait.”

I kept walking. I wanted to hear that he wanted me to stay. I wanted to hear that he did actually have something to say.

“Wait!”

“If you have something to say, Chase Aarons, give me a reason to wait!” I shouted over my shoulder. I kept walking. Kept wishing random stones didn’t hurt my toes.

Kept wishing he’d fucking want me to stop, because goddamn this shit. I was over it. He either had something to say or he left me the hell alone.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Raelynn! Will you put your stubborn bitch back

up your ass and stop and fucking listen to me for five seconds?”

I stopped and spun on the spot. “Oh, look. There you are.”

He was barefoot as he stopped a few feet from me. “Do you know you’re fucking insufferable? You’re hot-headed and hard-headed and if you were trying to get a rise from me, then good for you, because you did it. You got what you wanted.”

“No. I didn’t get a damn thing I wanted!” I slammed my shoes onto the ground and stared at him. “You have no idea why I came here or what I want from you, because it sure as shit wasn’t the admission you stole all my ideas!”

“You want me to lie instead?” He threw his arms out to the side. “Is that what you want? You want me to lie to you and tell you I didn’t take your ideas and that I opened that store to spite you and ruin your life? Is that what you want to hear?”

My heart thundered. “What?”

“Everything you think I did wrong isn’t true. Do you really believe I’d do anything to deliberately hurt you?”

I swallowed and took a step back.

Yes. No. Yes. No. Yes. No.

“If you have something to say, say it,” I said, my voice wavering. My heart was going insane, and it took all I had on focusing on the basic in-out act of breathing. “Don’t beat around the bush, Chase. Spit it out.”

He rubbed his hand down his face, looking out to the water before bringing his attention back to me. “I didn’t open the store to get back at you, Rae. I couldn’t get revenge for something I didn’t understand. You never told me why you broke up with me. Your reason was bullshit, and you fucking knew it. I opened the fucking store so I could talk to you. I thought that if we were close, I’d eventually get you so pissed off you’d storm in there like you did yesterday and rip me a new asshole.”

My throat tightened.

“I didn’t fucking do anything to hurt you. I could never do anything to hurt you. Don’t you get that?”

“Don’t you get that you did? Whether you meant it or not, you did hurt me.”

“Yes. Yes, I get it, all right? One hundred percent. I was wrong, and I hurt you, and I fucking hate myself for it.” He ran both hands through his hair. “But it was never my intention. Ruining your life was the last thing on my

mind when I opened that damn place. If I could go back, I'd change it all. I'd show up on your doorstep with pie and casserole and clean your floors and wash your car instead of fucking hurt you."

I covered my face with my hands. I was frozen in place. I could barely breathe without my chest fucking burning. I knew what he was saying, but that didn't mean it made any sense to me.

"How could you not know that would hurt me?" I dropped my hands and met his regretful eyes. "Seriously, Chase? How could you not know that you weren't just digging in the knife, you were twisting it and carving patterns in my skin?"

"I didn't think!"

The pain in his eyes was so real and raw that I had to be totally heartless to think he was lying.

"I didn't think," he said, softer this time. "All I wanted was you back, Rae. You ignored me and dumped me without another word. You couldn't even be on the same side of the street as me, and I'd done nothing but be there for you. I could understand if I'd done something wrong, but..."

His trailing off caused the lump in my throat to jump up and choke me. I half-coughed, half-sobbed, and I covered my face once again to make it stop. But it didn't, and the tears I'd kept in since I'd seen him yesterday burned my eyes again.

I wanted to cry this time. I wanted to let it all out so I could let go. I couldn't, though. This wasn't the time or the place. I still didn't understand. I didn't know what he was saying.

No, I did. I knew what he was saying, but what sense did it make? None. It was all crap by the time it reached my ears.

"Don't blame it on me!" My voice was stronger than I felt, once again, adrenaline pumping through my veins like it was my backbone. "You made the choice to open that store! You made the choice to hurt me!"

"No, I didn't. I mean, I did. I opened it, but I didn't mean to hurt you. Jesus, fuck, listen to me, Rae." He held his hands out to the sides, all but begging me to listen to him. "I loved you. I—"

"You don't hurt the person you love!"

My heart pounded, my chest heaving. My words echoed across the beach in a bitingly cold vibration that clung to my skin like poison.

"You don't hurt the person you love," I shouted. "You don't do that to

the person who means everything to you!”

“And what you did to me? Was that love, Rae? Ignoring me and leaving me fucking heartbroken?”

“Don’t you dare blame your bad choices on me!” The tears fell freely from my eyes, all the pain from the last two years blossoming inside me. “You said all the things you wished you did differently. I wish I’d done things differently, but you—you, Chase. You fucked it up so much.”

He fisted his hair, his frustration evident in the tensing of his arms. I could taste it on the salty sea air, how angry he was. I could see it, taste it, feel it.

“You fucked up, too.” He wasn’t even trying to keep his cool anymore. He was shouting the same way I was. “I’ve tried. I’ve tried to be so fucking nice to you for two years, and where has it gotten me? Standing on a beach as fucking gutted as I was the day you told me we were done?”

Sucker punch to the gut.

“Don’t feed me that shit!” I was screaming at him now, my voice as strained as my heart felt. “You don’t feel shit for me. You’re worried I’m going to run you out of business the way you tried to run me out of it. Do you think I didn’t notice how you only really tried when I put that fucking sign on the door?”

Chase stilled, the moon now fully on him. It played off the strong features of his face, making him seem scary to anyone else. But I knew he wasn’t. I’d seen that face in pitch black. I knew the anger wrinkling his brow and turning his lips down was real.

“I don’t feel shit for you?” His voice was hard and edgy, rough and thick with emotion. “That’s what you think?”

“Yes! You don’t get it, do you?” I wanted to tug my hair out. My skin tingled. my entire body was alive, and it was all adrenaline, beat after beat of it flooding through my veins.

Chase stepped forward. “No, Rae, I don’t. I don’t get it. Tell me now how I never loved you and how I don’t feel a damn thing for you right now and if you’re right, I’ll walk off this beach and never talk to you again.”

“You’re right. You don’t get it. The store, Chase. It’s always about the store. My ideas, my dreams, my plans. You took the one thing I had left in my life at that point and you took it from me!”

“You had me!” A vein bulged in his neck. “You had me, and you didn’t even remember it.”

“You idiot! My parents left, my aunt was dying, and I had an entire business on my shoulders! What did you want me to do? Tell you to wait until I had my shit together again?”

“No.” He took a deep breath. “No. I would have done it even if you’d told me not to.”

I wrapped my arms around my waist, watching him as he came closer and I walked backward.

“I loved you, Rae. Did you think I’d leave you, too? You were wrong. Fuck—I screwed up, okay? I can never apologize for that. Nothing I do will ever make my choices right. It will never excuse or justify what I did. But you pushed me away at the same time. You have to take responsibility for your choices, too.”

He kept walking to me.

I kept stepping back.

Until I tripped on a rock.

Chase caught me, his hands circling my wrists. I fought him for a second before he let me go and I staggered back, barely able to breathe.

Everything hurt.

It was all a swirling mass of emotion and confusion, and I said the one thing I’d wanted to say for so long.

“You don’t ruin the person you love!”

Now that—that was poison. It was the poison that’d run through my veins since I’d seen him open his store. It was the one that kept my hatred and hurt alive every day since.

And now it was tangible. It was real. He could hear it for himself.

“You don’t ruin the person you love,” I repeated, hugging myself once more. “If you’d really loved me, if you’d loved—”

“If I’d had half a brain cell I’d never have let you go at all!” He threw his arms out. “I’d have called you ten times a day. I’d have shown up whether you wanted me to or not. You don’t know that I took your aunt soup until the day before she died. You don’t know that I worked wood with your grandpa until we were done on the project. You don’t know that I gave you all the space in the world because I thought that was what you wanted.”

“So what are you saying? That it’s my fault? That all of this is because of me?”

“Fuck, and you think I’m stupid.” Chase rubbed his hand down his face then met my eyes with an intensity that sent shivers rippling all over my body. “No, Rae. I’m not saying that. I’m saying everything that I did was because I loved you, no matter how fucked up it all was. No matter how wrong it was. No matter how misjudged my decisions were. And if I have to spell it out for you now—”

“You do. Go ahead. Write it in the sand. Say it.” I didn’t know what to do with my hands. “Spit it out so we can both move on.”

“Move on? You think that’s what this is? I’m still in love with you, you stupid woman!”

I froze, and before I could make another move, he was right in front of me. His body was right there. His words were still sinking in. I couldn’t move, and I couldn’t breathe.

Chase hesitated, then he cupped my face with his hands, coming even closer to me. “I don’t care if you hate this. I don’t care if you hate me,” he breathed, dipping his face so his mouth was close to my ear. “I know you do, but I want you to listen to me. I know you hate me. I know what I did to you was unforgivable, but that doesn’t change how I feel about you. I love you, Raelynn. I never stopped. And if you want to move on from this, then, fine. You do that. But not before I do this.”

He tilted my chin up and pressed his lips to mine.

It was soft. Gentle. Familiar. Warm and comforting and at the same time, teasing. It was everything I’d missed in a kiss, because nothing had ever been his kiss.

I wanted to cry. The tears that prickled at my eyes were sharp and stinging, but even as one escaped down my cheek, he didn’t move.

He simply used his thumb to brush it away.

At that one tiny move, I collapsed against him. My fingers wound in his t-shirt, and I opened myself to the kiss, letting the familiar sensation of having Chase Aaron’s kiss work its way across my skin and through my bloodstream.

There was nothing like it.

It was home. It was the place I felt the most comfortable. Kissing him was the center of my compass, the single place I felt untouchable, even if I was crying when he did it.

And I was.

I was crying.

I collapsed fully into his arms, pressing my face against his chest. His strong arms wrapped right around me, and one of his large hands cupped the back of my head, his fingers winding into my loose curls.

He held me as tightly as I held him.

I didn't know what I cried for. I just knew there was a tight ball of emotion in me that linked the present with the past that I needed to cry out and let go of in order to be able to move forward.

So I let it go. And I cried until my eyes were all dried out of tears.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN – CHASE

There was nothing worse than listening to the woman you loved sobbing into your chest.

Take it from me.

It was, after all, happening right now.

Tonight's conversation had gone from explosive to emotional to explosive and back to emotional again. I wasn't sure how much more I could take, not if Rae kept crying the way she was.

I cupped the back of her head with my hand, holding her against me. My own eyes fucking stung. I guessed that was what happened when you listened to the person you loved being heartbroken and knew you were the reason why.

I had to tell her, though. She already hated me—even if she never spoke to me again, even if she looked me in the eye in the next few minutes and told me she could never be friends with me, she knew.

She knew the truth.

And that was all that mattered to me. Rae had to know the truth behind everything, and she deserved to know that I knew I'd fucked up and that I was taking responsibility for the things I did and the ways I hurt her.

That didn't mean this was easy. Hell, I didn't want this to be easy. I deserved to hear this—I deserved to feel like a piece of shit for making her hurt.

Even as she reached up between us to wipe her face with her hands as she finally stopped crying. I wasn't going to lie and say that I wasn't happy she'd stopped. I hated hearing her, but I also knew she hated crying.

I could count on one hand the number of times I'd ever seen her cry, and this was by far the hardest.

She pulled back slightly, and I loosened my grip on her, letting my hand fall down to the top of her arm.

Rae looked up at me, and I simply stared at her. She wasn't wearing a damn bit of makeup, and even though her eyes were a little puffy and her face was red, she was still the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

Tiny freckles dotted the bridge of her nose and swept lightly down onto her now-patchy cheeks. Her dark brown eyes shone with the remnants of her tears, and her dark lashes were clumped together until she reached up and brushed at her eyes, separating them.

Gently, I reached up and pushed a strand of hair from her cheek that was stuck where she'd cried. "I don't want to fight with you anymore, Rae. Not like we have this week. I can't do that anymore."

She opened her mouth, but I lightly set my finger on her lips.

"Give me two more minutes, okay?"

She nodded, meeting my eyes.

"I can't fight with you anymore. I'd rather never speak to you again than fight with you like this, okay?" I trailed my thumb off her lip to cup her chin. "I'm so fucking sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry I did it all over again tonight, but I wanted you to know the truth. I owed you that much. If you tell me right now that we're done, that you don't care, that you can never forgive me, and you never want to see me again, then I'll accept that. It's nothing less than I deserve, but I respect you enough that I'll do whatever you want me to."

Her chest heaved as she took a deep breath and slowly let it back out. "I don't know what I want you to do," she said softly, briefly running her fingers down my side before they fell away. "I have no idea how I feel about any of this—about you. I don't know if I want to kiss you or punch you in the teeth right now."

Fair enough.

"I'm not—I don't—" She gave another sharp inhale and let it out fast. "I'm not going to make any decisions right this second. I can't. I'm sorry. I have to process everything you've told me and figure out how I feel. I can't do that in a split second. That's a lot of things you told me tonight."

"I know." I kept my voice low. "And if that takes an hour, or a week, or six months—that's fine. Even if you only decide that we're friends or just civil to each other. After everything I've done to hurt you, I don't expect for a second that you'll ever tell me that you love me again. Not because you want to hurt me, but because you deserve more than the way I've treated you."

She shifted. Her gaze flicked out to the ocean before she brought it back to meet mine. "Well, for what it's worth, you deserved more than the way I treated you when we broke up. I could have handled everything better, even if I'd only engaged my brain and thought things through."

I smiled, but the way she said 'deserved' cut into me. I knew I didn't

deserve a damn thing, but I still had the hope that maybe she thought I wasn't a total fucking asshole.

"At least we agree on something." My lips twitched.

"That's a start." Hers did the same thing before they dropped. "I should go. I—I'm glad I came. I think. But I need to go."

I nodded slowly. "I understand. And Rae, I meant what I said about you taking time. I've waited two years. I'll wait for another two if that's how long it takes you to decide where you stand."

She picked up her shoes then wrapped her arms around her waist with a gentle bob of her head. "I mean—I just need to think, okay? I'm not saying I'll never speak you to again, Chase, but I just can't right now."

"I get it." I put my hands in my pockets and shrugged. "I do. But, if it helps, I'm happy to stand here and let you punch me in the teeth."

She placed her hand over her mouth. Her shoulders shook the tiniest bit, and I knew she was doing everything she could to hide a laugh. After a moment, she straightened, but her lips were still twisted to the side in the tiniest curve.

I hoped that was a good thing for me. I could still make her laugh, even when she wanted to punch me in the teeth.

Now that was a special kind of skill.

"I'll keep that offer open for now." She let her mouth fully take the gentle smile and walked backward.

"Keeping me on my toes, eh?"

"You know it, Chase Aarons." She spun on the balls of her feet, pausing only when I caught up with her. "What are you doing?"

"Making sure you get to your car without being ambushed by a serial killer." I shot her a side look. "I know what you're thinking."

Even in the low light, I could see her blush and look down at the ground. "Yeah, well, you never know."

"I think that's the general idea of being a serial killer. It'd suck if your victim knew you were coming."

She reached out and hit the back of her fingers against my arm right as her car came into view.

"Why'd you park so far away?"

“So the serial killers didn’t know where I was, obviously.” She turned and pulled her keys out of her pocket. The street lit up when she pressed the button. “Isn’t that your car right there?”

I looked in the direction she was pointing. “Yeah, and? Serial killers don’t just want hot young girls. I’m quite the catch for a rampant murderer.”

“You’re a catch for an impulsive one, never mind a rampant one.” She pulled the door open. “Thank you. For walking me to my car.”

“Anytime.” I tipped an imaginary hat. “Thank you. For tonight.”

“I wish I could offer the same sentiment.” Her smile was wry. “I’ll speak to you soon.”

I nodded and waited until she got into her car before walking to mine. She pulled away, and I followed her, detouring through town until I watched her park in her driveway.

I pulled up against the curb and watched her walk up to the front door. She stopped, her hand on the doorknob, and turned over her shoulder. The security light that had blinked on illuminated her face, and I saw the tiny smile that crossed her face as she looked at my car.

I held my hand up to say goodnight, and she did the same before she put her key in the door and disappeared inside.

Blowing out a long breath, I rested my forehead against the top of my steering wheel. My heart was still in the pit of my stomach—at least it felt that way—but the way we’d left things gave me the tiniest hint of hope that even if there was no chance of her ever being mine again, that we could be friends.

And I’d take any bit of Raelynn Fortune I could get.

Even if it was her fist in my teeth.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN – RAELYNN

“Huh.” Grandma sat opposite me, sliding me my second cup of coffee. “I didn’t see that coming.”

I’d filled her in on everything that’d happened last night with Chase. I wanted her opinion on everything because I’d barely slept thinking about it. Yet, I hadn’t been able to think about anything at all.

It’d been a total mess of thoughts that all seemed to string together in something that didn’t make any sense to me.

All I knew was that two things had stood out.

He hadn’t opened the store to hurt me.

He still loved me.

Both of those things went against everything I’d thought for two years and changing that wasn’t going to be easy.

If I even wanted to change it.

“What do you think about it?” Grandma opened a banana.

“If I knew that, I wouldn’t have asked for your opinion.” I sighed and leaned forward, looking down at the table. “I don’t know. On the one hand, I want to tell him to shove his stupid apology and reasons up his stupid ass.”

Her eyes sparkled. “And on the other?”

On the other...

I dropped my head briefly before I looked back up at her. “It’s Chase.”

She raised her eyebrows. “I know it’s Chase. That doesn’t explain anything.”

Jesus.

“No. I mean... It’s Chase.” I tucked hair behind my ear. “You know? It’s Chase. It’s not like he’s someone I don’t know. He’s not a random guy. We have a history and a past and, I don’t know, Grandma. Maybe there is still something there.”

“Are you saying this because you think it or because he finally told you he’s still in love with you?”

“What do you mean, finally?”

“Honey, he’s been coming here every Sunday since you broke up helping your grandfather in the garage. At least two to three hours the way he always used to.”

I choked on my coffee. “What? Why?”

She shrugged a shoulder. “Because he wanted to. Your grandpa didn’t mind. He welcomed the company from someone who wouldn’t shout at him about sawdust. I’ve known that boy never got over you.”

“Is there anything in this town that hasn’t been hidden from me? It’s not like I left and came back. I’ve been here the whole time.” Annoyance filtered through my veins—was there anything I did know?

“Don’t start a guilt trip with me.” She wiggled a wrinkled finger at me. “What goes on between you two is none of my business. How you feel about each other and what you do about that is between the two of you. Now, unless you know what you want to do with this situation, I can’t help you or offer advice.

“Would I like to see you two kids get back together? I sure would, but I understand there’s a lot of water under the bridge you’re both standing on right now. I won’t push you in any direction. What you do with the information Chase told you last night is solely up to you, Raelynn. I will be here for you if you need some help, but I can’t look inside you and tell you how you feel about him.”

I swallowed down the bubble of annoyance. She was right. As much as it pissed me off that my grandparents apparently had a secret friendship with my ex, that really was quite small in the grand scheme of my personal life right now.

I took a deep breath in and sighed it out, linking my fingers behind my neck. “Okay.” I dropped my hands. “I get that. I just... I don’t know what to do, Grandma. Do I forgive him? We both did wrong. Do we be friends? Do I cut him off? Do I open myself to the potential of a future?”

“That’s a lot of questions, and none of them have an answer until you decide it, sugar.” She got up to handle the bacon that was spitting in the frying pan.

