

A close-up photograph of a man and a woman kissing. The woman's hand is gently cupping the man's face. The image has a dark, teal-green color cast.

**RESISTING
RYDER**

HELLFIRE MC

BLAKELEY WILDE

Resisting Ryder

Blakeley Wilde

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Ryder Jacks is a good guy, or at least he tries to be. On his own since 18 and recruited into the Hellfire MC, he's paid his dues and worked his way all the way up to VP. When he finds out that his estranged brother was murdered in cold blood, possibly by one of his own Hellfire men, he vows to bring the killer to justice.

When Stormy Jacks opens her door the night of her husband's funeral, she cannot believe her eyes. The man standing before her is the spitting image of her late husband, and he claims to be his brother. Only Stormy never knew he had a brother...

Ryder begs for Stormy's help in finding Jett's killer which will require her to go in deep into the MC world, a world of which she had promised herself never to return. Can she trust him to keep her safe? And when sparks start to fly between them, can she trust him with her heart?

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This book is chock full of steamy romance, peppered with tasteful sex scenes, and spiked with a love triangle for good measure. Intended for mature readers. This is a full-length, standalone novel that contains a HEA ending.*

DEDICATION

To my one, true love. You are the definition of crazy, passionate, inexplicable love, and this book would not have been possible without you.

-Blakeley

PROLOGUE

After Jett's funeral, Stormy turned her phone off. She sped home to their little trailer on the outskirts of the city, locked all the doors, and drew all the curtains. She wanted to be alone. She wanted to be alone with her memories, with Jett's things, with whatever she had left of the life she had loved. She wanted to see if she could feel him around her. She wanted to grieve. She wanted to cry. She didn't want to be judged, consoled, pitied or stared at.

Stormy ransacked their shared closet and threw on a thick, hooded sweatshirt of Jett's. It was the closest thing she was going to have to being held by him. She flipped through some

pictures of the two of them, but there weren't many. He always hated to be photographed and Stormy never knew why. He was gorgeous. He had a sort of quiet sex appeal about him. Half-Hispanic and half-Caucasian, he was tan with dark, chocolate brown hair and the most mesmerizing hazel eyes.

She laughed. She cried. She laughed and then she cried some more. She never knew she could experience so many different emotions all at the same time.

She threw herself on the broken-in couch and grabbed one of Jett's many motorcycle magazines off the coffee table. As the Vice President of the Iron Souls motorcycle club, biking was his

life. She flipped through the pages, the pages that Jett himself had once touched, and she felt a little closer to him. She thought about all the trips they were going to take, just the two of them. Trips that, now, would never happen. She thought about hopping on his bike and going solo, but that would require money. Jett had been her sole supporter for the last three years. As his old lady, she didn't have to work. Now that he was gone, she was going to have to find a way to support herself.

She didn't want to sell their little trailer, but it was going to be the only way she'd be able to travel the country in his memory. The trailer probably wasn't worth a lot. He had bought it for

her in their hometown a year ago so she'd have a place to stay when they started a family; yet another thing that would never happen now that Jett was gone.

With swollen eyes growing heavy, she laid back down on the couch, covered up with a blanket, and let the tiredness take over. It was an uncommonly chilly, rainy day in June and Stormy just wanted some warmth and comfort. She'd spent the entire day grieving, and she was exhausted.

No sooner had she closed her eyes, did she hear a knock at the front door. She thought about ignoring it. It was probably her mom or Brooklyn stopping by to check on her since her

phone had been off all day.

The knocking on the door continued and then continued some more. For a split second, Stormy worried it was someone looking for Jett. There were always random strangers showing up at their place looking for him, but she never had to deal with them. Jett always took care of it.

She peeked out the front window in the living room and saw a bike in her driveway. It was dark outside, but from what she could see it looked like a black BMW cycle, and she had never seen it before in her life.

She wiped her tear-stained face and finger-combed her hair before opening the door. Standing before her

was a man the spitting image of her beloved Jett; chocolate hair, hazel eyes, and all.

“Are you Stormy?” he asked.

“Who are you?” she responded.

“I need to talk to you,” he said as he clutched a letter in his hand.

CHAPTER 1

“Wh-who are you?” Stormy stammered. Her heart raced as she waited for the man standing at her front door to speak.

She couldn't believe Jett was standing in front of her in the flesh, only she knew it wasn't him. She had just buried him that morning, in the rain, on that insufferable, cold June day. This version of Jett looked a little bit older, a little bit more ripped, and a little bit different. There was something behind his eyes that she'd never seen in another human being before, and yet at the same time his eyes felt like home.

He had Jett's same chocolate brown hair, and his hazel eyes were

framed by the same dark lashes that Jett had. He stood about Jett's height, slightly taller, and had a few extra pounds of muscle on him, but if she squinted just right, the man standing before her was Jett.

“Ryder,” he said. Even his voice was soothing like Jett's. “Ryder Jacks.”

Stormy was confused as she tried to wrap her head around who this person was. Was she dreaming? Was he a relative? Did he think she inherited money? Why wasn't he at the funeral? A million questions swirled around in her mind as she braced herself against the door.

“I'm sorry,” she said as she managed to swallow the lump in her

throat. “Are you a relative? A cousin?”

“I’m Jett’s brother,” he said. “May I come in?”

Stormy swung the door open wide and motioned towards the living room. Ryder stepped in and took a look around at the humble little trailer she called home. They hadn’t even begun to decorate it much before Jett was murdered in a bad drug deal and their cozy little life had come to a screeching halt.

His heavy shoes clomped on the beat up faux wood floors as he shuffled his way to the living room and sat down.

“You don’t happen to have anything to drink do you?” he asked. “Beer? Liquor?”

Stormy narrowed her eyes as she hesitated for a moment. She didn't know this guy yet he had just walked into her house and asked for alcohol.

“Wine,” she said. “I have some wine. That's it.”

“Wine works,” he said as he sighed and leaned back onto the couch. He seemed to have something heavy weighing on his mind but had no qualms about making himself right at home.

When Stormy returned with two wine goblets filled almost to the top with red wine, Ryder sat up. He sipped his wine, then gulped it, then chugged it until nothing was left. She looked at his black leather jacket and tried to read the logo on the arm. It was a little skull and

crossbones with “Hellfire MC” stitched beneath it. She vaguely remembered Jett talking about a rival motorcycle club – hell something – but she wasn’t sure.

“I’m normally not a drinker,” he said. “I swear.”

Stormy wasn’t convinced.

“It’s fine,” she said. “I needed a drink too.”

“Honest, I’m not,” he insisted. “This is just really weird for me. It’s weird being here. Back in this town.”

Stormy nodded and sipped more of her wine. She had so many questions but didn’t know where to even begin. One second she wanted to wrap her arms around him and pretend he was Jett, but the next second she was wary of

Ryder and his intentions. It didn't feel real to be sitting with a person, Jett's brother no less, that she didn't even know existed.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't even know you existed. I'm still kind of in shock."

"Really? Jett never said anything me?" he asked.

"No. He pretty much implied that he was an only child. Or I guess I just assumed."

"That's really, really weird," he said as he scratched above his eyebrow and then folded his hands in his lap. He leaned forward before cocking his head. "I guess I get it."

"Well, I don't get it," Stormy

snipped. “I’d love if you could fill me in. I’m really confused right now.”

“Stormy,” he laughed. When he smiled, all she saw was Jett’s smile, right down to the shape of his perfect, white teeth. “There’s so much more than I could ever begin to tell you. Our family is so complicated. More than you could ever begin to imagine.”

“I want to know everything,” she demanded.

“There’s a reason he didn’t tell you everything,” Ryder retorted. “I should probably respect my brother’s wishes, don’t you think? Maybe he didn’t tell you things as his way of protecting you?”

“Maybe,” Stormy said as she

shrunk back in her seat. Her eyes felt hot as the tears began to well up. “Guess I’ll never know, will I?”

Ryder, upon seeing the tears, scooted closer to her. He went to put his arm around her but stopped. It seemed like the natural thing to do, but they were still more or less perfect strangers.

Stormy wiped her eyes. “So what do you want from me, Ryder? Because I’m pretty damn sure I don’t have any money if that’s what you want.”

“Oh, I don’t want any money,” he said as he placed his hand over his chest. “Swear.”

“So why are you here?” Stormy demanded. “What do you want?”

“Because you’re my brother’s

widow,” he said. “Jett and I weren’t talking these last few years, but I feel like I owe it to him to make sure you’re okay.”

Stormy paused trying to wrap her head around a concept that made no sense whatsoever.

“So let me get this straight,” she said as she stared him square in the face. “Jett didn’t talk about you, didn’t tell me you existed, but you want to take care of me? Yeah. Right. Makes perfect sense.”

Ryder laughed. “I know it seems crazy. I’m just trying to right some wrongs, you know?”

“A little late for that, don’t you think?”

“It’s never too late to do the right

thing.” Ryder shifted uncomfortably. “I also want to find out who killed him, and I need your help.”

“The police said it was someone in a rival gang,” she said. “Honestly that’s all I know. I’m afraid I won’t be of much help.”

Stormy rolled her eyes. She was still having a hard time buying what Ryder was trying to sell her. Something seemed fishy.

Ryder’s eyes danced around the room and he took a deep breath. “It was one of my men.”

“What?!” Stormy yelled.

“I’m pretty sure,” he said. “I just need your help because I don’t know for sure.”

“Help? How?”

“If you become my old lady and I bring you into the group, maybe we can see who treats you differently or acts differently around you,” he said.

“Wow,” she replied. “I don’t even know you, Ryder.”

“Ask me anything,” he said.

“When did you move out of Coleville?” she asked. If he wasn’t going to volunteer any information, she figured she could at least ask questions and try to piece something, anything together.

“When I was eighteen,” he said. “I was into some bad stuff. Smuggling cocaine. Got recruited by the Hellfire Motorcycle Club. Never came back.”

“Why didn’t you come back?”

Ryder chuckled as if her question was silly. “Would you want to come back to Coleville if you didn’t have to? I worked my way up to VP. It’s hard to walk away from all that power. Why are you still in Coleville? There’s nothing here.”

“My family’s here. It’s not that bad,” Stormy shrugged.

“Well, when your family is like mine,” he began. “Sometimes it’s not worth coming back for. My mom was a drugged up hooker. My dad left when we were little.”

“So you just abandoned your younger brother? Nice,” she retorted.

“Jett was sixteen when I left. He

wasn't a kid. He could fend for himself. Plus I figured he'd be out of the house sooner or later," he justified it.

"Unfortunately he didn't take it that well and stopped talking to me."

"Can't say that I blame him. Pretty shitty thing to do," Stormy said as she scowled at him. "But then again, I can't say I blame you for wanting to get away from your mom. If you can even call her that. Jett told me stories."

"Good old, Misty," Ryder said as he stretched his hands back behind his head and sunk back into the couch cushions. "How is that crazy broad doing these days?"

Stormy was a little taken aback by Ryder's candor, but on the other hand

she appreciated that he wasn't trying to put on an act with her. So far he appeared to be forthcoming and genuine, but only time would tell.

“She hates me,” Stormy said.

“That’s about all I know. She thinks I took Jett away from her. Really I told him to stop supporting her drug habit by giving her money every other day.”

“Yeah, she’s obsessed with money,” he said. “And getting her next fix.”

She wanted to ask more questions, but she didn't want to bombard him just yet. It seemed like a few questions here or there were getting him to open up about things without realizing it. She was going to have to be strategic if she

wanted to get any more information from him.

An awkward silence filled the space between them for a few moments until Stormy got up and grabbed their empty wine goblets. The moment she stood up, she felt dizzy. She then remembered she hadn't eaten all day.

“Whoa,” she said as she braced herself on the arm of the couch.

“Need help?” Ryder asked.

“No, it's okay,” she said as she swayed her way to the kitchen. She rinsed out the wine goblets and returned to the living room where Ryder was paging through one of Jett's old magazines that had been sitting on the coffee table.

“We loved motorcycles as kids,” he said as he paged through. “I’m the one who introduced him to the world of bikes.”

Stormy smiled. For a brief moment it felt just like Jett was sitting there, on the couch, in his favorite spot, reading his favorite magazine. For those few seconds, Jett was still there. He wasn’t dead and buried in the cold, hard ground.

“This is really awkward, but do you mind if I stay here tonight?” Ryder asked as he looked up at her with his hazel eyes. “I’ve been riding all day, and I’m exhausted. I could just pass out here on the couch if that’s okay?”

“You’re Jett’s brother. Of course

it's okay," Stormy said as she went to grab blankets and pillows for him.

She glanced at her watch, which read nine o'clock, and decided it was probably a good time for her to retire as well. Her swollen eyes were so fatigued that she wanted nothing more than to crash for the night, but having a perfect stranger staying in her house was going to make it a little difficult.

"Here you go," she said as she tossed him some clean linens and a fluffy pillow. "I hope you don't mind, I'm going to go to bed now. It's been a really long day."

"Yeah, of course," he said.

"Goodnight," she said with a shrug as she walked back towards the

bedroom.

“Stormy?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for letting me crash here tonight.”

“That’s what family does.”

Stormy locked her bedroom door the minute she got inside. She didn’t know Ryder from Adam, and although she wanted to believe his intentions were good and that he was a good guy, there was a reason Jett never told her about him. She didn’t trust him quite yet, and it was going to take some time.

As soon as she climbed into her bed and under the covers, she tossed and turned as she struggled to shut her mind off. Within minutes, however, her tired

body won against her wound up mind
and she was out cold.

CHAPTER 2

The moment she opened her eyes, the sun was shining and the alarm clock read a little past seven o'clock. She had hoped to sleep in that day. The more time she spent sleeping, the less time she'd spend mourning Jett. The less hours she had to spend in a world without Jett, the better.

She heard a light rapping on her door.

"Stormy?" a man's voice called out. "You up?"

Stormy shot up, forgetting for a second that Ryder had stayed the night. She pounced out of bed and unlocked the door.

"Yes," she said. She only opened

the door a few inches, but standing next to him felt just like standing next to Jett. The top of her head lined up right at Ryder's mouth, about like it did with Jett.

“Do you want to go out for breakfast? I'm starving. My treat,” he offered.

Stormy laughed for the first time in days. “That's why you're knocking on my door at seven in the morning?”

Ryder's full lips spread into a wide smile. His teeth were perfectly straight and bright white, just like Jett's. Stormy couldn't help but think about kissing him. She wanted so badly to know if his kiss would feel like Jett's. She stared at his mouth as her mind

wandered, lost in thought and obsessing over the fact that she would never again get to experience Jett's kisses in her lifetime.

“Stormy?” he interrupted her trance-like state. “Why are you looking at me that way?”

“Sorry, sorry,” she said as she shook her head. “Just thinking.”

“I probably remind you of him, huh,” Ryder stated with his hands on his hips. He ruffled his fingers through his buzzed, chocolate hair and sighed. “I’m sorry. Didn’t even think about that. Must be hard for you.”

Stormy shrugged and then nodded as she fought back another wave of teary eyes. They seemed to come and go in

random intervals, and any little thing that reminded her of Jett set her off.

“Hungry?” Ryder changed the subject. “You look hungry. Let’s go. Hurry up.”

“Give me two minutes,” she said as she shut the door. She hurried and threw on black yoga pants and another baggy, old sweatshirt of Jett’s. She wrapped her hair up into a top knot and made her way to the bathroom to freshen up and slap on a hint of makeup.

The face staring back at her in the mirror looked strange and unfamiliar to her. Her eyelids were puffy and her cheeks were red. She splashed cold water on her face before dabbing on some tinted moisturizer, blush, and

waterproof mascara. It was going to have to be good enough that day.

“Ready?” she said as she emerged from down the hall.

Ryder was seated at the couch again, flipping through Jett’s book. He had neatly folded his linens from the night before and sat them on top of his pillow on the couch arm. He stood up and jingled his keys in his hand before heading towards the front door.

“I can take us,” he offered. “I’ve got a spare helmet.”

“You’re going to have to. You parked behind me,” Stormy said as she pointed out the obvious.

Although she had just met Ryder, there was something oddly familiar and

comforting about him. She hardly knew him, yet she felt like she could be herself around him. She felt like he was some sort of extension of Jett. She couldn't have Jett anymore, but having Ryder around was almost like the next best thing. He was like the designer imposter version of Jett; a close knock off.

He hopped on his BMW, flipped up the kickstand, and she climbed on behind him. The seats were tan and buttery smooth, and the bike had hardly a scratch or spec of dirt anywhere on it.

“Is that diner on 10th street still around?” he asked. “They have the best breakfast.”

“They are,” she responded.

They rode in silence to the diner

as Stormy wrapped her arms around his waist. She couldn't stop herself from staring at his reflection in the side mirrors.

“Why are you staring at me?” he yelled back. “It's freaking me out.”

“Sorry, didn't mean to,” she lied. Her cheeks turned a shade of crimson as she turned to stare out the opposite window.

They pulled up to a stop sign.

“Growing up, people always thought Jett and I were twins,” he yelled. “Except Jett was always a little bit smaller. That was the only difference,” he said. “That and I have dimples.”

He flashed a megawatt smile and revealed the most gorgeous and perfectly

placed dimples Stormy had ever seen. Jett was a handsome guy, but Ryder was the Abercrombie model version of him.

“That’s the only difference?”

Stormy teased him as she tried to distract herself from feeling any ounce of attraction towards him.

“Pretty much,” Ryder grinned as he took off and drove another couple blocks. “We’re here.”

He pulled into the weeded parking lot of the diner and shut off the bike. Ryder let Stormy climb off first before following right behind her. Stormy loved that he had good, old-fashioned manners. It was something she’d always loved about Jett.

They took a spot in a booth in the

corner and waited for their server to approach. A young girl, probably still in high school, came and took their drink orders.

Stormy's swollen eyes ached as the bright sunshine poured in through the diner windows. She stood up and pulled the shade down.

"Hope you don't mind," she said to Ryder.

"Not a fan of sunshine?" he asked.

"Not today," she huffed.

"I can't live without it," he said.

"That's partly why I moved to California. Or maybe why I never left. It's beautiful. Sunny, palm trees, hardly any rain. Growing up in that dark, dirty house with Misty was so oppressive and

miserable. Never again.”

The server came back with an orange juice for Stormy and a big glass of chocolate milk for Ryder.

“Jett liked chocolate milk,” Stormy said with a smile.

“I know,” he said. “I got him hooked as a kid.”

They ordered their breakfasts, Stormy settling on an English muffin and fruit plate, and Ryder ordering the biggest breakfast platter he could find on the menu.

“So, Ryder, what’s your plan while you’re in town?” she asked, cutting to the chase.

“I guess I just really wanted to get to know you,” he said. He wasted no

time being blatantly honest with her.

“Make sure you’re okay. Solicit your help in finding out who murdered my brother. You know. That sort of thing.”

“Hm,” Stormy said. She was still trying to gauge whether or not she could trust him. So far he seemed genuine, but she’d only met him the night before. What did she know?

“I have to admit, I was a little shocked when I heard Jett was married,” he said. “I hadn’t heard from him in years, and then all of a sudden I find out he’s in love with some girl and married? And then my source told me he had passed. I had to come back here.”

“Who’s your source?” she asked.

“I can’t say. No one you’d know.

Inside people,” he insisted. Given his candor all this time, she had no choice but to believe him.

“So tell me about yourself. Where do you work? What do you do?” Stormy asked.

“Aside from running the MC, I have various, uh, business endeavors,” he said. “It would bore you to death, but it pays the bills and lets me work from anywhere in the world.”

“That doesn’t sound shady at all,” Stormy guffawed. “Are you trying to impress me or do you really have legitimate business endeavors?”

“I don’t need to impress you, Stormy. I’m just saying, what I do outside the club is legit, and I’m serious,

it's boring," he replied. "Websites, clicks, referrals, that sort of thing. Your eyes would glaze over if we went over what I do."

"I see." She looked him up and down and studied his face. He didn't seem like the kind of guy who would run online businesses. He was so rugged, rough and tumble, and dressed in head to toe denim and black leather.

"Believe it or not, I don't want to stay in the MC forever," he said. "So, Stormy, what do you do?"

"I'm a registered nurse," she said. "Currently unemployed."

"I thought nurses were always an in-demand profession?"

"I thought so too, but not in

Coleville, I guess,” she shrugged.

“Is that how you met Jett?”

“Oh, yeah, I just assumed you knew that. I was his nurse after he had a real bad bike accident a few years ago,” she said.

Ryder’s face became pinched.

“Oh, yeah. I can see how you marrying and running off with him would upset Misty then. Big time.”

“Why do you call your mom Misty?” Stormy asked. She was dying to know more about their odd family dynamic.

“I’ve called her Misty ever since she decided not to be a mom,” he said. “The word ‘mother’ is reserved for people who actually fit the bill for that

role not someone who runs off with men every night of the week and leaves her young kids at home with no food in the cupboards.”

Stormy could hear the disdain in his voice when he talked about his mother. It was the same tone she'd hear in Jett's voice anytime Misty came around. Ryder was lucky that he was able to escape her powerful grasp and live a life all his own. Poor Jett never had that opportunity until Stormy came along.

Their food arrived and Ryder dug in right away.

“Mmm,” he said between bites of fluffy scrambled eggs and crispy bacon. “Just like I remember.”

“You don’t have greasy spoons in California?” Stormy asked.

“Of course we do. Nothing beats your hometown diner,” he said. “That nostalgia just adds a little something extra, you know?”

He continued scarfing his food as Stormy picked around at her fruit plate. Some of the fruit looked questionable, and her appetite hadn’t quite returned yet. Instead of eating, she just watched Ryder devour his breakfast. He was such an animal when he ate. He was night and day from Jett. Jett would eat slowly, with intention, while Ryder just inhaled everything.

“Oh, man,” Ryder said as he sat back in the booth and pushed out his

belly. “That was good.”

He rubbed his stomach contently as he smiled at Stormy.

“I missed that,” he said. “A little greasy food never hurt anyone.”

She looked down at her fruit and back at him.

“I guess you didn’t eat crap today,” he laughed. “Well, good for you.”

The server brought the check and Ryder slapped a twenty dollar bill on the table before leaving.

“I forgot how cheap small towns are,” he said. “I don’t even think I could get breakfast for \$20 back home.”

He followed Stormy back out to the bike. The sun was still shining bright,

and it was a perfect day for a ride. The fresh air felt good on her face as they headed back towards her house.

The moment they pulled into her driveway, they stood outside and lingered a bit on the front porch.

“So what’s your plan, Ryder? How long are you going to be in town?” she asked.

“No itinerary of any kind. Just sort of playing it by ear,” he said. “I was going to ask you something. You can totally say no if you want, and I’ll understand.”

“What?” Stormy was almost scared.

“Would it be okay if I stayed at your place while I’m in town?”

Stormy wondered why he would want to sleep on her couch when he clearly had money. He drove a nice bike, bragged about his internet businesses, and seemed like a pretty resourceful guy.

“You’d rather sleep on my couch than at a nice hotel?” she asked.

“Name one nice hotel in Coleville,” he laughed. “Go.”

“Good point,” she said before pausing for a couple seconds. “Of course you can stay with me.”

“You’re a sweet girl, Stormy,” he said. “Thank you.”

Ryder still hadn’t answered her question about what his plans were. It seemed he just wanted to hang around

her for whatever reason.

“Does your mom, I mean Misty, know you’re in town right now?” she asked as they made their way inside.

“Nope,” he said as he turned to face her in all seriousness. “And it better stay that way.”

“Got it.” She was slightly insulted by his remark. He should’ve realized by now that she was more or less estranged from that crazy woman.

Stormy tossed her purse and house keys on the kitchen table and kicked off her shoes.

“So what are your plans for today?” Stormy asked yet again. “Anything in particular you need to do?”

“A few things,” he said. “I’ll

probably take off for a bit. You going to be around most of the day?”

“Yeah, I’ll be here,” she said. She was dying to know where he was going though.

Although she’d only just met him, he had given her a bit of a reprieve from crying. He had distracted her from her grief, made her feel like she was with a familiar face, and even got a few laughs out of her. No one else could do that, she was sure of it. The thought of Ryder leaving for a bit and leaving her all alone with her sad thoughts sent her instantly into a blurry mess of tears. She turned her face so he wouldn’t see.

Ryder sent a few text messages on his phone before looking up at Stormy

and smiling.

“I better get going,” he said. “I’ll be back later. Maybe late afternoon or early evening.”

“Okay,” Stormy said as she smiled through teary eyes.

“You going to be okay?” he asked with one raised eyebrow. “I can stick around if you want. I don’t want to leave if you’re going to start bawling the moment I walk out of here.”

Stormy’s lip trembled, but she forced a smile. “There’s nothing wrong with crying.”

“I suppose you’re right,” he said. “But seriously, I’ll stay if you need me to.”

“No, go,” she said as she shoed

him towards the door. “Do what you need to do. I’ll see you later.”

Ryder stared at her saddened face for a moment and hesitated before walking outside and climbing onto his bike and backing out of the driveway. Stormy watched out the curtains and waited for him to ride off before shuffling back to her bedroom, throwing herself onto her bed, and burying herself under the thick covers.

CHAPTER 3

As Stormy spent the day alone, she couldn't help but reflect about how crazy the week had been. It was only Thursday, but in the last four days her life had been chewed up, swallowed, and spit back out. Nothing was the same anymore, and it was never going to be the same ever again.

Her mind wandered all over the place as she wallowed in grief and self-pity. Was her life worth living anymore? How could she ever find someone to love her the way Jett did, and how would she ever find someone she'd love the way she loved him?

As Stormy drifted deeper and deeper into the darkest parts of her mind,

her thoughts only became blacker and more disturbed. She knew Jett would've been furious to know the kinds of thoughts she was having, but she couldn't help the way she felt. All that hope she'd had just less than a week ago had faded into sheer nothingness. Any excitement she had for the future had flown out the window the moment she found Jett lying unconscious and bleeding on the floor of their kitchen and saw the front door was wide open. She knew she would never in a million years be able to get that image out of her head.

The minutes ticked on and the hours passed as Stormy stayed cemented under the covers of her bed. She didn't want to move. She didn't want to turn on

the T.V. or read a book. Her appetite was non-existent. Most of the time she stared up at the ceiling. Between bouts of crying, her eyes would tire out. She would fall asleep only to wake up and find it had only been twenty minutes or so. The day couldn't have moved any slower, and time seemed to stand still, locking her into a living nightmare.

Welcome to the rest of my life,
Stormy lamented to herself.

She wondered how she was ever going to be happy again, and how she'd ever be able to move on without Jett. She wondered if he was around her at all, watching her cry and wanting to hold her. She was sure he was, but then again, she knew it was probably just wishful

thinking on her part. There were times, though, that she could have sworn she could smell his woodsy cologne or feel him around.

Tired of crying and miraculously energized from lying in bed all day, she decided to get up and grab a glass of water from the kitchen. As she tiptoed down the hall towards the kitchen, she walked past her phone, which had been turned off all day. She knew the moment she turned it on she would have a million voicemails and text messages from people checking on her, but she did it anyway.

The first voicemail was from her mother. The second voicemail was also from her mother. The third voicemail

was from her best friend, Brooklyn, as were a myriad of text messages. But the fourth voicemail caught her by surprise.

“Hey, Stormy. It’s Hayden,” the voicemail said. “I’m sorry to hear about your loss. I’m here if you need anything.”

Hayden, her high school sweetheart, paled in comparison to the kind of man Jett was, Stormy knew that, but she couldn’t help but breathe a happy sigh in knowing that he took time out of his day to think about her. She would never be able to love Hayden as deeply as she loved Jett, but a part of her would always love him. He was her first love. If anything, he would be a good place card to fill the void when her days got

too lonely to bear.

Hayden was night and day compared to Jett. Jett was the quintessential bad boy with a tiny bit of a jealous streak. Hayden was the quintessential high school quarterback who could have any pick of the litter. Hayden dumped Stormy the minute he went off the college, and she held a flame for him until the day she met Jett Jacks.

She was startled by a knock at the door and almost dropped her phone on the hard floor but caught it just in time. She peeked out the window and saw Ryder's BMW parked in the driveway. He was back.

She swept back her hair and

checked her reflection in a nearby mirror to make sure she didn't have any rogue mascara streaks down her face. As soon as she confirmed that she was somewhat presentable, she unlocked the front door and let him in.

“Hey,” she said with a smile.

“Come on in.”

Ryder stared at her swollen, reddened face and puffy eyes and looked sad for her.

“You doing okay, kid?” he said as he walked inside. “You need a hug or something?”

Stormy shook her head, but Ryder stepped towards her and wrapped his arms around her anyway, squeezing her tight. Stormy tensed up at first, but after

a few minutes she let go and just let him hold her for a bit. She buried her face in his jacket, which had the same familiar leather jacket smell Jett always had. It was nice to be held, and if she closed her eyes and used her imagination, it was almost like Jett was holding her.

They lingered in the doorway in their shared embrace for a bit until Stormy pushed back and stepped away.

“Thanks,” she said, although she was a little embarrassed. She was surprised by how touchy-feely Ryder was since Jett was the complete opposite. She wasn’t used to it.

She glanced at the clock, which read a little past five. For the first time all day, her stomach growled.

“Are you hungry?” he asked. He had clearly heard the rumble. “I haven’t eaten yet. Want me to whip something up for us?”

“I guess,” she said. “If you want. I don’t have a lot of groceries here.”

“I’m sure I can find something,” he said as he oozed confidence. “I’m pretty resourceful. Growing up with a mom who never cooked kind of forced me to learn that skill early on.”

She loved how comfortable Ryder made himself in her home. It made her feel like she had known him a lot longer than a day, and it made her feel more at ease around him. There was just something about him, and she couldn’t put her finger on it.

She sat at the kitchen table in awe of him as he ransacked her pantry and cabinets, pulling random pots, pans and utensils out as well as the random canned vegetable or box of dry pasta. He was in his own little world as he whipped up some sort of dinner creation. Stormy couldn't help but watch the way he moved, the way his arms flexed when he whisked the sauce, and the way he licked his fingers when he sampled it. Jett could hardly boil water or heat up frozen pizza. Ryder, apparently, really knew his way around the kitchen.

She admired how independent and inventive Ryder was. He seemed so self-assured the entire time. He didn't

even care or notice that Stormy was watching his every move in the kitchen.

After a few more minutes, he plated the piping hot food and brought it over to the table and sat down next to her.

“I don’t know what to call this,” he said as he handed her a fork. “It should be fairly edible. If not, pizza’s on me.”

Stormy laughed. “Thanks for cooking. This looks good.”

“Anything you need,” he said. “It’s the least I could do for you since you’re letting me crash here.”

“Ryder, you’re family,” Stormy reminded him. She was starting to trust him, little by little. “Of course I’d let

you stay here. Don't feel like you have to pay me back or that you owe me or something.”

Ryder cocked his head and looked at her with a funny smile for a second.

“There aren't a lot of people like you where I come from,” he said.

“Everyone's always out to get something, especially when you have the power that they don't have. There are no favors. No free lunches. This is refreshing.”

Stormy didn't know what to say. She was just trying to be herself. It was the way she was raised.

“I hate to be rude, but I've got to get a little bit of work done,” he said as he ran out of the room. He returned with

his laptop, cracked it open, fired it up, and continued shoveling bites of food into his mouth as he clicked around and opened various websites and spreadsheets. “Hope you don’t mind if I multitask here.”

“I completely understand,” Stormy said. She tried not to stare at his computer screen, but she couldn’t help herself. She took great satisfaction knowing he wasn’t lying to her about his work being boring. Nothing on his screen jumped out at her or made her even remotely want to know more about what he did. She was just amazed at the fact that he was some sort of biker business man. She’d never heard of such a thing, and it impressed her more than

she cared to admit.

Ryder didn't try to hide his screen or turn it away, even though it was completely obvious that Stormy was looking on. She liked that about him. He wasn't secretive.

She finished her meal and took her dish to the sink to rinse it off before heading out to the living room. The night was young, she was no longer tired, and she didn't know what to do. She sat in the quiet, dark living room alone with her thoughts. She didn't feel like hanging out with Brooklyn, she didn't want to talk to her parents, and she didn't feel it would be even remotely appropriate to contact Hayden.

She leaned back on the couch and

crossed her legs as her foot twitched with wild vigor. She sat, lost in thought, until the light was suddenly switched on.

“You just going to sit here in the dark?” Ryder laughed. He plopped down on the couch right next to her with his laptop still open.

“Sorry,” she said. “Kind of in my own little world these days.”

“Don’t apologize, Stormy,” he scoffed. “You’ve got nothing to be sorry for. Nothing at all.”

His eyes were glued to his screen as he was still clicking around and pulling up various documents.

“Still working?” she asked.

“Almost done,” he said. “Okay. Done.”

He closed the lid to the laptop and sat it down on the coffee table before leaning back on the couch, both of his strong arms spread wide against the back.

“I like it here,” he said. “I feel like a part of Jett is here. It feels like home to me.”

“I can tell,” Stormy teased.

“I missed out on so much of his life,” he said. “And for what?”

“It’s not your fault,” Stormy said. “You can blame that on Misty.”

“Yeah,” he shrugged. “I can. But I also could’ve tried harder. Shit. He was just a kid when I walked out of here and never looked back. Brothers don’t do that to each other.”

“So back to how you found out that Jett was married,” Stormy said as she cut to the chase. “How did you find out exactly?”

Ryder bit his lip. “I have my sources.”

“Did he contact you?” she asked.

Ryder looked down and hesitated.

“Yeah.”

“Really?”

“He actually asked me to be his best man,” he admitted. “I regret more than anything in the world that I turned him down.”

“That’s really shitty,” Stormy said as she crossed her arms. “Why’d you turn him down?”

“I had my reasons,” he said. “Too

many reasons that seemed legit at the time. Now I know it was just my pride.”

Stormy shook her head in judgment.

“I guess I was also kind of jealous that he had found someone to love him,” he said. “My whole life I’ve been searching for the kind of love that Jett said he found.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about his life before you,” he continued. “Running around with shady people, being controlled by Misty and having all his money go to her. He meets a nice young, pretty girl like you and everything changed. He was trying to turn his MC club legit so he could give you a nice, normal life and support

the family he wanted to have with you. He wanted to have the family that we never had. He wanted you to be the mother of his kids. Where I'm from, that's big. That means something."

"How often did he call you?"

"Not that much. Maybe once or twice in the last few years," he said.

"He always had my number. I guess he thought I probably wouldn't answer if he called too much."

"I just think it's so weird that he never told me about you," Stormy mused. "I can't wrap my head around it. There's got to be a reason."

Ryder looked worried for a split second, like Stormy was second-guessing her decision to let him into her

life.

“Jett was a peculiar boy,” he said.

“I think we can both agree on that.”

“Peculiar, no,” she said.

“Mysterious, absolutely.”

“Yeah, that’s probably a nicer word for it,” he agreed.

“Hey, what was that letter you had in your hand the other night?” Stormy asked.

Ryder hesitated. “What letter?”

Stormy knew he was lying. “I don’t buy that for one second. You had one in your hand last night, didn’t you?”

“That was your address,” he said, though he appeared to be lying. His nose twitched a bit. “I had written down your address and directions to your place.”

Stormy was still unsure. “Well, why can’t you show me then?”

“Look, I won’t say no, but I can’t say yes quite yet,” he said with a pained expression on your face. “You have to wait. It’ll all make sense later. I promise.”

Stormy crossed her arms and sulked as she turned away from him.

“You’ve got to just trust me,” he said.

CHAPTER 4

Friday morning came without warning and Stormy woke with the relief of knowing Ryder was still there. She wasn't ready to be alone yet. She wasn't ready to face the brutal, harsh reality of life without Jett.

Had Jett still been there, she would've pounced on him that morning and awoken him with a good-morning kiss. She then would've made him breakfast and gone on a nice ride around the neighborhood with him. They might have gone to a coffee shop or they might have just taken a long ride out in the country through the scenic hills and valleys of Coleville. She had no one to do those things with anymore. She had

no one she wanted to do those things with anymore either. Those things would never be the same without him.

She climbed out of her warm bed, one foot at a time, and headed towards the bathroom which was occupied by Ryder. She waited in the hall for a few minutes, back against the wall, before deciding to wait in the kitchen. She poured herself a bowl of cold cereal and sat at the table alone with her thoughts and the occasional clanking of the spoon against the ceramic bowl.

Several minutes later, Ryder emerged from down the hall. His chocolate brown hair was shiny and still wet as it glistened in the daylight that shined through the window. The smell of

fresh aftershave and coconut body wash followed him and filled the air. His t-shirt clung to his still damp body, embracing the cambers of his shoulders, and his muscles flexed as he hoisted his duffle bag in one hand.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Were you waiting on me to get out of the bathroom?”

“It’s okay,” Stormy said as she took the last bite of her cereal. She couldn’t help but stare at him a bit more.

She took her bowl to the sink and headed to the bathroom to get ready. She’d been neglecting herself lately, and she knew it was starting to show. She slathered on a cucumber-mint face mask, drew a hot, steamy bubble bath, and laid

in the tub until the water turned cool. It felt good just to soak away her stress, to calm her nerves, and to empty her head. The steam filled her pores and helped sooth her tired, swollen eyes. She was slowly beginning to feel human again.

When she emerged from the hour-old, lukewarm bath water, she wrapped a towel around her long, dark hair and threw on a robe. She smoothed some foundation over her face with her finger tips, brushed on some pink blush, and swiped on a few coats of lengthening mascara.

We're getting there, she thought to herself as she slicked on some rose-tinted lip balm.

She was starting to catch a

glimpse of her old self looking back at her in the mirror. She knew Jett wouldn't want her to spend her days crying in bed. He would want her to get back out there and live life, if not for her, then for him. Jett didn't have the luxury of being alive anymore. Stormy did. She would be doing a huge disservice to Jett's memory if all she did was wish her life away.

She finished up in the bathroom then headed to her room to change. She decided against her normal yoga pants and sweatshirt uniform and slipped on a pair of her favorite jeans and a navy blue polka dot blouse. The jeans hung off her hips and barely stayed up. Almost a week of not eating much had worn her a bit thin.

She walked out to the living room where Ryder was sitting and fiddling around on his laptop again.

“Working hard as always, I see,” Stormy teased.

“Oh, Stormy, hey,” he said as he looked up at her then back at his laptop. He then glanced back at her again.

“Wow, you look really nice today.”

“Thanks,” she said as she appreciated the double-take. “I think.”

“I just mean,” he started. “You look nice. That’s all.”

Ryder seemed a little flustered by Stormy’s innate beauty. The last two days he’d pretty much only seen her with puffy cheeks and swollen eyes, wearing dirty, rumped sweats.

Ryder looked up at her again to sneak another peak. It was safe to say he was starting to look at her in a whole new light. He could barely keep his eyes off her, as if he was hypnotized.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Stormy asked, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

“I’m not,” he lied. Poorly.

Stormy plopped down next to him on the couch and grabbed a pillow to hug in her lap.

“What are we working on today?” she asked.

“Just checking in with my business partner,” he said.

“What’s his name?” Stormy asked, though she didn’t really care. She was

just trying to make conversation.

“Veronica,” he said.

“Oh,” Stormy said, taken off guard. “I don’t know why I just assumed it was a guy.”

Ryder shrugged and thought nothing of her assumption.

“How did you two meet?” she asked. She felt a tiny twinge of inexplicable jealousy and had no idea where it was coming from.

“We met at a bar in California,” he said. “We were really drunk and scribbled a business plan on the back of a napkin. The next day we met again and realized we both had really good ideas. She had the money, I had the brains. She became my investor.”

“Oh, so you’re only partners then?” Stormy knew she was making herself seem super obvious, but she didn’t care.

“We dated,” he said. “She was a real spitfire. Bright red hair. Legs up to here. Crazy eyes. A personality to match. Almost married her. Didn’t work out. We saved our business though.”

Stormy couldn’t understand why Ryder talking about another woman made her jealous. Maybe it was the way he made her feel like she was the only person in the world when they were together. She had never even thought about the possibility of him having a girlfriend, let alone an ex-girlfriend that he damn near married.

“That’s good,” Stormy said as she tried to act casual. “I’m intrigued by this relationship. How do you keep things all business and nothing personal? Isn’t that hard?”

“It’s probably harder for her than for me,” he said. “I’m the one who broke things off. She just got too crazy. Too obsessed with me.”

“Do you still love her though?” Stormy was dying to know.

“We were together for a long time, and we’re still friends, of course I love her,” he said. “We had crazy chemistry. Still do. It’s just never going to work out for us.”

“Does she know that?” Stormy asked.

“Ha,” he laughed. “She still has hope I think.”

Stormy shamed herself for getting jealous of Ryder’s ex-girlfriend. She barely knew Ryder. She didn’t have feelings for him and yet she was drilling him about Veronica. She had no place to ask those questions, and she had to stop.

“Anyway,” Stormy said. “Sorry to pry. I know it’s none of my business.”

Ryder shrugged as he seemed to think nothing of it. “No worries.”

“So what’s your plan for today?”

“I was actually thinking about heading back to California,” he said.

Stormy’s face fell. She knew he wasn’t there to stay long, but she didn’t think he’d take off after just two days.

“Unless you want me to stay?” he said. “I don’t want to leave you hanging. If you need me to stay, to help you with anything, I will.”

Stormy wanted him to stay even if only for the company he gave her. She liked having a piece of Jett with her. She liked how he inadvertently distracted her and made her smile more than she’d smiled in a long time.

“Listen, you do what you need to do. Don’t worry about me,” she insisted. The last thing she wanted was for him to think she was needy and helpless.

Ryder took a deep breath and sat in silence as he thought for a bit. He rubbed his hand across his stubble-covered, square jawline and then turned

to her and flashed his charming, signature Ryder smile.

“I think I can stick around one more day,” he said. “I’ll just leave first thing Saturday morning.”

Stormy couldn’t help but smile back. She was so happy to hear he was staying another day. She wanted to get to know him a little more, she enjoyed his company, and there were still so many unanswered questions.

“So what do you want to do on your last day in Coleville?” she asked.

“Gosh, that’s a tough one,” he said. “So many different options. How will I ever decide?”

Stormy laughed at his sarcasm.

“Why don’t you plan a day for

us?” he asked. “Show me around town. Show me what’s changed in the last eight years. I’m perfectly fine just bumming around today and hanging out. I don’t need to be entertained.”

“Sounds good to me,” she said.

“Want to go for a ride on the bike?”

Ryder stood up and stretched as he grabbed his keys and phone off the coffee table. They headed outside where Stormy stood on the front porch fidgeting with the sticky door lock.

“Jett was going to fix this,” she said, embarrassed. “Never got around to it. Obviously.”

The breeze swayed and rustled the green leaves on the sycamore trees that lined her street. It was a perfect June

morning. The summer heat had yet to set in, and the sun was shining bright.

“Allow me,” Ryder said. He pulled on the door, jiggled the lock, tightened something or other, and then the key went into the lock and turned as if it were brand new.

“Wow, thanks,” Stormy said.
“You’re good.”

Ryder said nothing as he turned and walked towards his bike and climbed on. Stormy climbed behind him on the passenger seat as he started it up and rolled out of the driveway. The leather seat was warm beneath her jeans. The bike’s engine hummed softly, vibrating underneath her, and the breeze floated by, carrying the sweet scent of

the neighbor's flowering peony and lilac bushes. Stormy wanted to stay in that moment forever.

They drove down Stormy's street and headed towards Main Street. As they buzzed up and down the business district, Stormy pointed out the various shops and eateries that had closed and reopened under new management or had become yogurt shops and bars. The town was a far cry from what it was eight years ago, and with the demise of the appliance factory, everything had gone downhill fast.

“Don't you ever want to get out of Coleville?” Ryder asked as they pulled up to a stop. “Live someplace else? See what it's like?”

“I’m only twenty-two,” she yelled back. “I’m young. A lot can happen.”

Stormy realized her birthday was coming up in two weeks. Jett had been planning a special surprise for her big day, but now she’d never know what that was. Never in her life did she imagine she’d be a widow at twenty-three.

“What are you waiting for?”
Ryder asked. “Come to California for a visit. I bet you won’t want to leave.”

Was that a genuine invitation? She wondered. Or was he just saying that because that’s what people say when they’re trying to be nice?

He pulled his bike into a parking spot and shut off the engine.

“Maybe when I get a job, I can

save up some money and come out and visit,” she said.

“Or I could just fly you out,” he said. “Not a big deal. We’re family, right?”

“Oh, you don’t have to pay for me to fly anywhere,” she said.

“You’re my brother’s sweet, young widow,” he said. “It’s my job to look after you now, kid.”

Stormy loved that he said that, but hated that he called her “kid”. She was a young woman, not a child. She didn’t need anyone to take care of her. She just wanted a friend, someone she could rely on and talk to.

“You don’t have to take care of me, Ryder,” Stormy insisted. “I don’t

need anyone to take care of me.”

“Jett probably left you a pretty penny, huh?” Ryder laughed, though Stormy wondered what the intentions were behind his question.

“Are you kidding me?” she asked. His words were like a knife through her heart. All along, she realized, he’d probably been testing her. That or he wanted money.

“As far as I know, all I have is our trailer,” she said through gritted teeth. “We never talked about money. He took care of everything. I didn’t ask any questions. He didn’t have a life insurance policy. Something we just never got around to setting up I guess.”

“Whoa, geez,” he said with his

hand up in the air. “I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry.”

Stormy sat in the passenger seat steaming mad. She couldn’t believe Ryder would even bring up anything about Jett’s money.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s just that you don’t know me at all, and you’re already bringing up Jett and his money. You’re just like Misty.”

“That was low.”

“Do me a favor,” Stormy said as she turned to face him. “Don’t ever make another assumption about me again. Ever.”

“Well this day’s gone to shit,” Ryder said with as much sarcasm as he could muster.

The two sat in complete silence as Ryder climbed back on the bike and continued riding around. A million thoughts circled Stormy's mind as she tried to gauge Ryder's intentions. At first she loved how comfortable and genuine he was with her. She loved that he had Jett's smile and his same eyes and matching hair. She loved that he seemed to want to take care of her, but the minute he brought up anything about Jett's money, everything she liked about him went out the window.

For all Stormy knew, Misty had recruited Ryder to spy on her, to peek into her life and see exactly what kind of person she was. Maybe Misty wanted to know how much money Stormy was

worth now that Jett had died. She was always trying to get her hands on whatever she could. Misty had always insisted that Stormy was only ever after Jett's money, and who better to get on the inside than Jett's doppelganger brother?

“Look,” Ryder said as he broke the silence. “I’m really sorry. I really am.”

Stormy wanted to believe him but she just couldn’t. Her heart was still too raw from that week’s events.

“Maybe we should head back to my place,” she said in his ear. She wasn’t feeling the ride anymore. She knew she was being overly sensitive, but she couldn’t help it.

“I’m sorry, Stormy,” Ryder said the moment they got back to Stormy’s. “Please forgive me?”

She glanced over at his face and he truly looked apologetic. He held his hand across his heart as his eyes pleaded for her forgiveness.

“I’m sorry too,” Stormy sighed. “Please don’t ever bring up Jett’s money around me ever again.”

“Got it.”

It was not quite lunchtime, and Stormy just wanted to lay down for a bit.

“Help yourself to whatever you want in the kitchen,” she said, though she really didn’t need to tell him to make himself at home at this point. “I’m going to take a nap.”

“It’s, like, 10:30,” he said.

“You’ve only been up a couple hours. You’re really going to take a nap?”

Stormy nodded and trekked back towards her bedroom. She buried herself beneath the covers for the millionth time that week and sunk her head into the thick, feather pillows. For the first time all week, her mind was blank. She wasn’t thinking about Jett, and she wasn’t trying to figure out Ryder. She didn’t know what to think about anything anymore. She was tired of thinking. Her mind was exhausted, and she just wanted to sleep.

CHAPTER 5

When Stormy awoke from her nap, her alarm read four o'clock. She'd slept for over five hours. All that time, just gone. She felt bad for leaving Ryder alone all afternoon. She didn't intend to sleep for that long, but her body must have needed it.

She left her warm bed and headed out to the living room to see what Ryder was up to.

"She's up," Ryder declared when she walked in the room. "I was starting to get a little worried about you."

She took a seat on the far end of the couch and wrapped herself in the fuzzy, sky blue blanket that was thrown across the back of it. She was still a

little groggy from her nap, but she was going to force herself to be sociable.

“Sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to sleep the day away.”

“It’s okay,” he said. “You obviously needed it. What do you want to do now? I need to be in bed by eight tonight. I’m leaving at five tomorrow morning.”

“It’s a Friday night in Coleville,” she said. “All there is to do is go out for drinks or rent movies. That’s about it.”

“I’m not a big drinker,” he said. “Shocking for a guy like me, huh.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that Wednesday night when you chugged that glass of wine I gave you,” she teased.

“Let’s watch a movie,” he

suggested. “I’m fine with that. What do you have?”

Stormy pointed to a cabinet in the back of the living room with a massive slew of DVDs. Jett was an avid movie enthusiast.

“DVDs are in there. Pick what you want,” she said. She stood up and headed to the kitchen to pop some popcorn. She was still a little ticked about their conversation earlier, but she was grateful for his low-key, low-maintenance company.

She came back with two bowls of popcorn and two cans of soda.

“Sorry I don’t have any candy,” she said as she sat everything on the coffee table.

Ryder was fiddling with the DVD player and figuring out the various remotes. Minutes later, the movie started, and he plopped down next to Stormy. As they sat a safe distance apart, Stormy couldn't help but feel some sort of magnetic pull towards him that she couldn't explain. While they sat together in the dimly lit living room that late afternoon, she wished more than anything that he would just hold her. Nothing more, nothing less, and no meaning attached to it. She just wanted to be held.

“What movie did you pick?” she asked. She was sure, though, that it wouldn't matter. Most of the movies were Jett's.

“Clear and Present Danger,” he said. “Random, I know.”

“Not random at all,” Stormy smiled. “Jett loved that one.”

Ryder smiled and gave her a pitiful look.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I talk about him too much, don’t I?”

“Stormy, don’t apologize for that,” he said, almost insulted. “He was your husband. You loved him. His passing was sudden and unexpected. It’s not even been a week. Talk about him as much as you need. It’d be weird if you didn’t.”

Ryder totally understood, and all guilt associated with obsessing about Jett and missing him and talking about

him dissipated into thin air. She relaxed back into the couch, under the fuzzy blanket, and took a deep breath.

The movie played on, but Stormy didn't pay much attention to it. She just tried to focus on being in that moment. It was all she had after all. Yesterday was gone. Tomorrow didn't exist yet. All she had was that moment, on the couch, watching a movie with Jett's brother.

A couple hours later the credits rolled across the screen as Ryder stood up and stretched. It was growing darker outside as the sun began to fade into the horizon, and he would be going to bed in the next hour or so. He grabbed the remote off the table and clicked the T.V. off.

Stormy threw the blanket off her lap and stood up to stretch her legs and walk around for a bit. She knew her time with Ryder was coming to an end and there was nothing she could do about it.

“So what now?” he asked.

“Is there anything else you want to do? It’s almost seven,” Stormy replied.

“Would it be okay if we went to the cemetery?” Ryder asked, though he seemed afraid of her response. “I don’t want to upset you, but I feel like I need to pay my last respects before I leave town. I can go alone if you want.”

“Absolutely,” Stormy replied. “You’d have to drive though. It’s across from your mom’s house. She knows my car and would flip out if she saw me

anywhere near her street.”

Ryder shook his head. “So wrong. I’m sorry you’re treated that way. All you ever did was love Jett. You have every right to visit him as much as you want.”

She took a seat on the edge of the couch. “It’s just his body. I have his memories, his love, his spirit. I feel like he’ll always be with me.”

“That’s a beautiful attitude,”
Ryder said. “Don’t ever lose that.”

Stormy was surprised that she wasn’t in tears. It was one of the first times that week she could talk about him, really talk about him, without bawling. She felt a little numb on the inside and a little dried up, but on the other hand she

felt the tiniest glimmer of hope for her future. It meant the world to her to have Ryder on her side and in her life.

“You’re his spouse, shouldn’t you have had the say over where he was buried?” Ryder asked. “Why do you just let Misty run the show?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I guess I was just in shock. Plus Misty paid for the funeral, the burial, the headstone. I don’t have any money. I couldn’t expect them to pay for everything and then tell them where to put him.”

“You need to not be so afraid of her,” he said. “She’s just a person, like you and me.”

“Yeah, a person who would love nothing more to hold things over my

head,” Stormy remarked. “She paid for the funeral, but I’m sure she’ll come knocking one of these days asking for something in return.”

“I think you should contact her,” he said. “When you’re ready of course. Tell her you want to bury the hatchet and move on.”

“Easier said than done,” she scoffed. Her hands began to visibly tremble at the thought of interacting with Misty. Misty terrified her. She was crazy and there probably wasn’t a whole lot she wouldn’t do to get what she wanted. She just wanted that chapter of her life to end. She wanted no more reasons for Misty to meddle. “Anyway, let’s not talk about Misty anymore.”

“Agreed,” Ryder said with raised eyebrows. “So what are we doing tonight? Want to go grab a bite to eat one more time?”

“Sure.”

Stormy and Ryder left and stopped at a little restaurant just south of the downtown square. It was a newer spot and a lot of younger people went there, so Stormy was almost afraid to go. She didn't want to be seen. She knew the entire town of Coleville knew her by name now. She was the young woman who married that bad ass biker gang VP who just so happened to be known for shady drug dealings. Stormy never asked, and Jett never told. She just pretended not to know what he did to

generate income. She was happier that way, and he said she was probably safer that way.

She was loaded now, they'd all say. She was a millionaire. She was just using him. She never really loved him. People there thought he was a big time drug dealer, but it couldn't have been further from the truth. He sold a little marijuana here and there and sometimes dabbled in gun trafficking, or so she assumed, but that was all she knew. She also knew how people in her town talked. She knew the rumors that swirled around that town like wildfire.

They took a seat in a corner booth in the back of the restaurant, away from the constant chiming of the front door as

people came and went in droves.

“I think I’m going to have a drink tonight,” Stormy announced as she paged through the drink menu.

Ryder raised one eyebrow and smirked. “Good for you. I’m sticking with water. Someone’s got to be the sober one.”

Stormy kicked him playfully under the table.

“Ouch,” he teased. “Seriously though, drink as much as you want. I’ve got you tonight.”

She ordered some fruity, blue cocktail and sipped it quickly as Ryder sat across from her, nursing his water and reading something on his phone with sheer intensity.

“Anything good?” she asked. “On your phone, I mean.”

Ryder looked up. “Oh, just good, old Veronica. Up to her usual antics.”

“Oh,” Stormy said. She felt that bizarre pang of jealousy again but tried to stuff it down.

“She can’t understand that there are always going to be ups and down with our businesses,” he said. “Some months are better than others. She can’t just roll with the punches. She’s so high maintenance. Nothing like you.”

Stormy was shocked when Ryder compared Veronica to herself. She wondered if he meant to do that but decided she shouldn’t read too much into it.

“Thanks, I think?” she smiled.

“Nah, I just mean you’re a cool girl,” he said. “They don’t have a lot of girls like you where I’m from.”

Stormy was the quintessential girl next door and she always had been. She was average in height and build, and her long, dark, curly hair was rarely treated to hi-lights or anything special. Her face was never caked in makeup like Brooklyn or her little sister, Willow. She was perfectly happy in jeans and a t-shirt and the occasional dress. She was pretty low-maintenance, and she was never going to change that.

“Does everyone in California have blonde hair and implants?” Stormy asked.

“Ha,” Ryder laughed. “Not everyone. But it’s not unusual. You kind of get used to it.”

“Do you like that sort of thing?” Stormy asked. The drink was starting to get to her. Her face felt numb and her filter was starting to fade. Anything could come out of her mouth now.

“I mean, I don’t actively seek out girls who look like that, no,” he said. “But I wouldn’t discriminate. I tend to date women based on whether or not we click. The physical attraction is just secondary.”

“Do most guys in California like that stuff though?” Stormy asked with wide eyes.

“I don’t know,” Ryder laughed.

“Why don’t you come out and see for yourself? I’m serious about that open invitation. You need to get out of Coleville. This place is not good for anyone.”

“You’re probably right,” Stormy said as she sipped the last of her blue drink. “Be right back.”

She stumbled out of the booth and ran up to the bar to order another fruity blue drink, making it a double. She was definitely feeling it now. The room was beginning to spin a little, but she didn’t care. She just wanted to feel nothing. The drinks helped clear her mind and made her temporarily forget the deep pain, loss, and trauma that still freshly resided inside her.

“Stormy?” she heard a familiar voice behind her. She flipped around only to be faced with none other than Hayden Goodwin. “What are you doing here?”

“Hayden,” she said, flabbergasted. “So we meet again.”