“I knowwww, and that doesn’t *helppppp*,” I whined, slumping forward onto the table. One big huff escaped me, and I sat back up. “I wish someone

could come out of the woodwork and tell me what to do with this situation.”

As if I’d summoned someone, there were three knocks at the door.

“I got it.” I slid off the chair and walked to the door.

I twisted the key in the door and unlocked it, and upon opening it, saw a face I hadn’t seen in two years.

My mother’s.

A face I most definitely didn’t expect to see.

“Your father left me.”

And I most definitely did not expect to hear that.

I scrubbed the floor harder than I’d scrubbed anything in my life.

The painting in Best Served Cold was done, and the floor was filthy despite all my best efforts with dust sheets during that process. I still had to reattach shelves to the wall and put the ice cream cone lights on the walls, but I couldn’t think about that right now.

Anything was better than the scene I’d left at my house.

My mother had been crying on the sofa because my dad had apparently run off with someone younger with perkier tits than her—her words, not mine. My grandma was confused about why she’d come home without calling, and my grandfather had walked in, saw in hand, taken a look at the situation, and turned around again.

I’d made a break for it at that point. I couldn’t handle my parent’s issues as well as my own, but of course that was how it worked.

When something wanted to shit on you, it didn’t just take a shit. It ate three currys and took ten laxatives and covered you in it.

At least my toe didn’t hurt today. Small mercies and all that good juju thought bullshit things.

I dipped the brush into the hot, soapy water in the bucket next to me and, after giving it a shake, got back to work on the floor. It wasn’t dirty, per se, but it definitely needed a good scrub to make it look the way I wanted it to.

AKA, white again.

It was therapeutic. All the frustrations and anger from the past week—and last night—that I'd held tight in my muscles was being worked out. Every scrub I made provided a release from the emotion that was knotting itself inside my body.

I'd had enough. I was done.

I didn't want to hurt anymore. Where Chase was concerned, I didn't know how to move forward, but I just knew I didn't want to hurt. I didn't want to fight with him.

I knew him.

I knew he hadn't done anything deliberately to hurt me. His ideas were stupid and his execution of them even dumber, but he wasn't a cruel person. He wasn't mean or vengeful.

Not like me.

I was vengeful. I wasn't perfect. If you wronged me, I wanted to see you get your comeuppance. I wanted karma to bite you in the ass and laugh in your face.

I was human.

I had flaws, and I owned up to them.

One of my flaws was the inability to face my emotions.

I mean, I'd left my own mother crying on the sofa to scrub a fucking tiled floor.

I wasn't exactly daughter of the year, never mind human of the year.

I knew it. I couldn't face my emotions. I didn't handle them well. Handled them a lot like picking up a hedgehog with my bare hands, if I was honest.

Hell, not even a hedgehog.

I'd handle sitting on a wasp nest better than I would my emotions.

The fact was, I knew Chase hadn't deliberately tried to hurt me. I believed him on that. I wasn't going to hate him forever because of something that had happened... Well, I don't know why it'd happened. His idea was fucking dumb, and I think he knew that. He knew he'd fucked up, he admitted it, he owned it.

There was nothing more to discuss there.

Chase Aaron's couldn't lie to me.

I knew him too well. Although only days ago, I'd thrown back in his face that he "knew" me, it didn't matter. You didn't change a whole lot in two years unless you moved away and had a fucking epiphany or some shit.

He hadn't moved. Neither had I.

Neither of us had changed. We'd grown older and gotten more experience, but we hadn't changed as people.

I still binged on trashy TV and murder mystery shows. I still ate my weight in pizza. I still drank vodka with water because that way, I could get drunk and be hydrated at the same time.

He still let his beard grow just long enough to be a little unkempt but kept it trim enough that you couldn't tell whether it was deliberate. He still had the same laugh that could light up Main Street during a blackout.

He was still Chase.

I was still Raelynn.

And, in the end, we'd broken each other's hearts.

It didn't all have to be hard. It would never be easy. I didn't know if I could forgive him, but I knew I didn't want him out of my life. Even if we were only ever friends...

But could we be friends while he still loved me?

How did I feel about him? Did I have any feelings? I'd sure as hell felt something when he'd kissed me last night. I'd felt that zing of delight and familiarity as his lips had pressed against mine.

Yes, I'd cried. But that wasn't my fault. That was, um, hormones. You know. Those ones that come out when your ex kissed you.

In my defense, it would have been equally as easy to punch him.

See? Uncontrollable.

Nothing I could do about them.

Pesky little bitches.

I sighed and dropped onto my ass. This cleaning wasn't anywhere near as therapeutic as I'd thought it would be. I couldn't get anything straight inside my mind, so the only option here was abandonment.

I had all the time in the world to clean.

I needed to create right now, and luckily for me, I had a freezer full of ice cream tubs waiting for me.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN – RAELYNN

I carefully set a handful of cotton candy on top of the Princess Sundae and sprinkled glitter over the white fluff. It was perhaps the prettiest I'd created yet—pink and sparkly and glittery, from the ice cream to the cotton candy to the white-chocolate water that was coated in glitter and sprinkles and cut into a crown shape.

Mumford and Sons' "I Will Wait" blasted into my ears courtesy of my headphones. Spotify had been both spot on and incredibly irritating with its music choices for me since I'd been creating, but all the music had done was block out everything but the lyrics and the process my brain went through as I worked.

I put the finishing touches of silver candy balls onto the top of the sundae and glanced at my phone for the time. A frown marred my expression as I noticed the three text messages and four missed calls from Chase.

I opened the messages and pulled the headphones off my ears.

CHASE: I have a delivery with your name on it. Box is huge.

CHASE: Hey. Are you in the store? I saw your car, but you didn't answer the door.

CHASE: ...Rae? Your box is the size of a minivan. What did you order?

I smirked.

ME: A minivan.

His response was instant.

CHASE: Oh look, she's alive. Ok to bring it over?

ME: Sure.

I turned off my headphones, leaving the music playing out of my phone in the kitchen and went to unlock the front door. I held it open, leaning against the wall as I waited for him.

I scoffed the second I saw him. “That’s hardly the size of a minivan, is it?”

Chase put the box on the floor and pushed it over the threshold into the store. “It’s fucking nearly there. It’s been in the middle of my floor for the last two hours.”

“Two hours?”

“Yeah. What the hell have you been doing in here?” He stepped inside the building.

I shrugged. “Creating my new menu. I’ve had one hell of a morning and started off cleaning.” I motioned to the floor. “Then gave up. I locked the door, put my phone on silent, and then played music through my headphones.”

Concern flickered in his eyes. “What happened?”

Anxiety bubbled in my chest. I needed to talk about it, but I didn’t want to unload on him. Hell, I didn’t know where we stood. It wasn’t fair for me to tell him all my issues right now.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s not—”

“Important? It is. You look exhausted.” Chase took the door from my eyes and met my gaze. “If you need to talk it out, Marnie and Chelsea have the store sorted. In fact, I was all but kicked out.”

I looked down with a smile. “You don’t—I mean, you don’t think it’s unfair?”

“What’s unfair?”

“For me to unload on you when I still haven’t processed everything that happened last night.”

Chase took my face in his hands. “Rae, the way you feel about me, whether you know what that is or not, doesn’t change the fact that I’m here for you. Me caring about you isn’t based on the way you feel about me. It’s unconditional.”

My heart skipped a beat. “My mom showed up this morning.”

He actually dropped his hands and took a step back. His eyes were wide and his eyebrows were basically in his hairline they'd shot up so high. "Your mom?"

"Yup." I leaned back against the wall. "She showed up at, like, eighty-three, and declared on the doorstep that my dad had left her for someone else."

"Well, shit."

"Your reaction is scarily close to what mine was."

"Your dad left her for someone else?"

I shrugged. "That was all I heard before I made a break for it. I left her sobbing on the sofa with Grandma. Definitely not winning any daughter of the year awards."

Chase wrinkled his face. "Hate to agree with you, but probably not. Still, that's a little left-field, and you did have to come to work..."

I shock-gasped and pressed my hand against my chest. "Are you writing me a whole list of excuses for why I couldn't stay for the pity party?"

"No, I was hoping you'd mumble something about feeling bad." He shrugged a shoulder. "Never mind. I see your emotions are fully with the ice cream today."

"What do you mean?"

"You have sauce on your forehead and ice cream in your hair."

Simultaneously, I wiped at my forehead and reached for my hair. Sure enough, my fingers connected with sticky sauce on my forehead that turned out to be chocolate—how long had that been there?—but I couldn't find the ice cream.

"Here." Chase stepped forward and reached for a lock of my hair like he had every right to run his fingers through my hair. "Wait, you probably can't see that, huh?" Without releasing my hair, he nudged me into the restrooms and into the ladies' room.

Standing in front of the mirror, I saw it instantly. Pink and red made up the ice cream that colored the dark-blond part of my balayage hair. I wrinkled my nose at the stickiness that was already setting in.

"How," Chase started, still holding my hair, "the hell did you get ice cream at the back of your head?"

"Um." I met his eyes in the mirror and blushed. "I was in the zone. I

don't really know, if I'm honest."

"What are you making?"

I swiped my hair down the side of my head, pulling my hair from his grip. "New menu."

"You're redoing it? Huh."

"Why so surprised?"

"I don't know. Isn't that a lot of work?"

"Yes. Not that you'd know."

He drew in a deep breath.

I covered my face with my hands. "I'm sorry."

"No." He stepped back. "It's okay. It's fair."

"No!" I spun and dropped my hands. "No, Chase, it's not fair. You regret what you did. You didn't mean it. Me beating you over the head with it isn't fair. I'm sorry."

He rubbed his hand over the back of his neck and smiled cautiously at me. "I feel like I deserve it."

"Just because you feel like you deserve it doesn't mean you do," I said softly, finding his gaze with mine. "And it doesn't mean I think you do, either."

"You don't think I deserve it?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. I'm undecided, but I think I should not do it until I've come to my final choice." I smiled and grabbed a paper towel to wet and get the ice cream out of my hair. It worked, leaving a bit of blue paper behind.

Chase leaned forward and plucked it out of my hair. "There. Now you look like a regular human again. Except, you know, the sauce."

Crap. The sauce. How had I forgotten about that?

I reached for another towel, but Chase already had one in his hand. Reaching around me, he wet it, then wiped it across my forehead, only just avoiding squeezing water into my eyes.

I brought my shoulders up and squeaked as the ice-cold water trickled down my nose. I shivered, and Chase laughed, squeezing the paper towel so more than just one droplet ran down my skin.

I screamed and stepped away as the water trickled down onto my

collarbone and onto my chest. My toe throbbed at the pressure, so I ended up hopping into the wall. Chase's laughter echoed off the tiled walls, and he leaned against the sink, putting his weight on it, as he laughed from his belly up.

I knew that because it was deep and low, yet it had all the amusement of a thousand laughing toddlers.

Fuck his laugh.

Fuck him and his laugh and his smile.

"Oh my God!" I wiped at my cheeks. "What the hell was that for?"

He shrugged, still laughing, still bent at the waist. "It was funny," he breathed. "You looked so cute with your nose wrinkled up."

I snatched the wet paper towel from the side of the sink and threw it at his face. "Asshole!"

He tugged it away and filled his hand with water before throwing it my way in the lamest way possible. It barely even touched me.

I grabbed a huge handful of paper towels from the dispenser and turned on the tap. A dark blue clump of stuff flew at me, and I ducked in time to avoid the flying, wet missile.

Half of my towels managed to get wet before I scrunched them into a ball and launched them at Chase. He avoided them with a deft step to the right, but the second hit him in the cheek.

It was so wet it splattered across his face and onto the wall behind him. I clapped my hand over my mouth and burst out in laughter, instinctively reaching for more paper towels.

He stared at me, then, with a smile, disappeared into a cubicle. By the time he emerged with a big handful of tissue paper, I had two handfuls of paper towels that were sopping wet and ready to use as missiles.

I balled them into one and tore off small pieces, only to ball them in my fingers. One after one I launched them at him. After a few, they ended up as sloppy bits of paper flying through the air.

I gave up. I threw great globs of wet paper at him, and he did the same to me. They flew through the air with the accuracy of a five-year-old with a Nerf gun shooting at a moving object.

I ran out of paper and found myself backed into the wall. The dispensers were out of reach, but Chase wasn't. He had a handful of soaking wet tissue paper, and he wasn't shy about it.

He threw clump after clump at me. I was defenseless. I swat out at the stupid little clumps as they came at me, but it did nothing except make them splat onto the floor in a mess I'd have to clean up.

"No, no, no, stop it!" I hit away a huge wad of the yucky paper towel and flattened my hands against the wall. "Chase Aarons, if you throw that at me, I'll never speak to you again."

He stopped a few steps away from me. His eyes flicked between the wet glob of paper in his hand and me. I even widened my eyes and added a little drama to my expression so he knew I was serious.

Seriously.

Hollywood needed someone like me.

I was wasted in Key West.

Jennifer Garner, eat yo heart out.

Chase took a step toward me, fingers clenching around the tissue paper.

"I swear—" I held up a finger. "I will never speak to you again! I mean it!"

He shrugged, and instead of throwing it at me, planted it right in my face.

My jaw dropped, my mouth forming an 'o' in shock as the ice-cold water trickled out from the paper over my face.

It was fucking freezing.

I peeled the paper from my face and threw it to the floor with a slap. "What the hell?"

"You said don't throw it." His eyes danced with laughter. "I didn't throw it."

"You little—" I launched myself at him, balling my hands into fists. I got a few lame-ass thumps into his chest before he grabbed hold of my hands, laughing through everything I chucked his way.

"Whoa, spitfire. Calm your ass down."

"Dick! Jerkface! Asshole! Douchemonkey!"

He laughed no matter how many insults I tossed his way.

"Fuckhead! Shitbag! Cockshit!"

Still laughing, his fingers curled around my wrists, and he pulled me

close to him. “Go ahead. Keep shooting shit at me. See what happens.”

“What’ll happen?”

“It’s no fun for me if I tell you, is it?” His blue-green eyes still shone with laughter, and I realized how close we were.

Inches.

There were only inches between us.

I could feel his breath fluttering through my hair. My skin tingled where his fingers held my wrists just tight enough that I knew there was no escape, and shivers tickled up and down my arms, making the hairs stand on end.

Goosebumps. They were all over my arms. There wasn’t an inch of skin not covered by them.

Chase was *right there*. Touching me. So close that one twitch would have my lips on his.

So close I couldn’t handle it.

I cleared my throat and stepped back, dropping my arms. He slowly let go of my wrists, letting his fingertips trail across my skin as he released me. I fought against the shiver that threatened to wrack my body.

I couldn’t let him see how badly he affected me, especially when I still didn’t know what to do with him right now.

“I hope you’re going to clean this up.” I folded my arms and raised my eyebrow. “Since you started this.”

“You threw the first bit of tissue!”

“You squeezed water down my face. You started it. You can finish it by cleaning up.”

Chase took a deep breath before he sighed it out. He even added a roll of his eyes, like this whole thing was just too much for him. “Fine. I’ll clean it up. But it wasn’t just me. You threw your fair share of wet tissue, Raelynn Fortune.”

I bent down and grabbed a handful from the floor, then hit him in the face with it before he could react.

He wiped it off with one hand, and it fell in a splatter between us. “What was that for?”

I shrugged a shoulder and backed toward the door. “Do I need a

reason?”

“No. But I want you to have one.”

“Okay. I did it because you did it first.” Another shrug. “Don’t give it if you can’t take it, Chase.”

“I can take it.” His lips quirked to the side. “Can you?”

“Is that a declaration of war?”

“Maybe.” He paused. “Depends how you wanna fight.”

I drew my lower lip between my teeth and ran it between them as if I were picking at a dry bit of skin on it. Chase’s bright eyes dropped to my mouth, flashing with a darkness that looked an awful lot like desire.

“I see,” he mused, dragging his gaze back up so his eyes met mine. “You’re playing dirty.”

“If you think *that* was dirty,” I said, opening the door and looking him up and down, deliberately making my gaze linger on his groin area. “Then you’re about to get a goddamn shock.”

“I look forward to it.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN – CHASE

And I did. I looked forward to it.

If Rae was messing with me, she wasn't hating me. Every second she spoke to me was a second closer to her keeping me in her life. I didn't give a fuck how I was in it, just that I was.

Every moment we spent together solidified the one thing I knew. She was still attracted to me. Whether or not she wanted to admit it or accept it or take that any further, she was attracted to me.

She tried to hide it, but I saw how she reacted to me. I saw the things she tried to hide.

Every time she blushed, she dipped her head to hide it, but she couldn't hide the pink flush that colored her neck.

Every time she bit back a shiver, she couldn't hide the way goosebumps erupted on her skin.

She thought she could.

She thought she was clever. She thought she had control over her body, but she was wrong.

I couldn't control it either. I couldn't control the way my heart beat a little faster at the mere mention of her name, never mind actually seeing her. The sound of her voice captivated me in a way I couldn't explain. Even when she was throwing sass like it was her damn job.

In her eyes, it probably was.

I left the broom propped against the wall and looked around the store. It seemed hollow now that everything was out in the open and Rae knew the truth.

And I didn't really care. I realized that. Looking around the empty space, I didn't care. It wasn't like I was good at making ice cream—I didn't make it. I didn't have the vision or the passion that Rae did.

Not once had I ever gotten ice cream in my hair because I'd been so in the zone.

I couldn't remember all the ingredients for a chocolate fudge sundae half the time.

I didn't want to lose this space, but I couldn't help but wonder if there was something else I could do with it when Rae reopened. She hated that it was an ice cream store, but there had to be another option.

I liked running my own business. It gave me the freedom to do what I wanted and when.

I just needed to figure something else out.

I used the dustpan to pick up the dirt on the floor and dumped it into the trash. Three knocks sounded at the door, and I looked up to see my sister standing there with Chelsea.

I unlocked the door to let them in. "What are you two doing back here?"

"Need any help?" Marnie asked, hands in her pockets.

I shook my head. "I'm good. Why?"

Chelsea rolled her eyes. "She wanted to know how your conversation with Rae went last night. She also wants to know what was in the minivan-sized box."

"You weren't supposed to tell him right away." Marnie snorted and walked to the fridge and grabbed two bottles of Coke.

I raised my eyebrows at her as she popped the caps off the glass bottles. "Are you paying for those?"

She paused. "Sure. I'll deep-clean the freezer tomorrow."

"You're damn right you will." I perched on the edge of a table and folded my arms. "I don't know what was in the box. She didn't open it when I was there."

"You were gone a long time."

Chelsea smiled slyly. "Yeah, you were."

"I'm the boss here, aren't I?"

"Yeah," Marnie said. "But I'm your bratty teenage sister, so I'm allowed to annoy you."

"I can fire you."

"But you won't. That would get in the way of you trying to get Rae back." She smiled smugly. "So? How did your conversation with her last

night go?”

I pushed off the table and walked to the counter to clean it. “That’s none of your business.”

Chelsea sighed. “It went bad.”

Marnie nodded. “Yep.”

I gritted my teeth and rinsed a dishcloth in the sink behind the counter. I didn’t need to wipe the countertop down, but I needed to not talk to two teenage girls about my problems.

Why the fuck was I even entertaining it? Jesus. My life was falling to shit if they were my only potential confidantes.

I needed a life.

“We aren’t discussing this,” I said firmly. “It’s none of your business.” I threw the cloth in the sink. “When you’re older, you’ll understand.”