Hayden made a face at her dorky comment. “Who are you here with?”

“A friend,” she said as she nudged towards Ryder sitting in the booth. His head was down, and he was staring at his phone.

Hayden squinted as he tried to figure out who the guy in the booth was. Stormy could read the judgment all over his face. He was probably wondering why she was hanging out with some

other guy less than a week after her husband died.

“It’s Jett’s brother,” Stormy said in an attempt to squash any harshly incorrect thoughts going through his head. “He’s in town. Staying at my place. He leaves tomorrow. We’re just getting dinner.”

For some reason Stormy always felt the need to explain herself to him.

“Ah, I see,” he said as he kept staring at Ryder. The moment Ryder turned to look over towards the bar, Hayden turned his head the other way as fast as he could. Sitting in the corner, hunched over in the booth and dressed in leather, Ryder probably looked pretty intimidating.

The bartender sat her drink down on the bar, and she slapped a five dollar bill down in its place.

“Excuse me,” she said as she brushed past Hayden and returned to her booth.

“Was that guy bothering you?”
Ryder asked as she returned.

“Ha. Hayden? No. He’s harmless,” Stormy said. “Just an ex.”

Ryder’s curiosity was clearly peaked at the mention of her ex.

“Interesting.”

“Interesting how?” Stormy said.
“Everyone has exes.”

“Do you still talk to him?”

“Not if I can avoid it,” she said.
“He’s pretty much an asshole. He

dumped me before he went off to college years ago. Tried to get me back when he found out I was getting married. He's a very lost soul. I feel bad for him actually."

"Been there. I, too, was once a very lost soul," Ryder said, though he didn't seem to care to elaborate on that.

The food arrived, hot and steaming, and the conversation seemed to cease as Ryder shoveled heaps of mixed vegetables and bites of cheap sirloin steak into his mouth. Stormy picked at her chicken sandwich and concentrated more on her drink. She was ready to go for a third drink until she stood up and nearly fell down.

"Maybe you better cool it with the

drinks,” Ryder said as he reached out and braced her arm. “You’re a total lightweight. Want some water? I’ll get you some water.”

Stormy sat back down as Ryder ran to the bar to grab her a refreshing and much needed glass of ice cold water.

“Drink up,” he said as he continued funneling his dinner into his mouth.

She sipped on the freezing cold water and felt a little embarrassed, but she sort of liked how Ryder looked after her. The things he did were the things Jett would’ve done. The Jacks boys were nothing if not chivalrous.

With empty plates and full bellies,

Ryder took care of the check and escorted Stormy out to his bike. She was very much tipsy, but she could still feel the stares of all the locals as they walked out together. She could only imagine what was going through their heads. The idea of California was sounding better and better to her but it wasn't realistic. She couldn't expect Ryder to hold her hand and take care of her if she moved out there. She'd have to start from scratch. She'd have no one and nothing, and she was sure she'd be homesick.

Ryder helped her inside the house and walked her to her room where he hoisted her into bed and covered her with layers of blankets and sheets.

“I’m sorry I can’t help you undress,” he said. “I hate to make you sleep in jeans. I just don’t think it would be right for me to – “

“Mm, hm,” Stormy said as she interrupted him. “It’s okay.”

The room was spinning as she melted back into the soft mattress. It was dark outside and under the pale moonlight that spilled through the curtains, Ryder looked exactly like Jett.

He lingered for a bit on the edge of her bed as if he had more to say.

“I really miss Jett,” he said. “I want you to know I’m sorry I couldn’t have spent more time with him over the last eight years.”

“You don’t have to tell me that,”

she mumbled.

“I just never really got to tell him that,” Ryder said as he looked down. “I missed out on so much, and now he’s gone. You’re all that’s left of him.”

“Me?” she asked, confused.

“Yeah. He loved you more than anything, Stormy,” he replied. “Spending the last few days with you, I get it.”

Her heart melted a little. His words meant more to her than anything and they were exactly what she needed to hear after the long week she’d just had. She rested her eyes for only a moment and then she was out.

CHAPTER 6

Stormy awoke the next morning with a pulsing headache and a burning urge to throw up. She flung the covers off herself and ran down the hall forgetting, for a moment, why she was still in jeans. She wrapped her hands around her hair and pulled it behind her neck as she threw up the putrid remnants of the night before and watched them swirl down the toilet never to be seen again.

She rinsed her mouth out, splashed cool water on her face, and brushed her teeth before heading out to the living room. The house was eerily quiet, and as soon as she rounded the corner she saw nothing but an empty couch with

perfectly folded blankets resting on a cushion. On top of the blankets was a note from Ryder.

She sunk down as she realized he had left early that morning. She didn't even get to say goodbye, and she wasn't sure if or when she'd ever see him again. She kicked herself for drinking the night before and passing out. Her fingers could hardly open the envelope fast enough.

Thanks for the hospitality. You're a true gem, and my brother was lucky to have someone like you in his life. Please think about helping me. Take care, and I'll be in touch soon.

-RJ

Stormy clutched the letter to her

chest. That was all that was left of her short time with Ryder Jacks. Jett was gone forever, and Ryder may as well have been too. She enjoyed her time with him, probably a little too much, and it all came to an end in an instant. She was right back where she started; alone with her deepest, darkest thoughts.

She spent another week isolated and in mourning. The curtains drawn on every window in her house, bottles of sleeping pills to help her sleep all day when she wasn't busy crying, and her phone turned off.

As if something came over her, she decided to call up Brooklyn to come over. She didn't want to be alone with her thoughts another day. It had been

almost two weeks now since Jett died. She didn't want to spend another twenty-four hours holed up in her dark trailer, crying in her empty bed.

“Knock, knock,” Brooklyn called out as she walked in the door ten minutes later. “I'm glad you're up for having company. I've been thinking about you all week, but I wanted to give you your space.”

The girls sat down on the couch across from one another. Brooklyn sipped on her energy drink as she tried to get a read on Stormy.

“You look like you have a lot on your mind right now,” Brooklyn observed. “Speak, girl.”

Stormy smiled as she appreciated

Brooklyn' candor in that awkward moment. "So Wednesday night, this guy showed up at my door."

"What?" Brooklyn said as she sat up. "Keep going."

"It was Jett's brother," she said with a squinting face as she waited for Brooklyn' reaction.

"Are you kidding me? I didn't know he had a brother," she said as she slapped the back of the couch with her hand. "Was he for real? How do you know he was really his brother?"

"He was the spitting image of Jett," she sighed. "Only a little bigger. He's a little taller, a little more muscular, but yeah, same face, same hair, same eyes."

“Weird,” Brooklyn said as she concentrated on Stormy’s face. “Was he nice to you?”

“Very,” she replied without hesitation. “Almost too nice. But he wasn’t weird or anything. We were just oddly comfortable around each other. It was nice having him around. Kind of felt like hanging out with an older, more outspoken Jett.”

“Yeah, Jett always was kind of reserved,” Brooklyn noted.

“Ryder is more of a cut-to-the-chase kind of guy,” Stormy continued. “Jett was more of a piece-the-puzzle-together and read-between-the-lines kind of guy. And that’s great. That’s who he was. But it was kind of nice how

outgoing Ryder was.”

Brooklyn stared at Stormy again.

“Why are you looking at me that way,” she said.

“Just the way you talk about Ryder,” she said. “Do you have something for him?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Stormy snapped. “Jett’s been dead less than two weeks. I’m not falling for his brother.”

“I didn’t say you were,” she said. “There’s just something different about you when you talk about him. Your face kind of lights up.”

Stormy hadn’t realized it. She had felt a tiny bit of attraction towards him, but she chalked that up to his resemblance to her late husband. She

tried to ignore it. It was too soon. She was still grieving, she told herself. No one moves on that fast.

“I guess he just felt like home to me,” she said with her head held low. “It was like Jett had come back to me, only healthier. It sounds so silly to say it out loud.”

“Not silly at all,” Brooklyn said. “It makes sense. Plus this has been a long week for you. I’m sure you’re feeling all kinds of different feelings right now.”

“That I am,” Stormy agreed. “My emotions are pretty much all over the place. I just want to feel normal again.”

“What the hell is normal anyway?” Brooklyn laughed. “No such thing. I will

tell you, though, that you need to stop hiding away in this big, old house. It's not good for you. There's a life outside those doors waiting for you."

"I'm sure I'm the talk of the town," she said. "I don't even want to go to the grocery store. Anytime I leave the house, people stare at me with those hateful, judgmental eyes. I'm sure Misty's trashed my name to three-fourths of the town."

"Who the hell cares what anyone says?" Brooklyn yelled. "Screw them all. What other people think of you is none of your business. Are you living your life for you? Or are you living your life for them?"

"Good point," Stormy said.

“So what did this guy want anyway?” Brooklyn asked.

Stormy took a deep breath. “He claims one of his men killed Jett. He wants me to help him find out who it was.”

“His men?”

“Yeah, he’s the VP of the Hellfire Motorcycle Club,” she replied. “I guess they’re rivals?”

“Mind. Blown,” Brooklyn said.

“Want to move to California?”

Stormy said as she changed the subject. “I’m completely serious.”

“Why California?” Brooklyn asked. She scratched her head before her eyes widened. “Oh, my God. That’s where his brother lives, isn’t it?”

Stormy couldn't hide the crooked half-smile that was forming on her lips. "I just think it'd be a good change. This town doesn't have anything else to offer me. Aren't you tired of the same old thing?"

"Your family's here," Brooklyn said with her head cocked to the side. "You'd miss them too much. You'd get homesick and want to turn around and come back home after a day or two."

"No, I wouldn't," Stormy insisted. "That's why I need you there. You're family to me."

"It's tempting," Brooklyn said. "We need jobs though. We can't just up and move."

"I'm a nurse. I'll find a job. I'll

support us both until you get something. It'll be fine. We can make this work.” Stormy's eyes pleaded with Brooklyn. “Please? Just think about it?”

Brooklyn sighed as she leaned back into the couch. A smile slowly spread across her mouth as she was clearly entertaining the idea of moving to California.

“Please?” Stormy begged again. “I need something new. Different.”

Brooklyn laughed and rolled her eyes. “I'll think about it.”

Stormy reached across the couch and hugged her. “I'll take that as a yes.”

“So tell me more about this brother of his,” Brooklyn asked. “Does he have any hot friends?”

“Ha,” Stormy laughed. “I have no idea. I’m sure you’ll have your pick of the litter in California.”

“I’ve always wanted to be some guy’s old lady,” Brooklyn laughed. Stormy knew she was half serious though.

Stormy knew Brooklyn would fit right in out west with her tall, lithe frame, ocean blue eyes, and platinum blonde hair. She never looked like she belonged in Coleville in the first place.

“Do you think I’m being irrational?” Stormy asked in all seriousness. “Something about spending those few days with Ryder just made me want to leave Coleville. There’s so much more out there. I used to think I’d

be content to stay here forever, but now it feels like torture. Every street sign, every building, every tree all reminds me of Jett and the life we'll never have. I want to get out of here. Away from Misty. Away from the rumors.”

“I think a change would be good for you,” Brooklyn said. “Anything’s better than treading water. I don’t want you to stay here, in this house, reliving the bad things over and over again. I know that’s what you’d do. You need to think about the next chapter. You need to think about what happens after this.”

Stormy nodded as she fought back tears. She knew Brooklyn was right. If she stayed here, she’d be stuck in that awful moment, reliving everything all

over again, night after night.

“I don’t want to sell the trailer, Brooklyn,” Stormy sighed. “But I don’t have a single dollar to my name.”

“Don’t sell it,” she said. “Rent it out. That’ll be a source of income for you. We’ll figure this out if this is what you really want.”

Brooklyn’s phone beeped, and she glanced down to read a text message.

“Ugh,” Brooklyn groaned. “I better get going. Work needs me to come in early today.”

Brooklyn was the manager of a local call center, which was pretty impressive for her young age and lack of a college degree of any sort. She was the hardest working person Stormy knew,

though. She started working there in high school and just kept climbing the ladder. She always thought Brooklyn was selling herself short, but she seemed moderately happy, so Stormy always kept her mouth shut.

“That sucks you have to work on a Saturday,” Stormy said. “Thanks for coming by today. I needed this little talk.”

“Let’s hang out more often, okay? I’m completely serious,” Brooklyn said as she stood up and hugged Stormy. “I know you hate when people just drop by, but I don’t care. I’ll do it if I have to.”

Stormy laughed as she walked Brooklyn to the door. Within seconds, she was all alone again, only her

thoughts weren't as dark as they had been. Little by little, she was starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel. She was starting to regain that hope she thought was gone forever.

Spending time with Brooklyn made her want to get out of the house a little. She thought about going over to her parents' house for a bit, but she didn't know if they were even home that day. Saturdays were always a wild card in the Michaels family, especially in the summer. Her dad was an avid fisherman and it was one of the less expensive hobbies he could still enjoy while he was laid off from the factory.

As she flicked through all of the contacts in her phone, she happened to

pass by Ryder's name. She didn't remember putting it in, and she wondered if he'd done it the night she was passed out. She thought about sending him a quick message, but something told her to wait. She decided to let him contact her first.

Stormy slipped her shoes on and went for a drive to stop by her parents' house. She figured her mother would at least be home.

She pulled into her parents' cracked and pitted driveway and saw her mom's rusting, beige mini van parked in the garage. She walked in the house and announced her presence, expecting to be greeted with her mother's smiling face at any second.

“Oh,” she said as she turned the corner towards the living room and saw Willow sitting on the couch.

“Where’s Mom?” Stormy asked.

“Backyard,” Willow said as she avoided eye contact. “In the garden.”

She walked outside to the backyard to see her mother. Her mother was crouched over pulling weeds from her pride and joy vegetable garden.

“Hey, mom,” Stormy said as she hugged her mom from behind.

“Oh, hi, Sweetie,” her mom said as she pushed herself up and hugged her back. “I wasn’t expecting you today. This is a nice treat. How’s my girl doing?”

Her mom brushed the dirt off her

gloves and smoothed her hair out of her sweaty face.

“I just wanted to stop by and say hi,” Stormy replied. “I needed to get out of the house.”

“Good for you,” her mom smiled. “I was thinking of stopping by sometime, but I wasn’t sure if you wanted visitors yet. Have you been alone all week?”

“Actually no,” Stormy said, unable to hide her smile.

Her mom cocked her head to the side as she tried to get a read on her daughter’s mysterious smile.

“Brooklyn keeping you company?”

“No, it wasn’t Brooklyn.”

“Please tell me it wasn’t Hayden,” her mom said as she rolled her eyes.

“It was Jett’s older brother,” Stormy said, biting her lip and waiting for her mother’s response.

“I knew it,” her mom half-yelled as her eyes widened. “I knew he had siblings. I tried to tell you once and you didn’t believe me.”

“Okay, okay,” Stormy laughed. “You were right.”

Her mom beamed proudly.

“I only know of the one brother now,” Stormy mused to herself. “But at this point, nothing would surprise me. For all I know, there could be more. I just can’t figure out why Jett never told me about Ryder.”

“I’m sure he had a perfectly good reason,” her mom said. “Maybe this

brother is bad news. There's a reason he didn't want you to know he existed."

Stormy wanted to tell her mom how wonderful her days with Ryder were, how he had breathed a little bit of hope back into her life, and he had allowed her to forget her pain for a few days. She wanted to tell her how genuine and smart and successful he was. He was living the life Jett was meant to live. He was healthy and strong and independent.

"I'm still trying to figure everything out," Stormy said as she kept her thoughts about Ryder to herself. "I'm thinking of going out to California to visit him. I want to get to know him a little better. He's all that's left of Jett."

“Don’t be ridiculous,” her mom scoffed. “That’s absurd. Don’t do that.”

“So I shouldn’t go visit my dead husband’s brother? Is that against some sort of widow guidelines that I don’t know about?”

“I didn’t say that,” her mom rolled her eyes. “I just think it’s weird. You don’t know this guy. Jett didn’t want you to know he even existed. There’s got to be a reason.”

For the very first time, it occurred to Stormy that maybe, just maybe, Jett was afraid she would want to be with his strong, older, lookalike brother instead of him. Perhaps that was why he didn’t want her to know he existed. He was afraid he’d lose her. Maybe Ryder

wasn't a bad person after all, he was simply competition in Jett's eyes.

Stormy's face lit up as she came to that revelation. Everything was starting to make perfect sense to her now.

She smiled as she refused to believe it could possibly be any other scenario. This was the only thing that made sense to her, and it was the only thing she wanted to believe.

CHAPTER 7

Stormy's fingers drummed nervously against the top of her kitchen table as she sat and stared at her phone. She wanted to reach out to Ryder, but she didn't have a good reason. She simply wanted to hear his voice. The voice that sounded so much like Jett's, the voice that soothed her when she was in a bottomless pit of grief and mourning, and the voice that could somehow make her day instantly ten times brighter.

Don't be silly, she scolded herself. This is beyond inappropriate. The timing is all wrong. You're going to make yourself seem like a desperate idiot. You have no place looking to get

into a relationship with anybody right now.

Patience was never a virtue of hers and she impulsively grabbed her phone and called him before she had a chance to talk herself out of it again.

“Hello?” she heard his voice say on the other end. Her heart was pounding so hard she could feel it in her ears and her face immediately flushed.

“Ryder?” her voice squeaked. Her attempt to sound casual had failed miserably.

“Hello?” he yelled into the phone. Judging by the sheer loudness in the background he was at some sort of bar.

“Who is that?” Stormy heard a woman’s voice say in the background.

She sounded like she was sitting right next to him.

“Stormy?” he yelled. “I can’t hear you.”

This was a huge mistake, she told herself. She was absolutely mortified. He was clearly settled into his old routine back home in California and everything was back to business as usual. It was a Saturday night. Why would he not be out on a date with some gorgeous girl? She hung up the phone and slammed it down on the table before burying her face in her hands.

A minute later her phone began to ring. It was Ryder. Her heart raced again, and her palms were sweaty as she took a deep breath and answered it.

“Hello?” She said in her sweetest, most innocent tone.

“Stormy,” Ryder said. It was much quieter where he was now. “Is everything okay? Are you okay?”

She wasn’t prepared for that question. She just wanted to hear his voice. She hadn’t thought beyond that.

“Yeah,” she said. “I just – “

“You had me worried there for a second,” he said as he sighed into the receiver.

“If you’re busy, we can talk another time,” Stormy offered.

“I’m out right now, but if you need me, I’m here,” he said. “Stormy, are you okay?”

“I just felt bad that I didn’t get to

say bye to you last weekend,” she half-lied. It seemed like a legitimate reason for calling him. “I really enjoyed your company during those days. Thank you for that.”

“Oh, is that all you wanted?”

Ryder laughed. “Listen, kid. I’m out right now, but why don’t I give you a call a little later?”

“Sure. If you want to that is,” she said.

“If I don’t call you tonight, I promise I’ll call you tomorrow,” he said. “If anything comes up, and I mean anything, don’t hesitate to call me again.”

“Thanks, Ryder.” Stormy hung up. Still mortified and hope fading fast, she

couldn't help but imagine him walking back to the bar and hopping back on his barstool with that redheaded vixen, Veronica.

She hated herself for making her weekend with Ryder into something it wasn't. Ryder was just checking on her and making sure she was okay. She was attracted to him, sure, probably because he looked exactly like Jett, but looking back, she didn't get any kind of vibes back from him. He probably just thought of her as a naïve, kid sister. He did call her "kid" after all.

A knock on the door startled her out of her deep thoughts as she arose to answer it.

"Ugh, Brooklyn," she groaned to

herself. “You know I hate random visits.”

She opened the front door only to be greeted by Hayden Goodwin, head held low and an armful of flowers.

What the hell does he want? She thought to herself.

“Hayden,” she said, showing an obvious lack of any kind of emotion.

“Hi, Stormy,” he said. He held out a bouquet of gorgeous and simple, white calla lilies. “I just wanted to stop by and offer my condolences. We didn’t really get to talk much last week at the restaurant.”

“Oh,” she said, taken aback. Maybe he was simply just doing the right thing. The son of a local doctor, he was

always more of a proper sort of guy; except when he was crushing her heart into a million pieces. “You can come in if you want.”

She widened the door and Hayden walked in, immediately removing his shoes. She motioned towards the living room, and he took a seat on the edge of the couch. He was clearly uncomfortable in her house, the house she shared with her late husband, the man she loved more than any other in the world, and the man who had dethroned Hayden in Stormy’s heart.

“I just wanted to say that I’m sorry for everything,” he said. His immense, sapphire blue eyes stared straight into hers. “Everything I did to you. All the

ways I hurt you. It was wrong. I was young and immature and only thinking of myself.”

Stormy was speechless. She perched herself on the couch arm and continued to let him speak.

“You were the best girlfriend a guy could ever want,” he said. “I threw it all away because I thought I could do better. And then I realized, there’s no one better than you.”

She was melting on the inside, but she refused to let him see it. She bit her lip as she waited to hear more. Her feelings for him had faded into oblivion months ago, but everything he was saying was everything she had waited years to hear him say.

“When I heard you were getting married last year,” he said as he swallowed the lump in his throat. “It changed everything for me. It put everything into perspective. I saw my entire future go down the drain, just like that. After everything we’d been through, I always thought you and I would end up together one way or another.”

Stormy slid down off the couch arm and onto the couch cushion next to him. He reached out and took her soft hand into his and squeezed it.

“I was such an idiot,” he said as he ran his fingers through his wavy auburn hair. “I’ve been kicking myself for months.”

Stormy sat in pure bewilderment

at Hayden's revelations. She was shocked to hear what he was saying, but even more shocked that he had the guts to say it so soon after Jett's passing. She didn't know whether to kiss him, hug him, or punch him after everything he'd put her through.

"I have a bit of a confession to make," he said. His eyes shifted nervously from hers to the floor and back. "I sort of purposely got expelled from Vanderbilt. I wanted to come back here. I wanted to be around you. I wanted to see if it could work."

"But you knew I was with Jett," Stormy said, confused. "Married."

"By the time my grades had slipped, it was too late," he said. "But

when I heard about Jett's passing, I thought maybe there was a chance. And when I saw you at the bar a couple weeks ago and at the restaurant last week, I knew there was a reason we kept crossing paths."

"You're just reading into things," Stormy insisted. "Coleville is a small town."

"I get it," he said. "I hurt you pretty bad. I don't expect you to forgive me. I just want you to know that I'm sorry. And I want you to know that I still love you more than anything."

Hayden appeared to be teary eyed, but Stormy couldn't quite tell for sure because he got up quickly and trampled to the door to put his shoes back on.

“Hayden,” she called out. “Wait.”

He turned back towards her, and he was definitely teary eyed. In all their years together, she had never seen him cry about anything, ever. She had never heard him open up. She had never seen him so vulnerable.

“Don’t go yet,” she said. “Come back here.”

He came back and took a seat next to her on the couch, only this time he was even closer to her.

“I’ve missed you so much, Stormy,” he said as he buried his face in her chest and sobbed.

This is a first, she thought to herself as she reluctantly put her arms around him. She ran her fingers through

his thick, messy, auburn hair and tried to calm him down and comfort him.

“I messed up so bad,” he cried. “I just want you. I just want to be with you.”

“Hayden,” she said. She wanted to break it to him gently. “I’m in a really weird place right now. Everything is so complicated. I don’t know if this is a good time for us to revisit anything.”

Hayden sat up and dried his eyes with his hands. He seemed a little embarrassed. He wasn’t usually one to open up emotionally to anyone. He was a star quarterback, former med school student, son of a prominent Coleville doctor. He wasn’t supposed to let his guard down or act like his life was

anything other than perfectly put together.

“Thanks for the flowers,” Stormy said as she tried to break the awkward silence between them. “They’re very pretty.”

Hayden smiled and nodded as he avoided eye contact with her. He inched a little bit away from her on the couch.

“I should probably take off,” he said as he slapped his hands on his thighs and stood up.

“You literally just got here,” she protested.

“Yeah, and I poured my heart out to you and you pushed me away,” he retorted. “You clearly have no place for me in your life.”

“That’s not true at all,” she said as she stood up next to him. “Can’t we be friends? After everything we’ve been through together?”

“I can’t be friends with you, Stormy,” he said as he turned to face her. “I love you too much.”

Stormy didn’t know whether it was the rollercoaster of emotions coursing through her body at any given second, her gut wrenching loneliness, Hayden’s words or a combination of all three, but something came over her in that moment. She placed her hands at his hips and leaned in towards him. The air between them was charged, and she knew what was about to happen.

She nudged her face up towards

him as her lips met his. He kissed her back, softly and gently at first and then passionately. He cupped the back of her head with his big hands as his fingers tangled through her long, dark, curly hair.

What am I doing? She thought to herself.

She knew she didn't love him. She could never love Hayden the way she loved Jett. Hayden was sort of a placeholder for her. He was filling the vast, empty void. He was filling the giant, gaping hole in her constantly aching heart.

There was something comforting about kissing Hayden. Never mind that he dumped her like a sack of potatoes

year ago. Never mind that he was always running hot and cold around her. He felt safe for a brief moment. She didn't care if he walked out the door and never came back. She didn't care if he kept pining for her and chasing after her. None of it meant anything, and maybe that's why she wanted to kiss him.

She just wanted to feel something, anything. As Hayden's lips pressed against hers and his hands held her body close to his, Ryder's face immediately flashed before her. She wasn't expecting it. It just sort of happened, and in that moment kissing Hayden felt like kissing sandpaper. He had lost all appeal. And then she pulled away.

“What? What's wrong?” Hayden

asked, breathless.

“We shouldn’t do this,” she sighed.

“You kissed me,” he reminded her as he leaned in for more.

“I know, I know. I’m sorry,” she said as she leaned away. “I told you, I’m in a weird place right now.”

Hayden took a deep breath and a step back. “I should go.”

Stormy nodded in agreement and said nothing.

She watched as he went back to the front door to put his shoes back on, and she walked him just outside the front door. He hugged her goodbye and then strutted back to his car. The moment he got inside, he stared at her and smiled.

The smile was a mixture of pity and hope. Hayden was probably just as confused as Stormy was about the whole thing, but she had clearly given him an ounce of hope that he didn't have before.

CHAPTER 8

Stormy checked her cell phone the next morning as soon as she got up. She had been leaving it off for the last two weeks, but decided to leave it on so she wouldn't miss Ryder's call. The thought of hearing his voice sent butterflies whirling around in her stomach followed by instant pangs of guilt and confusion.

She heated some water in the kettle on the stove and got out a mug and some tea. She toasted some wheat bread with butter and sat at her kitchen table. The silence of the house was almost deafening, but she was quickly becoming used to it. This was going to be her life from now on unless she did something about it.

As she chewed her final bite of toast, her phone began to light up and buzz. It was Ryder. She washed her food down with a couple gulps of hot tea, nearly scalding her throat, and took a deep breath.

“Hello?” she said in her sweetest, most casual voice.

“Stormy,” Ryder replied. “Good morning, sunshine.”

She didn’t know what to say next, so she sort of lingered there in silence.

“So, did you need something last night?” he asked.

“Oh, no,” she said, embarrassed. “Like I said, I just didn’t get to say goodbye to you when you left last week. I just wanted to see how you were doing

and what you were up to.”

“Ah, I see. Well that’s very thoughtful of you,” he said. “I’m doing pretty well. What about you?”

“As good as can be expected, I guess,” she said. “I’ve been trying to get out of the house more and spend more time with friends.”

Her mind instantly flashed to the night before. She cringed as she thought about her kiss with Hayden. She was filled with immediate regret and disgust.

“That’s great,” Ryder said. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“How’s work going?” she said as she tried to make conversation.

“As good as can be expected,” he laughed. “I was actually out with

Veronica and the group last night.”

“I wondered if that’s who that was in the background,” Stormy remarked.

“We were supposed to discuss work things and have some beers, but she was trying to make it into a date type of thing,” he said, annoyed. “I had to end the night early. She just doesn’t get it.”

“How annoying,” Stormy lamented, half-relieved. “My ex, you know the one from the restaurant that one night? He stopped by last night with a bouquet of flowers. Said he was sorry about everything and that he loved me and wanted me back.”

“Really?” Ryder’s interest seemed piqued all of a sudden. “And what did you say to him?”

Stormy was both taken aback and thrilled by Ryder's interest.

"He kissed me," she lied. She would never in a million years tell him that she initiated it. "I pushed him away and told him I wasn't ready to revisit anything with him."

"Good, good," Ryder said. "Do you still have feelings for him?"

"I don't think I could ever love him the way I loved Jett," she said. "I don't think there's a future for me and Hayden."