“When we’re older? You’re only eight years older than me,” Marnie grumbled, flicking her hair.

“Exactly. Which means I knew how to be an irritating brat when you were still screaming for someone to give you attention,” I shot back. “Come back to me when you’ve had a relationship with someone who doesn’t sell pot out of his mom’s garage.”

She sniffed. “We’re not dating.”

“That’s true,” Chelsea piped up. “They’re not.”

“All right,” I said, shrugging. “So, if you’re not dating the local teen pot dealer, what are you doing at his house on a regular basis?”

I knew the answer to that, and she knew I knew it. I raised my eyebrow as she squirmed on the seat.

I won that round.

Marnie sniffed and got up. “Whatever. I’ll go ask Rae instead.”

“If she’s still there. Even if she is, she’s probably in the bathroom cleaning up the tissue.” My lips twitched.

“What?” Marnie frowned.

“Never mind. Go away. I have work to do.” I waved my hand at them, and they disappeared quickly. Thank God. I didn’t have the time to amuse my sister’s nosiness today.

I didn't actually have work to do, and I did have the time, but it felt better to tell myself that I didn't.

Instead of going home, I created work. I deep-cleaned the entire front of the store, and by the time I was done, my fingers were wrinkled, and my stomach was rumbling.

A glance at the clock told me why. It was almost six p.m. I'd be annoyed if the place wasn't sparkling and smelling like lemon—or whatever the shit was in that cleaning stuff Marnie had bought last week.

I grabbed my stuff and locked up, pausing outside Best Served Cold. I didn't think seeing Rae twice in one day after last night would be a good idea, especially since I'd had to leave before I'd kissed her again.

I didn't think that would work in my favor.

A loud thump came from inside, quickly followed by a smash, and I instinctively reached for the door. It was unlocked, swinging open with one hard push. "Rae?"

She walked out from the kitchen, rubbing the side of her head. "What?"

"What the hell was that noise?"

She winced, hand still on her head. "I was reaching up for a glass on the shelf, but I didn't stack them right. I nudged the plastic tub full of tubs I'll never use. That fell on my head and on its way down, took two sundae glasses with them. There's glass all over the floor."

I pinched the bridge of my nose and stepped inside. "How the hell does anyone think you're able to run a business without supervision for your safety?"

"Starting to wonder that myself," she muttered. "I just wanted to make a sundae."

"At six p.m.? Aren't you hungry?"

She glanced up at me, muttering again. This time I couldn't hear her, and she darted into the kitchen before I could ask what she'd said.

I shut the door behind me and followed her through to the back. It was fucking carnage. Two sundae glasses had not only just broken on the floor—they'd shattered, and the bright lights glinted off the tiny pieces that coated the floor.

Ingredients were everywhere, and there was a smear of neon green across the floor near where Rae was standing. She herself had purple and pink patches on her arms, and what the hell was in her hair?

“What in the ever-loving fuck have you been doing back here?” I blinked at her.

“Trying to take over the world, clearly,” she snarked. “Are you going to help me clean up or are you here to watch while I do it all?”

“I’d prefer to watch,” I admitted. “But in order to save myself from the murder in your eyes right now, why don’t you pass me that broom and I’ll get started?”

She passed me the broom with a wry smile on her face.

“Are you aware you look like you had a fight with a box of coloring pens?”

Rae sighed and looked at her arms. “I can’t focus today. Hence why I’m still here, eating ice cream for dinner and hoping I won’t be done with work until midnight.”

I paused mid-sweep. Right. Her mom had shown up this morning. “Avoiding your mom?”

“Like the plague.” She shrugged a shoulder. “I’m a selfish bitch, I know, but it’s been two years, we’ve barely spoken, and I just don’t think I can cope with it right now.”

“Everything happens in threes.”

“Great. I can’t wait to see what else gets thrown at me this week.” She huffed out a big breath and opened the dishwasher. “It’s not hellish enough.”

I emptied the dustpan in the trash and continued sweeping. “It can still get better. I mean, from your perspective, it can’t get much worse, can it?”

“You’re not making me feel better.”

“Hey, you could be me. You could have told your ex you still love them and had them not say it back.”

She froze and side-eyed me. “I hope you’re going somewhere with that, Chase.”

“Not really. I was just pointing it out.” I smirked. “It could be worse.”

She threw a towel at me.

“The last time you did that, you ended up with a bathroom full of wet tissue paper. And, the last time you took a towel to me, I ended up whipping your ass with it.”

“Whatever. I won both fights, and you know it.”

“Did you?”

“Well, one of us had to leave, and it wasn’t me who walked away from the fight.” She shrugged and finished loading the dishwasher.

I emptied the last of the glass from the dustpan into the trash. “Try it again, and I won’t be walking away from anything, whether you like it or not.” I propped the brush against the wall and surveyed the rest of the mess she’d made in the kitchen. “Do you want a hand cleaning the rest of this up?”

Rae stood up and smiled sheepishly. “Only if you don’t clean up too fast. And I can pay you.”

“You don’t need to—”

“In ice cream,” she said quickly. “I, um, I made some chocolate fudge brownie ice cream earlier.”

My favorite.

She swallowed, fiddling with the hem of her shirt. “Um. I made it for you anyway. To say thank you for helping me with the steamer. And taking my parcel. And sorry for being a huge raging bitch?”

I ran my tongue over my teeth and grinned at her. “Are you apologizing for that last one, or are you still deciding?”

“Um.” She rubbed her hand over her mouth to hide her smile and met my eyes. “Apologizing. Awkwardly.”

“An apology with ice cream is my favorite kind. Especially that flavor.” I reached out and tugged on her hair. “Come on. I’ll help you clean up. Then we’ll go and find real food for dinner.”

“Are you asking me on a date?”

“Do you want to go home?”

“No.” She paused. “But it’s not a date.”

I held up my hands. “Not a date. Just two hungry people avoiding real life.”

She frowned. “What are you avoiding?”

“Marnie. What else would I be avoiding?”

“There’s a story there.” She threw me a damp dishcloth. “There you go. Get cleaning and tell me why you’re avoiding your sister.”

“She won’t stop,” Rae said, propping her chin up on her hand. “You know she won’t. She’s like those little dogs that bark through gates at you when you walk past.”

“The little yappy ones?” I raised my eyebrows. “Are you comparing my sister to a chihuahua?”

“You’re the one who lived with her. You know exactly what I mean.” She pulled her glass of Coke over toward her and sipped through the straw. “She’s going to keep bugging you until you give her what she wants.”

“I’m not telling her anything.” I held my hands up. “That conversation was between you and I. It’s one thing for you to talk to Sophie, but I’m not talking to my baby sister.”

She hid a tiny laugh behind her hand. “I haven’t actually spoken to Sophie yet. I did speak to Grandma, though.”

“You did?” I quirked a brow. “What did she say?”

“Something pretty interesting. Apparently, you still worked wood with my grandpa for a while. A little more frequently than you told me.”

Shit. We’d never deliberately kept that a secret from her, but we’d never exactly mentioned it, either. I hadn’t known how she’d take it that I was still close to her grandfather, and as far as I knew, he’d never found an appropriate time to bring it up.

I nodded slowly and eyed her, unsure of her response. Would she be mad at that? “We were in the middle of a project, and he asked me if I’d help him finish it. I’ve given him a hand a few times since then.”

“What did you work on together?”

I didn’t answer.

Rae’s lips curved to one side. “What? You thought I’d be mad?”

“You’ve got a bit of a track record with that.”

She laughed, dipping her head. “Hey, I know that. It doesn’t make sense to be mad at you for that. I didn’t expect my family to ignore you just because I was.”

Well, fuck me dead. I didn’t expect that.

“We were working on the bench your grandma wanted to go near the

rose bushes.” I paused. “We weren’t quite done, and it was a side project to a set of side tables someone had commissioned from him, so he asked me if I’d still come by a few times a week to help him.”

“How did I never see you at the house?”

“I never went inside. I used the side door to the garage. Not to be rude, but because we all know how much your grandma hates sawdust on the carpets.” I sipped my Coke.

Rae laughed, resting both arms on the table and meeting my eyes. “That’s true. I wouldn’t even have had a chance to question it if I’d seen you. She would have murdered you on the spot.”

I smirked because it was true.

Our dinner was brought to us then, and that gave us a moment’s silence before we could carry on the conversation.

“What have you been working on together?” Rae sprinkled parmesan over her pasta.

I tried to hide my surprise at her interest. I wanted to talk to her like this—to have some kind of normal relationship with her.

But that didn’t mean it wasn’t weird.

“Mostly garden stuff. He got a lot of requests for things like bird boxes and wildlife houses last summer. I helped him do a few, but his favorite was a bug hotel.”

“A bug hotel? What the hell is that?”

“Exactly what it says it is. It’s a place for bugs to live and thrive.”

She wrinkled her face up. “That sounds like my worst nightmare.”

Laughing, I shook my head and speared a shrimp on the end of my fork. “No, no. Good bugs.”

“Okay, but what *is* it? How do you make one?”

I swallowed the shrimp. “It’s mostly a few wooden pallets stuck together and filled with things that bugs can nest in. Bricks, plant pots, old pipes, insulation, concrete slabs.”

“And you just put it all together? What about plants?”

“Yeah, but we don’t put those in. We just construct the house and get it there. We typically add the bricks and heavy stuff when we deliver it.”

“Wow. I never knew they existed.” She stabbed some pasta with her

fork. "I didn't know he made all that stuff."

"Rae, you haven't been in the garage for over three years."

"It's dusty and dirty, that's why." She smiled slightly. "Plus, Grandpa gets all assy if you get in his way."

I laughed. "I know. I do it often. He's... lovably assy."

"You can't be lovable and assy."

"Of course you can. You're that all the time."

She flicked a small piece of mushroom off the side of her plate. It landed on the table next to mine.

"Oh, boy," I said. "That sure told me."

She kicked me under the table instead. "Asshole."

"A lovable one?"

"Don't push it." She narrowed her eyes, but they were bright with amusement. "I can ignore you again anytime I want."

I pointed my finger at her. "Fifty bucks says you can't."

"You're seriously betting on my ability to ignore you? I did it successfully for two whole years." She responded by pointing her fork at me. "I can do it again."

I rolled my eyes and twisted my fork in my spaghetti. "Yeah, but now you've been exposed to my devastating charms again. It's not going to be that easy."

"Your devastating charms? Which ones might those be?"

"I'd have to take off my shirt to show you all of them."

"Let me guess. They come in a pack of six and disappear into your pants." Her lips tugged to one side. "And, if you tensed just right while lying down, you'd be able to sip liquor from between each little muscle."

"How did you know? Oh, right—you did that once."

Her cheeks flushed bright red. "It was my birthday, and I was drunk!"

"You did it in front of almost a hundred people at a bar."

"Again, it was my birthday, and I was drunk." She shifted on the chair. "It happened one time."

"I still have that video on my old phone."

“I thought we were going for dinner, not a rehash of old times.”

“Aw, come on, Rae. It’s so much fun when you blush, though.”

Her cheeks turned bright red again. “It is not!”

I grinned. “See, you say that, but you’re blushing right now, and it’s fucking adorable.”

She jabbed her fork into the pasta. She was still bright red, and her eyes narrowed as she put the fork into her mouth. She ate like that for a good minute until I laughed and shook my head, focusing my attention on my dinner instead.

We finished without saying another word. She made a point to ignore eye contact with me, but she finally broke that—and her silence—when I handed our server my credit card before she could even bring us the bill.

“What are you doing?” Rae asked. “I can pay for my dinner. This isn’t a date.”

“I know it’s not a date, but you’ve had a rough day, and I wanted to do something nice.” I finished the rest of my drink. “You don’t have to be so defensive all the time.”

She sighed. “I know. I’m sorry. Just—don’t you think this is weird? Us having dinner when...” She trailed off.

“When I just told you I’m still in love with you?” I raised my eyebrows.

“Yeah. That.”

“No. Do you?”

“Yes.”

I let go of a small laugh and leaned back in my chair. “All right, okay, fine. It’s a little weird, I guess, but I’m not doing it to try to trick you to fall back in love with me or anything. I don’t have some ulterior motive for being nice to you. Do I wish you still loved me? I’d be lying if I said I didn’t, but it’s not the point. I’m buying you dinner as your friend because you need one of those right now. You also made my favorite ice cream, so take this as my thank you.”

She twisted a lock of her hair around her finger. “The ice cream was a thank you.”

“So, dinner is a thank you for the thank you. Relax.” I smiled and took back my card from the server. “Speaking of... Do you think the ice cream will

be frozen now?”

She checked her phone by hitting the lock button to light it up. “Yeah. Why? Are you that impatient?”

“Are you kidding? I haven’t eaten that for two years. Let’s go.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN – RAELYNN

I laughed as I pushed open the front door to Best Served Cold. “That is not what happened, and you know it!”

Chase groaned. “It was. You deliberately let the ice melt over the floor so I’d slip on the water.”

“The freezer broke and defrosted itself. It wasn’t even close to being my fault.” I tossed my keys on the counter and set my purse next to them. “Not like you breaking my toe.”

“It was an accident.” He clapped with every word, blue-green eyes alive with laughter. “Unlike the water.”

“You didn’t even get hurt. All you got was a bruised ego, and I was the only person who was there to see it!”

He followed me through to the kitchen with a barking laugh. “That’s bullshit. My ego didn’t get bruised.”

“Oh, yeah right.” I scoffed, opening the freezer and getting a blast of cold air to the face. “That’s why you’re telling me it was deliberate. Face it, Chase. You walked into the kitchen, didn’t watch where you were going and slipped on your ass.”

He shook his head. “I can’t believe I’m listening to this.”

“I can’t believe it’s still an argument, but here we are.” I pulled the tub of chocolate fudge brownie ice cream out and set it on the counter, shoving the freezer door closed. “Am I making this into a sundae or can I just scoop it into a bowl?”

Chase looked at me and without blinking said, “If you just scoop that into a bowl we’re never speaking again.”

“Tempting.” I smirked.

He grabbed a sundae glass and put it in front of me. “Don’t swear at me. That stuff is too good to just be eaten without caring about it.”

“Calm down, princess.” I pulled the glass toward me. “Get me one, too.”

“Princess? You just called me a princess?”

“Are you acting like one?”

“I’m a big fan of this ice cream.”

I took the sundae glass from him. “You know you can buy it in tubs from literally any grocery store, right?”

He shrugged and leaned against the countertop. “It’s not yours though, is it?”

Our eyes met, and I blushed, looking away. I was no Ben and Jerry’s, but it was no lie that fresh ice cream was better than anything else.

I pulled down the chocolate sprinkles and reached for the sauce from the fridge. “Can you get the whipped cream for me?”

Chase moved, brushing past me as he went to the other fridge. I bit the inside of my cheek to stop myself reacting to his fleeting touch and focused on scooping the first bits of ice cream into the glasses.

The fridge opened and closed behind me. Seconds later, his hand settled on my lower back, fingers creeping toward my hip. He leaned forward and set the can of whipped cream on the metal counter next to me.

“Thank you.” My face turned instinctively toward his.

His breath fluttered across my lips. “You’re welcome.”

Neither of us moved for a second. My heart thumped hard in my chest. This position was so familiar—he used to stand here and watch me all the time, and it would always drive me crazy.

He reached forward and went to pinch a piece of brownie from the ice cream tub. My fingers connected with the back of his hand with a sharp slap.

“Shit!”

“Don’t touch the tub! You know the rules!” I whipped around and brandished my ice cream scoop as a weapon between us.

Not that there was a lot of room between us right now.

Nope. My scoop was touching his abs.

Jesus. It was getting more action than I was.

“Rae?” Chase said in a low voice.

I jerked my head up and met his eyes. “Yeah?”

“Your scoop is leaking ice cream through my shirt.”

“Shit!” I jumped back, bumping my ass into the counter, and dropped the scoop.

Chase laughed, bending down to pick it up. “Here, butterfingers.”

I took it from him with a glare and reached over to rinse it in the sink. “Do you want your ice cream or not?”

“I do.”

“Then stop hovering over me. You’re not a drone.”

He laughed and stepped to the side, holding his hands up in defeat. “All right, all right.”

I shot him one more look and focused on making the sundaes. The ice cream had only just started to melt, so I quickly got to work. Within a couple of minutes, I was looking at two rich chocolate fudge ice cream sundaes, complete with chocolate sauce, whipped cream, and wafers in the top.

“Grab spoons.” I picked up the glasses and swept past him into the main store. I could hear him rifling through the drawers in the kitchen as I set the two glasses on the counter and pulled up two of my new stools.

Yes, they were still covered in plastic. I wasn’t removing that until I was ready. Pretty bar stools were surprisingly expensive.

Annoyingly expensive, too.

“Found them.” Chase appeared with two spoons and took the stool opposite me, sliding one spoon across the counter.

“Did you need a metal detector to find it?” I asked, keeping my face expressionless.

“Ha ha ha. You’re so fucking funny I can barely breathe.” He rolled his eyes and picked up the spoon. “Can I eat my ice cream without a side of snark?”

I dipped my spoon into my own glass and put the ice cream into my mouth. My glare was his answer.

Every meal should come with a side of snark. Just like life.

Life was brighter with a little snark.

Chase groaned. “This is so good. I think I missed this ice cream more than I missed you.”

I laughed so hard I choked on a particularly chunky bit of brownie I’d just spooned into my mouth. My spoon clattered to the counter as I thumped

my chest and coughed it back up. I grabbed a napkin from the dispenser next to the register and spat the brownie into it.

“That was dramatic,” Chase said, lips curved in a wry smile.

“That’s okay. I’ll almost choke to death,” I rasped. “You sit there and eat your damn ice cream.”

“All right then.” His eyes glittered. “Let me guess—my fault, too?”

I got a bottle of water from the front fridge and sat back down. “You bet your dumb ass it is,” I said after taking a swig of the water. “But at least now I see where I stood in our relationship.”

“Second to your ice cream,” he replied around a mouthful of it. “What? I came second to my tongue. You were never as excited to see me as you were when I was about to lick your—”

I spat water over the floor. “The line. You’re crossing it.”

“Clit,” he finished, smiling way too smugly.

“Chase!”

“What?” He put his spoon in the glass, eyes dancing with laughter. “What do you want me to say?”

I wiped my mouth. “‘Thank you for making me ice cream, Rae,’ would be a nice start.”

“Thank you for making me ice cream, Rae.”

“Without the snark.”

“Coming from the queen of snark, that’s a little rich.”

“You know what will be rich? The hospital when you’re done paying the bill for the extraction of this spoon from your backside.” I waved the spoon at him. “How the hell did I put up with you for two years?”

He stuck his tongue out and wiggled it side to side, grinning like a fool.

I pursed my lips, trying not to laugh at him. He looked so freaking stupid. I dipped my head and pinched the bridge of my nose so he couldn’t see just how hard I was trying to not laugh at him.

His chuckle sent goosebumps over my skin, and I rubbed my hand down my face.

“I know you’re trying not to laugh,” he said through his own laughter.

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

“I’m not.”

There was a screech of metal against metal, and the next thing I knew, Chase was spinning my body on the stool and dragging me up. I bit my lip as I met his eyes, and desire flashed through his gaze.

He had chocolate sauce on his cheek.

“You’ve got—” I wiggled my finger, but it was useless because he had my hands in a vise-like grip.

“What?”