"Hm," Ryder said. She could hear the disdain in his voice. "That didn't sound too convincing."

"What are you talking about?"

"The way you said there wasn't a

future for you and Hayden,” he said. “If you stay in Coleville, I guarantee you you’ll end up with that douche.”

Stormy smiled and was thankful he couldn’t see it in that moment. She loved how protective Ryder was over her, and she knew he had a good point. She probably would end up with Hayden if she stuck around.

“I’ve been thinking more about your open invitation to California,” she said.

“Oh, yeah?” Ryder said in a cheerful tone. “And?”

“I think I’ll take you up on it,” she said. “It’d be good for me to get out of Coleville for a bit.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Ryder

said. “Do you want to come out next weekend? I can get your plane tickets and pick you up. You’ll stay with me of course. You won’t have to worry about a thing.”

“Are you sure?” Stormy winced. She couldn’t help but feel it was totally obvious that she was inviting herself out.

“Stormy, you’re coming,” he said. “I’ll book the tickets as soon as we hang up and email you the info.”

“Thanks, Ryder,” she said. “I can’t wait.”

She hung up the phone and flung herself across the couch as she dreamed about the sunny skies and swaying palm trees that awaited her in California. She thought about the moment she’d see

Ryder at the airport and how she'd throw her arms around him and give him a giant hug. Then she thought about all the plastic looking women out there and how she'd probably stick out like a sore thumb. For a split second she debated calling the whole thing off before he had a chance to buy the tickets.

The email alert on her phone dinged several minutes later, and she had a forwarded email from Ryder. She was going to leave Friday morning at eight from the Kansas City airport and land at LAX by noon. She'd fly back home Sunday night.

Stormy remembered she had never flown anywhere by herself before. Her family had flown to New Hampshire

once when she was a little girl to visit family, but that was over a decade ago. Her hands became clammy as her nerves got the best of her.

It was time for her to grow up and become an independent woman, she told herself. She was going to have to get over her fear of the unknown, the same fear that had kept her from ever leaving decaying Coleville. Jett had protected her from the real world for years, since she was a teenager, and she knew she'd have to branch out sooner or later.

The rest of the week ticked by as slow as molasses as she waited for Friday morning to arrive. She had packed her bag the night before and tossed and turned until her alarm went

off at five a.m. She threw on a pair of skinny jeans fresh out of the dryer. They were the only thing that fit her anymore considering her loss of appetite lately. She slipped on some sneakers and a cream tank top. She pulled her long, dark hair into a low chignon and massaged in some moisturizer on her face. She decided to wait until the plane was about to land before putting on any makeup. She wanted to look presentable for him, even though it felt wrong. It felt wrong on so many levels to want her dead husband's brother to find her attractive. She couldn't understand it, but she didn't try to fight it. She just went with it.

Several hours later, she was LA-

bound and her plane was beginning to descend to LAX. The captain turned on the seatbelt sign as the plane slowed down. Her ears popped and her stomach churned. Her heart raced, and she knew she'd be seeing Ryder very soon. She dug around in her purse for her makeup and began applying powder, blush, mascara, and lip gloss as best she could during the bumpy, turbulent landing.

It seemed like it took forever for the plane to come to a stop, and then it took forever for the passengers to file off the plane in an orderly fashion.

Everyone was bumping into one another, grunting and groaning, stretching, and taking up valuable aisle space, so Stormy just waited patiently until the last

person passed her. When the aisles were finally clear, she grabbed her carry on and exited the aircraft.

As she walked through the terminals and out past the security check point, her eyes scanned the crowds of people for Ryder's familiar face. She hoped he hadn't forgotten about her. She would be mortified if he did. She should have asked him what he was wearing that day, but she knew it wouldn't be hard to pick him out of a crowd.

"Stormy!" she heard a voice call out behind her. She had walked right past him.

"Hey!" she said, her face all lit up like a Christmas tree.

"I was getting worried. Your

plane landed a half hour ago,” he said. He put his arm around her like some kind of kid sister which instantly put the kibosh on that big bear hug she wanted.

“It was a pretty full flight. People were nuts. I just waited for everyone to get off first,” she said.

“That’s cute,” he laughed. “This is the big city, kid. Get used to it.”

He kept his arm around her protectively as they walked towards the baggage claim area.

“Let me take that,” he said as he grabbed her carry-on bag. His biceps flexed as he hoisted it over his left shoulder. His hair was slightly longer than last time, parted on the side and slicked down with brill cream, just like

Jett used to do. He looked more like Jett than ever before.

Stormy spotted her bag coming around on the carousel. “There it is. The one with the red ribbon on the handle.”

Ryder, like a true gentleman, ran after it and pulled it off before it got any further away. He pulled the handle up and wheeled it over as the loose wheels click-clacked against the tile floor.

“I’m parked out there,” he nodded outside to the short-term parking area. Stormy followed him, letting him lead the way.

She had never seen so many people in one place before. The sheer number of taxis, shuttle busses, and luxury imports in the pick-up lane was

enough to blow her away. She tried to take in her surroundings, but she was afraid to take her eyes off Ryder for one second in fear of getting lost.

They navigated their way through the sea of tourists and Californians as they made it to his parking spot. He clicked a button on the remote and the trunk of a red Audi convertible popped open. He loaded her things and then hopped in the car.

“Is this your car?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “I mostly ride my bike, but I’ve got this thing for special occasions.”

She climbed in and her jeans slid against the buttery leather. As he cracked the windows and pulled out of the

parking garage, she stared out the window in awe of palm tree after palm tree that passed them by.

He merged onto the freeway and traffic was bumper-to-bumper as far as her eyes could see.

“Wow,” she said. “How do you get used to this kind of traffic? This is insane.”

“You just get used to it,” he laughed. “We should be back to my place in about thirty minutes.”

Stormy sat quietly in the car as Ryder steered his way through the stop and go traffic congestion. He turned the radio on after a bit to fill the silence. She just wanted to take in her surroundings, and for a split second she

was starting to miss the comfort of Coleville.

Stop it, she told herself. You can't stay in Coleville forever. Give this place a chance.

“So where do you live out here?” she asked.

“I live in East LA,” he said. “I have a condo. And a roommate.”

“Oh, I didn't know you had a roommate,” she said. She hoped to God it wasn't a girl, especially not Veronica.

“His name is Zander. He's kind of my right hand guy,” he said. “He's a bit of a wild card. You've been warned.”

“I've got one of those,” Stormy laughed. “Her name is Brooklyn. She's kind of crazy, but I love her anyway.”

“So did you have anything you wanted to do or see while you’re in town?” he asked as he checked his mirror and switched lanes. His driving was a little scary and aggressive compared to what Stormy was used to back home. She couldn’t help but to grip handle on the inside of the door.

“I was hoping you’d just take me under your wing and show me around,” she said. “I just wanted to get out of Coleville.”

“You got it,” he said with a smile. She could tell he enjoyed this.

They finally arrived in East LA, and he pulled into an underground parking garage into a reserved spot. He grabbed her things from his trunk and

headed to an elevator as she traipsed behind him. The neighborhood seemed a little sketchy, but the building looked newer. She felt safe with him though.

They road up to the fourth floor where he walked down to the unit at the end of the hall.

“Home, sweet home,” he said as he unlocked the heavy door and swung it open.

The place was massive. Stormy was expecting some tiny, hole-in-the-wall apartment. She knew living in L.A. wasn't cheap, but this defied all of her expectations. The ceilings were sky high and the floor plan was wide open. The colors were neutral and the acid-stained concrete floors were flawless and so

shiny she could see her reflection in them. Floor to ceiling windows lined the far living room wall and the place was immaculate. She couldn't find a speck of dust or a stray shoe anywhere.

She stood in amazement at his gorgeous condo. It was straight out of a movie scene.

“Did you decorate this place yourself?” she asked as she took in the industrial paintings that adorned the walls and the giant ceramic pieces that seemed to be placed ever so perfectly in various places. The place was easily fit for a king – or a VP of a prominent biker gang.

“Oh, God, no,” Ryder laughed. “Zander used to date this one chick. I

think she was a set designer or something? We basically let her have free reign of decorating this place. Not too bad, eh?”

“That makes sense,” she smiled. “Your place looks like it’s straight off of a movie set or something. I guess I never thought a biker like you would live in such a palace.”

“I told you, I’m also a businessman. I sort of have to have one foot in each world, straddling both lifestyles,” he explained. “That, and I have an appreciation for the finer things given how I grew up. Nothing wrong with that, right?”

Stormy stood, cemented in her place, as she yearned for him to give her

a tour. She was dying to see the rest of the place. Ryder parked her suitcase next to the door.

“So down that hall over there is Zander’s area,” he said pointing to his right, just beyond the living room.

Stormy was curious about this Zander guy. She wondered if he was even home since the place was so quiet.

“Over to the left is my side of the place,” he said as he pointed just past the kitchen. “We each have our own suites.”

“Pretty neat,” Stormy said for lack of something better to say. “Where am I sleeping?”

“You can sleep in my room,” he said, not missing a beat. “I’ll take the

couch.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” she insisted. “I can sleep on the couch.”

“Nope,” he said. “You’re my guest. Plus, I really don’t want to subject you to seeing Zander walking around in the morning in his underwear chomping and smacking on his bowl of Fruity Pebbles. You’ll thank me later.”

Stormy laughed.

“Who’s this?” she heard another guy’s voice say from behind her.

“Zander, meet Stormy,” Ryder said.

Zander looked Stormy up and down, blatantly checking her out before extending his right hand.

“What’s up?” he said. His blond

hair was buzzed short, and he had tattoos on his neck. He wore a tight t-shirt emblazoned with some bar logo and low-rise straight cut jeans. He seemed like someone Brooklyn would go for. Stormy stifled a half smile as she thought about what Brooklyn would think of him. She'd probably make fun of him and then jump his bones later when no one was watching.

“Stormy’s staying with me for the weekend,” Ryder said.

“You’re not from around here?” Zander seemed confused.

“No, remember? This is my brother’s wife,” he replied.

“Oh,” Zander said, his face turning white for a split second.

“My late brother,” Ryder said.

“You never met him.”

Zander shrugged and then proceeded to the kitchen to grab a bottle of Fiji water from the refrigerator.

“A bunch of us are going out to the Crow’s Nest tonight,” Zander said as he slurped his water. “You two wanna join?”

“It’s up to Stormy,” Ryder said with raised eyebrows. “We’re doing whatever she wants.”

Stormy instinctively wanted to decline at first. She knew what happened at biker bars and how crazy things could get, and she didn’t come here to meet new people. She didn’t want to stand out in the city full of big-breasted blondes.

She just wanted to talk to Ryder and get to know him better. She wanted some one-on-one time with him, but then again she didn't want to seem weird or unfriendly. She wanted to prove to him that she could try new things and have fun, as much as she really didn't want to.

“Yeah, sounds fun,” she lied. She plastered the biggest, fakest smile on her face that she could muster while she made a mental note to herself to Google “The Crow’s Nest” the next chance she got.

CHAPTER 9

Ryder brought them home from the biker bar around eleven. Stormy had spent the entire evening swallowing her pride and chasing it down with glass after glass of cheap draft beer. There were about seventeen people in their group that night, most of whom were men. The two girls with them were friendly enough. They didn't make Stormy feel too out of place, and they even complimented her hair.

Ryder introduced her as his new girlfriend so as not to raise any suspicions. The group treated her like gold, as they dared not cross the VP in any way. He was still hopeful that she'd be willing to go along with his little plan

to find out which of his men killed Jett.

Stormy was hammered. Ryder wrapped one arm around her as he led her through the parking garage, to the elevator, and then down the hall to his place. Through her drunken stupor, she knew she was coming across as a bumbling, giggly idiot to him, but she didn't care. The alcohol took away her ability to care about what other people thought of her, if only for a short while.

As she stumbled in the door, he pulled her over towards the kitchen island where he propped her up onto a bar stool.

“Sit here,” he said. He fished around in the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of Gatorade. “Drink this.”

“I’m so not thirsty right now,” Stormy giggled. “Seriously. I feel like I’m going to explode.”

“You need some electrolytes,” he insisted. “You’re going to feel like crap tomorrow. Your whole Saturday will be wasted. You won’t want to do anything. Seriously, just do what I say.”

“You’re a little bossy, Ry,” she smirked. “I kind of like it.”

He rolled his eyes as he shoved the bottler closer to her.

“Why did you drink so much tonight?” he asked. He was clearly upset, and the alpha male in him was coming out to play.

“Did I embarrass you?” she asked in response.

“No, not at all,” he said. “My men, they think you’re a cool chick. I just don’t know why you needed to drink four or five glasses of beer. Just seemed a little excessive.”

“I guess I was nervous to meet everyone,” she said.

“That’s ridiculous,” he said. “First of all, I wouldn’t let you meet my friends if you weren’t a nice person, and second of all, I don’t hang out with assholes and douche bags, so you had nothing to be nervous about. Third of all, there’s a hierarchy in our club. If you’re with me, you get treated like me. They know that.”

He had a point.

“Well, I know that now,” she said in a sing-song voice. She began sliding

back and forth and side to side on the bar stool.

“Stop that. You’re going to fall off and hurt yourself.”

Stormy turned side to side even faster. The room was spinning, and she felt so free. Within seconds, and just as Ryder had predicted, she lost her footing and fell off the bar stool. She was about to smack her head on the floor before he swooped in and caught her.

“Ow,” she whined as she rubbed her knee.

“God, you are so hard headed,” he huffed. “Let’s move you over here.”

Both of his arms were wrapped around her as he led her to the couch in the living room and sat her down as

gently as he could.

“Stormy, I need you to tell me if you have to throw up, okay?” he said as he gave her a stern look.

Stormy laughed as she burrowed herself deep into the downy cushions and made herself comfortable. She stared out the floor to ceiling windows and admired all the twinkling city lights that shined in.

“I could never get sick of this view,” she sighed. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

The wine was starting to wear off, and she was beginning to feel somewhat normal again. She was grateful that in the dimly lit condo, he wouldn’t be able to see how bad she was blushing and

inwardly cringing. She knew her behavior was beyond juvenile. The sweet girl he'd met in Coleville a couple weeks ago was shaking her head on the inside.

"I'm sorry I drank so much," she said as she sat up and faced Ryder.

"I get it," he said.

"God, you look so much like Jett." She changed the subject yet again. As he sat across from her on the love seat next to the big windows, she could have sworn he was Jett. It had been a few days since she had last cried, but sitting just mere feet from his doppelganger brought out every emotion she'd been trying to stuff deep down inside the last week.

It was probably the beer talking, but she just wanted to kiss Ryder. She wanted to feel his lips pressed against hers, to see if he would feel like Jett or taste like Jett. She wanted to feel the heat of his body close to hers so she could close her eyes and pretend she was loved by someone special once again.

“Why are you looking at me that way?” Ryder asked, disrupting her train of thought.

Stormy shook her head. “Sorry. Got lost in my own head.”

She hoped that he hadn't seen her misty eyes in that moment but she was sure he had.

He stood up and walked over to

where she was sitting and took a seat next to her. Her heart began to pound as she wondered what he was doing. Was he going to try to kiss her? She could only hope.

She sat up and leaned in closer to him, but she didn't want to get too close. If anything was going to happen that night, she wanted him to be the one to initiate it.

He reached his hand up and tucked a curly tendril of her long, dark hair behind her ear. He studied her face, his eyes glazing over every inch of it, and he swallowed loudly. Stormy felt her lips part a little bit as she waited for his kiss. Their faces were so close, she could feel his breath on hers. Her heart was

thumping in her ears, and her palms were sweaty against her jeans.

“You’re so beautiful, Stormy,” he said. “Jett was so lucky to have you.”

He leaned away from her and in an instant the magnetic pull was gone. She sighed and threw herself back onto the couch. She told herself she was silly to even think for one moment that anything could or should happen between them.

“You should probably go to bed,” he said. “Let me help you.”

“I don’t need your help,” she said as she stumbled up and grabbed the edge of the couch for balance.

Ryder followed her anyway and grabbed the crook of her elbow as he led her to his room. He switched on a dim

lamp by his bed and threw back the sheets and covers. His king sized bed was covered in a million pillows, red satin sheets, and a thick, down-filled duvet. She couldn't imagine having all that space to herself but she was about to.

She unbuttoned her jeans and slid them down as Ryder pretended not to look. She pulled off her blouse, revealing a thin camisole, and then climbed under the covers. As soon as she was covered up, Ryder sat down on the edge of the bed.

“I feel like I should be reading you a bed time story or something,” he joked.

“I've always loved *The Three Little Pigs*,” she giggled.

He lingered there for a moment with his eyes locked on hers.

“You know, I’m not really that tired yet,” she said. “I mean, I am, but I always have a hard time sleeping in strange places. Will you stay and talk to me until I fall asleep?”

Ryder’s face lit up a little, although he probably didn’t realize it.

“Of course,” he said. “What do you want to talk about?”

Stormy bit her lip as she knew what she wanted to talk about, but she wasn’t sure if it was the right time to bring any of it up.

“Why do you think Jett never told me about you?”

“This conversation is really heavy

for this time of night,” Ryder changed the subject. “Can we talk about something else?”

Ryder stood up and walked around to the other side of the bed.

“I hope you don’t mind if I lay here for a bit?”

“No, not at all,” Stormy said. She was secretly glad he was making himself comfortable around her again. “Just stay on your side, buster.”

Ryder grabbed the mountain of pillows and arranged them between the two of them.

“Does that make you more comfortable?” he teased.

He laid on his side and propped his head up in his hands as he stared at

her. His eyes traced the outline of her body under the covers, and the pale light from the lamp illuminated her pretty face.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Stormy asked. “You’re freaking me out.”

“I’m not,” he lied. “I’m not looking at you in any certain kind of way.”

On the inside she was half-elated and half-confused. For a split second, she thought about leaning over and kissing him. It felt right in that moment, but she decided against it. If she was misreading their chemistry, she couldn’t risk having an awkward weekend the rest of her stay. She took a deep breath,

tried to fight back her urges, and closed her eyes.

When she woke up, it was morning, and Ryder was sound asleep right next to her on the other side of the pillow fortress, lying on top of the covers.

CHAPTER 10

Stormy crawled off the bed as slowly and quietly as she could and tiptoed her way to Ryder's bathroom. As soon as she got inside, she realized her suitcase was still out by the front door, where he had left it the day before. She snuck out the door and down the hall and wheeled her bag back as silently as possible, but the uneven wheels clicked loudly against the concrete floors and Ryder popped up the moment she re-entered the room.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. "Go back to sleep. I didn't mean to wake you."

Ryder stared at her, groggy-eyed, and leaned back down onto the pillow.

He climbed under the covers and pulled them over his face as the sun shined in through a break in the curtains. Stormy wondered if he had intentionally fallen asleep next to her or if they had both just passed out at the same time. She tried not to read too much into it, but she couldn't help it.

Ryder's bathroom was palatial. It was probably almost the same size as his bedroom, which was easily the size of her entire trailer back in Coleville. A marble whirlpool rested in the corner while double sinks with gold faucets and limitless cabinetry lined one wall. A walk in, tiled shower was nestled into another corner of the room, and off from the shower was an entry into an

enormous walk in closet with custom shelving. Everything was meticulously organized.

One thing was certain – Ryder was big time. Whatever he was doing was making him filthy rich. She wondered why, then, if his MC was so substantial what beef would they have with Jett's small town, small time MC?

She stripped down and stepped into the tile shower. There were several different showerheads that did numerous different things, but she figured out how to turn on the rain shower head above her and made the water about as hot as she could stand. The falling water trickled down her long hair and dripped down her body. It was one of the most

relaxing experiences she'd ever experienced. She couldn't believe this was Ryder's life. He got to live this every single day.

Stormy thought about the house she grew up in with her family. They had one shower in the house, which was tucked away in a moldy basement bathroom. She rarely used it, opting to use the bathtub on the main floor instead. Even the shower in her trailer was a plain, white acrylic tub and shower combo. This was pure, unadulterated luxury.

She grabbed a bottle of Ryder's men's shampoo and lathered up her hair. She loved the cedar and musk smell that filled the steamy air around her. She

breathed the hot air into her lungs as she grabbed a bar of some sort of homemade-looking soap and smoothed it over her body. She was used to drugstore brand everything, but she was beginning to enjoy seeing how the other-half lived. There was something to be said about high end bath products, and she wasn't quite sure she'd ever be able to go back to the cheap stuff.

She conditioned her hair and let it steam in the hot water before rinsing off and stepping out. She had never felt so rejuvenated and relaxed in her entire life, and for the first time, she had gone more than twenty-minutes without thinking about Jett and the downward spiral she was trying to avoid.

She stepped out and wrapped a fluffy towel around her body. The room was filled with steam, and she could hardly see where she was going at first. She felt her way towards the vanity and used her hand to wipe the mirror so she could see her reflection.

Her fingers traced the marble countertops as she stood and simply admired the beauty that was Ryder's bathroom. She took her time applying her makeup and diffusing her curly hair. She tousled her curls into loose waves and slicked on some red lipstick. She not only wanted to look pretty that day, she wanted to feel pretty.

She exited the bathroom fully washed, dressed, and ready for the day,

and saw that Ryder's king sized bed was completely empty and made. She trekked down the hall to the living room area where Ryder was sitting on the couch on his laptop.

“Good morning, kid,” he said as he didn't look up once.

“Hey,” she said.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Inquiring minds want to know.”

“Oh,” she laughed as she remembered all the beer she had downed the night before. “Actually, I feel completely fine. That Gatorade really helped I think.”

“Ha. I'm surprised you remember,” he said with a smile on his face.

“I was drunk, I admit,” she huffed.
“But I wasn’t that drunk.”

“Sure,” he said as he looked up and winked. “I’m going to hop into the shower. We can go do stuff in a little bit. Help yourself whatever you want in the kitchen.”

He shut his laptop lid and sat it carefully on the coffee table next to his phone as he popped up and walked back to his bedroom. She heard his bathroom door shut and the sound of the shower turning on. She felt weird rummaging through his kitchen like she owned the place, but her stomach was growling and she was starving.

She opened cabinet after cabinet until she found where the cereal was

stored. She saw box upon box of fruity flavored cereal in brightly colored boxes with cartoon characters on them.

Those have to be Zander's, she thought to herself. She dared not touch them.

She found a loaf of bread, a toaster, and some peanut butter and made herself some toast. She wanted something that would stick to her ribs and keep her full that day. She had no idea what the plan was, but she didn't want to be too hungry that day.

As she munched on the crunchy toast, she heard a door open and saw Zander, in nothing but boxer-briefs, stumble down the hall towards the kitchen. His abs were ripped and his

torso was covered in even more tattoos than his neck. He grunted some sort of greeting as he clinked and clamored with dishes and bowls and silverware and poured himself an enormous bowl of Froot Loops. He took a seat on a bar stool and engulfed his entire bowl before Stormy was even done with her second piece of toast.

“So did you have a good time last night?” he asked. He was suddenly alive and coherent after ingesting all that sugary cereal.

“Uh, yeah,” she said. “I did.”

“Everyone thought you were pretty cool, so...”

“That’s nice,” she said. She didn’t know what more to say, but she was glad

to hear she didn't make a complete fool out of herself.

“What are you and Ryder doing today?”

“I have no idea. Any suggestions?”

Zander shook his head ‘no’ and hopped off the bar stool. He rinsed his dish and placed it in the dishwasher.

“Knowing Ryder, I’m sure he’s got something up his sleeve,” he said. “He’s sort of a control freak, but don’t tell him I said that.”

Zander said nothing else as he walked back to his bedroom and shut the door.

He’s definitely a wild card, Stormy chuckled to herself. And he’d be perfect for Brooklyn.

She took a seat over on the silk couch as she waited for Ryder to emerge from his room ready to hit the town. She stared out the window at all the hundreds of cars below and the bumper to bumper traffic. She heard the faint sound of honking car horns and saw random groups of gorgeous, leggy blondes, transsexuals, and thugs walking side by side on the sidewalks. In so many ways, she was on an entirely different planet, but she was beginning to like it.

She heard a buzz and happened to see Ryder's phone light up out of the corner of her eye. She glanced around really quickly to see if anyone was watching before reaching down and

snapping it up. He had a text from Veronica. His phone was locked, but the text was nothing but question marks.

She seems bat shit crazy, Stormy thought as she rolled her eyes and sat the phone right back where it was.

Within seconds, footsteps echoed from the hallway as Ryder made his way towards the living room. His hair was neatly combed and slicked back with brill cream once again, and he was wearing a cerulean blue polo and light, faded slim cut jeans. His generous arms filled out the polo and the jeans flattered his perfect stature. Stormy couldn't help but stare at the gorgeous man standing before her.

“Did you get something to eat?” he

asked.

“I did, thanks.” She still couldn’t stop staring. She noticed a tattoo peeking out from under his sleeve and wondered why she hadn’t noticed it before.

“What do you want to do today?” he inquired. “We can do anything you want.”

“I am fine with whatever. This is your city. Show it to me,” she replied.

“I was thinking maybe the Santa Monica Pier?” he said with squinty eyes. “It’s a tad bit touristy, but it’s so much fun and you can’t beat the people watching there.”

“Sounds fun.” Stormy smiled.

As Ryder and Stormy road to Santa Monica on that beautiful day, she

tried her best to take in all the various sights and sounds of the city. There were so many people, so many fancy cars, and so many palm trees. She felt like she was in some sort of far off, exotic place that she'd only ever seen in movies. She wasn't so sure she wanted to leave on Sunday.

Ryder rode around for a bit looking for a place to park before finally finding one several blocks from the pier.

“We’re going to have a bit of a walk,” he warned her. “This place is nuts, especially on Saturdays.”

“No problem,” she said as she followed him.

They strolled down to the pier where people on rollerblades whizzed

past them and hot dog and cotton candy vendors lined up every twenty feet or so. The peaceful rush of the ocean waves in the distance provided the most beautiful backdrop against the crazy chaos that was the pier.

“What do you think so far?” Ryder asked with a mischievous smile. “Pretty crazy, huh?”

“I’m just fascinated,” she said. “So much to take in.”

A man rollerblading in bright yellow short shorts glided past them with his little wiener dog trailing behind him. Up ahead, a woman wrangled her five small children who were trying to go every which way. Next to them, a sweet couple sat together on a park

bench, holding hands and sharing a stick of pale pink cotton candy. There were joggers, power walkers, and musicians singing for change. She had never seen so many different types of people all in one place, and she loved it.

After a few minutes, they happened upon an empty park bench and quickly grabbed it up.

“Are you ready for the most amazing people watching experience you’ll ever have in your entire life?” Ryder teased.

He leaned back and placed one arm on the back of the bench, behind Stormy. She breathed in the salty sea air as she took in the overabundance of sights, sounds, and people that

surrounded them.

“This is so different from Coleville,” she observed. “But in a good way. I’m glad I came out here.”

She turned towards him and smiled.

“Thanks for making me come out here,” she added.

“Whoa, you came out here on your own free will,” he joked. “I didn’t make you do anything.”

Stormy blushed as she realized he was right. It was her idea to come visit, though he had been the one to extend the invitation and plant the seed.

“I’m glad you came out too,” he said as he tried to clear the awkwardness he had just created. “I

wish you were staying longer actually.”

Butterflies ruffled around her tummy as he said those words. She wondered if she was reading too much into everything or if she was just drawn to him because of his stark resemblance to her dead husband. She didn't know much, but she knew she was enjoying his company and she didn't want it to end either.

“Maybe I'll come out again soon,” she suggested. “I'd invite you back to Coleville, but that would just be punishment for you.”

Ryder laughed and looked down at her. She could tell he wanted to say something but didn't know how to say it.

“If you ever need me to come out

to Coleville, you know I would,” he said. “It’s not exactly Aruba or anyplace I’d want to vacation, but I’d go if I had to.”

“Thanks, I think?” Stormy chuckled.

“That came out wrong,” he said. His cheeks flushed for the first time ever. It took a lot to embarrass him. “I just mean, Coleville is pretty lame, but if you needed me for something, I’d be there in a heartbeat.”

She smiled as her heart warmed over. It was nice having someone to protect her and care about her well-being. She had her parents and Brooklyn, but there was something special about having a guy who cared about her when

he really didn't have to.

“I'm a pretty independent girl,” she said. “But my door is always open for you, Ryder. I hope you know that. If you ever get sick of these palm trees and watching dolphins swim in the ocean and riding your bike down the Pacific Highway, Coleville is just a quick plane ride away.”