“You’ve—give me my damn hand back.” I wrestled my hands from his and tapped my cheek. “Sauce. On your cheek. And you think I’m messy.”

“You are messy.” His lips twitched, and he wiped at his cheek. “Got it?”

I shook my head. “The other cheek.”

“Crap.” He rubbed his other cheek, but he still missed some. “Now?”

Again, I shook my head, but this time I laughed. “No. Damn it. It’s here.” I touched my finger to his cheek, no more than an inch from his mouth, and wiped my thumb across his face.

The stubble on his jaw brushed against the backs of my fingers, and I drew in a deep breath when I met his eyes. His full lips were slightly parted, and I couldn’t help how my gaze dropped to it.

My body’s reaction to this closeness was immediate.

Goosebumps erupted over my arms. A shiver ran down my spine, and my heartbeat picked up double-time, sending heat flushing through my body in an instant.

“Did you get it?” Chase asked, his voice low.

I swallowed. “No. It’s just—” I paused, moving my thumb closer to the corner of his mouth where the sauce started.

His skin was soft beneath my thumb. The sauce disappeared, transferring from his skin to mine, and as I slowly moved my hand from his cheek, the pad of my thumb brushed down the stubble coating his jaw.

I moved before I even knew what I was doing.

I touched my lips to his, my fingers moving so my hand cupped the curve of his perfect jaw. He didn’t move to touch me, he just leaned in,

hesitant.

I pulled back, heat flushing my cheeks.

I didn't know what came over me. I just wanted...needed...to kiss him. Just for that second, it'd seemed so damn right to press my lips to his.

"I got it," I whispered, dropping my hand from his face.

His eyes opened, his gaze slamming into me with a fierce desire burning there. He took a deep breath and let it out, bringing his own hand up to touch his cheek and jaw where my fingers had just trailed.

"Thanks," he said, voice still low, barely above a whisper. "You've got some, too."

My heart jumped out of my chest. "Where?"

He raised one large hand and cupped my jaw, fingers curled beneath my chin as his thumb touched the very corner of my mouth. "Just here."

He dipped his head.

My eyes fluttered shut when his lips brushed the corner of my mouth. I knew what he was doing, and I didn't care.

I didn't care at all.

"Did you get it?" I whispered.

"No."

He kissed me. Firm and deliberate, his lips covered mine as his hand snaked around the back of my neck and pulled me closer to him. My fingers wound in his shirt and pulled him right into me as our kiss deepened, his tongue teasing its way between my lips.

We staggered back, my feet dragging me to the stool I'd just vacated. My ass propped up onto it as fire burst through my veins.

Chase's fingers dug into my hip as he slipped between my legs and tilted my head back to kiss me fully. He had a few inches of height on me, so it worked, even when I slid my arms around to his back and gripped his shirt there.

I could barely breathe. This was everything I'd tried to avoid, but at this moment, it was everything I wanted. I wanted his fingers digging into my hip and his lips moving over mine with a hunger I'd missed for a long, long time.

It felt right and comfortable and like I'd come home.

Home.

It was that overwhelming feeling of being exactly where you knew you were supposed to be.

That was in Key West, in the middle of my half-renovated ice cream store, in the arms of my ex-boyfriend.

And, at that moment, as Chase pulled away from kissing me only to come back and do it all again, I realized that this was so much more complicated than I'd ever imagined it would be.

Because my feelings for this man weren't entirely dead.

Every second I spent with him reminded me why I fell for him in the first place. His assholery and his jokes and his smartass sexy mouth. His smile and his eyes and how he had that something.

That something special.

The ability to make me feel like I was the only girl in the world. The only girl who mattered. The only girl he saw. The only girl he heard. The only girl he thought about.

The only girl who existed.

I leaned up into him, pushing my body closer to him. His muscles were tight, clenching as he held me to him like I'd disappear into thin air. His cock was hard as it pressed between my legs, and desire flushed through my veins.

I'd forgotten this.

I'd forgotten what it was like to want someone this way. Probably because I'd never wanted anyone the way I'd ever wanted Chase—I doubted I ever would, and that was terrifying.

Chase slid his hands up my body, his fingers probing against my skin as they crept from my hips over my waist and across my breasts to my neck. They came to rest on either side of my neck, his thumbs curving over my jaw to cup my face and hold me right where I was.

The kiss slowed, moving from deep and hungry to slow and gentle. Slow kisses, one after another, sent shivers over my skin and down my spine.

Kiss. Kiss. Kiss.

Each one tasted like he didn't want to stop, like he didn't want to let go, just in case it never happened again.

Each one felt like that. Like a desperate cling onto right now, just in case I suddenly jerked away and the moment slipped through his fingers.

And I understood it.

I felt it. I tasted it. I knew it.

When Chase said he was in love with me, it was the way he'd loved me when I'd left him. It was the same all-consuming love we'd shared back then, and guilt wracked me, because I didn't quite know how to handle the emotions that were rocketing through me right now.

But I knew how he felt.

I tasted his guilt, his regret, his want, his hope, his love. All of it was wrapped into tiny little kisses that were dotted one after another against my lips.

I slid my hands up his body, pushing his arms apart, and wrapped my arms around his neck. I took control and kissed him, making the tiny kisses hard and firm once again.

Kiss. Kiss. Kiss.

Kisses that meant something. Kisses that told him I didn't hate him, that I wanted him, that I wasn't closing a door.

Kisses that told him I was leaving the door ajar.

Leaving it open until I had it all figured out for myself.

Kisses that asked him for more time, that asked him to see if this would grow by itself, to see if we weren't done after all.

Kisses that I meant from the deepest part of me, no matter what I asked of him.

CHAPTER TWENTY – RAELYNN

Chase dragged his lips from mine with one gentle tug on my lower lip. Our noses touched, our breath mingling. My heart was going so fast that it was all I could do to regulate my breathing into something that didn't sound like I'd run a marathon.

That was what it felt like. I felt like I'd run ten marathons back-to-back and come out the other end gasping for air.

Chase rested his forehead against mine, taking a deep breath. "Rae."

"Chase, I—"

I was cut off by the ringing of the phone. Neither of us moved for a second, both of us frozen in place by the kiss we'd just shared. The phone cut off, sending an uncomfortable silence through the air, but it lasted only a second before it started up again.

"I have to get that," I breathed, sliding out of his grip. I snatched up the phone. "Best Served Cold, Raelynn speaking," I answered, doing my best to get control over my voice.

"Raelynn Marie Fortune! Where the devil are you?" Grandma shouted down the phone. "You're late. You didn't call. You didn't text. You—"

"I'm at the store," I replied. "Or I wouldn't be answering the phone here, would I?"

"Don't you sass me, young lady!" Grandma was still a few decibels too loud, so I held the phone an inch or two away from my ear. "I asked you where you were!"

"I'm at Best Served Cold!" I shouted back. "The phone you called me on!"

Chase buried his face in his hands to hide his laughter.

Grandma paused. "Oh. Of course. What have you been doing?"

"Working. Then I had dinner and came back here. Why?"

"Your mother is driving me insane."

“You gave birth to her.”

“And somehow got stuck with you,” Grandma continued. “I think I finally knocked her out with some hot soup.”

Oh no.

“You drugged her, didn’t you?”

Silence.

“Grandma!” I snapped, ignoring Chase’s laughter.

“Is that Chase? Are you together?”

“Answer the damn question!”

“Yes, I drugged her!” she spat out quickly. “She was hysterical. I slipped her a Dramamine, and she passed out on the sofa.”

Jesus. Help me.

I slumped onto the counter. “Grandma, you can’t drug her to make her stop talking.”

“That’s what parents do to their children. Don’t you know how good Benadryl is at making tiny humans sleep?”

“Grandma!”

“What?” she asked at the same time Chase did.

I tilted it so the voice piece wasn’t near my mouth and looked at him. “She drugged my mother with Dramamine because she was irritating her.”

That did it for him. He burst out laughing and collapsed on top of the counter. He didn’t even care that his half-eaten sundae had melted into a warm, gloopy mess that had brownie bits floating on top.

All I could deduce was that he was high as fuck on kissing.

You could be high on worse things.

“That was Chase! You’re with him!” Grandma’s voice was shrill.

She’d been drinking. Dear Lord.

“Where’s Grandpa?” I asked. “I have a question for him.”

“You don’t need your grandpa,” she replied. “I can tell—dammit!”

“Hey, pumpkin,” Grandpa’s dulcet tones came through the line. “What’s up?”

I cut to the chase. “Should I come home, or should I find a place to stay

tonight?”

“Depends,” he answered. “Are you with Chase? Because I’m workin’ on this birdhouse and I’ll be damned if I can get the damn thing to go right.”

That wasn’t what I was looking for.

“Fine. But you make sure Mom is asleep, and Grandma is shackled before we get there. Did you let her drink?”

“Which one?”

“Either one.”

“Oh, I gave them both a glass of wine with some herbal calming crap in it. I guess it worked a little too well.”

Great. Mom had Dramamine and herbal stuff. No wonder she was out of it.

“Jesus, Grandpa!”

“It’s fine. It was lavender. They’re fine.” He paused. “Are you coming back?”

“Hold on.” I pressed the phone against my shoulder. “Grandpa wants to know if you can come over and take a look at a birdhouse.”

Chase held out his hands. “I’m here, aren’t I? Tell him we’ll be right there.”

“We will, will we?”

“We will.” His eyes sparkled, and the curve of his lips made my stomach flutter. He reached out and took the phone from me before I could consider that he was talking about us in a couple term. “Hey,” he said into the phone. “We’re on our way. Give us fifteen minutes, and we’ll be there.... Sure.... You got it.” He finished with a laugh and handed the phone back to me. “We have to go.”

That was all he said before he set the phone back on the dock and headed for the door.

I guessed I was turning off all the lights.

I pulled up in front of Grandpa’s truck, leaving Chase to park on the

street. He didn't seem to mind at all. He was at my car before I'd even gotten out, and he emphasized that by opening my door for me.

I muttered a thank you and headed for the side door of the garage with Chase right behind me. I couldn't quite compute that less than an hour ago we were kissing in the store and now we were at my house to deal with my insane relatives.

Great.

This couldn't get any worse, could it?

Hold that thought. I'd watched rom-coms. I knew what those thoughts ended up as.

Ignore that, universe.

Come back tomorrow.

I pushed open the side door to the garage with Chase right behind me. Grandpa was kneeling on the floor with his head inside what looked like a huge wooden box. He was surrounded by bricks and tubes and other garden things, so I guessed he was in the middle of one of those bug house things.

"Hey, Grandpa." I dinged the windchime that hung near the door.

He bumped his head on the ledge above him as he moved out. "Hi, kids. Your grandma finally calmed down," he said, looking at me. "She's passed out on the sofa."

"I can't believe you drugged them."

Chase chuckled.

"This is not funny!" I turned to him, hands on my hips.

"I didn't drug them. I simply...influenced them." Grandpa stood up and wiped his dirty hands on his even dirtier pants.

Way to go, Grandpa.

"You drugged them!"

"It's herbal. It's fine. They're fine." He waved a hand and went over to the small sink to wash his hands. "Your mom is asleep in bed and, as I told you, your grandmother is snoring on the sofa. No harm done. Except to my earlobes from all the caterwauling."

Caterwauling? Oh, God. He was pulling out the big words.

"Caterwauling?" Chase laughed. "What were they doing? Singing?"

“Whining. Fucking whining,” Grandpa grumbled, grabbing a towel. “Like a bunch of teenage girls who’ve been caught wearing too-short skirts to school. Like you did, Rae.”

“I did not,” I replied indignantly.

“You did,” Chase responded immediately. “I remember that well.”

I shot him a dark look. That wasn’t helpful at all.

“Thank you.” Grandpa nodded in his direction. “I don’t know why you’re complainin’ over there, Rae. You didn’t come home to handle it, did you?”

I shifted uncomfortably. “No, I didn’t. She showed up after two years of barely talking to me. Am I supposed to suddenly fall over my feet to be there for her? Where the hell was she when Aunt Allie died? Where was she when we needed her? She didn’t even come home for her own sister’s funeral. She didn’t come when I needed her. She never helped anyone except Dad. Excuse me if I harbor some crap toward her.”

Grandpa sighed, resting against the wooden counter that ran the length of the garage. Cupboards hung above it, and the storage shelves beneath it were stacked with all kinds of building materials.

“I know,” Grandpa said quietly, letting out a long breath. “I know, sweet pea. I know. But that doesn’t mean she doesn’t need you right now.”

“She hasn’t needed me for two years. Why would she now?”

“She’s your mom.”

“That didn’t bother her when she didn’t come home when I needed her.”

“Rae...” Grandpa sighed, rubbing one hand down his wrinkled face. “I know. Holding grudges doesn’t help anyone. She’s hurting. She’s my daughter, and I love you both more than you know, but you holding onto this anger doesn’t help either of you in this situation.”

I folded my arms across my chest. Was I childish? Yes. Was I avoiding this? Yes. Was I wrong? Yes, probably. Did that mean my emotions didn’t still control my actions?

No.

Sometimes emotions ruled all.

“Anyway,” Grandpa said, smiling. “What are you two doing together?”

I shared a look with Chase.

“Saving her from hurting herself even more,” he answered. “I was about to go home when I heard her smashing things in the back.”

“Smashing things?”

“I tried to get something off the shelf and caused carnage. I was hardly throwing plates at the walls.” I folded my arms across my chest. “It’s a little thing called an accident, and they happen to people.”

“Especially creative people,” Grandpa said, nodding.

“Yeah, ‘cause her head is always in the damn clouds,” Chase muttered, walking over to Grandpa’s project and crouching down.

I stepped forward and smacked my hand across the back of his head. “Asshole.”

He winced, rubbing the back of his head, and Grandpa laughed.

“How are the tables?” I asked him, catching sight of something that looked similar in shape to the ones I’d shown him on my laptop.

“One is done. Ready for your paint.” He pointed to the one I was looking at. “The second one is almost done. They were simpler than I thought they would be.”

“Tables?” Chase asked, looking up at me then over at the table.

I went over and ran my hand over the top. “New tables for the store.”

“You can’t buy them like a normal person?”

I pursed my lips. “You’re getting on my nerves now.”

He grinned.

Grandpa shook his head. “I’m going to check on the whiny ones. I’ll be back in a few.” He left, kicking his shoes off at the door that led into the house.

Chase stood up and walked over. “They’re nice. You’re painting them?”

I nodded and opened my mouth to answer, but nothing came out.

“Ah. Secret?” He quirked his lips to the side and looked at me knowingly.

“Not really.” I paused. “They’re going to be cones.”

“Cones?”

“Ice cream cones. You know, those weird wafer things you serve ice

cream in?”

“Ha. Funny.” He poked me. “So you’re painting them to look like cones?”

I nodded and ran my hand over the top. “The top of the table is going to be the ice cream, and they’re going to be all different colors. Then I’m going to paint the ice cream down the side as if it’s melting.”

Chase bobbed his head up and down. “They’re going to look awesome. Very you.”

I smiled and shrugged a shoulder. “I can’t take credit for it. It goes to Pinterest.”

He laughed and wrapped one arm around my shoulders, hugging me against his side. His body was solid, and I leaned into him, turning my body into his a little.

His laughter petered out until we were standing in complete silence. He dipped his head to mine, making my heart stutter with the thought he was going to kiss me again.

I wanted him to.

I didn’t know why, but I did. I wanted him to kiss me again.

A throat cleared from behind us and we jumped apart. Grandpa was standing in the doorway, a foot in one of his shoes, with an eyebrow raised and his lips curving to the side.

I coughed. “We were just—the tables. Explaining it. To Chase.”

Grandpa took his foot back out of the shoe and went back into the house.

“Smooth,” Chase laughed, nudging me.

“Shut up.” I nudged him back and stepped away, hiding my own laugh. “Thank you for dinner.”

“You’re welcome. Thank you for not wishing I’d choke on my food.”

I laughed, wrapping my arms around my waist. “You’re welcome. Thank you for not choking. I appreciate it.”

He rubbed his hand over his chin, smiling. Slowly, he reached out and pushed my hair behind my ear, letting his fingertips trail down the curve of my jaw until they fell away. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Rae.”

My skin tingled where he’d just touched me. “See you tomorrow.” I

smiled and watched him leave, going out the same door we'd come in.

I dipped my head to look at the floor, still smiling.

Damn it.

I was in trouble.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE – RAELYNN

I wielded the drill like a weapon.

I had no idea what I was doing with this thing, but I was determined to figure it out. I had no idea what I'd do if I needed to be bailed out again by Chase.

I'd never live it down, I knew that much. First the wallpaper stripping, then the painting, and finally, last night's adventures in the kitchen where I'd smashed two sundae glasses.

If I needed him a fourth time...

Well, I didn't know if I could cope with that. Not just because it would prove that I was wholly incompetent at any kind of DIY work, but because it'd mean being with him again.

No matter how much I thought I hated him, an almost sleepless night of flip-flopping from my belly to my back and from my left side to my right side had proven it wrong.

I didn't hate him. I hated the thought of what he'd done, and while there was still some anger from his admission that he did steal my ideas, I couldn't be angry about the why.

I got it. I understood. It was stupid, and he was stupid, but I got it.

And no matter what I did, my body reacted to him. Like a moth to a damn flame, I couldn't help it. I wanted him to kiss me. I wanted to curl myself into his side and just stay there.

I was screwed. I didn't know if it was just the feeling of having him in my life again or if the way I was feeling was something deeper.

Despite my protests, neither of us had ever had closure with the end of our relationship. I hated to admit it, but Sophie had been right when she'd said I'd never given myself any time to get over Chase.

I hadn't.

I'd gone right into hating him before I'd been able to mourn the end of the relationship. Before I'd been able to face up to what I'd done to him and

how I'd hurt him. I'd never allowed myself to think about the fact I'd broken up with him—I'd never been able to see if there was a way to change that.

Everything after that had happened so fast, and in a stupid blur of emotion, everything that had happened, happened. There was no way to go back and change it. I couldn't take back two years of hating him just like he couldn't take back opening his store.

We'd both made stupid choices.

I just needed to figure out if my feelings were nostalgia or real. And doing that wouldn't be easy. I didn't know where to begin doing that, but I knew one thing: I needed to tell Chase.

I needed to talk to him. Not talking was why we'd been through the things that we had. If I'd spoken to him, I might never have needed to break up with him, and he never would have opened that store.

If my feelings turned out to be because he was there and it was comfortable, then he needed to know that. He needed to know that I was confused and unsure and didn't know what to do.

I owed him that much.

We were adults, and we had to act like it. Especially me. I wasn't always good at that. My biggest flaw was my tendency to lead with my heart and not my head. I let my emotions take control too often, and the fact that I had a hot temper wasn't exactly complementary to that flaw.

It was one hell of a pain in the ass to be me. And know me. And love me.

Which made Chase Aarons one hell of a guy.

Still a douchebag—my toe did still hurt—but better than I gave him credit for.

I pressed the button on the drill, and it buzzed, the sound vibrating through the silence. I could do this. I could put a few holes in the walls for my ice cream lights. It wasn't that hard, was it?

No. It was just a hole.

"What are you doing?"

I turned to see Sophie standing in the doorway. "What?"

"You're standing there with the drill running and doing nothing." She fought back laughter. "What are you doing?"

"Oh." I glanced at the drill. "Thinking about the best way to drill a hole

in the wall.”

“Are your lights here? Ooh, ooh, I wanna see!”