They shared smiles as she nudged his arm playfully. She'd only know him for a few weeks, but she felt like they were already good friends. She felt like she could be herself around him. Even in all her years with Jett, she never fully felt that way around him. She always felt like she had to put on some sort of act and fit some sort of role as his old lady.

It certainly wasn't like that with Ryder.

CHAPTER 11

Saturday was coming to a close and Stormy and Ryder had retired to his condo for her final night's stay. Just as she'd expected, the day went by entirely too fast. Their morning was spent at the Santa Monica Pier, they had lunch at a little rooftop café nearby, and they walked Rodeo Drive that afternoon. Ryder even offered to buy her a new handbag, but she refused.

They settled in that evening on the deck of his condo, under the clear, starry sky. It was a cool seventy degrees and a light breeze tickled their faces. They sat side by side on the outdoor couch as they listened to the street symphony beneath them and the city lights lit their faces and

made their eyes twinkle.

“I’ve had so much fun with you this weekend,” Stormy said as she turned to Ryder. “I needed this little break from reality.”

“Stormy, this is reality,” he said. “This is real life. This is right now. There’s nothing else besides this moment right now.”

She knew he had a valid point, but in her mind, her reality was back home in Coleville, alone in an empty trailer, hiding from all the local, gossiping townsfolk and avoiding Misty.

“You’re right,” she said. “But the moment I step on that plane tomorrow, this will all fade into oblivion.”

“It doesn’t have to though,” he

said, turning to look her square in the eyes. “You can leave Coleville.”

“I have no money,” she said. “I couldn’t move out here without a job or a place to live. That’s ridiculous.”

Ryder laughed a frustrated laugh. “You don’t understand what I’m saying, do you?”

Stormy shook her head. She was dying to know what he was trying to get at with her.

“I will help you,” he said. “How many times do I have to tell you I’m going to take care of you? I owe it to Jett to take care of you.”

“You really feel that strongly about taking care of me?” she asked.

Ryder nodded, not saying much.

“Is that why you’re so good to me? Because it helps you not to feel so guilty about abandoning Jett?” she asked.

“No, not at all,” he insisted.

“Believe me, if you were this horrible person, I would not have stayed all those days with you in Coleville, and I would not have flown you out to L.A. to spend the weekend here. I loved my brother, but a guy can only do so much.”

“Oh, okay,” Stormy said as she tried to hide her smile. “Makes sense.”

“So far everything Jett ever said about you has been right,” he said.

“You’re a good girl, Stormy.”

He sunk back into the scratchy fabric of the outdoor loveseat and slipped his left arm behind her.

Stormy wondered if he could feel what was going on between them. There was some sort of magnetic pull, she was sure of it, and she was refusing to believe it was all in her imagination. She knew she had her own personal reservations about the timing of everything. It was still so soon since Jett's passing, and this was his brother. It felt wrong, but the feelings were too strong for her to deny.

She tried to be nonchalant as she inched closer to him. She could feel the heat of his body radiating onto hers as she encroached into his space. She waited patiently, heart pounding, for him to make some sort of move or gesture, but he seemed to be just as frozen as she

was.

“Would you ever really consider moving out here?” Ryder asked.

“If I could figure out the logistics I think so,” she replied. “It’s just a little scary.”

“I meant what I said about helping you get on your feet,” he said as he nudged her and inadvertently moved in closer to her. “You can stay with me until you find a job, and I’ll help you find somewhere to live.”

“You’re too good to me,” she said. “It’s really something I need to think about. I love the idea of it, but actually doing it is completely different.”

“Totally understand.”

Without even thinking too much

about it, she leaned her head on his shoulder. By the time she realized what she'd done, she was too embarrassed to move so she just stayed in that position. The seconds that followed her cringe worthy move were agonizing until, without warning, he slipped his hand down from the back of the couch and rested it on her arm. He squeezed her closer towards him, but that was it. He made no other moves. He said nothing.

Stormy didn't want that moment to end. She didn't want to go to bed. She didn't want to wake up. She didn't want to drive to the airport. She didn't want to go back home to Coleville where her real life was waiting for her. Ryder had painted such a beautiful portrait of the

life she could have if only she tried, but she wasn't sure things would pan out the way he promised. If there was anything she had learned in her almost twenty-three years, it was that life never goes as planned.

She snuggled in closer to him as they sat in silence under the starry sky. If there was nothing going on between them, she didn't want to know, at least not yet. She just wanted to enjoy his company and the comfort that he gave her.

“My arm's falling asleep,” Ryder said minutes later as he gently lifted it up from around her. “Sorry.”

That blissful moment on the deck was officially over as they each sat up

and repositioned themselves apart from each other on the couch.

Ryder looked at his watch. “It’s getting late.”

“Yeah,” Stormy agreed. She stood up and stretched her arms out wide and stifled a yawn. She knew she had to wake up early the next morning if she wanted to make it to her flight on time. The plane was leaving LAX around nine, so she needed to get there at least by six or seven if not before.

She followed Ryder back inside, closing the sliding glass door behind them, and trekked down the hall to his room where her bags were. She pulled out her pajamas and went into his bathroom to change. When she came out,

he was just sitting quietly on the edge of his bed, in the dark.

“Oh, you scared me,” she said as she jumped.

“Sorry,” he said as he turned towards her. “I was just waiting for the bathroom.”

She shuffled over towards the bed and sat down next to him. As their eyes met, she could tell he had something on his mind.

He swallowed audibly as his eyes moved down to the floor and then back up at her again. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Stormy had never seen him so out of sorts before. This was not like him at all.

“What’s wrong?” she asked as she

grew more and more concerned.

“I just don’t want you to leave,” he blurted.

Stormy smiled from ear to ear as her hunch was beginning to be confirmed.

“I don’t want to leave either,” she admitted.

“I really enjoy spending time with you.”

“Me too.”

His eyes shifted towards her lips as he leaned in closer to her. Within seconds, his mouth was pressed against hers and his hand was brushing against her soft cheek. She couldn’t believe it was happening. She had wanted it to happen. She had willed it to happen. She

had manifested this moment, of that she was sure. At the same time, however, it didn't feel the way she thought it would. Her feelings of excitement and bliss were instantly replaced with remorse and guilt.

His lips felt like Jett's. That was enough to make her realize how wrong it was. It was too soon. He was Jett's brother. She needed more time to grieve. She wasn't ready to move on yet.

She pulled back away from him only to be met with an apologetic and embarrassed look on Ryder's face.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that," he said. He wasted no time in getting up off the bed and walking out of the room as he closed the door behind

him.

Stormy traced her lips with her fingers. They were still warm and she could still taste him. She couldn't help but wonder if she had ruined the good thing they had going, just like that.

She climbed under the covers of Ryder's enormous bed and concentrated on the moon that glowed in through the window. She was too tired to get out of bed and shut the curtains, so she laid there, lost in thought, waiting for her eyes to close. She replayed Ryder's kiss in her head over and over, like a scene in a movie, and analyzed it as much as she could.

She thought about what she could say to him the next day to make it all

better, to take away the sting of rejection and the awkwardness that was sure to fill the space between them. She wondered if this would be the last time she'd ever see him and it made her sad.

Stormy thought about going out to the living room where Ryder was sleeping and kissing him back just to prove to him that it wasn't that she didn't like him. She didn't want him to feel like he'd done anything wrong, even if she felt that way about herself.

Before she had a chance to give it anymore thought, exhaustion had overtaken her and she found herself passed out. By the time she opened her eyes again, the moon outside the window had been replaced with the sun which

was starting to rise bright and high in the sky.

She popped out of bed and hurried into Ryder's bathroom to get ready. She wanted to make herself look as good as possible, as if that would stifle any of the awkwardness that was bound to go on that morning. If anything, she just wanted to leave him with a good picture of her in his head, though she wasn't sure why it mattered.

The guilt from the kiss the night before still lingered and she spent the entire morning telling herself that she did the right thing by ending it. She reminded herself that Jett had only been gone for a few weeks. It was impossible to move on that quickly. She needed more time

for herself, and Ryder's stark resemblance to Jett was the reason she felt so confused. As the morning went on, she talked herself more and more out of her feelings for Ryder.

She emerged from his bathroom and began packing her things. It was already six in the morning, and they'd need to leave very soon.

"Knock, knock," Ryder called as he opened the door a crack. "I need to jump in the shower real quick and then we can go."

He flashed a charming, Ryder-esque smile as he skipped into the bathroom. Much to Stormy's relief, he acted like nothing happened. He was back to his old self again, and Stormy

vowed to do the same.

Twenty minutes later, they were packed and loaded and heading down towards the freeway towards LAX. Ryder was cracking jokes in the car as per usual and Stormy was laughing at each and every one of them.

They pulled up to the drop off area and Ryder placed his car in park. He hesitated for a brief moment before getting out and pulling her bags from the trunk. She met him at the curb side as he sat her things down.

She didn't know whether to hug him or give him a friendly peck on the cheek. As if he could read her mind, he opened his arms wide and gave her the biggest bear hug.

“Thanks for coming out to visit,” he said. “I hope you’ll come out again. Soon.”

“Thanks for having me,” she replied as she wrapped her arms around his Greek God physique. “I’ll definitely be back.”

He squeezed her tight before letting her go and slowly made his way back to his car. As soon as he climbed into the driver’s seat, he gave her a friendly wave and watched her as she walked away.

She felt her heart sink a little as she made her way to the check in area. She didn’t want to go back to Coleville, but she knew she had some thinking to do and some things to figure out. She

thought about that kiss the night before and reminded herself yet again that it meant nothing. She couldn't possibly love Ryder the way she loved Jett. He was just a secondhand replacement. He was just something to fill the huge black hole in her heart. She imagined that Jett would be seriously hurt if he knew she was moving on so quickly, and that she had thought she had feelings for his estranged older brother. She couldn't do that to him.

CHAPTER 12

Back home, Stormy settled in to her normal routine. Her quiet house, hot tea, random crying spells routine that she had abandoned while she was in California, came back to her like second nature the moment she walked in the door to her trailer.

Brooklyn stopped by for a bit Sunday afternoon, as she was anxious to hear all about her trip.

“So what was it like out there?” she asked, eyes wide open.

“Beautiful,” Stormy sighed. “Palm trees. The ocean. Gorgeous people. Amazing restaurants. Fancy cars everywhere you look. It’s a whole ‘nother world, Brooklyn.”

“So should we move there?”

Brooklyn asked, only she appeared to be completely serious.

“I don’t know how we could,” she said. “It sounds good in theory.”

“You’re such a fraidy-cat,” Brooklyn huffed. “Live a little.”

“You know, Ryder’s roommate, Zander, would be perfect for you,” Stormy piped up. “He is like the guy version of you. And he’s Ryder’s right hand man. And he doesn’t have an old lady yet.”

“Oh, geez,” Brooklyn laughed. “A California biker? Let me guess, he has sandy blonde hair and a ripped body and is super chill.”

“Exactly!” Stormy laughed. “I

think you'd really meet your match with Zander.”

“Well, I'll probably never meet him because someone's too scared to step outside of Coleville for more than a weekend,” Brooklyn teased. “If you go back, let me know. I'll go with you.”

“Really?” Stormy entertained the idea. “I don't know when I'll be going back.”

“And why is that?”

She wasn't quite sure how to phrase it, so she just came out and said, “Ryder kissed me.”

“What?!”

“And I kissed him back.”

Brooklyn leaned over and grabbed her arm in disbelief. “That's Jett's

brother!”

“I know, I know,” Stormy lamented. “Which is why I stopped it after a few seconds. It just felt wrong.”

“So how did this happen? I don’t think he would just randomly kiss you. You had to have been giving him signals or something,” Brooklyn analyzed.

“I don’t know. I guess we’d just been spending so much time together,” she said. “The attraction is definitely there, at least for me. But I think it’s because he looks so much like Jett.”

“Obviously he’s attracted to you if he kissed you,” she said. “And he invited you out to visit him. He must think a certain way about you.”

“He’s just taking care of me,”

Stormy insisted. “He feels like he has to take care of his brother’s widow. He’s just being a good person.”

Brooklyn squinted as she didn’t buy it. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Who knows,” Stormy said as she rolled her eyes.

“Are you sure you don’t have feelings for him? Not even a little?”

Brooklyn smiled wide.

“Even if I did, I’m not going to entertain them right now,” Stormy explained. “It just feels wrong. I can’t do that to Jett. It’s not right.”

Brooklyn shrugged. “I guess you just have to do what you think is right.”

“I’m trying,” she replied. “Believe me, I’m trying. Everything is so

confusing right now.”

“You just need to let loose and have fun,” she said. “If you’re really that lonely, there’s always douche bag Hayden to keep you company. Rumor has it he’s holding a big ol’ flame for you and it’s burning awfully bright.”

“What do you mean?” Stormy asked, her curiosity piqued.

“Oh, girl, he’s so in love with you,” she laughed. “Ever since you got married, it was like something switched in him. Every time I see him at O’Malley’s he basically pounces on me and tries to get information out of me. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s stalking you.”

“Are you serious?”

“I’m kidding about the stalking part, but yeah, he’s pretty much obsessed with you,” she elaborated. “I guess he tells everyone what a mistake he made.”

“He admits he made a mistake? That’s not like him at all,” Stormy mused. “Good to know though.”

“He’s kind of a whole different person now,” Brooklyn went on. “Something changed him in these last few months. Personally I don’t think he deserves another chance, but I thought you should know that he’s eating his heart out now.”

Stormy thought about Hayden in a whole different light for the first time in a long time. Maybe he had turned over a new leaf? Maybe he did truly love her

and want to get back with her. She, of course, wouldn't do anything unless the time was right, but it gave her a little bit of hope.

“I think I just need to focus on myself right now,” Stormy declared. “I don't need to be talking to Ryder or Hayden or any other guys. I need to grieve. I need to be by myself.”

“You've got your entire life to grieve,” Brooklyn said. “You can't hold a flame for Jett forever. I'm sorry, but he's not coming back. At some point you're going to have to live your life and move forward.”

“At what point is it okay for me to do that?” Stormy asked as tears formed in her eyes.

“It’s not like there’s a manual or anything on how to grieve,” Brooklyn replied. “You have to do it when it feels right for you. No one else can tell you when that is. But don’t sacrifice the good guys that happen to come into your life all because you’re trying to create some kind of appropriate timeline because it makes you feel better about yourself.”

Stormy knew Brooklyn had a point, and after hearing how obsessed Hayden was with her now, she almost wanted to see him again. She had spent years pining for him and hoping he’d come back to her and love her again, and now that the tables had turned and she had mentally made Ryder off limits, she was seeing Hayden in a completely

different light.

In high school, she was the girlfriend who trailed along behind him. She was loyal and faithful and did everything he wanted her to do. She planned surprises for him, lavished him with gifts, and in return, he gave her flowers every month and a promise ring before dumping her the moment he moved way to school.

They were just a couple of kids though, she told herself. You can't believe what an eighteen year old promises you. Eighteen year olds shouldn't make promises to naïve little sixteen year olds.

Still, Stormy loved that things had ended up in her favor. It made her happy

to know that she held his heart in the palm of her hand for the first time and not the other way around.

“I should probably get going,” Brooklyn announced as she crawled off the couch. “Think about what we talked about though. I’ll go to California with you next time you go. I’m actually sort of curious about this Zander guy.”

Brooklyn knew how to take a heavy conversation and spin it into something lighthearted. She always had a way with words, and Stormy loved that about her. Brooklyn had been there for Stormy since they were kids. She was there when Stormy’s grandmother passed away, when Stormy’s dog was hit by a car, when Hayden broke

Stormy's heart into a million pieces, when she eloped with Jett, and when Jett died, and Stormy knew she was always going to be there.

Brooklyn left the house and Stormy watched as she sped down the quiet, tree-lined street and faded into the horizon. She was alone with her thoughts once again. She debated calling Hayden, just to see if he'd answer, but she stopped herself just short of dialing his number.

"It's not good to do things just to get a reaction," she could hear her mother saying if she only knew. "Don't do things when you're feeling emotional or stir crazy. You'll regret it all later."

She relished in the fact that

Hayden was out there wishing, dreaming, and hoping that she'd come back to him. She decided to let that soak in a little bit and take her sweet time. She wanted to leave him hanging just as he'd done to her for so many long, tortuous years. There was no harm, in her opinion, in a simple game of cat and mouse.

CHAPTER 13

It had been over month since Jett had passed, two weeks since she had visited Ryder in California, and three weeks since she had last seen Hayden. Stormy had become a bit obsessive lately about counting the days since her life had been turned upside down. She had too much time on her hands to think and strategize and analyze things until there was nothing left to analyze.

She had a couple of missed calls from Ryder that she had ignored and several text messages from Hayden that she completely disregarded, but she'd had no urge to talk to either of them yet. She was still figuring things out.

She was still weirded out by her

kiss with Ryder. He might have been able to act like nothing happened, but it didn't rid her of the enormous guilt she felt. Hearing his voice would've just been a reminder of what they did.

She spent most of her days reading, soaking in sunshine on her back deck, and going to her parents' house for supper on Wednesday and Thursday nights. She usually spent her evenings watching an ungodly amount of bad reality shows and fell asleep on the couch half the time.

Sometimes she would write letters to Jett, hoping that somewhere, somehow he could read them. Certain nights were harder than others and all of her emotions seemed to spill out of nowhere

all at the same time.

Her birthday was coming up at the end of the week. She was going to be twenty-three. She was sure Brooklyn would want to go out for drinks, and if nothing else came up, she would probably go. She couldn't think of anything more depressing than spending her birthday at home, alone.

The Thursday before her birthday weekend consisted of her usual routine of laying on the couch watching reality shows and washing down bites of Chinese takeout with gulps of cheap wine. She was starting to gain back a little bit of the weight she'd lost after Jett's passing, but she had no desire to cook anymore, and the alcohol seemed

to numb her enough so she could fall asleep at night.

Her hair hadn't been washed in a couple days and was thrown back into a low pony tail, she was wearing yesterday's sweats, and she didn't have a care in the world. She was growing used to her cozy, isolated little cocoon. Most days her phone was off and her curtains were drawn. She liked not having to deal with the world outside her door. It felt safer that way.

Stormy was almost passed out around eight when there was a knock at her door. She forgot for a moment that she was looking like a hot mess and peeked out her window only to see Hayden standing there. He had totally

seen her, and she couldn't avoid him now.

She was annoyed at his unannounced visit as she reluctantly opened her front door.

“Stormy,” he said as if seeing her face was the highlight of his day. He couldn't contain the excitement in his voice even if he'd tried. He looked like he'd just won the lottery.

“Yes,” she said, not even trying to hide her annoyance.

“Is this a bad time?” he asked. He glanced over her shoulder and saw the scattered boxes of takeout and empty wine bottles that covered her coffee table.

Stormy shrugged and opened the

door wide to invite him in. He stepped in, sensing her reluctance, and took his shoes off.

“What’s up?” Stormy asked.

Hayden stared her up and down. He had probably never seen her looking so disheveled before.

“Just checking on you,” he said. “Hadn’t heard from you in a few weeks.”

“I’m here,” Stormy said. “Don’t really know what else to say. Just taking things one day at a time.”

She chuckled on the inside as she remembered what Brooklyn had said about him. He really was obsessed with her. In all their years together, she had always been the one chasing after him.

He'd never really chased after her. It was nice for a change.

"I've been thinking about you a lot," he said. He seemed nervous, and there was an obvious longing in his voice.

Stormy walked into the living room and sat down on the couch as Hayden trailed behind her. He took a seat right next to her leaving very little space between them.

"That's nice," she said. She sort of liked being a bitch to him. He deserved it.

"Have you given anymore thought to what we talked about a few weeks ago?" he asked. His eyes twitched nervously as he waited for her response.

She could tell he'd been thinking about this nonstop.

“Somewhat,” she replied. “I’ve just had a lot going on lately. Nothing’s really changed since three weeks ago. I don’t feel any differently.”

“Oh,” he said. He was crushed and his face said it all. “I hope we can still be a part of each other’s lives. I want to make it up to you. The way I treated you. I want to make it right. Can we start as friends and go from there?”

There was something different behind Hayden’s sapphire blue eyes. He was being earnest for the first time in his life, and his face was pained. He had never opened up like this before, and Stormy had to give him credit for that.

“I’d love for you to make it up to me,” Stormy snipped. “You were so shitty to me, Hayden.”

He hung his head in his hands and hid his face. He said nothing, but his sniffing gave it all away. He was desperate. Something about seeing Hayden so vulnerable and in emotional pain tugged at Stormy’s heart strings. She couldn’t continue being a bitch to him. It just wasn’t in her nature.

She reached her arm behind him and rubbed his back as she said nothing.

“I messed up so bad,” he sobbed and sniffled into his hands. “I had you, and I lost you. And now you’re gone forever.”

“Don’t say that,” Stormy soothed

him. She didn't want to get his hopes up, but at this point the future was one giant question mark. She was ruling out nothing.

He lifted his head up and turned towards her, tears streaming down his face. There was something so touching about seeing perfect, grown man Hayden lose his composure and break down in front of her. They locked eyes for a moment, and Stormy instinctually leaned in to kiss him. She didn't give it much thought. She just did it. With Hayden it just felt like second nature no matter how many ups and downs they'd had over the years.

Their lips touched and his hands moved to her face and then down her

sides. He kissed her with a fervor she'd never experienced before from anyone. His kisses were passionate and hungry, and he positioned himself over her as she leaned back against the couch pillows. He laid on top of her as he kissed her like he'd never kissed her before as his hands traveled the length of her body.

Stormy blocked out all the warnings that flew through her mind and just tried to enjoy the moment. She blocked out the fact that she was making out with her jerk ex on the couch her dead husband bought her, in the home her dead husband bought her. She blocked out the warnings that told her Hayden was bad news and would never

change. She blocked out any and all thoughts of Ryder that instantly came to her mind the moment her lips touched Hayden's.

Hayden was in a vulnerable, lonely place and so was Stormy. She was sure she'd be sorry in the morning, but she didn't care. She wanted to be touched. She wanted to be longed for. She wanted to feel loved again, and Hayden felt like the safe choice in that moment.

Hayden's hands glided under her shirt as he caressed her soft breasts. Stormy knew where things were headed yet she had no desire to stop any of it. She wanted to feel something, anything. She wanted to feel human again. She

wanted to feel hot, bothered, angry, guilty, happy, and sad. She wanted to feel everything. She was tired of feeling numb. With the wine still coursing through her veins and clouding her judgment, she closed her eyes and let Hayden call all the shots. As far as she was concerned, he could have her. All of her. Just that once.

His lips pressed against her neck and his breath blew hot on her skin. He tore at her clothes like some kind of hungry animal and soon they were both naked on the couch. He picked her up, lips pressed against her collarbone, and carried her back to the bedroom where he threw her down on top of the ruffled bed.

He climbed over her and positioned himself between her thighs. Within seconds, he had pressed himself inside of her. She closed her eyes as he made feverish, passionate love to her. For one night, she would give him her body but nothing else.

The next morning she awoke in her bed, only something was different. She rolled over and saw Hayden lying sound asleep next to her. She sat up, startled, as bits and pieces from the night before played through her head.

What have I done? She asked herself. What was I thinking?

Seeing another man lying in Jett's place was just too much for her, and she couldn't keep herself from instantly

sobbing.

“What? What?” Hayden popped up, suddenly wide awake. He reached his arm over and grabbed hers. “What’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

Stormy was inconsolable. She couldn’t stop hyperventilating long enough to tell him what was wrong, but she had a feeling it didn’t matter to him. He got what he wanted from her. He won the battle the night before.

“Stormy!” he yelled. “What’s wrong? Talk to me!”

He reached both arms around her and pulled her into him, holding her in his strong arms and rubbing her back.

“You’re okay,” he whispered into her ear. “You’re going to be okay.”

She calmed down long enough to catch her breath and wipe her face clean with her sleeve.

“I feel so guilty,” she huffed.

“Guilty?” Hayden questioned. He looked confused. “You’re not married anymore. You’re a single woman.”

Stormy glared at him.

“Poor choice of words. Sorry,” he said as he looked down. “I just mean, it’s not like you cheated on Jett or anything. I’m sure it’s weird having another guy sleeping in your and Jett’s bed. Believe me, it’s weird for me too. You insisted I stay last night, remember? You said you didn’t want to be alone.”

“I did?” she questioned. She was beginning to remember less and less of

the night before.

“Mm, hm,” he said as he nodded. “If it makes you feel any better, I’ll take off now. I don’t want to upset you any more than I already have.”

He climbed out of bed and slipped on his jeans that were laying in a heap on the floor. He pulled his shirt over his head, leaned down, and kissed her softly on the forehead.

“Happy birthday, by the way,” he said as he tossed an envelope onto the bed next to her. He must have had it in his pocket all night. He turned and walked out the door and down the hall. Stormy waited until she heard the front door open and close before tearing into the envelope.

She was expecting a letter, a birthday card, something typical, but it was a little rose gold ring with tiny white diamonds around it. It was the promise ring he'd given her in high school. It was the same ring she had tossed in his face the night he'd broken up with her before he moved away to college. She had thrown it at him in his Jeep and was sure it was lost or stuck between some crevice, never to be seen again, but he'd found it. He must have searched his car high and low to find that tiny little thing, and he'd kept it safe for the past five years.

Maybe he was really coming around? She thought to herself. Maybe he deserved another chance?

CHAPTER 14

Stormy spent the rest of her birthday trying to make excuses for her late night hook up with Hayden. Her once hardened heart was beginning to form a soft spot for him, and the possibility of moving forward with him was back on the table. She wouldn't tell him that though. She wanted him to work for her.

At the same time, she couldn't understand why Ryder kept popping into her head. She hadn't talked to him in two weeks and although she had fun with him, she had convinced herself that her attraction to him was simply because he was the living, breathing, successful and independent version of the man she had

loved more than anything in the world. Never mind that he made her feel like a million bucks. Forget that he made her smile. It didn't matter that he made her laugh, even though Hayden could do none of those things.

Hayden was safe and familiar. Ryder was new and exciting, and in Stormy's book that equaled scary. Hayden was the easy choice for her. When the time was right and she was ready to move on, she imagined she'd move on with him.

Brooklyn called her around noon that day to sing her an awful rendition of "Happy Birthday" that sounded more like a bunch of feral cats fighting in an alley. She also reminded her that they

had plans to go out that night for a couple drinks to celebrate her birthday. Stormy wasn't in the mood to go out, but she knew she didn't have a choice. Brooklyn would show up at her door and drag her kicking and screaming all the way to O'Malley's if she had to.

For the first time in a long time, O'Malley's was dead. The music that boomed from the speakers played to a dead audience. There were maybe five people in the entire bar, not counting Stormy and Brooklyn.

"What's going on here?" Stormy wondered.

"Fourth of July weekend," Brooklyn said as she stomped her feet. "I wasn't even thinking about that."

People are probably out at the lake or on vacation.”

“It’s okay,” Stormy insisted. “Less people to gawk and point at me and call me names.”

Brooklyn’ strutted over to the bar, all 5’9” of her, and ordered two Cosmos.

“Happy birthday, Stormy,” she said as she took a sip of her drink and stared around the room. The music was too loud for them to have any real kind of conversation and the lack of other patrons gave them nothing else to talk about.

Stormy sipped her drink and looked down at her watch. It was barely nine, and it was going to be a long night.

She didn't want to bail early on Brooklyn, but she didn't want to hang out in an empty bar the rest of the night.

She couldn't help but wonder what Hayden was up to. He was probably out on the lake with his family. They owned a lake house about an hour north of Coleville. She had been there many times in high school, and she knew it was a Goodwin family tradition to spend Fourth of July weekend up there.

"I slept with Hayden," Stormy blurted out to Brooklyn. She couldn't help it. He'd been in the forefront of her mind the entire day.

"You did what?" Brooklyn said with her jaw dropped. "Please tell me you're joking."

“It just...sort of...happened,” Stormy said with a sheepish smile. “I think you’re right. He’s totally in love with me. He’s trying to change. He wants to make it up to me. He wants another chance.”

“And you’re not going to give him another chance, right?” Brooklyn pleaded. “Stormy, how many times do we have to go down this road?”

“People change all the time,” Stormy defended him. “He was crying, Brooklyn. Real tears. Streaming down his face. Begging me to give him another chance.”

“And the second he has you back, he’s going to drop you like a sack of potatoes all over again,” Brooklyn

jabbed. “He only wants what he can’t have. Haven’t you figured that out by now?”

Brooklyn rarely got annoyed with Stormy, but Stormy could sense the conversation was getting ugly fast.