I pointed to the monstrous box that Chase had taken in yesterday. “They’re all boxed individually. I opened a couple. They’re really cute.”

Soph ran over and tore open the box, picking up the first small one and pulling out the light. It was so cute, maybe ten inches tall, and one half of it was flat so it would be flush against the wall. Tiny little switches were just under the ice cream part of the light, and I couldn’t wait to see how they looked when they were all turned on.

“How do they attach to the wall?” She flipped it over.

“There’s a little thing that attaches to another thing.”

“That sounds like it can’t possibly go wrong.” She paused. “Why don’t you ask Chase to help you?”

“Why would I ask him to help?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Because he’s a man, and because you two had dinner together last night?” Her tone was accusatory, but her eyes said she was messing with me.

I sighed and explained how we’d ended up together. “He was just helping me waste time, that’s all.”

“I can’t believe your dad left your mom.”

“I know. She was still asleep when I left this morning. Maybe we’ll talk tonight, I don’t know. But I can’t focus on everything at once.” I shook my head, picking the drill back up. “Between the store, Chase, and my mom, my head is exploding.”

“Why would Chase be making your head explode?” She waggled her eyebrows. “Are you falling for him again?”

“I don’t know. Can you fall for someone more than once?”

“I think you can fall in love with someone a hundred times,” Soph said, sitting on the window seat. “Just because you fall in love with someone once doesn’t mean that’s the only time. How do you think those couples who have been together for, like, seventy years do it? They don’t love each other at eighty the way they did when they were twenty or even at fifty. Love isn’t one size fits all. Love evolves as you grow and change.”

I leaned back against the counter and looked down at the drill.

“Like, my sister said that when she had Jessie, she fell in love with Dan

all over again when she saw him with her. She just found out she's pregnant again, a total surprise, and she thinks she fell in love yet again when he handled it way better than she did."

"She's pregnant again?"

"Like I said, surprise." Sophie smiled. "She just told us and only because Jessie blurted it out." She snorted. "But, yes. I think you could fall in love with Chase all over again, mostly because I think that deep down, you never stopped loving him. You just let go of enough hatred to see that."

I sighed and looked out of the window. Cars passed by as they drove up and down the street, and people snaked through the ones that were parked at the side of the road.

"Of course," Soph continued. "He never stopped being in love with you, so maybe that's just me projecting."

I almost dropped the drill. "What? How do you know that?"

"You know that?"

I nodded. "He told me the other night. On the beach. He told me everything. When did he tell you?"

She shifted uncomfortably. "The day you broke your toe. That thing that he stopped Marnie saying? It was why he opened the store. She told me in the kitchen, and I asked him. He admitted he was still in love with you."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"It wasn't my thing to tell you. It was his to say when he was ready. I'm sorry. I wanted to, but it didn't feel right."

I sighed. "It's okay. Really. I wouldn't have believed you anyway."

"Exactly." She laughed and stood up. "Are you going to drill that wall, or are you going to hug that drill and pretend you're going to do something?"

"I'm trying to figure it out," I said. "I'm not exactly your regular Miss Fix-It, am I now?"

"My cousin knows one of those."

I frowned. "A what?"

"A Miss Fix-It. She lives in California and had her come to do a couple things around the house for her." She shrugged and stood up. "If a woman can do it for a job, I think we can figure out a drill between the two of us."

Sophie came and took the drill from me. She looked at it and shrugged

once again as if to say, ‘How hard could it be?’

“How hard could it be?” She met my eyes. “Where do you want it?”

That felt a lot like “famous last words.”

“Um,” I said.

Sophie lifted the drill, picked one of the spots on the wall that I’d marked with a little pencil ‘x,’ and pressed the button to run the drill. With her tongue sticking out of her mouth and my heart somewhere beneath the outer crust of the Earth, she started to drill the hole.

She stepped back almost instantly. “Holy shit, the wall is hard!”

I snorted. “Of course the wall is hard! It’s fucking brick!”

“I know, but have you seen the power of this thing?” She waved the drill at me.

“Yes! So stop brandishing it as a weapon!” I took it from her. “It can’t be that hard. You’re just being a wimp.”

I stepped up to where she’d just been and put the drill in that spot, then turned it on.

Wow. The wall was hard.

I pushed, and the drill broke the surface of the wall.

Until I slipped.

I screamed as the drill jerked against the brick and my grip loosened. The heavy drill dropped out of my grip, and I let out another scream as I jumped back to stop it from falling on my toe.

Except the case for the drill was on the floor, and that was where my good foot had landed. The plastic case went flying across the floor, taking me with it, and it took everything I had to grab hold of the counter so I didn’t hit the floor and break my spine or something.

The door slammed open just as I stopped myself from hitting the tiles. Chase rushed in and stopped dead, his eyes instantly falling to me. I was gripping the counter for dear life and had my right leg outstretched to protect my toe.

“I heard a drill, then a bang, and a lot of screaming,” he said slowly. “But now, I realize I should have expected to come in here and see this.”

“Walls are hard,” I replied lamely, finally setting my foot down and standing up straight. “Um. Sophie couldn’t do it either.” I pointed at her.

Not that she could say anything. She was laughing so hard tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Did she almost fall over like you?” Chase’s eyes lit up. “Why are you incapable of doing any kind of handiwork?”

“Do I look like a builder?”

“No, you look like a walking liability.” He laughed and picked up the drill. He pressed the button a few times to confirm it was working, then picked up the case and put them both on the counter. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Just.” I smoothed out the skirt of the dress I’d put on this morning. “But I think I might need some help with the drill.”

He bent over on the counter and laughed.

“I need to go,” Sophie wheezed through giggles. “I have to get back to work.” She grabbed her purse and left, still laughing like hell.

Some best friend she was.

Although, if it were the other way around, I’d probably be peeing myself, too.

“Do you want me to help you?” Chase’s hand brushed across my back as he walked around me. “My store is dead. I’ve had one customer all morning because they’re at that stupid festival thing on the beach. I’ll close up and come to help you.”

I waved my hand. “No, it’s fine. Don’t close. I can call Grandpa.”

“He’s working on your tables today. What part of one customer didn’t you understand?” His eyes still shone, but now with laughter. “Seriously. Give me five minutes, and I’ll be right back, okay?”

Sighing, I nodded. “Okay. Thank you. I don’t want to think about what damage I could cause with that thing.”

He backed toward the door, grinning. “I’m a little more worried about what you can do to yourself with it, and I kinda like you just the way you are.”

I blushed as he left and turned to his store.

Damn it.

“Bailing you out is becoming a habit. One more time and I’m going to rent a suit of armor.” Chase blew in the hole he’d just drilled, and dust went flying.

“Why? Because you’re my knight in shining armor?” I snorted and put another grape in my mouth.

He turned, holding his arms out to the sides. “One of us is drilling your holes. The other is—what? What did I say?”

I bit the inside of my cheek. “Nothing. Carry on.”

He started to talk, then stopped. “It’s because I said ‘drilling your holes,’ isn’t it?”

“Little bit.”

“Are you an adult woman or a teenage boy?”

I thought about that for a second and then said, “An adult woman with an inner teenage boy.”

Chase stared at me for a second then burst out laughing. “That’s about the answer I expect. How about I rephrase and say, ‘I’m drilling holes for you?’”

“Better.” I nodded. “Thank you.”

“Although I’m totally down to drill your holes should the opportunity arise.”

I covered my face with my hands and bent forward. Oh my God. “I can’t believe you just said that.”

“Hey, you’re the one who turned an innocent comment sexual. You’re the one who has a dirty mind.”

“You realized what I was thinking. That gives you a dirty mind, too.”

“Correct.” He pointed the drill at me. “Mine is probably dirtier.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Are you thinking about me screwing you up against this wall right now?”

My cheeks flushed. “No.”

Chase held out his hands. “Dirtier. I’m definitely thinking about that.”

My lips parted into an ‘o.’ “You can’t think that!”

“Why not?”

“Because!”

He waited for me to elaborate. I didn’t.

He set the drill on the counter and laughed. “Wow, now I get why. Your explanation was gold.”

I threw a grape at him, only for him to catch it and pop it into his mouth with a grin. “You know why. It’s weird.”

“I’m gonna humor you.” He rested against the counter and put one hand on his hip. “Why is it weird that I’m thinking about screwing you against a wall? It wouldn’t be the first time.”

I blushed from head to toe. I fucking swear. “Chase!” I threw another grape. “Stop it!”

“Why?” He laughed. “You don’t want to hear more about how I’d pick you up and—”

“La la la la!” I put my fingers in my ears and got up, walking away from him. “La la la la!”

“Rae!” His laughter made it through my attempts at blocking him out. “Rae!”

He caught me in the kitchen and pulled my fingers out of my ears. His laughter was deep and low and rich, and goosebumps immediately erupted all over my skin.

Our eyes met, and I pouted. “What?”

He paused, trying to control his laughter if the brightness of his eyes was anything to go by. “I’m messing with you, babe.”

“So you aren’t thinking that?”

“Oh no. I am. I’m definitely thinking about it.”

“Then how are you messing with me?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t have to tell you. I just...I forget sometimes. I forget this isn’t what it used to be.”

A lump formed in my throat. “It’s okay. You’re not pissing me off; you’re just embarrassing the heck out of me.”

He paused. “Rae, you once got your period in the middle of sex, and you’re embarrassed about this?”

Shit. I’d forgotten that. “Um. Well, now I’m embarrassed about the period thing.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not.”

“You’re right. I’m not.” He grinned. “Listen—I’m not going to apologize for being stupidly attracted to you. It kinda comes with the territory of being crazy in love with you. But if that makes you uncomfortable, I’ll stop telling you it.”

“No. It doesn’t. I mean—you don’t have to.” I took a deep breath and let it go.

We were so close. I moved even closer as my heart picked up a little, and I tilted my head back to look into his eyes.

They were beautiful. Fucking unfairly so. They were so bright and perfect, the color of the eyes of princes in fairy tales.

You could drown in them.

I knew.

I’d done it a thousand and one times.

He watched me, questions in his eyes. Hesitance was the most prevalent emotion—and I swear, he was afraid of what I was going to say.

“I don’t hate you,” I said quickly but quietly. “I feel...something, Chase, but I don’t know what. I don’t know if it’s just because you’re here and there’s...this...and it’s safe and comfortable and familiar or because there are real emotions left inside me that I’m just acknowledging.”

He didn’t say anything.

“I want to figure it out. I want to know how I feel about you for real, but all the issues we’ve ever had have been because we didn’t talk. I don’t want...” I took a deep breath. “I don’t want that to happen again. Even if the way I feel right now is just because it’s you—”

“I know. I get it.” He brought his hands up to my face and cupped it. “I know, Rae. And I don’t want to pressure you into figuring anything out. I really don’t. Do I want you back? Yes. I’m not gonna lie to you, babe. I wish you could look me in the eye right now and tell me that you want to give us another try, but I’m not going to force you into any decisions right now.”

I nodded, swallowing hard.

“But I’m not gonna change how I am with you. This is the only way I know how to be with you. I’m not gonna stop messing with you. I’m gonna fuck with you until you have no choice but to kiss me to shut me up.” His lips

twitched.

“You’re a giant pain in the ass, Chase Aarons.”

“I know. But so are you, and here I am.” He winked, brushing his thumbs over my cheeks. “But, in case you need any help to decide how you feel...”

I knew what he was going to do before his lips touched mine. I knew he was going to kiss me because that was the one thing he could do. It was the only tool he had at his disposal to change my mind, to influence how I felt, to help me clear up the mess of emotions that swirled inside me.

Kissing me was the only thing he could do, and I’d bet all my money that he did it because he wanted to.

He kissed me like he needed to. His fingers dove into my hair and his lips moved across mine with expert moves. Seconds passed as he just kissed me, and with every second that did I understood just how he felt about me a little more.

It was the same as before.

Two years, bad decisions, hatred, anger, arguments—and today, I understood something.

He’d taken everything, all the anger I’d directed his way, all the fights we’d had and the insults I’d hurled his way. Yet, through it all, Chase loved me the way people loved in movies.

Unabashedly, unashamedly, unconditionally.

And as he curled his fingers around the back of my neck, slowly pulling away just to keep the contact between our lips as long as possible, my heart skipped a beat, warmth spreading through my veins.

I wanted to pull him back. I wanted to curl my fingers into his t-shirt and pull him back into me, to kiss him deeper and harder and longer.

But I couldn’t. Because *that* was emotional thinking. That was my heart and my hormones leading the charge, and if I was going to do this—if I was going to be a freaking adult and do this properly, I was going to use my head.

I wasn’t going to rush into choices.

I was lucky. Chase understood where I was. He understood there was a lot of water under the bridge, and that I was willing to wade through that water to figure it out.

As long as we were honest with each other and talked, then maybe, just

maybe, we could pick up where we left off.

I wanted to remember why I fell in love with him.

I wanted to get my store back to where it should be.

I wanted to get my family sorted out.

I wanted to be happy. If I was honest with myself, that was the one thing I'd never been since we broke up. And, hey, I took full responsibility for that. It was all me. It was wrong and stupid and immature, but somehow, I really felt like there was a second chance being handed to me.

To us.

And maybe, just maybe, we could make it work.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO – CHASE

“How many more holes?”

Rae sat at the bar counter, sipping on a tall glass of ice water. “How many little x’s are left?”

“Depends if you’re Snow White and dated a few dwarves.”

“I’m trying really hard to like you, Chase, but you’re making it difficult.”

I laughed and prodded her in the arm. “Who shut their store to help you redo yours? Even though you’ll be real competition with whatever fancy shit you’re concocting back there?”

She held up a finger. “Are we going there again? Really?”

“If I hadn’t opened there’d be nothing to close? Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever.” I placed the tip of the drill bit on one messy little ‘x’ and started it. It whirled to life and, with a little pressure, broke through the wall and made a perfectly round hole. A quick blow into it removed all the loose dust and sent it cascading across the counter.

“And there goes my water.” Rae got up and dumped the contents of her glass into the sink. “Thanks for that.”

I shrugged. “Can’t drill without dust, babe.”

“Can’t drill without dust, babe,” she parroted in a high-pitched voice. “Whatever. You can drill without contaminating my water.”

“Remember who’s doing who a favor here.”

She cocked one hip and put her hand on it. “The only reason you’re still here is because I bent over an hour ago and you saw my underwear.”

I couldn’t help the twitch of my lips. “That may be a contributing factor.”

“Oh, please. You keep staring at me just in case I flash you again.”

“Actually, I’m staring at you because you look hot as fuck in that dress.” I paused. “But I won’t deny that you flashing me would be a bonus.”

Rae rolled her eyes. “I don’t even know what to say to you. You’re ridiculous.”

“Ridiculously charming.”

“Ridiculously frustrating.”

“Charmingly frustrating.”

“You—” She stopped and pointed at me. “You are. You are. You!” she growled and stomped into the kitchen.

I choked back a laugh. “I am delightful, handsome, and phenomenal in bed!”

She came back within seconds. “If you’re trying to make me fall in love with you again, you’re failing dismally.”

“Technically, I’m not trying. I’m such a delight you’ll fall back in love with me anyway.”

“You’re a raging egomaniac.”

“And you are a beautiful ray of happiness.”

“And you—wait, what?” She frowned. “When did this get turned around on me? Stop complimenting me. You don’t compliment me when I insult you.”

I leaned against the wall, still holding onto the drill. “All right, you’re a miserable little shit. Is that better?”

Her lips twitched as she tried not to laugh. “No. You’re supposed to compliment me even when I tell you not to.”

“I’m not falling for your female psychobabble.” I pushed off the wall and looked for the next ‘x.’ “Compliment yourself. I have no problem doing it.”

“I compliment myself all the time. Have you seen my boobs?”

I shot her a side-eye. “Yes. I’m also fond of those.”

Rae folded her arms across her chest. It did nothing to further her cause of pretending to be annoyed. All it did was push her tits up.

“If you’re trying to make me stop looking at your tits, you’re doing a bad job.”

She looked down and immediately dropped her arms. “Yeah, well, shut up.” She sniffed. “How many holes are left?”

I scanned the wall. “Three. You should try one. It won’t kill you.”

She shifted. “No offense, but I don’t know if I trust you around me with tools.”

“I wasn’t even near you when you dropped the scraper on your foot. I won’t drop the drill. I promise.” I paused. “If anything, I’m the one who should be worried given that you’ve already dropped the drill once.”

“That was an accident.”

“Exactly.” I pushed off the wall. “Come on. You might learn something.”

“I doubt it,” she mumbled, wiping her hands off on her dress and coming to stand at my side. “Okay, let’s humiliate me.”

I laughed and drew her into my body. She nestled against me as if she were made for me. Her ass curved perfectly into my hips, and the gentle sweep of her back flattened against my stomach and chest like a missing puzzle piece.

“Wrap your hand around the handle,” I said, raising her hand to it. “And hold onto it. Tight.”

“I think I can figure that out.”

“Remember who dropped the drill.”

She sniffed. “I didn’t expect the wall to be so hard.”

“Rae, it’s fucking brick. Not marshmallow. What the hell did you expect?”

“Shut up. Are we doing this or not?”

“Yes.” I shifted behind her and lifted the drill. “Press the edge of the drill bit onto the ‘x’ and hold the drill straight.” She did as I guided her. “Now, I’m gonna go out on a limb and guess that you went full power when you started.”

She looked back at me. It took everything I had not to kiss her. “Well, yeah. What else would I do?”

“There you go. That’s why you had the shock of your life.” I bit back a laugh. “You have to start off slow. Press the button in just a little, then as the hole grows, give it a little more power. Like this.”

I guided her fingers onto the button and gently pressed. The drill whirled to life at a slow speed, and the wall cracked as it gave way to the hot tool.

“Now a little more.” I squeezed a little harder, and Rae winced as the drill picked up pace and moved a little farther into the wall. “Keep it straight and push into it. The farther into the wall you go, the harder you squeeze.”

I swallowed hard as she pressed her back against me. Her ass was nestled right into me, and I took a deep breath to stop my thoughts from going where they wanted to.

To her being bent over somewhere with that dress flipped up over her hips.

I shuddered and finished drilling the hole as my cock throbbed. “There. Done. It wasn’t hard.”

Rae let go of the drill and stepped away from me, her hair flicking over her shoulder as she turned her head to look at me. “That doesn’t mean I want to do it again.”

“Is that you telling me I should do it myself?”

“No, it’s me telling you that I’m not going to do it again.” She flashed me a flirty grin. “I’m going to make ice cream.”

She spun on her heels and strolled around the counter to disappear into the kitchen. I watched her go, moving up onto my toes to get a good look at her ass.

Damn it.

I couldn’t see it.

Talk about a downer.

I finished the drilling and by the time Rae walked out of the kitchen with a weird fucking multi-color sundae in her hand, I had all the holes ready for the lights to go right up.

“What the hell is that?”

Rae set the glass on the bar counter and held out a spoon for me to take. “Fairy Sundae. What does it taste like?”

“Like fairies and glitter and fucking princesses, looking at this.” I poked the spoon at the glittery, pink and red concoction she’d placed in front of me. “What is it?”

“A Fairy Sundae. I just told you that.”

“But what is it?”

She sighed. "Strawberry and raspberry ice cream with strawberry sauce and pink edible glitter. And a wafer cut into a crown. Does that answer your question?"

I looked at the sundae then at her. "Yes, but why are you giving it to me?"

"Because I want you to taste it. Jesus, you're hard work."