“Okay, okay,” Stormy surrendered. She didn’t want to get Brooklyn any more riled up about Hayden than she already was. Brooklyn had been a saint throughout the years, and Stormy had cried to her about Hayden more times than she could count. She understood why Brooklyn was so upset.

The girls sat, once again, in the loud bar, not saying a word to one another. They finished their drinks and

exchanged looks of pure boredom.

“Well, should we call this night a bust?” Brooklyn asked, eyebrows raised. “I’m so sorry your birthday night was so lame.”

“Oh, no, it’s fine,” Stormy said with a smile. “You got me out of the house. That’s all that mattered.”

Brooklyn closed her tab, and they walked back outside to her car.

“I should probably just go home now,” Stormy sighed.

Brooklyn squinted at her for a minute before saying, “You just want to go home so you can call Hayden.”

She knew Stormy all too well.

“That’s not true,” Stormy said, though her wrinkled nose gave it away.

“Liar,” Brooklyn snipped.

“Whatever. Get in the car. I’ll take you home.”

As they drove the streets of Coleville and turned onto Stormy’s road, she couldn’t help but notice a black car with bright red tail lights sitting in her driveway.

“Is Hayden at your house?”

Brooklyn huffed.

“No, that’s not Hayden’s car. I don’t know whose car that is?” Stormy was perplexed. “Wait here.”

She climbed out of Brooklyn’s car and walked up to the driver’s side of the black car. It was just a Toyota, nothing special. The windows were a little dark, but she could see the outline of a man

sitting in the seat. She rapped on the window and as it slowly rolled down, she knew immediately that it was Ryder.

“Ryder?”

“Hi,” he said as he studied her reaction. He shut off the car engine and climbed out.

Stormy saw Brooklyn staring hard to figure out who that was. She was probably making sure it wasn't Hayden. Stormy waved her away until she finally got the hint and left.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I hadn't heard from you since you left L.A.,” he explained. “You weren't returning my calls or texts. It's been weeks. I was worried.”

“So you came all the way here to check on me?” Stormy was bemused and flattered at his bold move.

“I did,” he admitted. “I know you’d been a little depressed. And after I kissed you that night, I was worried I pushed you away.”

“No, you did nothing wrong,” she swore. “I’ve just been taking some time for myself. Trying to figure things out. Trying to move forward. It has nothing to do with you.”

“Well when someone ignores my calls, I tend to think it does have something to do with me,” Ryder said. He seemed annoyed, not to mention a little hurt. “What was I supposed to think, Stormy?”

She scratched her head as she tried to make sense of why he would be so hurt. They really barely knew each other. It's not like they were best friends. They spent a few days together and everything was fine. She didn't think ignoring his calls would drive him to fly all the way out to Coleville, Kansas to check on her.

“You want to come inside?” she said as she nodded towards the door.

She crossed her arms as she walked towards the house and Ryder followed her in. She kicked off her heels, which instantly lowered her by several inches, and stood in the entry way waiting for Ryder to say something or make some sort of move.

“So as you can see, everything’s fine here,” she said with a nervous laugh and then patted her belly. “I’m even eating again.”

Ryder smiled, but she could see something was not right behind those hazel eyes of his. She could tell he wasn’t himself.

“You okay?” she asked as she reached across and rubbed his arm. “You seem different tonight.”

He ran his fingers through his chocolate brown hair, messing it up, and sighed heavily.

“What the fuck am I doing here?” he muttered to himself.

“Excuse me?” Stormy asked.

“This was a bad idea,” he

muttered again.

“What are you talking about? Why are you being so weird?” Stormy took a step back. “You’re really kind of freaking me out right now.”

She racked her mind trying to figure out what was behind Ryder’s bizarre behavior. She thought back to her days in nursing school during her psych rounds and decided she should calm him down. From the looks of it, he was about to have some sort of nervous breakdown. Maybe that was the reason Jett never told her about him? Maybe he wasn’t mentally stable? She found that a little hard to believe given how normal he’d seemed during their days together, but if she had learned anything in the

recent months, it was that she knew nothing.

Stormy reached for his hand and led him into the living room where they sat side by side. Her couch was getting a lot of company lately.

“Talk to me,” she pleaded as she stared into his gorgeous eyes. She took his hand in hers and held it in her lap.

“I can’t get you out of my head,” he said as his eyes locked into hers. “Ever since I met you, you’re all I think about. When you came out to L.A., I couldn’t believe it. I shouldn’t have kissed you when I did, but I just had to. I’d been dying to kiss you that entire weekend.”

Stormy blushed and looked away,

secretly happy that she wasn't just imagining the magnetism between them that weekend.

“When you left and then I didn't hear from you,” he said as he gulped. “And you didn't return my calls or texts, it just made me even crazier.”

“I-I had no idea you felt this way about me,” she said, half lying. “I don't know what to say.”

Ryder seemed crushed. “I've been struggling with these feelings towards you for weeks. You're my dead brother's widow. It just seems so fucked up. I tried to deny them. I tried to talk myself out of them.”

On the inside, Stormy wanted to tell him how she had felt the exact same

way, but she said nothing.

“Damn it, Stormy,” he said.

“You’re this broken little bird, and I just want to take care of you. And you’re so freaking beautiful.”

Stormy laughed and shook her head. “I wouldn’t say I’m beautiful. Broken maybe. Not beautiful.”

“But you are!” he said, almost shouting it. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met.”

“Okay, now I know you’re lying. I’ve seen the women who live near you. I don’t even hold a flame to them,” Stormy said.

“No, you don’t understand. Those women are vapid and shallow. Their exterior beauty is all they have,” he

explained. “They hear my title and they’re all over me. I don’t want that. You are the whole package. Inside and out. You’re the most normal girl I’ve ever met, and I mean that in the best way. You’re a breath of fresh air.”

“What you’re saying sounds really nice and all,” Stormy mumbled. She thought about Hayden and about how things were maybe starting to get on track with that. “I just don’t know if it’s what Jett would’ve wanted.”

“You have no idea what Jett would’ve wanted. You can speculate all you want if it makes you feel less guilty or whatever,” Ryder huffed with a bitterness in his tone. “I know you feel something too. You’re just too scared to

admit it.”

Ryder hit the nail on the head, and Stormy knew it. The way she looked at it, she had two choices. She could completely close the chapter on Ryder and focus on Hayden and move on or she could accept that her feelings towards Ryder were real and that it was okay to explore whatever it was that was going on between them.

“I’m not going to lie,” she prefaced. “I’ve felt something between us too.”

Ryder’s faced seemed to light up a bit.

“But how do I know I’m not drawn to you because you look like Jett?” she wondered. “You’re like the older,

stronger, more independent version of the love of my life. I'm constantly comparing you to him and that's not fair to either of you. Sometimes when I look at you, I only see him."

"I can't control what you see when you look at me," he replied. "That's all you. But I can tell you what I see when I look at you."

Ryder repositioned himself so that he was facing her straight on. He stared at her face, which was caked with makeup from her failed girls' night out, and took a deep breath.

"I see a young woman who's afraid to try anything new. She's afraid to step out of her comfort zone. She loves with all her heart and yet at the

same time she holds her cards close. She's afraid to get hurt, but once she opens up, she has the most beautiful soul," he said. "She's protective and loyal and a little curious when she lets her guard down, which is rare. She likes comfort and routine, but I know she'd be a little more adventurous about things if she had the right partner beside her."

Stormy was blown away by how well he knew her. They had maybe spent five or six days together total in the last month, yet he knew her just as well as anyone else in her life if not better.

"I see someone who has so much potential if she just stepped outside of her comfort zone once in a while," he said. "You have the potential to go

places in life and do great things, but you're scared. I want to help you. I want to support you. I want to be there for you every step of the way. You don't see what I see, Stormy. You don't see it at all. People like you are rare."

"Wow," Stormy remarked as her eyes misted up a little. "That's, like, the nicest thing anyone's ever said about me before. How do you know me so well? I feel like I hardly know you at all."

Ryder shrugged as he studied her face and her every move. He seemed so present, so in tune with her.

She thought about Jett and what he would think in that moment, then she realized that maybe it didn't matter. Maybe all he would've wanted was just

for her to move on and be happy. She thought about Hayden. Hayden couldn't stack up to Jett and he certainly would never stack up to Ryder, but Hayden was safe. She knew him. She'd known him since grade school. He wasn't perfect, but he offered her the comfort and familiarity she didn't quite have yet with Ryder.

Ryder leaned in closer to her, and she knew he wanted to kiss her. She tried to fight it. She tried to deny her feelings, but they were too strong. She wanted to kiss him too. She wanted to be with him more than she cared to let herself admit.

Stormy leaned closer to Ryder and pressed her lips against his. His kisses

were soft and gentle, not hungry and passionate like Hayden's were the night before. He was delicate with her and sweet.

He tasted like cinnamon gum and he smelled like some sort of masculine body wash. She ran her fingers through his already mussed up hair and relished in that moment. Maybe it was too soon. Maybe it was wrong. Maybe it was all sorts of messed up, but she couldn't deny that she was falling for him. She couldn't stuff those feelings down anymore. Ryder was pretty amazing, and that she could not ignore.

His hands traced her face softly before he ran his fingers through her loose, brunette curls. His touches were

tender not naughty. He wasn't only after one thing as far as she could tell. He was taking things slowly and that's exactly what she needed. He always seemed to know exactly what she needed.

CHAPTER 15

Ryder slept on the couch that night while Stormy slept sound in her bed all alone. It was what she wanted though. She didn't want to rush anything, and Ryder was perfectly fine with it.

The next morning, she couldn't wait to wake up and see him. She pounced on the couch at eight in the morning and woke him up with a sweet peck on the lips.

“Hey,” he said with a smile as he sat up.

There was something so freeing for Stormy to finally acknowledge her feelings. If he had never opened up to her the way he did the night before, she probably would've stuffed those feelings

down so far she'd never find them ever again. She probably would've continued to ignore his calls and texts, and she would've settled for whatever life decided to throw her way which probably would've been Hayden.

“So I didn't ask you, but how long are you in town this time?” she asked.

“Well, I have an open ended ticket home,” he said. “And I have my rental car. It kind of just depended on how things went last night. I wasn't sure how it was going to go.”

“I think things went pretty well. I don't know about you,” Stormy teased.

Ryder smiled and nodded. “Sorry I poured my heart out like that. I'm usually not that, um, open about things.”

“I’m glad you said those things,” she replied. “I was really confused about a lot of things, still am, but your words sort of solidified some of the feelings I was trying to ignore.”

“Ignoring your feelings is the worst thing you can do,” he said. “Believe me. They’ll come out one way or another and sometimes not in good ways.”

“I’m sure,” she agreed. She stood up and went over to the thick, drawn curtains and pulled them open. She was okay with letting the light in that day. In fact, she welcomed it. As she pulled the second curtain back she saw a black Jeep driving slowly past her house.

“Shit,” she whispered to herself.

She knew Hayden was probably checking on her and wondering why there was some random car parked in her driveway. She also wondered why, on the Fourth of July, he wasn't up at the lake house.

“What do you want to do today?” Ryder asked as he folded the blankets and sat them neatly on the arm of the couch. “It's the Fourth. I'm sure we can find a decent fireworks show somewhere around here.”

She spun around, instantly feeling guilty about her little unintentional love triangle.

“Um,” she stalled. She felt the need to text Hayden and explain, but she didn't want him to know she saw him

driving by. “Yeah, the fire department does fireworks. We can go out to Odemeyer Road and find a little spot to park and watch.”

“Sounds nice and low key,” he said.

“What’s the plan today?” she asked. “It won’t get dark until almost nine. We’ve got the entire day to burn.”

“I guess I hadn’t really thought about it,” he said. “I was half expecting you to slam the door in my face and half expecting you to be with that douchebag ex of yours.”

“Heh,” Stormy let out a nervous laugh.

“Has he been hassling you again?” Ryder asked.

“He’s stopped by a couple times,” Stormy said, keeping it short and sweet. “I wouldn’t say he’s been hassling me per se.”

“Who’s that pulling up in front of your house?” Ryder asked as he pointed out the window.

Hayden’s Jeep was parked in the street out front, and he was making his way up the walkway towards her door.

“Give me a minute,” she said as she hurriedly slipped on a pair of flip flops by the door and walked out to the porch.

“What the hell’s going on?” Hayden asked, all wild eyed. She had never seen him so jealous and accusatory before. “Who’s at your house

right now?”

Stormy breathed in deep as she searched for the words.

“It’s a guy isn’t it?” he demanded to know. “Who is it?”

“Hayden,” Stormy said as she placed her hand on his chest. He seemed ready to charge in her door at any second. “First of all, you and I aren’t even really together. Second of all, I don’t know if I’m ready to explore anything with you again. And thirdly, I’ve kind of fallen for someone else.”

Hayden looked crushed. Devastated. His face fell as he took a step back.

“I knew it,” he said. “I knew I lost you forever.”

He shook his head as he stepped even further away from her.

“I hope you and what’s-his-name are very happy together,” he sulked. He turned and strutted back to his Jeep.

“Hayden!” she yelled after him. “We can still be friends, right?”

His back was towards her as he threw one hand in the air and flipped her off. He hopped in his car and sped down the street. She knew he was upset. She couldn’t blame him. She couldn’t hold any of that against him.

With her love triangle officially over, she headed back inside where Ryder was sitting on the couch. She was sure he heard everything through those thin living room windows, but he didn’t

say a word.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“I think so,” she said. “Just a bruised ego.”

Ryder raised his eyebrows.

“His. Not mine,” she clarified.

“He’s not used to being rejected and not getting what he wants.”

Ryder tugged on her arm and pulled her into his lap as he wrapped his arms around her.

“I think you made the right choice,” he teased. “Hometown hero who also happens to be a jerk wad? Or powerful, big city biker guy who happens to be really, really ridiculously good looking and crazy about you?”

Stormy playfully slapped his chest

and giggled. She loved that he had a sense of humor about everything. Even Jett, as much as she loved him, could rarely get her to laugh the way Ryder did. Jett was always so serious, but she couldn't blame him for that. Jett seemed to live his life in black and white. Ryder was pure Technicolor.

“I'm going to hop in the shower if that's okay,” Ryder said as he nudged her to get up.

“Of course,” she replied. “Make yourself at home.”

As Ryder grabbed his things out of his car and headed back inside to get ready, Stormy headed back to her room to tidy up a bit. As she fluffed her pillows and made her bed, she caught

the glimmer of her rose gold promise ring sitting on her nightstand. She felt bad for hurting Hayden, even though he had probably hurt her ten times worse before. She didn't like to hurt people. It wasn't in her nature. She imagined he was probably crying by now and thinking of ways he could win her back. He was never one to go down without a fight. She reminded herself that she had picked the right guy in choosing Ryder and that Hayden was getting a good old-fashioned dose of his own medicine. It was nothing but pure karma.

Later that night, Ryder drove them out to Odemeyer Road where they found a spot nestled along the side of the road between various other Coleville locals.

They put a blanket down in the field and laid down as they prepared to watch the show.

The sun was setting fast and it was only a matter of time before the fireworks began. They had spent the day mostly doing nothing but in a good way. They had taken a walk, had a million and one conversations about completely random things, shared sweet kisses, and reminisced about the days when life was simpler.

The instant the sky was filled with night and stars, the fireworks started. One by one, one after another, bright bursts of gorgeous colors spread out in various patterns. The pops and crackles shot through the air and tickled their

ears. It was a splendid sight, and Stormy couldn't think of anyone better to spend it with than Ryder.

“What would you be doing tonight if you were back home?” Stormy asked him.

“There's a little bar by the ocean that my buddy owns,” he said. “He usually reserves a table on the roof for a bunch of us. We watch the fireworks from there. It's sort of tucked away. A special place.”

“Aw,” Stormy said. “I'm sorry you're missing that right now. That sounds really nice.”

He turned towards her. “I'd rather be with you than there.”

Her heart warmed over as he said

those words.

“Move to California, Stormy,” he said as he propped himself up on his elbow and turned to look her in the eyes. “I’m completely serious. Be my old lady. Help me find out who killed Jett.”

Stormy laughed. “Don’t be ridiculous. That’s not realistic for me right now.”

“If I figure everything out for you and all you have to do is pack your bag and hop on a flight and be there tomorrow, would you?” he propositioned her.

It was very tempting to Stormy, but it scared her to the core. She was a planner, and adapting to big changes was not her strong point.

“What’s stopping you? Really?” he asked.

“My house for one,” she said. “I don’t know how long it would take to sell it.”

“I can take care of that,” he said. “I’ll buy it from you.”

“That’s insane,” Stormy laughed. “Also, I need a job.”

“I’ll take care of you until you find one,” he insisted. “Old ladies don’t work anyway. You don’t even need a job.”

“Then I’ll feel like I owe you,” she said. “I don’t want to feel that way. And I certainly don’t want to feel like a mooch.”

“You’re not a mooch,” he said.

“And you won’t owe me anything. I want to do this. I want to be with you, but I can’t do the long distance thing. This is the only way it would work.”

“But can’t you work from anywhere?” Stormy asked. “Your companies. They’re all online, right?”

“Yeah, but my headquarters is L.A. I have investors and partners there,” he said.

“Veronica,” Stormy huffed.

“Yes, Veronica,” he laughed. “But that’s not why. She has nothing to do with anything. Believe me. That ship sailed a long time ago.”

“We’re missing the show. Can we talk about this later?” Stormy changed the subject. He leaned back down on the

blanket as she curled up to him with her head on his shoulder. She tried to focus on the fiery, colorful swirls and shapes flying through the air, but all she thought about was Ryder's proposition.

The moment the show ended and they were back inside Ryder's rental car, the topic came up again.

"Stormy, we really need to figure something out," he said.

"What're you talking about?" She played dumb.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," he scoffed. "Are you moving out west or not?"

"The thought of picking up and leaving and moving to be with someone I've only known a short time is terrifying

for me,” she said. “You have to understand that.”

“Trying to have a relationship with someone halfway across the country is not doable for me,” he said. “Long distance relationships never work out. I want to give this a fair chance.”

“Where would I live?” she asked.

“You could stay with me until you get a job and then I’d help you find a place,” he said. “And I’m completely serious about buying your place. If you don’t want to sell it, why don’t you rent it out? That would give you some extra income so you don’t feel so dependent on me for things, not that I wouldn’t help you out.”

Stormy bit her nails with

nervousness and excitement as she thought about it. The idea of packing up her bags and hopping on a one-way flight terrified her, but she knew if she wanted to see where this was going with Ryder, she had no other choice.

“I’d rather not sell my house,” she said. “Just in case this doesn’t work out. I need a place to come home to.”

“Completely understand.”

“I guess I’ll post an ad online looking for renters,” she sighed. “You win.”

Ryder beamed from ear to ear as he reached over and squeezed her hand hard. He really did like her. He really did want to be with her. He really was serious about trying to make it work.

“Are you sure Zander will be okay with me staying with you guys for a bit?” she asked.

“Zander reports to me. His opinion doesn’t matter,” Ryder snickered. “But of course he’ll be fine.”

“Okay, good,” she giggled.

“And if he’s not, well, I own the condo. I’ll just tell him to take a hike,” Ryder said.

Stormy loved that Ryder was a no nonsense kind of guy, but every once in a while she saw a tiny bit of the alpha dog control freak in him come out. She didn’t know if it scared her or turned her on.

They arrived back at the trailer and headed back inside. The crickets chirped stridently outside and the cool

air of the inside of the house was a welcome relief from the humid, July night air.

Stormy's hair was sticking to her sweaty neck, and Ryder's face was glistening.

"I'm not used to all this humidity anymore," he said as he wiped his brow.

"I don't think I've ever gotten used to it," she replied as she gathered her hair at the nape of her neck and moved it over her shoulder. She fanned her face as she attempted to cool off. Impatiently she stripped her t-shirt off right then and there, leaving nothing but her shorts and camisole.

Ryder smirked as he looked her up and down. "You're so fucking sexy."

Stormy's cheeks burned red, only from embarrassment rather than heat. Jett had always told her how sexy and beautiful she was, but she never believed him. She thought he was just being nice. It felt good to hear Ryder tell her that too.

“Stop,” she said as she swatted her hands towards him.

She trotted into the kitchen to grab a chilled bottle of water from the refrigerator and tossed one towards him. They gulped the refreshing, chilled water and stood in the kitchen in silence. Ryder was standing exactly where she had found Jett lying bleeding and unconscious the day that he was killed. She forced herself to think of something

else. She had to replace the bad memories with the good or else she'd never move on. She'd be trapped, reliving those moments over and over again, just like Brooklyn said.

“What’s wrong?” Ryder asked.

“Nothing,” she said as she shook her head.

He stepped towards her and kissed her mouth sweetly.

“I had fun with you tonight,” he said.

“Me too,” she replied. “I’m getting tired. Mind if I go to bed?”

Ryder looked disappointed but he understood. “Nah, go ahead. I have work to do anyway. Not tired yet. Still on west coast time.”

She stood on her toes and kissed him goodnight before heading back to her room. The moment she was changed and under the covers, she grabbed her phone and posted a quick ad to Craigslist advertising her house for rent. She told him she was going to move. She had to keep her word.

Now she had to decide if she was going to go undercover in his MC gang. With Jett's passing, she had kind of hoped to get out of the dangerous MC lifestyle. With Ryder, she knew she was just going to get sucked right back in.

CHAPTER 16

Sunday morning, Stormy and Ryder shared a peaceful hour over two cups of cheap gas station coffee and a box of donuts that Ryder had run out to grab from the store. They flipped through the Sunday paper, discussed current events, and shoved their faces full of sticky, sprinkle-covered confections.

“What would you be doing now if you were back home?” Stormy asked. She wanted to get, in bits and pieces, a glimpse of the life that awaited her out there.

“I probably would sleep in until at least nine or ten, get up, take care of some MC business and check on a few things for Veronica. Every day’s a work

day for me,” he said. “What would you be doing if I wasn’t here right now?”

Stormy didn’t want to answer him. She didn’t want him to hear how pathetic her life had become. Her routine was literally doing nothing while he was out living his life to the fullest.

“Pretty much nothing,” she said. “At least nothing compared what you’re used to. Things are a lot slower here. Especially with Jett gone now.”

Ryder nodded and asked no questions as he flipped the page of the newspaper and sipped his steaming coffee.

“I was really hoping to get out of the biker club world,” Stormy mused.

“To tell you the truth,” he replied.

“So am I. That’s why I work so hard on my side business.”

“I thought once you’re in, you can never leave?” she asked.

“There are ways,” he said. “That’s all I’m going to say.”

“Oh.”

“So are you interested in helping me find out which of my guys killed Jett?”

“I knew you’d ask that again,” she sighed. “I want to, but I don’t want to. What does it matter? Jett’s gone.”

“And whoever took his life has to pay,” he said with gritted teeth. “Don’t you think?”

“Are you sure this is the right thing to do? Are you sure this is going to

work?”

“No,” he said poignantly. “I’m not sure of anything. But I do know if I don’t try, it’ll eat at me the rest of my life.”

“Fine. Whatever. I’m in,” she agreed. She reached for her phone to check her email and was shocked when she saw three different email responses to her rental post on Craigslist. “Hm.”

“What?”

“I’ve got three people interested in renting this place,” she stated. “Maybe that’s a sign?”

“Damn right it’s a sign,” he said with a grin. “That or you’re asking too little for rent. But either way, that’s pretty awesome.”

She clicked through all of them

and each one had local numbers and seemed legit.

“Stormy the Landlord,” he said. “Add it to your resume.”

“I’m sure it’ll help me get a bazillion nursing job offers,” she laughed.

“You never know,” he sassed.

She walked to the next room to start making phone calls and came back ten minutes later.

“I, uh, guess I need to pick up a little. I’ve got a couple showings this afternoon,” she said, a little dazed.

“What are we waiting for?” Ryder asked. He was super excited as he began collecting the garbage on the table and straightening up the random assortment

of kitchen clutter on the counters.

Stormy followed suit and began frantically picking up everything in sight and shoving it anywhere it would fit.

“This is nuts, right?” she said.

“This is really happening.”

Ryder spun around, placed her head in his hands, and kissed her forehead. He couldn't even contain his excitement.

A few hours later, there was a knock on the door. It was a younger couple who had recently relocated to Coleville for some insane reason. The wife seemed disgusted with the entire trailer, but the husband was fine with it. They said they'd be in touch as they walked out.

“This reminds me of the home I grew up in as a child,” the husband kept saying. “It’s almost the exact same layout and everything.”

“I refuse to live in a trailer,” the woman would whisper to him.

The second showing was in the late afternoon and it was to a single guy. He worked in construction and had a long term gig in a nearby town and needed a place to live for a year or so. He even offered to do some repairs around the place and work on fixing some of the plumbing issues when he had time. He was needing a place to live as soon as possible, as he was rooming down at the Starlight Motel just off the highway.

Ryder's eyes pleaded with her to say yes as the deal was almost too good to be true.

“Why don't I get the paperwork together and you can come by tomorrow to sign everything?” she said, though Ryder suspected she was just trying to buy more time.

The young man shook their hands, gave her his number, and left.

“You're going to go through with this, right?” Ryder asked. He clearly needed a little reassurance from her. “I sense a little hesitation from your end.”

“It's just all happening so fast,” she whined.

“It's happening exactly the way it's meant to happen,” Ryder insisted.

“You want me to get on a plane with you two days from now,” she stated. “I haven’t even said goodbye to my family yet. Or Brooklyn for that matter.”

“You act like you’re going to another country or something. I will fly you home anytime you want. Your friends and family will always be just a plane ride away,” he promised.

Stormy chewed her nails, a horrible habit she’d picked up as of late, as she stared down at the cheap, laminate floors. She was quite sure, in that moment, that she was going to miss seeing those every day. They had become familiar to her and for some reason, comforting.

“I’m your safety net,” he said.

“Jump and I’m right there.”

She raised her eyes to meet his and saw the sincerity behind them.

“I know,” she said. “I’m doing this. I promise.”

Ryder smiled. He had pretty much been nonstop smiling the entire day. “I’m going to print off some legal paperwork for your little transaction here, just to be safe.”

She loved that he thought of those things. She certainly didn’t.

“You know, if you’re going to whisk me away with you, you’re going to have to meet my parents,” she said. “Nothing serious. Nothing like that. They just need to know who you are and that

I'm not being kidnapped or coerced by some psychopath.”

“Fair enough,” he said as he clicked around on his computer.

“And you should probably meet Brooklyn too,” Stormy continued. “I've sort of told her a lot about you.”

“Not a problem,” he said, never looking up once. Nothing seemed to faze him. He was as cool as a cucumber. Stormy wished she had an ounce of what he had in that regard.

Later that evening, they made their way to Stormy's parents' house. It was just past supper time, and she was sure they'd be curled up on the couch watching the latest edition of Sixty Minutes or some other news show.

“Knock, knock,” Stormy called as she walked in the front door. “I have someone I’d like you to meet.”

Her parents came out from around the corner within seconds and stopped dead in their tracks. Her mother opened her mouth to say something and then stopped.

“This is Jett’s brother, Ryder,” Stormy said. “Ryder, this is George and Maureen, my mom and dad.”

Ryder extended his hand and exchanged handshakes with them both.

“It’s very nice meeting you,” he said. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

George stood in silence and stared at Ryder. It was never good when George was silent. He looked him up

and down, taking in every square inch of his denim and leather ensemble.

“I’m so sorry about your brother,” Maureen said with sympathetic eyes.

“We really loved him. He was so good to our Stormy. He was gone too soon, that’s for sure.”

“So what brings you back to Coleville?” George asked. “Weren’t you just here a few weeks ago?”

Maureen nudged George as if he’d spilled some top secret of hers, and Stormy threw an angry glare towards her mother for telling him about Ryder in the first place.

“I was just checking on Miss Stormy here,” Ryder said. “We’ve become quite good friends these last few

weeks.”

George’s eyes widened as Maureen smiled. Stormy could tell her mom was already smitten with him, and she was sure he reminded her of Jett. Maureen loved Jett to pieces.

“Oh, yeah?” George asked, arms crossed. “Where you been staying?”

Ryder cleared his throat nervously.

“At my house,” Stormy replied. “On my couch. I wouldn’t dare make him stay at some flea infested motel.”

“I’m very grateful for that,” Ryder chuckled.

“Anyway, I came by to say that I’m leaving in two days,” she stated.

“Leaving for...?” Her mother

seemed confused.

“I’m going to move to Los Angeles for a bit,” she said. “Just to try something new. I need a change of pace. A change of scenery.”

“What?!” Her mother covered her mouth with her hands in disbelief.

“That’s crazy talk.”

“My mind is made up,” she said. “I’ve found someone to lease my place for a year. I’m leaving on Tuesday.”

Ryder watched on the sidelines as Maureen and George scoffed at Stormy’s plan. They made several valid arguments, all of which Stormy carefully rebutted. Stormy was sure he was worried they would talk her out of it or make her change her mind. He had

worked so hard to talk her into taking this leap of faith with him, and he was counting on her to help him find Jett's killer. He'd be devastated if she collapsed under the pressure of her gawking parents.

"We should probably go," she said as she realized the conversation was going nowhere. "I'll be staying with Ryder here until I can find a place of my own and get on my feet. I'll call you when I get there. Come on, Ry."

They left the house, her mother almost in tears and her father's face beet red, and she didn't look back once.

"I was worried you were going to change your mind," Ryder admitted once they got back in the car.

“Never,” she said as she turned towards him, her eyes sparkling in the moonlight that trickled through the shiny glass windows.

He pulled her hand up to his mouth and kissed it. He was a little old-fashioned, and she loved that about him.

The moment they returned to the trailer, Stormy wasted no time and started packing for Tuesday. She emptied out her side of the closet into a couple of suitcases and filled a carryon bag with some personal items. She left out what she'd need for the next couple days, and all that remained in the house was her furniture and Jett's things.

“Do you want me to box up Jett's stuff?” Ryder asked as he stood in the

doorway of her bedroom. He had caught her staring into the half-empty closet, gazing at what remained of Jett's wardrobe. "You don't have to touch anything. I'll box it up. We can put it in storage and keep it safe."

Stormy sunk down on the bed into a pile of exhaustion.

"That would be nice," she said. "There should be some empty boxes outside in the shed."

Ryder left and returned with a few large, cardboard boxes and began carefully folding Jett's clothes and boxing them up. He took another box to the living room and packaged up Jett's books and DVD collection. By the time he was done, all traces of Jett had been

clean wiped away. All that was left were memories that played in Stormy's mind, little moments frozen in time forever.

The next day, the young construction worker stopped by to sign the lease agreement. He promised to leave the house in better shape than he found it, to fix things, to keep it clean, and to be gentle on the furniture. He could tell this was much more than just a house to Stormy. He reassured her up and down that the house was in good hands, and Stormy could do nothing else but trust him.

He paid his security deposit in cash, and she told him she'd leave the keys under the mat for him Tuesday

morning. Their flight was to leave at eight, so they'd be gone by five at the latest.

The man left, and Stormy was quiet as the reality of what she was doing sunk in.

"Hey," Ryder said as he put his arm around her. "Everything's going to be fine. I promise."

"We'll see about that," she said.

"Don't be so negative," he said.

"Live a little."

It was easy for Ryder to say. He wasn't giving up anything except a little extra space in his condo. He wasn't uprooting his entire life and moving away from his friends and family. If it didn't work out, he could send her

packing and go back to living his west coast, biker bachelor lifestyle.

“I’m trying,” she said. “It’s just scary, that’s all.”

CHAPTER 17

Stormy sat in a window seat next to Ryder on the plane. The distinctive, stale smell of airplane oxygen filled her nostrils as she watched people shuffle in, bags in tow, and find their seats. He had secured them two seats together in the first class cabin of the plane. The seats were roomy and comfortable. She was already sipping champagne and wrapped in a warm blanket as she clenched onto his hand nervously.

Ryder claimed he wanted the trip to feel extra special, so he cashed in some frequent flyer miles for the first class upgrade. Stormy couldn't help but feel out of place amongst all the upper crust people that surrounded them in first

class. They were, by far, the youngest and most underdressed, but she tried not to let it get to her.

She heard the jet engines firing up and watched as the flight attendants secured a few things and got into position. The captain made his announcement over the loud speaker, and the doors were latched and locked.

The plane taxied to the runway where it came to a complete stop before gently taking off again. It started out slow, then fast, then even faster as she felt the nose of the plane lift up. It tickled her stomach until she felt the rear of the plane lift up as well and they were sailing upwards, straight through the air. She was officially headed to Los

Angeles with Ryder. There was no turning back, at least not yet.

Stormy spent much of the four hour flight resting her head on Ryder's shoulder and breathing in the comforting scent of his organic, lemongrass body wash. She was trusting him to take care of her and to follow through with his promises.

They touched down a little after noon and were some of the first to exit the aircraft. They walked, hand in hand, down the terminal and towards the baggage claim area. Ryder was in Heaven with Stormy by his side. Every so often he'd squeeze her hand and smile at her, as if he was reassuring her that she'd made the right choice.

“Brooklyn!” Stormy blurted out as they waited for their bags.

“Huh?” Ryder asked, confused.

“I didn’t say goodbye to her,” she pouted. “I didn’t even tell her I was leaving. I’m such a shitty person.”

“The last couple days were sort of nuts,” he said. “I’m sure she’ll understand.”

“She wanted to come out here with me and visit,” Stormy said.

“And she still can,” he replied. “Fly her out next weekend or something. My treat.”

Not only did Ryder want to take care of her, but he wanted to spoil her as well. He was almost too good to be true.

“Really?” She was almost in

disbelief.

“Yeah,” he insisted. “You can call her when we get to the car if you want. Make the arrangements. Whatever. Not a big deal.”

Their multiple bags came veering around the carousel as he scrambled to grab them all. Stormy laughed as she rushed to help him. They wheeled their bags out to the shuttle and rode it to the long-term parking area where his red Audi was waiting.

The air was dry and warm and the palm trees were swaying in the breeze. It was a beautiful Tuesday afternoon, and Stormy felt nothing but hopeful.

When they arrived at his condo, it looked exactly like it had a couple

weeks ago when she had first visited. She wondered if he was a clean freak or if he had his own housekeeper, but she figured she'd find out soon enough.

He wheeled her bags to his room and parked them in front of his walk in closet. He shoved a bunch of his clothes to the side and tried to make as much space for her things as he could.

"It's okay," she said. "I really don't have that much stuff."

She stared down at her two suitcases and her one carryon. Her entire life was in those bags.

"I'm so tired," he groaned. He stumbled out towards his bed and collapsed on the fluffy bed.

"Me too," she said as she

followed and laid down next to him.

He closed his eyes, and Stormy studied his face. With his eyes closed, he was a living, breathing Jett. She looked at his soft lips and wanted to kiss them. She pulled his arm out and around her as she nestled up into his shoulder. The heat of the early afternoon sun beat down through the window and warmed the bed. She closed her eyes and drifted off to the most peaceful slumber she'd had in weeks.

When she awoke a couple hours later, she found their legs intertwined and his head buried in her neck. She felt so safe and cozy squished up next to him on his soft bed.

She heard Ryder make a few

audible moans and sighs as he loosened himself from her and stretched out.

“That was a freaking awesome nap,” he breathed.

“Yeah, it was.”

He rolled back towards her and rested his head on his hand and looked down towards her smiling face.

“Welcome to the first day of the rest of your life,” he said.

“You’re so cheesy,” she laughed. “But that’s okay. I can handle cheesy.”

“You hungry?” he asked as he scooted off the bed and headed towards the hall.

“A little,” she lied. She was starving. She followed him down towards the kitchen where he was

grabbing plates and avocados and various tools.

“Guac and chips okay?” he asked as he began whipping up homemade guacamole. He grabbed a bag of blue corn tortilla chips and poured them into a bowl. “Is it too early for margaritas?”

“Not today,” she said.

“I make them pretty mild,” he said with a wink. “Don’t worry. I’m not trying to get you drunk or anything.”

“I can make them if you want?”

He nodded towards the cupboard where she found a blender, an uber-expensive bottle of tequila, Cointreau, and rock salt, and she pulled a lime from the refrigerator.

“Wow, you really know what

you're doing, don't you?" he said. He was clearly impressed.

"This was the first drink I ever learned to make," she said as she filled the blender with ice. "I used to bartend back in the day. Well, a couple years ago. Briefly. Jett didn't like me working so late, so I quit. Learned a lot though."

They each worked diligently on their little projects until they were finished. They sat side by side at the island, sipping their icy margaritas and munching on chips and guacamole.

The clock on the microwave read half past three. The day was still young.

"I was thinking maybe we could take a walk after this?" Ryder proposed. "It's really nice out. I'm feeling a little

energized from that nap we just took.”

“Sounds great,” Stormy replied.

As soon as the guacamole bowl was empty, they slipped on their shoes and headed downstairs to the street below. Ryder grabbed onto her hand and pulled her close into him as they walked. She loved that he wanted the world to know she was his, especially since she wasn't a stereotypical California big-breasted blonde.

Most of the women they passed seemed too into themselves to care about some lovey-dovey couple walking down the street. They didn't give Stormy a second look, and in a lot of cases, they didn't give her a first look. Sometimes they'd quickly check out Ryder, but it

was rare. She was pretty sure the women here were used to being chased, not the other way around.

“I still need to call Brooklyn today,” Stormy said out of the blue.

“That’s right. You should.”

“So did you mean what you said earlier about inviting her out this weekend?” Stormy asked.

“I always mean what I say,” he said as he looked her in the eye. “By all means, invite her out. My treat.”

She slipped her arm around his waist and gave him a side hug. They strolled together, arm in arm down the busy, East LA sidewalk. The whirl of people and honking cars and rumbling motorcycles were like a harmonic

symphony of beautiful chaos. It was the soundtrack to her new life, and she decided to love it. She had a feeling things were going in the right direction for once, and she was going to choose to be happy about it. Brooklyn always told her that happiness was a choice, but it never really clicked until that day walking down the sidewalk with Ryder.

They returned to his condo an hour later, and Stormy immediately grabbed her phone and called Brooklyn.

“Brooklyn,” she began. “Don’t be mad...”

“Oh, geez,” Brooklyn said, clearly annoyed. “Are you back with Hayden? Don’t lie to me.”

“No,” Stormy said, her voice

trailing.

“Then what is it?”

“I sort of moved to L.A. with Ryder,” Stormy blurted. She was cringing hard on the inside.

“You did what?” Brooklyn growled. Her voice said it all.

“But I have good news,” Stormy perked. “Ryder wants to fly you out this weekend.”

Brooklyn was silent on the other end.

“Did you hear me?” Stormy asked. “Ryder is going to fly you out for the weekend. That is, if you want to come.”

She knew Brooklyn couldn't stay mad at her forever. In their almost twenty years as best friends, they'd only

been in a handful of major fights and they'd never gone more than a few days without speaking.

"I guess," Brooklyn sighed. She tried to act mad, but Stormy could tell she was quickly getting over it. "This weekend, you said?"

"Yep. Does that work?"

"Lucky for you I happen to be off work this weekend," she said. "Just send me the itinerary, and I'll be there."

"Yay!" Stormy squealed. "I can't wait for you to see L.A. You're going to love it."

She hung up with Brooklyn and couldn't stop smiling the rest of the night.

"So she's coming?" Ryder asked.

“Yep, she is,” Stormy said as she beamed from ear to ear. “I can’t wait until she sees it out here. Maybe she’ll want to move out here, and she can get a place with me?”

“You just can’t be alone, can you?” Ryder laughed. “Pretty soon you’ll invite your family out and then the rest of the city of Coleville.”

“No way,” Stormy giggled. “I left that place for a reason.”

Ryder sat down next to her on the couch and put his arm behind her back. His penetrating hazel eyes seemed to pierce right through her.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Stormy asked. “All intense.”

“I just can’t believe you’re really

here,” he mused. “It doesn’t feel real.”

Stormy pinched his arm. “I’m here. This is real.”

“I could just stare at you for days,” he said, smitten.

Stormy remembered a time when she felt the same way about Jett, but she knew for her own good she needed to stop comparing the two. It wasn’t fair.

“That’s creepy and sweet all at the same time,” she replied. “But now I’m always going to be wondering if you’re just admiring my extraordinary beauty or if I have something stuck in my teeth.”

He leaned down and kissed her lips softly. He traced her delicate jawline with his finger and then nuzzled his nose into her hair, breathing her in.

Stormy wasn't used to getting this much attention from guys, and she wasn't sure where it was all coming from. For years she had been single without so much as a second look from anyone as she pined day after day, month after month for Hayden. The minute Jett fell in love with her, he insisted on marrying her. The minute Jett married her, Hayden became obsessed with trying to get her back. And the moment she was widowed and met Ryder, he fell hard for her.

What's so damn special about me? She wondered. As far as she knew, she was the same girl she'd always been, but for whatever reason, Jett set off some sort of domino effect.

"You're intoxicating," he said. "I

don't know what it is about you, but you've just drawn me in."

"Oh, geez," they heard a guy's voice say from the opposite hallway. Zander was strutting towards the kitchen from his room. "Give me a break."

"Shut up, man," Ryder said to Zander. "I think I've seen your smooth moves in action more times than I'd care to admit."

Zander laughed as he rifled through the refrigerator and pulled out some leftovers.

"How you liking LA so far, Stormy?" he asked.

"So far so good," she said. She still felt a little shy around Zander for some reason, maybe because she felt

like she was on his turf. She figured it would be a while before she could truly make herself feel at home in the condo with him there.

“How long are you staying here?” he asked.

“Oh, uh, um,” she stammered.

“As long as she needs,” Ryder interjected. “She has to find a job and then an apartment. She’s a nurse. Know of any nursing jobs?”

“Um, check the hospital, man. I don’t know,” Zander said with a mouthful of some sort of food. He grabbed his plate and took it back to his room.

“He pretty much hangs out in there all day,” Ryder said. “He’s harmless,

really. Take everything he says with a grain of salt. I think he was dropped on his head as a baby or something.”

Stormy laughed. “Does he work at all?”

“He’s our secretary,” he said. “He spends most of his days doing things for the club and most of his nights down at the bar, getting hammered and cruising for a good piece of ass.”

“How are you two even friends?” she asked. “You seem like polar opposites.”

“We were both recruited at the same time,” he said. “We just sort of clicked. We were both scared and trying to prove ourselves. We had some good fights, but we came out of it as best

friends. We've lived together ever since."

"Ah, I see," she replied.

"Brooklyn and I always talked about living together, but she's too crazy for me. We'd probably fight like cats and dogs. She's a lot like Zander."

"When you live with someone, you just have to make adjustments," he said.

"It's give and take. You get used to things and you figure out a way to make it work."

"Jett was the first person I ever lived with outside of my family," she said. "I thought it was going to be weird at first, but it was just effortless. We clicked somehow. It was almost too easy."

Ryder winced at the mention of Jett's name.

“Sorry,” she said as she saw the pained look on his face. “Should I not talk about him with you?”

She figured he was still grieving. That or he didn't want to be reminded of the man she loved more than anything in the world.

“No, it's fine,” he said. “Talk about him as much as you need.”

“That's not very convincing,” she said with a frown.

Ryder shook it off and changed the subject. “So, anyway. You were saying?”

CHAPTER 18

Ryder had various club meetings and work lunches scheduled throughout the rest of the week and spent most of his time glued to his laptop when he was home. He tried his best to make sure Stormy wasn't too bored, but he couldn't attend to her every beck and call. She didn't expect him to keep her entertained, but she couldn't help but grow a little bored with each passing day.

The only thing keeping her excited that week was Brooklyn's impending visit. She was set to arrive Friday afternoon, and Stormy couldn't wait. She wasn't sure what they'd do that weekend, but she was elated to bring a

little piece of home to California if only for a brief couple of days.

Ryder sprung for a little Mac Book Air for Stormy so that she could apply for jobs, and when she wasn't job hunting, she was doing small things for his business. She felt she had to earn her keep, even if he insisted it wasn't necessary. Stormy was many things, but a mooch she was not. He gave her a few data entry type things and spreadsheets to update, but it was never more than an hour's worth of work in any given day. It still made her feel better though.

At night, she was growing more and more comfortable with helping herself around the kitchen. She began cooking for the guys, who appreciated

her traditional, hearty Midwest pastas, casseroles, and creamy sauce ladled dishes.

“Your old lady is totally trying to fatten me up,” Zander said to Ryder one night.

They hadn’t discussed labels at all. It wasn’t really even in the forefront of their minds. They didn’t know what they were, but it was so weird for Zander to call her his old lady, even if that’s what she was.

“Yeah, my old lady can cook,” Ryder replied, clearly comfortable with the label.

“You don’t have to eat my cooking,” Stormy teased.

“How can I say no?” Zander

replied. “I smell this stuff in my room every night and it’s like I just follow my nose and I end up right here with a big old plate of whatever it is you cooked up.”

Stormy smiled. She was starting to see how harmless Zander really was, and she was growing more and more comfortable around him with each passing day. She also couldn’t help but wonder what was going to happen when Zander met Brooklyn. There was no doubt in Stormy’s mind that they were perfect for each other. They were both blonde, wild, unfiltered, and up for anything.

“Are you going to be around this weekend?” Stormy asked Zander.

“Uh, yeah, why wouldn’t I be?” he asked. He was such a smart ass.

“My friend is coming to visit,” she replied. “We should all go out or something.”

Zander looked at Ryder who shrugged and nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, we can do that,” Zander said. She could tell he had a hunch that he was being set up. “This isn’t like some double date thing or something is it?”

“No,” Stormy laughed. “But I think you’ll really enjoy meeting her.”

Zander rolled his eyes. He was not one to be tied down, and he rarely had a girlfriend and preferred no-strings-attached one night stands from what

Ryder had said about him, which was exactly why he was perfect for Brooklyn. She was the female version of him.

Zander finished his dinner and trekked back to his room, shutting the door.

“Good old Zander,” Ryder laughed. “He really doesn’t like being set up, just so you know.”

“Oh, this is not a set up,” she said. “Brooklyn hates that too. This is more of an experiment for me. Think of it as our entertainment for the weekend. Either they’re going to be all over each other or they’re going to hate each other. My money’s on the former.”

“My money’s on the latter,” Ryder

said.

“If I had any money, I’d make you a real bet,” Stormy smirked. “Just be prepared to lose.”

“We can make a wager,” he proposed.

“Okay,” Stormy said, intrigued. “And what are the terms of our little wager?”

“If I’m right and they hate each other, I’ll cook you a five star, gourmet dinner every single night next week,” he said. “I’ll do the dishes and everything.”

“Okay,” Stormy said. “Keep talking.”

“And if you’re right and they are crazy about each other, I’ll take you on a shopping spree, Pretty Woman style,” he

said. “Rodeo Drive or wherever. No limit. Anything you want, my treat.”

“Wow,” she said as she thought hard about it. “You really think they’re going to hate each other don’t you?”

He laughed and nodded. “You don’t know Zander.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal, mister,” she said as she extended her right hand.

They shook on it before sliding off the bar stools and cleaning up the mess Stormy had made in the kitchen. They made a pretty good team as they washed and dried the dishes and left the kitchen as immaculate as she had found it. She still hadn’t seen a cleaning person come all week, so she had determined Zander

and Ryder were just two guys who liked a clean place. Most of the guys back in Coleville were complete slob.

Stormy's phone buzzed on the table as a private number called. She wiped off her wet, soapy hands and answered.

"Hello?" she said. "Yes, this is she. Yes. Absolutely. What time? Sounds great. Thank you so much."

Ryder watched intently as she finished her call.

"I just got a job interview at Cedars Sinai Hospital," she said.

"That's one of the best hospitals in LA," Ryder said as he flashed a huge smile. "That's amazing, Stormy!"

He picked her up and swung her

around.

“When is it?” he asked.

“Monday at ten,” she said. “So, I’ll kind of need a ride.”

“Just take my Audi,” he said.

“Really? Okay,” she said with a grin. “I’ll need directions.”

“It has GPS,” he said. “You won’t get lost. I promise.”

The sun began to set outside, and Stormy felt drawn to the balcony. She wanted to breathe in the fresh, California air and relax outside for a bit. She wasn’t used to such balmy, mild weather. It was probably ninety and scorching and humid back home, and she probably would’ve been sitting in her house in the A/C avoiding the swarms of

mosquitos that hovered in large groups every ten feet.

Ryder followed her after a bit and sat next to her on the outdoor couch. So far they had been inseparable that week, and she hoped it wasn't just the new-and-exciting phase of the relationship.

“So I was thinking after we pick up Brooklyn tomorrow, I would just give you guys a few hours of alone time,” he said. “I’ve got a few errands to run, so I can just drop you off back here for a bit. When I get back, we can all go out for dinner and drinks. Sound good?”

“Yeah, sounds great,” Stormy piped. She was glad he was taking care of making the plans. She’d only lived in L.A. for less than a week and felt weird

about showing off a city that still felt like vacation to her.

She cuddled up under his arm, her new favorite place to be, and leaned her head back as the sky darkened and filled with twinkling stars. She was getting very used to her new little life out west. She was thinking of Coleville less and less each day, though Jett was always in her mind. She couldn't help but think about how much he would've loved traveling out there, and in her mind, he would've loved to see his big brother too.

After several yawns from each of them, they retired back inside and got ready for bed. She slipped on some pajama pants and a camisole and tucked

herself deep under the covers of his king sized bed. He climbed in a few short moments later and pulled her closer to him. They slept intertwined and glued to each other. She was starting to wonder if she was just as much a security blanket for him as he was for her. He seemed to need her the way no one else had ever needed her before. Jett was never as attached and clingy as Ryder.

Stormy had butterflies in her stomach as she slowly faded into unconsciousness. In half a day, she'd be reunited with her best friend. She couldn't wait to talk to her about everything and get her take on things. Brooklyn had a brutal honesty about her that Stormy found absolutely refreshing.

Friday morning was a rush and a blur as they got ready to head out to the airport to pick up Brooklyn. Stormy waited by the baggage carousel as she waded through the sea of tall, skinny blondes and tried to pick out Brooklyn's familiar face.

"Is that her? No," Stormy said to herself. "Wait, I think that's her. Wait. Nope."

"Relax," Ryder said as he rubbed her back. "She'll be here. Just wait."

"I wish you knew what she looked like," she lamented. "I need an extra set of eyes right now. Believe me when I say she'll blend right in here."

"Is that her?" Ryder said as he pointed across the area. "She's staring at

you pretty hard.”

“Yep!” Stormy exclaimed as she ran like a crazy person towards Brooklyn and threw her arms around her. She couldn't contain the squeals of excitement that escaped her mouth as they hugged and bounced like a couple of school girls. A person would've thought they hadn't seen each other in years.

Stormy was right that Brooklyn blended right in. She was freshly spray-tanned and wore skinny jeans that showcased her mile long legs. Her creamy sheer button-down tank top and her brown, leather thong sandals finished off her outfit. Brooklyn's sleek, platinum blonde hair was in a perfectly

smooth and shiny angled bob and her lips had the shiniest red gloss Stormy had ever seen. Brooklyn always liked to make a stunning first impression wherever she went.

“Brooklyn, meet Ryder,” she said. “This was the guy in my driveway the other night.”

“I see,” Brooklyn said as she stared him square in the face. “Nice to meet you.”

Brooklyn then smiled and her entire face lit up.

“Thanks so much for flying me out here,” she said. “You really didn’t have to do that, but thank you.”

Ryder offered a courteous grin. “It’s not a problem at all. Whatever

makes Stormy feel happy and comfortable, I'm going to do it.”

Brooklyn raised her eyebrows at Stormy, indicating that she was pleasantly surprised, and Stormy couldn't wait to be alone with Brooklyn so they could dissect and analyze everything.

Ryder dropped them off outside of his condo about an hour later.

“You have keys, right?” he asked Stormy.

She pulled them out of her pocket and dangled them in front of his face.

“I'll be back in a few hours,” he said. “Just be ready to go when I get back.”

Stormy kissed him goodbye as she

and Brooklyn climbed out of the Audi and headed inside.

“Where are we going in a few hours?” Brooklyn asked.

“You, me, Ryder and Zander are going out tonight,” she said. She tried her hardest to be casual about it. “Some biker bar. You know how those places are. We’ll have fun!”

“Wait,” Brooklyn said as she stopped dead in her tracks. “This isn’t some double date thing, right? You know I hate being set up.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” Stormy half-lied. “This is not a double date at all. We just didn’t want you to feel like the third wheel or anything so we’re dragging Zander along to make it an even number.

Don't read into it too much.”

“Better not be,” Brooklyn snuffed. “I came here to hang out with you, not to be some California biker dude's flavor of the weekend.”

“You're going to love their place,” Stormy said as she changed the subject. “It's amazing.”

They traveled up the elevator to Ryder's floor and shuffled their feet down the hall to his door. Stormy watched Brooklyn's reaction as she opened the door to the condo. Brooklyn was from a modest, working class family too, and she knew she'd never seen anything like it before.

“Oh, my, God,” Brooklyn said in a disgustingly impressed manner. “Is this

real life?”

“Yep.” Stormy beamed.

“Are you sure two guys live here because this place is pristine,” she said as she walked around. “Like I went to my brother’s place once, and I couldn’t get the smell out of my hair for days. This is incredible.”

“That’s Zander’s side and that’s Ryder’s side,” Stormy said as she pointed. “Living room and kitchen. That’s pretty much it.”

“That view,” Brooklyn sighed as she walked towards the floor to ceiling windows in the living room. “And there’s a balcony?”

She slid the door open and stepped outside and placed her hands on

the railing. The breeze blew through her sleek, flaxen locks as she looked down below at the passing cars.

“I could get very used to this,” she said as she smiled.

“I knew you’d love it here,” Stormy remarked. She knew Brooklyn too well, and she couldn’t wait to see her reaction to Zander later. “Just wait until you see Ryder’s bathroom. It’s like a freaking palace.”

Stormy led Brooklyn to Ryder’s suite and gave her the full tour. They collapsed side by side on his bed in the quiet condo.

“So, thoughts?” Stormy asked. “I know you’ve been taking in every little thing since you stepped off the plane.

I've been dying to pick your brain."

Brooklyn popped up. She loved sharing her opinion on anything and everything.

"Okay, for starters," she began. "Ryder seems great. Almost too great, but that's all I'm going to say because I really don't know him that well yet. The fact that he flew me out here to make you happy speaks volumes. Not a lot of guys would do that."

Stormy beamed. She loved that Ryder was already making a good impression on Brooklyn. Brooklyn was a hard girl to impress.

"Second, this city," she continued. "I've only been here a few hours and already I'm in love. It weirdly feels like

home, but it could just be that I'm on vacation and everything is new and exciting."

"Nah, I think it's just the fact that L.A. is pretty amazing," Stormy replied. "This place makes Coleville look like a boring little one-horse town."

"Coleville is a boring little one-horse town," Brooklyn said as she rolled her eyes. "That's why we love it so much."

"I don't understand this loyalty you have to Coleville," Stormy said. "What's so great about it?"

"I don't know," she said. "I guess I've just never really had a reason to leave, and it's home."

"We can talk again after you've

spent a couple days out here,” Stormy replied. “I guarantee you’ll change your mind.”

“I still think it’s freaking crazy that you just up and moved out here,” Brooklyn sighed. “What did you do about your car? Your house? What did your parents say?”

“My car is at my parents’ house. Some construction guy is renting my house for the next year. And my parents were pissed, but I’m twenty-three so there’s not much they could do to stop me,” she said. “I’m trying to move on.”

“Good for you,” Brooklyn said. “I’m glad you got it all figured out – logistics and everything.”

“Ryder helped,” she said.

“That makes sense,” Brooklyn teased.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Stormy asked.

“I just don’t think you would’ve done this on your own,” Brooklyn replied. “You’re sort of a fraidy-cat.”

Stormy playfully pushed Brooklyn, though she knew she was right.

“So what do you think of Ryder so far?” Stormy pried. She was dying to know and knew that Brooklyn had more of an opinion than she shared a few seconds ago.

“I knew you were going to ask me that,” Brooklyn said. “So far, I think he seems like a pretty alright guy.”

“Just alright?”

“I mean, it’s cool that he wants to take care of you and stuff, and it was super nice of him to fly me out, but don’t you think it’s all just so weird?”

Brooklyn stated. “Like who does that? Let alone what powerful, biker gang VP just sweeps some naïve little Midwestern girl off her feet like some knight in shining armor and moves her away from her friends and family so he can take care of her?”

Stormy didn’t like what Brooklyn was saying one bit. She refused to believe it.

“All I’m saying is that this sort of stuff doesn’t happen in real life,” Brooklyn continued. “Just be careful. Don’t let your guard down too much, and

don't become too dependent on him. You just don't know people that well until you've been with them for a while. Just take things slow. Promise me that."