I grinned and dipped the spoon in. "What, you can't do it yourself?"

"Yeah, but that's like a chef creating a whole new menu and never giving anyone else a try before it goes on the menu." She shrugged. "It tastes good to me, but that's not the point. I need to know if it'll taste good to anyone else."

"Don't you have Sophie do this?"

"Yes, but do you see Sophie?"

I looked around. "I don't. I'd hear her before I see her." I paused. "Why are you asking me? You know I'm not going to do anything but love this ice cream. I'm totally fucking biased."

"Chase! Just taste the damn thing!" She slapped her hand against the counter, and the look she gave me had me shoving a mouthful of the ice cream in my mouth.

It was so fucking good.

I moaned, putting the spoon down. "Are you capable of making a bad ice cream?"

Rae groaned and leaned forward. "Why can't anyone just tell me it's crap?"

"Because it's not. Has it occurred to you that you're just that good at what you do because you care about it?"

"Yes, but not everybody likes everything, and—"

"Rae. If someone comes in here and doesn't like your ice cream, then that's their opinion. This is a foreign concept to you, but you can't please everybody."

"I know I can't please everybody. I'm not a vibrator. Or a taco."

"Not even tacos please everyone, babe." I picked the spoon back up and got sucked in.

It really was that good.

Her lips tugged to the side as she watched me. “I thought you didn’t want to touch it because it’s pink and princess and fairy-like?”

“Yeah, but it tastes good,” I said around a mouthful of the ice cream. “Nobody is watching me eat ice cream. My male integrity is fully intact.”

“That fact that you think eating pink ice cream will ruin your masculinity is ridiculous.”

“It’s pink.”

She snorted and took the spoon from me. “If that’s all you’ve got, then you lose your man card for your inability to explain anything.”

“My man card is dependent on my ability to explain things?”

“Sure is.” She turned the spoon upside down and licked it clean, then pointed it out to the side as she leaned forward on the counter. “Your man card is issued for several things: stupidly arguing with women when you know you’ll lose, believing your cock is at least three inches bigger than it actually is, being a couch manager in any given sports season, and your uncanny ability to ignore any size of a hint.”

“That’s the weirdest insult I’ve ever been given.”

“Is it an insult if it’s true? I mean, that’s just kind of a truth bomb.”

“Sometimes the truth is insulting. Like, you are, on occasion, kind of a bitch,” I said, taking the spoon from her and digging back into the ice cream.

Rae sighed and flicked her hair over her shoulder. “It’s only insulting if you’re insulted by it. I’m not insulted by that at all. I know I’m kind of a bitch sometimes. But, that said, I’m only a bitch to people who deserve it.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Are you telling me I deserved the bitchy treatment?”

“Chase.” She pointed at my store next door. “You totally deserved that, and you know it.”

“What changed your mind?” I asked the question before I could stop myself. “What made you stop bitching me out?”

Sighing, she stood up straight and took a few steps back into the counter behind her. She gripped the top of it. Her eyes darted down to the ground, and she quickly let go of the counter and wrapped her arms around her waist.

“Rae?”

“You were too nice.” She met my eyes with a one-shoulder shrug.

“How could I hate you when you were so nice? Then the other night on the beach...” She tightened her grip on herself. “Everyone can change their mind, Chase. Even when I said I needed to figure out if the way I felt was just because you were right here or if because those feelings were real.”

My heart thumped in my chest. What was she saying? Was she saying the way she felt was real? That there was something there? That we had something again?

“What are you saying, Rae?”

“I’m saying I don’t know. I still don’t know.” She drew in a deep breath, seemingly not letting it out.

I knew. I fucking knew. I knew what she was saying to me.

And what she was actually saying was a pile of shit.

I dropped the spoon. It fell to the counter with a clatter and bounced onto the floor. The metal clinked as it scattered, flipping a few times before it came to rest against the wall.

I only had eyes for Rae.

I reached her in steps. Barely anything at all. She didn’t move. Not even a flinch.

Not a damn thing as I cupped the back of her neck and pressed my lips to hers.

She could tell me she didn’t know all she liked, but she did. She fucking did. She fucking knew how she felt and she knew it was damn real.

If I had to kiss her to make her admit how she felt about me, then you could bet your ass I was going to kiss the ever-loving fuck out of her.

And that was what I did.

I grabbed her face and kissed her.

Rae gripped my shirt, her nails tickling me as she wound the material in her hands. She was already pressed against the counter, but she kissed me back hungrily, tugging me right against her.

Blood pumped through my body. I kissed her harder than I’d ever kissed anyone in my life. Goosebumps erupted over my skin. I felt like I was going fucking crazy.

I slid my hands down her body as hers moved up mine. Lifting her onto the empty counter, I stepped between her legs and pulled her right against me.

My cock was rock hard, and I wanted her to know.

I wanted her to know what she did to me.

I wanted her to know how badly I wanted her.

Rae's hands curved around my neck as she pressed herself into me. She wrapped her legs around my waist, and as my cock nestled firm between her legs, it took all my willpower not to groan.

Fuck.

I wanted her. I wanted her so fucking bad it was almost painful not to undo my pants, move her underwear to the side and take her right here on this counter.

All I could say was thank fuck the blinds were down.

I pulled back and touched my nose to hers. I couldn't keep kissing her without taking it further, and I was certain that having sex in a place that sells food would get her shut down.

"I can't—" I took a deep breath and leaned back so I could meet her eyes. "If you keep kissing me like that, you're gonna need an awful lot of disinfectant."

Rae brushed her thumb over my jaw. Conflict waged in her eyes, and I could see that she was trying to decide what to do.

She was trying to decide whether or not to take this further, because if she did, she knew the game was up.

She'd have to admit she had real feelings for me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE – RAELYNN

I didn't know what to do.

I knew what my body wanted. The throbbing between my legs was intense, and my heart was beating straight out of my chest. Desire tingled as it flushed through my veins.

I already knew that what I was feeling for Chase was nothing residual. They were so real I could reach inside and tug them out to put on display if I really wanted to.

It'd been, what? A week? Ten days? How long had it been since I started this renovation and he plowed back into my life like a comet? Because that was what it felt like.

It felt as though he'd flown into my life at lightspeed, bringing a blazing trail of change with him.

If I gave into what my body—and very obviously his—wanted, there would be no turning back. There would be no more denial, and the only thing left would be seeing if we could make a relationship work again.

Could we?

I didn't know, but I also knew I had a stack of unfinished business with the man standing in front of me. Business that wouldn't be over unless one of us categorically said we were done, and with how we currently were, that wouldn't happen.

I pushed him back and slid down off the counter, careful not to put the full weight on my still-sore toe. "Come with me." I grabbed his shirt and dragged him after me, only just catching how quickly his eyebrows shot up before I turned.

I led him to the back of the store and the half-empty store cupboard. I yanked the door open and pulled him inside with me.

"What are you doing?"

"You wanna drive the fifteen minutes to your place and do it, or save yourself the frustration and do it right now?" I raised my eyebrows and closed the door. "I'm literally offering it to you on a platter right this second. If you wanna wait..."

"I didn't say I wanted to wait." Even in the darkness of the cupboard, I could see his eyes shine with laughter as my eyesight adjusted. "I'm just

confused about the location.”

“Well, we can’t fuck on the counter, and it’s not like a storage cupboard is the weirdest place we’ve ever had sex.”

He paused. “You’re right. The bathroom at the courthouse after my aunt got married is probably top of that list.”

“Exactly. We both know we aren’t over.”

“Raelynn Fortune, are you admitting that you have feelings for me?”

I pulled him into me. “I’m gonna have some very specific ones if you keep talking.”

He put a finger to my lips. “I don’t have a condom. I didn’t exactly come to work expecting to have sex today.”

I sighed. “I haven’t had sex since we broke up and I’m on the pill. Unless you hooked up with a bunch of questionable women, I think we’re probably okay. We haven’t used a condom since the night we met.”

He laughed, drawing me into him and kissing me. His hands curved around my ass, and his hard cock twitched against my stomach. “No questionable women. Or any women at all. I was too busy trying to win you back, wasn’t I?”

“In the dumbest way possible.”

“I’ll give you that, but for someone who wants to get on with it, you’re talking an awful lot.”

I gripped his collar and tugged his face down to mine. Even in the darkness, our lips met with an ease that sent a shiver down my spine.

A few steps back had me bumping into the wall. Chase’s hands explored my body as we kissed deeper, giving in to the desire that swirled around us. My heart was beating like crazy, and I wound my fingers into his hair.

God, it felt so fucking normal. I hated that it did, but it did. I couldn’t stop that. Chase would always be normal to me—he’d always feel right, even when I wanted it to be wrong.

He stepped to the side, turning my head with me, and slipped one hand beneath my dress. My thighs twitched as his fingers trailed up them toward my clit.

“Open your legs,” he murmured, brushing his knuckles over my underwear.

I did as he said, parting my legs just enough for him to push my underwear to the side. He kissed me as his fingers worked through the wetness of my pussy, flicking over my clit again and again.

The heat that flushed through me was almost unbearable. My legs were trembling. I wanted this—bad. More than I thought I had.

“Chase,” I whispered between kisses.

He chuckled against my lips, but he removed his hand and took a step back. There was a clink as he undid his belt, then a quiet whoosh as he dropped his shorts.

He tugged me a few steps over and kissed me again. His hands traced numerous paths over my body until he reached my thighs. His grip there was strong, and using the wall to brace me, he lifted me. I helped him with my hands on his shoulders and wrapped my arms around him.

His bare cock pressed against me. A whimper escaped my mouth as he stepped forward, making his cock bounce and rub against my clit.

He laughed into the kiss, but he pulled back so he could position his cock correctly. I was wet and aching—my clit was throbbing, and all I wanted was for him to be inside me already.

Chase moved slowly. Oh so fucking slowly, inching inside me bit by tiny bit. A tiny spark of pain flashed through me as he pushed deeper inside me, but it quickly subsided.

His groan shot tingles across my skin. It was deep and guttural, and I just about clenched at the damn sound.

He moved, adjusting himself and digging his fingers deeper into my legs. He lifted me a little higher, and my head knocked against the underside of the shelf.

I squeaked. “Shelf. Ow.”

Chase buried his face into my shoulder, laughing. “Sorry.”

I swatted his arm. “Apologize later. Get on with it.”

And he did just that, the laughter instantly dying.

He moved slowly at first, kissing me the exact same way. It didn’t last long. Within minutes, he had his forehead on my shoulder as he fucked me hard, sending wave after wave of pleasure shooting through my body.

I wrapped my legs around his body and clenched, hugging his cock tight. He groaned, gripping my ass harder than I ever thought possible. His

fingers dug right in, all but holding me in place as he thrust.

My nails made dents in his shoulders as I held him tight. Shivers ran over my skin as goosebumps prickled in their wake, and the more the pleasure built inside me, the faster my breathing came.

Our moans echoed off the walls, reverberating around the small space and making them seem ten times louder. Or maybe that was just me because the orgasm was swift when it hit, tightening the muscles all over my body.

I couldn't see, I couldn't think, and I could barely breathe.

All I was aware of was Chase moving a handful more times before he let out a long groan, burying his face in my neck. He kissed the sensitive skin, holding me in place for a moment before he slowly pulled out of me and helped me lower my wobbly legs to the ground.

"Is there anything in here to clean up with?"

"Turn the light on. There should be some tissue in here. It's where I keep the toilet paper."

"Lovely. Remind me never to fuck you in a cleaning closet again."

"I didn't find it that bad." I patted the wall until I found the switch and flicked it on.

Chase swung his arm over his eyes. "Fucking hell, that's bright. Couldn't you have just opened the door?"

I hit him with a dark look, wincing in the sudden brightness. "It's taking all my willpower to stand up right now, thank you very much."

He dropped his arm and grinned like I'd just told him he'd won the lottery.

In fact, he probably had. The sexual one.

"That's the nicest thing you've said to me in a long time." His grin was lopsided.

"Whatever. Pass me that tissue. I have semen dripping down my leg."

That made him stop grinning. "You're so sexy I can hardly stand it."

I laughed, clenching my legs together. "Okay, but seriously! Gravity is a thing, even in vaginas! Move!"

He snatched the tissue from the small shelving unit faster than I'd ever seen him move. He even ripped open the packaging and passed me an entire roll.

Thank God.

I wasn't lying.

I could feel it dripping.

It felt like recklessness and, well, semen. Which didn't feel all that great, in fairness.

I tore off tissue and wadded it up to clean up as Chase reached for another roll of tissue for himself. It was gross, and I had nowhere to store the tissue that I'd already used.

Seriously. This was why public sex wasn't all that great. It was messier than normal. Not that my cleaning closet was public, but it was public enough.

"Rae? Where are you?"

Both of us froze at the sound of Sophie's voice.

"Oh my God," I whispered.

Chase paused, hand wrapped around his dick with tissue.

"Clean up and put that thing away before you take out someone's eye," I hissed, I quickly wiped and threw the roll at him. It bounced off his chest onto the floor, and with a quick adjustment of my panties, I darted out of the closet and through the store where Sophie was standing with her phone in her hand.

"Hey. What's up?" I wiped my hands down my dress to make sure it wasn't tucked into my panties or something.

"Oh my God! Where were—" She froze mid-spin as her eyes land on me. "What the hell have you been doing?"

Panic. Abort mission. Run away. "What do you mean?"

Soph frowned. "Your hair is a mess, and you have—" She gasped. "You had sex!"

I didn't know what to do, so I stood there, eyes wide, totally frozen. "Um."

"Hey, Soph. What's up?" Chase strolled into the room like he hadn't just had his hand around his cock sixty seconds ago.

I bit the inside of my cheek.

Soph's mouth dropped open, and she made some incoherent noises as she pointed between us both.

“What’s wrong with her?” Chase nudged me.

“I think,” I said, watching my mute best friend. “I think she knows we just had sex.”

“You had sex!” she yelled, still pointing.

“Say it a little louder,” I drawled. “Not everybody heard you.”

She clapped her hands over her mouth and stared at us both. She said something, but it was muffled.

Chase walked over to the fridge and pulled out water. “You need some water over there, Soph? Maybe a shot?”

She took the water he held out and took a long drink before speaking again. “You—what does this mean? Are you back together?”

“It means I’ll never recommend sex in a cleaning closet.” I uncapped the water Chase handed to me. “I think I have a lump on the top of my head from that shelf.”

“Rae! You know what I mean!”

I sighed and sipped the water.

“No,” Chase said so I didn’t have to. “It doesn’t mean we’re back together.”

That seemed to shake her out of whatever haze she’d been in because she snorted and quirked an eyebrow. “Please. You’re in love with her, and she’s obviously in love with you. Not to mention you just banged in a cleaning closet. You’re back together, no matter how much you deny it.”

I wasn’t going to have this conversation with someone else involved. “Did you come for a reason?”

“Did you?” A wicked glint flashed in her eyes.

“What?”

“I came for a reason. Did you?”

Chase laughed, and it hit me what she meant.

I flipped her the bird. “What did you want?”

“I have no idea, but now I want you to call me later and tell me about this little tryst.” She wriggled her fingers, grinning and backed toward the door. “I’ll leave you to whatever it is you’re going to do now.”

She left as quickly as she’d arrived, but not without shooting more than

one awkward wink over her shoulder in our direction.

The door shut behind her, and I shoved the bottle at Chase. I stalked to the door and locked it just in case she decided to come back.

Chase laughed, putting the bottles on the counter and leaning forward, resting his hands flat on it. “She’s discreet, isn’t she?”

I grunted and grabbed my water. “She’s something.”

“Are you going to call her?”

“No. I’m going to be inexplicably busy washing my hair or something.”

He grinned. “I can help with that.”

“Seriously? Already? My legs are only just normal again.”

He pulled me into him, still grinning. “Already. And I swear not to bang your head against the shelf this time.”

I huffed. “That hurt.”

“Not enough for you to stop.”

Flattening my hands on his chest, I looked up at him. “What do you want me to do? Push you away and not have sex when we were already doing it? I think not.”

What did he think I was? Stupid? No. If you’re as far as we got, you don’t stop because you bumped your head.

I mean, you usually did that on a headboard anyway.

He shook his head. “Come to my place. We’ll have dinner. We’ll hang out like we used to.”

“Chase, that means we’ll eat McDonald’s in our underwear, watch trashy TV, and have sex.”

“Yeah? What’s the problem with that? Sounds like a good night, if you ask me.”

My lips twisted to the side. “Fine, but you’re going to get the food.”

“Why?”

“Because Molly Walker still works there and she always gives you extra fries.”

“Are you pimping me out for fries?”

“I’d pimp you out for a cheeseburger if I could.” I grinned and escaped his hold. “Let’s get the lights up. Get to work.” I reached around and slapped

his ass.

He laughed, grabbing my hand before I could escape. He spun me into him and pressed a quick but firm kiss to my lips. “Okay. Let’s do the lights. Also, your hair looks like a squirrel is nesting in it.”

I reached up to pat it down. “You could have told me that before I came out here.”

He walked backward with a grin. “I know.”

Then he stumbled over the drill and fell onto the window seat.

I laughed.

Hard.

“You could have told me that was there,” he grumbled, getting back up.

I twirled some hair around my finger, smiling slightly. “I know.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR – RAELYNN

“Okay, but in what circumstance would otters come to rule the world?” I flicked my hair over my shoulder and met Chase’s blue-green eyes. “That’s like saying koalas can run a country or sloths could win a sprint at the Olympics.”

“Otters are smart. I watched this program on the Discovery Channel about them.”

“Since when did you watch nature documentaries?”

Chase shrugged one shoulder, crossing his arms behind his head. “Sometimes you get drawn in. But they’re smart. They pick a rock that becomes their favorite rock—”

“You’re not convincing me of their intelligence with that sentence.”

“Hush. Let me finish.”

I didn’t see how a creature picking a rock to be their favorite forever made them intelligent.

“So they pick this rock, and they use it as both a toy and a tool. They use it to break open shellfish.” He quirked a brow. “And they have huge pockets under their arms that they use to store the rock and their food. Plus, they hold hands while they sleep so they don’t get lost.”

I blinked at him. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you speak about anything as passionately as you just did about otters. What on Earth makes you retain that information?”

“You never know when you’ll need random information.”

“I make ice cream. I don’t think I need any random info, but if I do, I now have otter information to keep.” I rolled my eyes. “You’re so weird.”

He grinned, rolling onto his side and tugging at my hair. “I am. But you’re the person who’s had sex with me twice today, so what does that say about you?”

“It says I have questionable judgment, especially since I didn’t get extra fries.”

“You ate half of mine.” He tapped me on the nose.

I batted his hand away and rubbed my nose. “I was hungry. We worked hard this afternoon.”

“You mean I worked hard. I put up about fifteen of those damn fiddly as fuck lights, then I had to fix my sister’s meltdown because she ran out of vanilla ice cream.”

“And then I made you six tubs of that which is currently in my freezer ready for tomorrow.” I prodded him. “That’s a lot of work. It wasn’t like I sat around on the floor reading a book or anything.”

“I wouldn’t know. I don’t make my own ice cream.”

I blinked at him. “You don’t make your own ice cream?”

Chase shook his head. “I tried once, and it went awfully, so I just make the cones and sundaes. I buy the ice cream in.”

“You’re swearing at me now. You don’t make your ice cream?”

“No. I can’t make it. I just said that. It doesn’t come out right. I don’t know how you do it.”

“I literally showed you how to do it. It’s not exactly astrophysics.”

He shrugged. “I can’t do it. Don’t ask me why, I just can’t.”

I shook my head and rolled onto my side, propping my head up on my hand. “I can’t believe that. You’re not even serving real ice cream. First the coffee machine, then the milkshakes, and now this. You, sir, are a mockery to the world of ice cream.”

He laughed, reaching over and pushing my messy hair away from my face. “I’m sure I am, babe, but hey, my plan worked, didn’t it?”

I stared at him. I wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that, because technically speaking, he was right. It had. It’d taken a hell of a lot longer than he thought it would, but I was lying next to him in bed, naked, with my hair all mussed and my makeup smudged.

“But it very almost didn’t,” I reminded him. “In fact, I was against this whole thing.”

“Yeah, you sounded so fucking against it earlier when you were moaning in my ear.”

I pushed at his chest. “Shut up. That’s not the point. I still maintain that I was against re-starting this relationship, but you kept on at me like a bad case of thrush and wore me down.”

“That’s the weirdest thing I’ve ever been called in my life.” He removed his hands from behind his head and pulled me over on top of his.

I rested my arms on his chest and gazed up at him. His arms wrapped

around my body, his fingers linking at the base of my back. A tiny smile tugged at the corners of his lips, and his eyes were bright and shone back at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Just...you.”

“That explains it.”

He laughed softly, tightening his grip on me for a second. “That’s all there is to it. I didn’t think I’d ever look down at you again like this.”

“Neither did I.” I smiled back and shifted so I was tucked into his side instead. The stubble on his jaw tickled against my forehead.

“Remember how we used to do this? Just lie down and talk about random shit all the time?” Chase trailed circles on my bare hip with his finger.

“You mean like otters and how they pick their favorite rocks?”

“Mmm. Just like that.” He paused. “If I were an otter, I’d give you my rock.”

“That is weirdly sweet, and I don’t know how to thank someone for that.”

He laughed, his whole body shaking. “Did you know that lobsters don’t actually mate for life?”

“They don’t?” I jerked up and looked down at him.

He shook his head. “Male lobsters are sluts.”

“My whole life is a lie. No wonder Ross and Rachel were a hot fucking mess.”

“Penguins mate for life.”

“Is this the random shit we’re going to talk about today?”

He nodded. “I actually think otters mate for life, too.”

“Holy crap, you really like otters.”

His laugh was deep but loud. “See? Random information.”

“For a random conversation.”

“Exactly. That’s why I retain stupid info. For that and quiz shows.”

“When have you ever been on a quiz show?”

“Never.” He chuckled. “But it’s fun to beat my family at them when we

watch. And your grandpa. It really pisses him off when I beat his ass.”

I sighed. I knew that much was true. Grandpa hated to lose during quiz shows.

“I still can’t believe you were friends the whole time.” I leaned my head back and looked up at him. “And I never knew.”

He shrugged the shoulder I wasn’t lying on. “We both enjoy the same things. Woodworking is fun. I guess it makes me feel as peaceful as you feel when you make ice cream.”

“That’s not always peaceful. It can be stressful. Like when I have to make six tubs of vanilla for someone who orders his ice cream in, and he didn’t even pay me.”

“I bought you dinner.”

“But you didn’t flirt your way to extra fries. So you still owe me.”

He shifted and looked at me. “Let me get this straight. You’re lying in bed next to me, totally fucking naked, and complaining that I didn’t flirt with another woman to get you extra fries?”

I blinked. “Yes. Also, six tubs of ice cream. That totally means you should flirt for fries.”

“That sounds like the working title of one of those stupid girly movies you watch.”

“What, flirt for fries?”

“Yep.”

“They’re called rom-coms, and I would be all over watching that one.”

“I’m stuck on the part where you want me to flirt with another woman.”

Sighing, I rolled onto my stomach and met his eyes. “There are three kinds of flirting. One,” I said, holding up my finger. “The casual flirt. You’re just being nice to someone, but if you’re kind of a flirty person, it’s not so bad.”

“Right,” Chase said slowly.

“Two, the deliberate flirt.” I held up another finger. “This is when you walk into a bar and deliberately flirt with someone you’re attracted to. This is not okay.”

“Obviously.”

I added another finger. “The third one is the kind of flirting where you exploit someone’s attraction to you to get what you want. Totally acceptable, especially if you’re trying to get something for your girlfriend.”

“I have two questions.”

I swallowed. “Yes?”

“Is this like when women flirt with guys in a bar to get free drinks?”

“Yes. Ten points to Gryffindor.”

“I’m a Slytherin.”

“Then ten points to Gryffindor and ten from Slytherin.” I grinned. “What was your second question?”

“Did you just call yourself my girlfriend?”

My mouth opened and closed a couple of times before a weird squeak escaped my lips.

Chase burst out laughing, wrapping me totally in his arms and pressing me against his body. I grumbled something, but he was laughing so hard at me that it didn’t matter.

Also because my face was smooshed against his chest so even if he weren’t laughing, I doubted that he’d be able to hear me anyway.

“You look like I just told you I ran over your kitten,” he laughed into my hair. “Relax, Rae. You don’t need to answer.”

“I don’t?”

“No. We both know you are.” He kissed me quickly and bolted, sending me rolling across the bed with an ‘oomph.’

“Wait, what?” I scrambled up, grabbing the sheet to wrap around me as I chased him. “Chase!”

He darted out from behind the wall and pulled me into his body, wrapping his arms around me from behind. His arms had mine held in place so I couldn’t wrestle my way out of his grip.

“What?” he murmured, kissing the side of my neck.

“We don’t both know I am!”

“Do I need to drag you back into that bedroom and fuck you again to prove you wrong?”

I stilled. “You can’t possibly go again.”

“I bet I could.”

Yeah, well, I couldn't. Vaginas weren't meant for constant pounding, no matter what porn told you.

“I'm not your girlfriend.” I wriggled against him.

“Rae...”

“Fine. Maybe I'm a little bit your girlfriend.”

He laughed, spinning me in his arms and looking down at me. I was still locked in place against him because he was unfairly freaking strong.

His lips twitched to one side. “You're my penguin.”

I hated the way my heart beat against my chest at that. “Yeah, well, you're a dork.”

“I'm your dork.” He wiggled his eyebrows and released me. “You want Pop Tarts?”

“What?” I frowned. Talk about an abrupt topic change.

Chase pulled the box down. “Strawberry Pop Tarts. Your favorite. Do you want one?”

My stomach rumbled.

He grinned.

“Yeah,” I said, tugging the sheet around me a little tighter. “I could eat a Pop Tart.”

Grandma stuck her tongue out of the corner of her mouth as she worked on the huge chalkboard that was slowly becoming my new menu. Her artistic streak ranged from paintings to baking to typography, and now, I was super thankful for that last one.

I had the handwriting of a ten-year-old boy on a good day. I certainly couldn't create a menu as pretty as hers would be.

“How was your night?” she asked, focused entirely on what she was doing. “You didn't come home.”

I blushed as I dipped the brush into the paint. “I texted you.”

“I know you did. I'm just terribly nosy.”

I laughed as I painted the second coat of pink onto the underside of the main counter. “It was good. We ate burgers, and I found out that lobsters don’t mate for life, but penguins do, and otters pick a rock to be their favorite.”

Grandma laughed. “Random information.”

“That’s exactly what I said. Did you know lobsters didn’t mate for life?”

“Yes, but then again, I didn’t rely on a nineties sitcom to provide me with accurate knowledge.” She paused and looked over her shoulder. “Or for Phoebe Buffet to know much of any real-world facts. Mystical was more her stretch of knowledge.”

“I know. I just assumed it was true.”

“Try the Discovery Channel if you want facts.”

“I’ll just use Google.” I shrugged and lay down on my belly to make sure I didn’t overlap onto the white.

“So. What’s going on with you two?”

My mind drifted back to our conversation last night. Technically, we were back together, but saying it out loud felt weird. Not that it was wrong or that it was stupid, but labeling it...

I don’t know. Labeling it felt weird. In my eyes, we just were. I hadn’t expected this to happen, and a part of me was still trying to wrap my head around it all.

I was due to reopen the store in two days. Today would be the last day of renovations, and tomorrow would be for reorganizing and making all the ice cream.

I wanted to focus on that, not my relationship with Chase and putting it into a tidy box. I didn’t think it needed to be in a tidy box.

I mean, I’d woken up in his bed wearing nothing but one of his t-shirts. You didn’t do that with booty calls.

Or exes.

Unless you were dating them again.

So, there we were. Not that I could use that description to my grandmother, of course.

“I assume by your silence—and sleepover—that things are going well,” she said.

“That’s a good way to put it.” I sat back up and crossed my legs, carefully resting the brush on the top of the paint can. “We’re...in a place that I didn’t think we’d get to again.”

“What she’s trying to say,” Chase’s voice came from behind me. “Is that we’re back together, but if it isn’t an ice cream tub, she doesn’t want to put a label on it.”

I looked over my shoulder at him as Grandma laughed. “That was helpful. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” He grinned, then bent down and kissed me.

I blushed and dipped my head.

Grandma snorted. “Please. I’ve seen far worse from far uglier. I’m glad you kids sorted your issues out. Stubborn as all hell you were, Rae.”

“Can we not?” I asked. “Are you here to help? How’s the vanilla ice cream?”

“Not giving Marnie a panic attack anymore.” His eyes sparkled. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. But I won’t do it again, Mr. Order-In-The-Ice cream.”

Grandma tutted. “Blasphemy.”

Chase held up his hands. “Don’t worry. I won’t be ordering any more ice cream.”

I frowned. “What does that mean.”

“You’ll see.” He half-smiled. “Also, no, I’m not here to help. Sorry—I know I said I would, but your grandpa called me about half an hour ago and asked if I’d give him a hand to get your final two tables sanded so you can paint them tomorrow.”

I groaned, burying my face in my hands. “I’m never going to get everything done.”

“Yes, you are.” Chase crouched in front of me and cupped my chin. “Between us, we can do it. Even if we have to coerce Sophie into getting her hands dirty at the kitchen sink.”

Yeah. And that was a flying pig that just went past outside.

“He’s right,” Grandma sang, still bent over the huge chalkboard. “We’ll get it done. I promise.”

“I’m holding you both to that,” I warned them.

“Duly noted,” she replied.

Chase just grinned. “I’ll see you later when we bring the tables, okay?”

“Okay. And try not to put any quiz shows on in the garage, all right? I need those tables.”

He kissed me again before backing to the door. “I make no promises. Also, I did actually bring reinforcements.” He shot me a small look before stepping and making way for my mom to fill the doorway.

“Hey,” she said softly. “I heard you needed a hand.”

My first instinct was to tell her no—to tell her I didn’t need her and to leave.

But, for the first time since she’d arrived at the house a few days ago, I looked her in the eye. I saw her masked pain and how badly she wanted to help, and there was no way I could turn her away.

Besides—I’d worked through my issues with Chase. I wanted to do that with her, too.

I picked up a clean paintbrush and held it out for her. “The high counter needs painting pink if you don’t mind getting your hands dirty.”

She smiled, taking the brush from me. “I got it. Let’s do this.” She immediately bustled over to the counter and as she searched for the screwdriver to open the can of paint, I met Grandma’s eyes.

She smiled.

I did, too.

Maybe I could get this store open on time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE – CHASE

Sam was sitting on the floor, hunched over one of Rae's cone tables. The sanding machine in his hands made one hell of a noise, and I waited for him to finish sanding the top flat before making myself known.

He tossed sandpaper at me before I could even say a word. "I did the other already. Smooth it all off for me."

I picked the paper up from the floor and went over to the other table without a word. The sander was already running before I'd even sat on the dirty, dusty ground.

We worked for an hour before either of us spoke again.

"You two back together?" Sam asked, looking over at me.

I nodded once. "Not that she'll tell you that."

He barked a laugh. "Why am I not surprised at that at all?"

"Same reason I'm not." I smirked at him. "She's a pain in the ass."

"That she is, son, but so are you. Birds of a feather and all that."

"I thought I was here to help, not get bullied by an old man."

Sam laughed again, standing up. "Boy, you're the one who called me, no matter what you tell that girl. If you call me, you come to help me. Now, what do you want?"

"Can we go sit in the kitchen?"

"No. We got work to do. Spit it out."

Ornery old man. "I'm closing the store."

That made him stop. One grey, bushy eyebrow raised in question. "Your store?"

I nodded. "I never opened it to hurt Rae, and now Best Served Cold is almost ready, I don't see a need to keep the Spoon open any longer. Besides, I don't really enjoy it that much."

"What are you gonna do with it?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about." I took a deep breath and met his eyes. "I think we can go into business together."

Sam folded his arms and leaned against the wall. "You do, do you?"

“Yes,” I said, getting up and putting my hands in my pockets. “You wouldn’t have to do much of anything. You have all this stuff stockpiled here—the birdhouses, the bug hotels—hell, Sam, you even have three sets of end tables over there in the corner taking up the room. You wouldn’t have to show up at the store. We can take all the stuff you make for fun and sell it.”

He tilted his head to the side. “And commission work?”

“Can either be done through you or they can leave requests at the store. We can keep a catalog of your work there.”

“What about the winter?”

“It’s in my tenancy that I don’t have to open November through January. Between the two of us over those months, we could get enough done to last the first few months of the year.”

“And tourists?”

“Make touristy things. Wooden magnets in the shape of the Keys or things that are associated with the island. Cutting boards—people fucking love solid cutting boards. They last for ages.” I ran my fingers through my hair. “Plus, a lot of them drive. They can easily take the bigger things home, or we can arrange to ship at their expense.”

Sam didn’t say anything for a moment. He simply stared at me, then slowly dragged his gaze around the garage. Silence filled the air for a couple of minutes, then he turned his attention back to me. “All right,” he said. “There’s a lot of stuff just sitting in this garage that we’ve made, and that isn’t going anywhere. If you think you can shift it from a store, I think it’s worth a try. I’ve meant to do something with all this stuff, so this seems as good a thing as any.”

“Your enthusiasm is infectious,” I said, trying to be flat and sarcastic, but it didn’t work because I knew I was damn well grinning.

I’d had a feeling he’d agree. He was running out of space to put the things he made, and I knew he was spending more money on wood than he was making.

Not that it bothered him. He’d made enough money when he’d earned the ice cream shop, but I knew Nora was getting fed up of not having any garage space at all.

“When are you closing the store?” Sam asked, pushing off the wall and going back to the table.

“Tomorrow.” I wiped my sandpaper over the rounded edge of the top of the table.

“Tomorrow?”

I nodded. “There’s no point keeping it open. I want people to go to Best Served Cold.”

“Damn. Does Rae know yet?”

“No. I wanted to speak to you first.” I looked up. “It might take a few weeks, but we can definitely get it open before the end of the summer.”

“What about the kitchen? That’s a lot of work in a short space of time.”

“I bought all the equipment. I’ll sell it—it shouldn’t be too hard. There are thousands of dollars of freezers and crap back there. I figure it can change into a workshop so I can work on small things during the day.”

Sam nodded slowly. “You’ve definitely put a lot of thought into this, huh, son?”

“You don’t need two stores next to each other. Rae already showed me the new menu. She’s still serving regular flavors and sundaes, but her focus is on the fairytale stuff she’s had me trying lately. If she gives me one more pink ice cream, I’m going to throw it at her.”

He chuckled. “She’s been bringing damn whimsical ice cream home for more than a week now demanding we try every flavor. God knows why. The girl couldn’t mess up ice cream even if she tried.”

“That’s what I tried telling her, but she still insists on shoving it at me. Not that I’m complaining, but pink glitter ice cream isn’t my favorite thing.”

“Speak for yourself. She gave me what she called a mermaid banana split a few days ago. I’m seventy-years-old, and I was about ready to hand in my man card.”

“Don’t get her started on a man card. You’ll never hear the end of it. I didn’t when I threatened that.”

He shook his head. “She’s too much like her grandmother, that one.”

I wasn’t going to deny that. “Well, in that case, even if her attitude sucks, at least she’ll still have her looks to bail her out in fifty years’ time.”

Sam burst out laughing. “Don’t let Nora hear you say that. Fucking hell—she’ll never shut up about that.”

That was true.

“Come on, then. Let’s get these finished and loaded into the back of the truck to deliver them.”

I looked at the tables, most of them still unpainted except for one.

Sam caught where my gaze had gone. “You gonna be caught up in painting later?”

“Not if I can help it.” I met his eye. “I’m gonna put shelves up at a world-record slow speed tonight.”

He laughed and tossed me more sandpaper. That was that.

I had what I wanted. The store, something I cared about, and, more importantly—

I had my girl.

The tables were fucking heavy, and it took two of us to heave each one into the store and onto the dust sheets that still coated the tiled floor.

Twenty minutes of hard labor later, the tables were lined up against the window seat, and me and Sam were downing a cold bottle of water each.

“Where’s Rae?” I asked Nora.

She nodded toward the kitchen and stood up her blackboard. She’d been working on it since I’d left two hours ago. “Kitchen,” she said simply, stepping back to survey her work. “She’s teaching her mom how to make unicorn ice cream.”

I shared a look with Sam. “She’s doing what?”

“Teaching her how to make ice cream.” She shrugged and turned around. “I don’t know either, and I was here when it happened. They talked through everything about her father cheating, and how sorry Eve was that she left and didn’t come back when she knew she needed her. Everyone apologized, there was some crying, and now they’re making ice cream.”

Sam huffed out a breath and squeezed between two tables to sit at the window seat. “I don’t understand women.”

“Women don’t understand women, honey,” Nora said, bending forward and coloring in a cherry on the board. “It’s all instinctive, really.”

“I’m, uh, I’m gonna go back and see them.” I scooted out to the back and stopped in the doorway.

Rae and her mom were standing next to each other, bent over ice cream

tubs and makers. From this angle, they were identical. They had the same dark hair, even if Rae's was lighter at the bottom, and their noses were clones.

There was barely an inch in difference in height between them, and that was only because Rae's dad was taller than Eve was.

Eve noticed me first. She smiled brightly. "Hey, honey. You back already?"

I nodded. "There wasn't much left to do of the tables. They're all out front—they just need painting."

Rae looked up with a big smudge of bright pink coloring over her cheek. "Hey."

I grinned and tapped my cheek.

She wiped at hers and looked at her fingers. "Crap."

Eve laughed and touched her shoulder. "Are we done?"

"I think we give it another mix and put it in the freezer."

They both picked up a metal skewer and ran it through the ice cream. It created a marble-like effect, and realization dawned.

"Oh," I said. "That's how you do that."

Rae's lips pulled to one side. "Yep. Just like magic."

"You don't need me to eat more glitter, do you?"

Grabbing the lids to the tubs, she laughed. "No. These are for the opening. I thought I'd get a head start since I have to paint the tables tonight."

"I'll help." Eve snapped the lid onto her creation. "I haven't painted in years. Unless you count painting an escape from Michigan to the Florida Keys." She laughed.

Rae's face lit up. "Really? That would be amazing."

"Of course." Eve wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into her with a quick squeeze. "I'll go check out these tables."

She winked at me as she left.

I opened the freezer for Rae to put them inside on one of the shelves. "You made up, huh?"

Rae nodded. "What's the point in being mad? I guess us sorting everything out taught me a lesson. I haven't really been happy in a long time, but now I have the chance to be. Harboring anger toward my mom for a bad

choice when I forgave you for yours..." She stopped and sighed, meeting my eyes. "I don't want to feel that way anymore, and she doesn't deserve my anger any more than you did."

I drew her into me, hugging her tight. My chin rested on top of her head, and she wrapped her arms around my waist, taking a deep breath.

"I have something to tell you," I whispered.

"What's that?"

"I'm closing The Frozen Spoon."

She jerked back from me, eyes wide with shock. "What? Why?"

"I don't enjoy it. It was a mistake to ever open it, and with you reopening, I don't want to be there to take anything away from you. I want you to have your dream, and I want you to have all of it."

Her lips parted. "What are you going to do instead? Do you have another job?" She paused. "Do you want to work for me?"

Laughing, I touched my forehead to hers. "No, I don't want to work for you, thank you. But if you wanted to give Marnie a few hours during the summer, I know she'd be happy to take them."

"Done. I get the feeling I'll need help if you're closing."

"That and your magic ice cream." I kissed her nose and drew back. "No, I'm, uh. Keeping the store, actually."

A frown marred her usually smooth forehead. "You are? For what?"

"Damn it, son, spit it out." Sam came into the kitchen and chucked Rae under the chin. "We're going into business together."

"You're doing what?"

"There's no need to sound so shocked. We're not a bad team, girl." Sam's eyes sparkled. "It's gonna be a wood shop."

Rae looked up at me then back at him. "What?"

"You know the garage full of stuff that's sitting there doing nothing?" I asked.

She nodded.

"We're gonna sell it. The birdhouses, the bug hotels, the tables—even commission work. We'll do touristy stuff too. I'm gonna sell all my equipment and turn the back into a workshop so I can work on some stuff when there are no customers."

“Yeah, well, you never had all the equipment anyway.” She sniffed.

Sam snorted.

“Hey!” I tickled her side, and she escaped my arms.

“I’m kidding!” She grinned, and the brightness in her brown eyes made me smile, too. “I’m happy for you both. I think it’s a great idea.”

“And, as a side bonus, technically speaking, you put him out of business,” Sam added. “So you got your revenge in the end.”

Rae blushed. “Right. This was the revenge I was going for.”

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “I knew she wanted to crush me. This will be nowhere near satisfying enough for her. She wanted to watch me burn.”

She laughed, meeting my eyes. “That’s a little dramatic.”

“But one hundred percent true,” Sam added, peering into the freezer. “You got any chocolate chip in here?”

“Yes, but I also have ice cream freezing in there, so get out.” Rae swatted at his arm. “I’ll bring it home for you tonight.”

Sam smacked a kiss on her cheek. “You’re my favorite granddaughter.”

“I’m your only granddaughter,” she replied dryly.

I hid a laugh behind my hand as he scooted out of the kitchen with a cackle.

She turned to me. “You’re really going into business together?”

I nodded. “Really really. So, you win. You put me out of the ice cream business.”

“It doesn’t count if you choose to leave it.” She walked to me and flattened her hands on my chest. “Besides, I don’t want revenge anymore.”

“Well,” I said, running my hands down her back and over her ass. “It counts if you’re the reason I’m choosing to leave it.”

She tilted her head to the side.

“Still don’t want revenge?”

“Eh,” she said. “Kinda, but I think I’ll pass on this being it. I want to keep you on your toes.”

“You do?”

“Well, yeah. Revenge is a dish best served cold. This isn’t exactly cold, is it? You warm it up a little when you choose to help me get it on you.”

I groaned. “Oh no.”

She grinned, the kind of grin that made her eyes shine brightly. “Oh yes.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX – RAELYNN

I collapsed against the counter.

I did it.

I'd survived day one. And not only had I survived reopening day, but they'd cleaned out my unicorn ice cream, and I'd had to call Mom in to make some around lunchtime because I'd seen it coming.

I couldn't run out of ice cream on my second day.

Even Chase had been cleaning tables and doing dishes for me. When Marnie had come in with her friends this afternoon, I'd just about hired her on the spot and begged her to start the next day. She'd agreed all too enthusiastically, and to say thanks, she and her friends had spent ten minutes buying ice cream just to Instagram it.

I still had ice cream to make, and it would be a long few weeks until I was able to stockpile properly, but I was thankful.

I was so glad for everything that had happened.

We'd finished the renovations on time. We'd managed to paint and prime and put everything where it'd needed to be. Mom had been a lifesaver with painting the tables, and we'd even been able to add the protective layer it needed for easy cleaning without ruining the paint.

I had no idea how we'd done it. I had no idea how we'd managed to cope with the onslaught of people who'd come in to not only see Best Served Cold's new look but just for the unicorn ice cream.

Apparently, Sophie's insistence on using social media to market had worked. Marnie had already sent me photos I could upload to my account, and I was sure as hell making her the girl in charge of taking photos.

I'd tried. I'd also failed.

"Hey." Chase came up behind me, wrapping his arm around me. "You good?"

"I'm exhausted," I admitted, standing up and falling into him. "I think I made more sundaes today than I have in weeks."

He circled my body with his arms and held me tight. "I'm not surprised. It was insane in here."

"I think I have blisters on my hands from holding the scoop."

“Yeah? Is that why you’re grinning?”

I buried my face in his chest, because yes, I was grinning. And I swore I had blisters. They hurt so bad, but in a weirdly good way. They were the marks of a wonderfully busy day. I knew the days wouldn’t always be like this, so even though I felt as though I was dead on my feet and totally shattered, I was happy, too.

“You wanna get something to eat before you make the ice cream?” Chase asked, looking down at me. “You didn’t get lunch, and you were too nervous to eat breakfast.”

“I don’t know. I’m—”

“If you tell me you’re too tired to eat anything, I’m going to drag you and make you eat.”

I sighed and rested my cheek against him. “Okay, I’ll eat. Pizza?”

“Whatever you want, babe.” He kissed the top of my head. “I’ll go grab some and bring it back.”

I nodded and smiled sleepily. He left, and I headed back to the kitchen to make a start. It was sparkling clean, and my lips curved as I looked around.

For a guy who’d nearly accidentally ruined my business, he wasn’t all that bad.

I took a deep breath and started making the next batch of ice cream. I went through the motions on auto-pilot. Making the fairytale ice creams was now so natural to me that I could probably do it with my eyes closed.

I was almost done with it by the time Chase got back with the pizza. My stomach rumbled the second he stepped through the door. The rich smell of the food reminded me that I was, in fact, hungry.

It was easy to forget to eat when you were so busy.

“Rae? Are you done?” He walked into the kitchen as I was pouring the ingredients for the mermaid ice cream into their containers. “That’s a no.” He set the boxes on the counter and came over. “Let’s do this together.”

“You sure?”

“Are you going to sit and eat right now?”

“Well, no. I have to get them done and in the freezer.” I shrugged, reaching for the skewer to mix the colors together.

Chase grabbed one of his own. “You pour, I’ll mix.”

I slid a tub over to him. “Do it thoroughly.”

“Yes, boss.” He smirked and got to work.

I watched him for a second before putting together the rest of the tubs. We worked in silence, both of us mixing the colored mixtures together. Within ten minutes, we were done, and I put the lids on each tub and put them away.

We took the pizza back through to the store and sat down.

“This stupid skirt is itchy,” I muttered, grabbing a piece of pizza.

“Your grandma did tell you the tutu would annoy you after a while.”

“It’s not a tutu; it’s a tulle skirt.”

“How is that different?”

“One is for a ballerina, and do you see me doing a fucking pirouette?”

He laughed. “No, but I think I’d like to. Just for my own amusement when you inevitably fall over.”

I stuck my finger up at him because I had a mouthful full of food. It only made him laugh more, but I didn’t care, because I was so hungry, all I wanted to do was maul my way through this entire pizza by myself.

So that was what I did.

Finally full, we both shut our boxes and folded them in two so they’d fit in the trash can outside. While Chase took them out, I proceeded to clean up the kitchen to get rid of the mess I’d made from the final batch of ice cream.

With that done, I changed from the skirt into a pair of shorts in the bathroom. In hindsight, I probably should have done that two hours ago when the store closed, but I hadn’t thought about it at all.

“Ready?” Chase asked.

I nodded. “Where are we going?”

He pursed his lips in thought. “We can either go to my place or we can go to the beach. It’s not too hot out there now.”

I considered the options for a second before saying, “Beach. Let’s go.”

He was right. It wasn't too hot. It was hot enough that you knew it was Florida in the summer, but not so hot that you wanted to claw your eyeballs out of your head.

Which happened unfortunately often.

We dropped down onto our spot. The one where we'd had our first date and the one where he'd told me he was still in love with me. It was weird—I hadn't been to this spot unless I was with him. The emotional attachment you could form to a place baffled me.

Chase leaned back on his hands, but I used my purse as a pillow and laid down flat. He chuckled, shifting back up the sand so he could look down at me to talk.

"That tired, huh?"

I nodded. "But if I go to sleep now, I'll wake up stupidly early tomorrow, and the circle will repeat itself."

"Yep. I think you're going to have an insane few weeks."

"Thanks. That makes me feel like I should buy stock in Red Bull for all the cans I'm going to buy." I sighed. "At least Marnie will be there to help tomorrow, even if she just rings up orders and cleans tables."

"I can help you for a bit, you know."

"How? It's not like I can pay you, and you need to get started on your store." It was all I'd heard all day yesterday was how excited he and Grandpa were to turn the store into something amazing and different to anything they'd seen in the area.

"Yeah, sure," Chase said, looking out at the water. "But it's not that simple. I think he's trying to see if he can buy the space from my landlord before anything happens. There's stuff I think he wants to do that he needs permission for."

"I'm shocked," I muttered. "Do you think your landlord will sell?"

"I'm not sure. I think he's open to it. He did half-ass offer it to me, but I wasn't in any position to buy it." He paused. "And I didn't want to buy it."

"Yeah, yeah, you were only supposed to be there a couple months." I reached over and nudged him. "You and your stupid ideas."

He laughed, lying down with me but rolling onto his side. "Can I ask you something?"

"Only if you're not proposing."

“Not yet.”

“Reassuring. Carry on.”

His eyes twinkled, then darkened. “Are you still mad that I took your ideas?”

“No.”

Chase raised his eyebrows. “You’re not?”

“Nope.” I rolled onto my side too and picked at a bit of grass that was coming through the sand. “Look—I can be mad at you for that, but it doesn’t achieve anything. You’re not Dr. Who. You can’t go back in time and change what you did. Although that would be a handy skill to have.”

“I wholeheartedly agree. We’d both change things, I think.”

“We would.” I let my lips tug into a small smile. “I think it was a good thing in the end. Grandma told me that I needed to make the store my own. The original ideas were something I thought I wanted, but the more I look at the store now, the more I see that it’s me. My personality shines through in it a lot more.”

“I don’t know. There’s not a whole lot of sharp teeth. It’s pretty deceiving.”

I smacked his arm, laughing. “You shut it. I’m still shocked at how it turned out.”

“I’m shocked you did it and didn’t hurt yourself again,” he teased with a big smile. “It was looking like it’d happen at one point.”

I poked my tongue out at him. “It wasn’t all me, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll still be apologizing for the toe thing in ten years.” He shook his head. “Women. Never let anything lie.”

“Except sleeping babies.”

“Always a good choice.”

I laughed and looked out at the water. “Do you think we’ll still be together in ten years?”

“Only if we don’t kill each other,” he replied, laughing too. “I do. I mean, if we can make it work after the last two years, don’t you think we can do it longer?”

“It’s only been like four days since I actively made a choice to stop hating your peachy little butt,” I reminded him. “So that’s quite cocky.”

“I know.” He reached over and pushed me onto my back, leaning over me. “But I know we will be.”

“And how do you know that?”

“Because,” he whispered, pushing a stray bit of hair from my face. “Rae, you’re my penguin.”

And penguins mate for life.

I smiled, reaching my hand up to touch the side of his face. His skin was warm and soft—his stubble dark and rough, tickling the inside of my palm.

Our eyes met.

“You know what? I’m pretty sure you’re my penguin, too, Chase.”

EPILOGUE – RAELYNN

ONE YEAR LATER

I was a genius.

I didn't want to hear anyone tell me anything different.

For three months I'd been plotting the revenge I never got to have, and I knew I'd nailed it.

No, it wasn't a prank. It wasn't a whoopie cushion or anything else amusing like that—it was the one thing we'd argued about ever since me and Chase had decided to live together.

A pet.

He'd refused while we were in his apartment, but after a crazy summer of success at Best Served Cold, plus him opening up Fortune & Aarons with my grandpa, we'd had enough money to rent a house instead of an apartment.

Which meant we had room for a kitten.

The very animal he claimed he was petrified of.

Which, of course, was horseshit. Who the fuck was scared of kittens?

I knew that in twenty-four hours, the tiny black and white kitten in the little cardboard box in my hands would have him eating out of her teeny tiny paws.

Because he was a big old freaking softie.

He had to be to handle me. I wasn't exactly a softie myself.

Case in point: for his birthday, I'd adopted him an otter at a zoo as a joke, and I swear, it was his favorite present.

It was also one of the hottest things about him, but I digress.

I still owed him revenge, and this was going to be it.

Well, it'd look like it. Really, it was me winning, because I wanted a kitten more than anything, and after Sophie's sister's cat got knocked up, I'd demanded one before the little mites were even born.

At that point, I'd just been a drama queen and thus had begun my begging to Chase for one.

I don't know why he never thought I'd get one. It was a small price to pay for having the spare bedroom filled with extra birdhouses.

Apparently, tourists liked birdhouses, especially when my mom was done painting them.

Yep. She'd stayed. The divorce was almost final, and while Dad and I had talked a few times, that was one relationship I didn't think I'd be able to fix. He was happy with his new life in Michigan with his much younger girlfriend.

I was just glad Mom had made him have the snip years ago.

So Mom had gone into business with Grandpa and Chase. Some of the houses went into the store to be sold either as they were or the buyer could pick the paint, and the rest went straight to her. My old bedroom was now her art studio, and she had any number of houses in various stages of paint.

It was something that worked for everyone.

And Grandma now had both paint and sawdust to complain about, but the store got Grandpa out of the house at least twice a week, so she wasn't complaining about it quite as much anymore.

Mostly.

I pushed open the front door. "Chase?"

He appeared on the stairs, totally naked save for a small black towel wrapped around his waist. Water dripped down over his abs, and I had to blink a few times before I could focus.

"Hello." He grinned, a lopsided, cocky little one that was stupidly hot. "What's in the box?"

"This," I said. "Is my revenge."

He reached the bottom of the stairs, one eyebrow quirked in amusement. "Your revenge?"

"Yep. I told it was a dish best served cold, and here it is. Super cold."

"Babe, it's frozen at this point."

"Excellent. I'm good at frozen things." I smirked.

The kitten let out a tiny noise.

He stepped back. "Is that box alive?"

"Yes," I drawled. "The box is a living, breathing thing. That's the revenge."

“What’s inside it?”

I grinned.

“Raelynn.”

I put the box down on the floor, opened it, and scooped out the tiny, eight-week-old kitten.

He jerked back with his finger pointed out. “That’s a kitten.”

“She is. And isn’t she cute?” I snuggled her into my chest. “Look at her. That little white sock and her eye patch. I die.” I made cooey noises as she tried to scramble up onto my shoulder.

“That’s a kitten.”

“It is a kitten.”

“I don’t like kittens.”

“What isn’t there to like? She’s tiny. She’s cute. She’s soft. She’s basically everything I’m not.”

He held up a finger. “You’re cute. Mostly.”

I rolled my eyes and set her back in the box, leaving the top of it open. “Well, I need to use the bathroom and get changed, so can you keep an eye on her for a second? I also need to get her things out of the car.”

“I—I—”

I ran upstairs, fighting back a giggle until I shut myself in the bathroom. I didn’t need to go at all, and I had a sneaking suspicion he’d be okay if he just, shock horror, touched her.

I waited five minutes then went back downstairs. They weren’t in the hallway, and the box was gone, so I poked my head into the living room.

I clapped my hand over my mouth.

Chase was sitting on the sofa, still shirtless, with the kitten tucked under his neck.

Sleeping.

“Well,” I said. “Isn’t this a strange turn of events?”

“I don’t know what happened.” He looked over at me, confused. “I put the box on the sofa, then she climbed out, and tried to jump off the sofa. I thought she might hurt herself, so I put her on my lap and now...”

“Now she’s sleeping against your neck.”

“Yeah. And I’m kind of afraid to move.” He paused. “But she is really, really soft.”

“For someone afraid of kittens, you’re doing a really good job holding her.” I smirked.

He was. He had one hand cradling her tiny back, and it was just about the sexiest damn thing I’d ever seen.

He looked down at her awkwardly. “Well, she’s not an otter, but—”

“How many times! You can’t have an otter as a pet!”

“I know, I know.” He sighed. “Sadly. They’d be a great pet.”

“They’d be an awful pet. They’d hit you with their rock all the time.” I shook my head. “So we have a kitten instead.”

“Does she have a name yet?”

“No. Why? Are you naming her?”

He slid her down his body, careful not to disturb her sleep, and cradled her against his arm. “She looks like a Socks.”

I joined him on the sofa and tucked my feet below my butt. “Nope. She’s only got one sock.”

“Patch?”

“No. She’s not a pirate.”

He frowned, then his face lit up. “I know. We’ll call her Otter!”

Oh, Jesus.

“Otter? Really?”

He smiled smugly. “You told me I couldn’t have a pet otter. Now I can.”

“But she’s a cat.”

“Look, babe,” he held out one hand, “It works perfectly. You get a cat, and I get an otter.”

That...sadly made an awful lot of sense.

“It’s a stupid name for a cat,” I said.

“Cats are stupid.”

I covered her ears. “Sssh. Don’t say that. She’ll hear you.”

He rolled his eyes but pulled me into his side with his other arm. He

kissed the top of my head. “You’re not very good at revenge, are you, babe?”

“Not really,” I admitted. “But this one is mostly so I can get my own way.”

“I figured that the second you pulled her out of the box.” He laughed. “I wouldn’t snuggle a kitten for just anyone.”

I tilted my head back. “Please keep doing it. It’s really sexy.”

He laughed, leaning over to kiss me. “You’re lucky I love you.”

I smiled, rubbing my thumb over his jaw. “And you’re lucky I love you.”

“Mm.” He kissed me again, his lips beautifully soft and smooth against mine. “I know I am.”

THE END

TEQUILA TEQUILA

Tequila + your best friend + your bedroom = um, whoopsie?

Don't sleep with your best friend.

Take it from me. I did it. And it was awful.

I-wish-the-tequila-made-me-forget kind of bad.

The problem is, Luke *has* forgotten. He swears that he can't remember a thing about that night beyond the trays of tequila shots being set on the tables.

Except I can't forget. I can't forget how good his hands felt until I fell over and hit my hip on the dresser, and I sure as hell can't forget the entire two minutes of tap-tap-squirt.

Awkward. Embarrassing. And the new subject of a couple of dirty lucid dreams.

But I have no intention of telling him what we did. Nothing good comes from telling your best friend he's the worst guy you've ever slept with.

Which makes the tequila on my birthday a very, very bad idea...

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Emma Hart is the New York Times and USA TODAY bestselling author of over thirty novels and has been translated into several different languages.

She is a mother, wife, lover of wine, Pink Goddess, and valiant rescuer of wild baby hedgehogs.

Emma prides herself on her realistic, snarky smut, with comebacks that would make a PMS-ing teenage girl proud.

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