"We are taking things slow," Stormy said. "At least physically."

"Okay, that's good," Brooklyn said. Her tone sounded more condescending than sympathetic.

Stormy was quiet, and Brooklyn knew she'd upset her.

"You asked for my honest opinion," Brooklyn said. "I gave it to you."

"I just want you to like him," she said. "I was just hoping you'd see in him what I see in him."

"Give it a little more time,"

Brooklyn said. “I’ve only been around him an hour or so. I really don’t know him. It’s not really even fair for me to give you my opinion on him yet anyway. We’ll talk again on Sunday, okay?”

Stormy nodded. She hoped Brooklyn was wrong about him and that he didn’t have ulterior motives, but she did have some valid points. When Stormy stepped back from the entire thing, it did seem a little too good to be true.

“I didn’t just come out here to be with him,” Stormy said. “He wants my help finding out who killed Jett.”

“Oh, you’re still going to help him with that?” Brooklyn asked. “I thought you were trying to get out of that

lifestyle? You going to be his old lady or something?”

Stormy nodded.

“Be careful. Seriously,” she said.

“This isn’t some small time biker gang.”

“Ryder would never let anything happen to me,” she said.

CHAPTER 19

Dinner was at seven that night. The girls got dressed to the nines and danced around in Ryder's massive bathroom while Brooklyn blasted music from her iPad.

"Girls, you about done?" Ryder called through the door. "We need to leave soon."

"Almost," Stormy yelled back. "Give us two more minutes."

Ryder waited patiently outside the door until the girls emerged followed by a cloud of hairspray and perfume and walked out towards the door. Zander was leaning against the kitchen island texting on his phone when he heard the girls' heels clicking on the concrete

floors. He looked up, then back down on his phone. Within a half second he looked up again and stared at Brooklyn.

Brooklyn, in true Brooklyn fashion, completely snubbed him and pretended not to care that he was checking her out. Stormy couldn't wipe the smirk on her face off fast enough. She had a feeling she was going to win the bet that night with Ryder.

"Brooklyn," Ryder said. "This is Zander. Zander this is Brooklyn."

Zander seemed mesmerized by Brooklyn's long, slender physique and platinum blonde hair. Her lips were slicked with glossy red lip gloss and her long eyelashes were full and curled. She wore a slinky black dress and nude

pumps and looked like she stepped of the pages of a tabloid magazine.

Brooklyn was LA, whether or not she'd ever admit it.

“Shall we go?” Ryder said, interrupting the silence.

The three of them followed Ryder down the hall, towards the elevator, and down to the parking garage where the bikes were waiting. Stormy climbed on behind Ryder, and Brooklyn reluctantly climbed on behind Zander. They held on tight as the men rode across town to the Crow's Nest, their bar of choice.

They walked into the bar and all eyes were on them. They found a corner booth and Zander took a seat directly across from Brooklyn. She rolled her

eyes at Stormy every time she caught Zander stealing a glance at her.

“I’ve never seen Zander this quiet before,” Ryder said to Stormy as they walked to the bar to order drinks.

“I think that means you’re losing our little wager,” Stormy said back.

They came back carrying four beers. The moment the drinks were on the table, everyone got busy sipping and slurping away, and the conversation picked up a little.

“Excuse me ma’am,” a server said to Brooklyn as he checked on the table. “I’m supposed to ask if you are on a date this evening.”

Brooklyn flashed her mega-watt, blindingly white smile. “Why, no, I’m

not.”

He sat down a pink, fruity looking drink in front of her.

“This is from that gentleman at the bar,” he nodded towards the bar on the other side of the room where a balding, middle-aged guy who was dressed in tight rock star jeans and a logoed t-shirt, like something a cheesy high school kid would wear, waved and winked at her. He looked grossly out of place at that biker bar, and was more than likely not a local.

Never one to turn down a free drink, especially when they were fifteen bucks a pop, Brooklyn winked and smiled back and mouthed “thank you”.

She raised the glass to her lips

when all of a sudden Zander reached out and grabbed it away from her.

“What was that all about?!” she exclaimed. “What are you doing?”

“You don’t know that guy,” he said. “Have you ever heard of roofies?”

“Yes, I’ve heard of roofies,” Brooklyn snorted. She grabbed the glass back from him and went to take a sip again, and again he reached for it and jerked it away from her.

“Trust me,” he said. “You’re better off not drinking it. If you want another drink, I’ll buy it for you. What do you want?”

“You don’t have to buy me a drink,” she huffed.

Stormy and Ryder watched in awe

at their interaction. They were both bullheaded, and it was cheap entertainment.

Zander said nothing and got up from the table to go to the bar. They all watched as he said something to the balding, middle aged man who raised his hands up as if to apologize. Zander came back with a fresh, new fruity pink drink and sat it in front of her.

“Freaking dumb ass girls,” he said to Ryder as he rolled his eyes and then turned back to Brooklyn. “You’ll thank me someday.”

Brooklyn looked at Zander in a whole different light after that.

“Thanks,” she said as she took a slow sip of her drink. “So, Zander, how

long have you been living with Ryder?”

“I don’t keep track,” he said with a shrug. “A long time.”

“About eight years,” Ryder responded.

Brooklyn nonchalantly scooted her chair a little closer to Zander and leaned into him. “Stormy told me you’re the secretary of the Hellfire club?”

“Yeah,” he replied.

“Best damn secretary a club could want,” Ryder responded. “My right hand man.”

Stormy nudged Ryder. “Let him speak for himself. How will they ever get to know each other with Chatty Cathy over here?”

“Okay, okay,” Ryder laughed.

“What about you?” Zander asked.

“What do you do?”

“I manage a call center,” she said with a proud smile. “It’s not glamorous, but I enjoy it. I like to be in charge.”

“I can tell,” Zander said with a smile.

Their eyes were locked and something magical was happening, Stormy was sure of it.

“Do you want to get some air?” Zander asked her. “It’s sort of stuffy in here. And the peanut gallery over there is starting to get on my nerves.”

He looked over at Stormy and Ryder who pretended to quickly look away, as if they weren’t watching them the entire time.

“Sounds like a plan,” Brooklyn said as she scooted her chair out from the table and grabbed her clutch.

Zander followed her with his hand on her lower back as they went out front.

Ryder’s face twisted as he watched them. “Hm.”

“What?” Stormy asked with a smirk.

“You just might be right about those two,” he said.

“Told you.” She nudged her elbow into his rib cage.

“Oof,” he said. “Looks like someone might be getting her Pretty Woman moment on Monday after all.”

“What do you think of Brooklyn so far?” Stormy asked. She was yearning to

know.

“I mean, we’ve just met, but so far she seems exactly like how you described her,” he said. “She seems very opinionated and independent.”

“That she is,” Stormy said as she took a sip of her sangria.

“Zander isn’t so much opinionated as he is independent,” Ryder said. “It’ll be interesting seeing how that plays out between them. Why do you feel the need to hook them up anyway? They live in two different states for crying out loud. She’d never be more than a one night stand to him. A fling.”

“I’m trying to convince Brooklyn to move out here with me,” Stormy replied. “I don’t care what happens

between her and Zander, I just want to show her that there are people out here to hang out with and have fun with. I want to show her life beyond Coleville, just like you showed me.”

“Stormy, Stormy, Stormy,” he said as he rubbed her back and sighed. “You can do things on your own you know. You don’t always need a security blanket. When will you realize that?”

Stormy leaned away from him, offended. “There’s nothing wrong with wanting to embark on this new chapter in my life with a familiar face around.”

“Okay, okay, geez,” he said with his hands in the air. “I’m just trying to help you that’s all.”

“You’re probably helping me too

much,” Stormy said.

“Well, well, well, look who it is,” a drunk, middle aged man with a matching black, leather jacket said as he approached the table. “What’s up Ryder, sir?”

“Bruiser,” Ryder said. “Meet my old lady, Stormy.”

“Nice job, boss,” he said as he tried his hardest not to check her out in front of Ryder. “Welcome, welcome.”

“Thanks,” Stormy said.

“I just need a moment of your time at some point tonight,” Bruiser said.

“Yep,” Ryder replied. “I’ll find you in a bit.”

It kind of turned Stormy on seeing how much respect Ryder got. He was a

young VP, but he had obviously earned the title and power somehow.

Brooklyn and Zander came in from outside with exhilarated looks on their faces, and Brooklyn adjusted her dress, pulling it down.

“What did you do?” Stormy leaned over and mumbled to Brooklyn.

“Nothing,” Brooklyn said with a smile. She was totally lying.

“Mm, hm,” Stormy responded. “We’ll talk later.”

The men left the girls at the table and headed over to the bar to talk to some of the other club members. They had concerned looks on their faces and Zander kept glancing back over at the table.

“Why are they acting so weird?”

Stormy asked.

“Are you sure you want to get back into this life?” Brooklyn asked.

“You know if Zander wanted you to be his old lady, you’d say yes in a heartbeat,” Stormy quipped.

Brooklyn bit her lip and said nothing.

“What?” Stormy asked.

“You’re probably right,” she said.

The guys came back with fresh drinks for them and sat back down. Zander couldn’t keep his eyes or his hands off of Brooklyn, which was attracting jealous, lustful looks from some of the other guys.

“Who is this guy, right?” Ryder

joked. “Why don’t you come outside with me?”

Stormy followed him outside, where it was a little quieter and they could have an actual conversation.

“I don’t want to freak you out,” he said. “But I got confirmation that it was definitely one of my guys that killed Jett.”

Stormy shook her head. “Why?”

“That’s what I’m still trying to figure out,” he said. “I think the person that did it, did it only to hurt me.”

“Do you have any idea who it might be?”

Ryder paused before saying, “I think it might be Zander.”

“What?!”

“I don’t want to believe it, but he knows me better than anyone, and he’s one of only a few guys who know I ever had a brother,” he said. “We both joined Hellfire at the same time, and I rose to the top of the ranks almost overnight. He was nothing more than a patch member until I vouched for him and got him up there with me. Made him my secretary. I think he’s always resented being under me.”

“That’s ridiculous,” she said. “That’s not a good reason to kill someone’s brother.”

“We’d always talked about getting out of the gang,” he said. “I told him the only way I’d ever leave Hellfire was if someone I loved and cared about got

hurt or killed. He knew my brother was the only person I truly loved.”

“Even though you weren’t talking?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “My brother was the only real family I had, even if we weren’t speaking. Zander knew that.”

“That son of a bitch just fucked my best friend,” Stormy said as she turned to run back inside.

“Stop!” he yelled as he chased after her and grabbed her arm. “You don’t know any of this.”

“So I’m supposed to stand back and talk to him and act like nothing happened? Like he didn’t come into my house and murder my husband?” Stormy was livid.

“For now,” he said. “You just have to trust that I’ll handle this.”

“I guess,” she said with her arms crossed.

“There’s one other thing,” he said. “We’re going to need Brooklyn to get involved.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” Stormy said. “She would never.”

“There’s no way you can talk her into it?” he asked.

“I can try, but she’s her own person,” she said. “What do you want her to do?”

“Keep him busy so that we can go through his room, for starters,” he said.

“So you want me to send my best friend off with some murderer so you

can snoop through his room like some amateur detective?”

“It’s a start,” he said. “Got any better ideas?”

“Can’t you just ask him and see what he says?”

“I don’t want him to know we know,” he said.

“And what happens when you find the evidence you’re looking for?” she asked.

“You don’t want to know,” he said. “It’s better that you not know these kinds of things. You wouldn’t be able to sleep at night if I told you.”

Stormy shuddered. The Hellfire MC was definitely on a completely different level than the Iron Souls.

They headed back inside the bar, Stormy's heart beating fast, and they saw Zander and Brooklyn making out like crazy in the booth. She was straddling him and his hands were gripped tight on her ass.

It made Stormy instantly nauseous, and she tried to ignore the fact that the hands all over Brooklyn's body were the same hands that had killed Jett.

"Remember, act natural," Ryder reminded her. "Don't ruin our only shot. If he knows we're onto him, he'll run. He's chicken shit like that."

"How am I going to get Brooklyn alone? She's all over him," Stormy said, concerned.

"I'll get Zander away from her,

don't worry."

They approached the booth and cleared their throats, and Zander and Brooklyn peeled themselves apart.

"What's gotten into you guys?"

Stormy teased.

"Zander, I need you, man," Ryder said as he pointed towards the bar.

Zander begrudgingly scooted out from the booth and followed him over to the bar where the two men proceeded to start talking.

"Brooklyn, how drunk are you?"

Stormy asked.

"Not that drunk. Honest," she said. "Just on vacation and having a good time."

"I have to tell you something,"

Stormy said as she glanced over at the guys. “But you have to promise you won’t freak out or act weird.”

“Okay, what?” Brooklyn asked.

“Now you’re making me nervous.”

“Ryder thinks that Zander killed Jett.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Shh! Don’t draw any attention over here!”

“I want to puke,” Brooklyn whined. “Do you know for sure?”

“He’s pretty sure,” she said. “We just need your help.”

“My help with what? I’m not involved in any of this,” Brooklyn retorted.

“I know it’s asking a lot, but

please just go along with this,” Stormy pleaded. “For your safety and mine.”

Brooklyn looked annoyed as she caved in and bowed her head. “Fine.”

The guys came back to the table.

“We better head home,” Ryder said. “Another gang is coming. Trying to start some shit. They want our territory. Pretty small time. We don’t want to waste our time with them.”

He winked at Stormy to let her know it wasn’t true. She figured he just needed an excuse to get Zander and Brooklyn home.

They left the bar in a hurry and rode back home, Brooklyn looking particularly displeased on the back of Zander’s bike.

“It’d be a nice night to sit out on the patio, don’t you think?” Stormy suggested as they got back to the condo.

Zander took Brooklyn’s hand and led her out through the sliding glass door, completely ignoring Stormy and Ryder.

“Perfect,” Ryder said. “You stand in the living room and keep an eye on them. I’m going to run to his room. Call my name if they start coming back, okay?”

Stormy nodded nervously. She watched as he reached into a hollowed out book on a nearby bookcase and pulled out a Ruger LCP gun and stuffed it down the back of his pants.

“What’s that for?” she asked.

“In case things get ugly,” he said. “I don’t want to scare you. I just need to be prepared. I thought I knew Zander, but now I’m realizing I don’t know him at all.”

He grabbed his phone, sent a quick text and stepped up to Stormy, giving her a kiss on her forehead.

“Some of the guys are waiting down the block,” he said. “If anything happens to me, you need to text Bruiser in my phone. They’ll be here in seconds.”

Stormy tried not to cry as she was overcome with fear. She kept a watchful eye on Brooklyn and Zander as her heart raced. She glanced over at Zander’s door as it was now wide open and

Ryder was rifling through things. She wondered what he was looking for, but she knew it wasn't the time to ask.

Within a few minutes, he came back out.

“God, what took you so long?” Stormy huffed. “I was getting nervous.”

Just then the sliding glass door slid open.

“Find what you were looking for?” Zander said with a crooked smile.

Brooklyn looked terrified as she shook her head and mouthed “sorry”.

“What are you talking about?” Ryder tried to act casual.

“He pulled a knife on me, Stormy! I'm so sorry!” Brooklyn yelled. “He threatened to hurt us all if I didn't tell

him what was going on.”

“Shut up, you little bitch!” he said as he shoved her back. She stumbled into the back of the outdoor sofa.

Stormy ran to comfort Brooklyn, but Ryder grabbed her arm.

“Stay here,” he commanded. His eyes locked on Zander as he reached back into his jeans to grab the Ruger.

“Ha,” Zander laughed. “Whatcha gonna do, Ryder? You wanna shoot me? You wanna get revenge for your brother’s murder?”

“I knew it was you,” Ryder said, seething. “How could you do that?”

“You said you wanted out,” Zander laughed. “I was just doing you a favor.”

“You sick son of a bitch,” Ryder said. He spat at Zander, who only laughed even harder. His laugh was almost maniacal and his face was twisted. “I loved you like a brother.”

Zander pulled out a gun of his own that he’d been stowing in a pocket holster.

“Two can play this game,” he said with a smile. “Go ahead. Shoot me.”

“I’ve killed a man before, and I can do it again,” Ryder said. “You of all people should know that.”

Zander swallowed and looked nervous but only for a split second.

“Do you have a death wish?” Ryder asked. “I’ll do it. I’ll fucking shoot you.”

“And throw away this life you’re starting with your brother’s precious, beautiful little widow?” Zander said. “You wouldn’t do it.”

Ryder stared at Stormy, who was fighting off tears.

“I bet she’s a fine piece of ass,” he said. “Don’t you know we’re brothers? Hellfire brothers share everything. You know that.”

“Leave her out of this,” Ryder commanded. “This is between you and me.”

Zander slowly sauntered over to Stormy, who was standing out of arm’s reach from Ryder. He put his arm around her, pulled her close, put his gun up to her head and cocked it.

“What are you doing?” Ryder said as he tried to keep his calm. “Don’t do this.”

“I have no choice,” Zander said as she suddenly began to lose his cool. He was clearly having some sort of nervous breakdown.

“I’m going to give you an out,” Ryder said. “I’m going to show you the mercy that you never showed to my brother.”

Zander looked intrigued and relieved all at the same time.

“You put your gun down on the table,” Ryder instructed. “I let you walk out that door. You are never to come back and show your face around here again, you here? That’s an order. Zander

Mayfield is dead. You get a new name. You get a new identity. You stay out of the any other MC.”

“This life is all I know,” Zander said. He was getting emotional.

“It’s your only option,” Ryder said. “Either I shoot you, right here, right now, which I don’t want to do in front of these ladies. Or you walk out and never come back.”

Zander released his grip on Stormy, threw his gun down on the sofa and hightailed it towards the front door.

“You’re just going to let him get away?!” Stormy exclaimed. She wanted to chase after him, but her legs were frozen with fear.

Zander swung the door wide open

and on the other side waited about five or six guys from Hellfire MC. They surrounded the doorway and there was no way Zander would be able to get through. They stood shoulder to shoulder, menacing looks on their faces, as they reached out to grab him.

“No, no!” Zander yelled. “Ryder, you said I could leave! No, no!”

Zander’s terrified yelps went suddenly silent once one of the guys put ducttape over his mouth. Another guy whacked him on the head as a third guy put a bag over his head. They nodded and exchanged looks with Ryder as they carried Zander’s limp body down the hall.

Ryder stood with his hands on his

hips, slightly trembling, as he stared at the floor.

“You okay?” he asked Stormy.

“I don’t know, I think so,” she said.

Brooklyn came in from the patio and ran to Stormy, burying her head on her shoulders and crying.

“It’s okay,” Ryder said as he consoled them. “That guy has a fate far worse than either of you could ever imagine. The things they’re going to do to him tonight...”

Ryder shuddered.

“Stop,” Stormy said. “I don’t want to know.”

“Are they going to kill him?” Brooklyn asked.

Ryder said nothing.

“I just want to make sure he’s not going to come after any of us,” she added.

“Let’s just say, he’ll never be able to hurt anyone ever again,” Ryder said.

“Excuse me for a minute, girls.”

He went into his bedroom, phone in hand, and shut the door.

CHAPTER 20

Stormy spent the next couple hours consoling Brooklyn until she fell asleep on the couch, under the sedation of some prescription sleeping pills Ryder had in his cabinet. She was clearly freaked out and ready to head back home the next day. Her trip to LA was one she would unfortunately remember the rest of her life.

As soon as Brooklyn was asleep, Stormy trekked back to Ryder's bedroom and rapped on the door.

“Can I come in?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said as he opened the door a few seconds later. He finished up his phone call and grabbed her hand, leading her to his bed. “You okay, kid?”

“I think so,” she said. “What about you?”

Ryder shrugged. “I guess there’s not much to say. I’m sorry you had to witness all of that.”

“Are you tired at all?” Stormy asked as she looked at the clock. It was already 2 A.M.

“Not really,” he said. “I’m pretty wired. All that adrenaline, I guess. I wish I had some sort of distraction. I need a release.”

“You want me to grab you a beer or something?” she asked.

“No, no,” he said. “That’s not what I need.”

He sat down next to her in the edge of the bed. Ryder leaned in and

kissed her lips tenderly while slipping one arm around her waist and pulling her into him. They leaned back on the bed, kissing and she slipped her leg on top of his. They were intertwined once again, just the way they liked it.

Ryder's kiss soon turned a little more passionate as he kissed her harder and faster.

"Whoa, slow down," Stormy said as she tried to catch her breath. "What's the rush?"

"Sorry," he said. "I was just really getting into it. I can't get enough of you, Stormy. I really need you right now."

"Really?" Stormy asked in disbelief.

"You're addictive," he said as he

leaned in to kiss her again. “I can’t get enough. I’d do anything for you. You’re the release I need.”

She kissed him back and relished in all the attention he was showering on her. Jett loved her deeply, but Ryder was showing a sort of passion she’d never felt before from any guy. It was new and exciting, and it was happening so fast.

“You look so beautiful tonight,” he whispered in his ear. “I’ve been thinking it all night, but I forgot to tell you. Guess I was a little preoccupied.”

“Thank you,” she smiled back at him. She buried her face in his neck and breathed in his expensive cologne. She’d never smelled anything like it before,

and she knew it wasn't anything remotely available in Kansas.

She ran her fingers over his brawny, tatted arms and traced the outline of his muscles that flexed and moved as he ran his hands over her body. She wanted him badly, but deep down she felt instant pangs of guilt. Jett hadn't been gone that long and here she was about to screw his older brother.

Ryder stood up and helped her up to her feet.

“What are you doing?” she cooed.

He picked her up in his strong arms and threw her back on his bed, up by the headboard, caveman style.

Stormy laughed. “Is this for real?”

Ryder locked the bedroom door

and walked back over to her on the bed. She began to get very nervous as he wasn't saying much, just looking at her with hungry, longing, aching eyes. He climbed over top of her on the bed and began kissing her again. He worked his way down to her neck and then her collar bone as his hands traveled every inch of her body. He slipped his hand up underneath her top and caressed her soft breasts with his strong, calloused hands.

“Do you trust me?” he asked in his breathless, sexy voice.

Stormy nodded. “Yes, but don't you think we're moving too fast?”

Ryder collapsed on top of her and stopped what he was doing. “Really?”

He rolled over next to her on the

bed, keeping a good distance between them.

Stormy wanted to continue, but she was sure she'd ruined the moment.

Ryder laid next to her, exasperated and frustrated.

“Hey,” she said. She stood up on her knees on the bed and pulled her top off. Next she unhooked her bra and tossed it on the floor.

Ryder perked up as he sat up. His eyes glazed over her body and her perfect, round breasts. He reached out and caressed them as he put his wet mouth on each of her nipples. His hands gripped her waist and pulled her back down on top of him.

She reached down and unzipped

his jeans, sliding them down. She could feel the outline of his hard bulge as she straddled him. She wanted him now more than ever. She couldn't wait any longer. After the kind of night they'd had, she needed a release too. And putting Jett's killer to justice was a great reason to celebrate.

“I just can't control myself around you,” he said, his mouth all over her body. “And knowing I shouldn't have you makes me want you even more.”

His words echoed more true than any other words he'd ever said to her. They resonated deep inside her as she laid next to him and thought about Jett once again.

She ignored her feelings of guilt

and the remorse she was sure to feel the next morning, and continued giving herself to Ryder. She slipped off her jeans and panties and laid on the bed, ready for the taking. She was going to give herself, all of herself, to him.

He climbed over top of her, his triceps steadying his muscular upper body, and lowered his hips to hers. He reached down, grabbing his thick cock, and wasted no time pressing it inside of her waiting lady kingdom.

“Ah,” she called out as it went in.
“Oh, my god.”

He exhaled slowly as he plunged himself deep inside her.

“Yeah,” he said. “This is what I needed.”

She grabbed his shoulders with her delicate hands and dug her fingernails into his thick skin. She loved watching the motion of his body and muscles as he moved and thrust inside of her. She felt safe with him. And wanted. And almost loved. And in the darkness of his bedroom, she could have sworn she was making love to Jett again.

She closed her eyes and swayed her hips into his, meeting him thrust for thrust. She forced her body to relax and enjoy the sweet release that was about to come over each of them. Screwing Ryder was intense, and she needed the distraction.

CHAPTER 21

The condo was quiet and still Saturday morning as Stormy laid in bed and listened to the thumping of her heart in her chest. She and Ryder had fallen asleep naked and on top of the covers the moment after their tryst happened. As she predicted, she instantly felt guilty about it. They had had too much to drink that night, she was sure of it, and with everything that happened with Zander, they weren't in their right state of mind. She chalked it up to that.

She forgot, for a moment, that Brooklyn was there, and she couldn't wait to talk to her and make sure she was still okay. The last time she saw her, she was passed out on the couch

after pretty much crying herself to sleep.

Stormy carefully crawled out of bed, trying not to wake Ryder, and tiptoed down the hall where she expected to see Brooklyn passed out on the couch. She decided not to wake her quite yet. She needed as much sleep as she could get.

“What are you doing up so early?” Ryder asked as he walked down the hall. His voice was groggy, and he was evidently a little hung over. He was in nothing but a pair of red plaid boxers.

“Good morning,” Stormy cooed as she slipped her arms around his waist. “How you feeling?”

He shook his head no and buried it on her shoulder as he moaned in pain.

“My head is pounding.”

“Go and sit down,” Stormy said.

“I’ll make you breakfast.”

“Where’s Brooklyn?” he asked as he noticed her snoring away on the couch. “Oh.”

“Rough night,” Stormy said.

“Shh.”

Ryder shook his head and buried it in the palms of his hands. “Definitely.”

“Where do you keep the ibuprofen?” Stormy asked as she opened cupboard after cupboard. “Never mind. Found it.”

She poured him a glass of water and gave him a few pills and got down to business making breakfast.

“The smell ought to lure them out

of there,” she said. “Who can resist the smell of bacon frying in a pan?”

Ryder laid curled into a ball on the love seat while Stormy made breakfast and sure enough, Brooklyn came to after a little bit.

“Look who’s up,” Stormy said. “Sleep okay last night?”

Brooklyn shot her a dirty look as she climbed up onto the bar stool and sat with her head in her hands.

“Just making sure you’re okay,” Stormy disclaimed.

Brooklyn shrugged and groaned. She plated the food and gave everyone their plate and a small glass of freshly squeezed orange juice. They all sat in silence as they scarfed down the

greasy breakfast and washed it down with the sweet, sugary orange juice.

“What’s the plan today?” Stormy asked. Seeing how she was the only non-hung over person out of the three of them, she didn’t have a lot of expectations.

“I really want to go back to Coleville,” Brooklyn whined. “I don’t think I can stay here another day.”

Stormy’s face fell. She felt horrible that Brooklyn wanted to leave right away.

“You just got here yesterday,” she said.

“Too much excitement for one day,” Brooklyn said. “I can’t stay here anymore.”

“I’ll call the airline and see if we can get you on a flight out of here today,” Ryder offered.

“Are you sure you have to leave?” Stormy pleaded. “You won’t let us make it up to you?”

“I don’t feel safe here,” she said.

“I don’t blame you,” Ryder said. “I mean, you are safe, but if you’re not used to this lifestyle, I can see how you’d feel that way. I’ll make a call here shortly.”

Ryder took his dish to the sink, rinsed, it and put it in the dishwasher before heading back down to his bedroom and shutting the door.

Stormy walked over to the living room, pulled the curtains back on the

giant windows and stepped outside to the balcony where she looked down on the bustling traffic below. The sun warmed her face as the breeze blew the leaves on the plants in the planters around her. She felt a sense of peace knowing that Jett's killer had been brought to justice. She could only imagine what the men had done to him the night before. Knowing how the big city MCs operate, she was sure he'd been tortured, killed, and left out in a desert to rot somewhere.

She was beginning to make her mind up about living out there and trying to make things work with Ryder. She'd had a million reservations, but after just one week, it was beginning to feel like

home to her already. She wasn't quite ready to be on her own yet, but she knew she'd get there eventually. And she could tell Ryder liked her a lot. She felt safe and protected with him. He reminded her so much of Jett.

"Hey," she heard a man's voice say behind her as the door slid open. It was Ryder.

"Oh, hi," she said. She was happy to see him. "I was just thinking about you."

"Yeah?"

"Well, you, us, living out here," she said. "Everything."

"And?"

"I think it's worth a fair chance," she said. "As long as you promise to get

out of the MC gang.”

“I’m working on it,” he said.

“Believe me. It’s not something that can happen overnight. Could take years.”

Stormy’s face fell. She didn’t want to wait that long.

“I was able to change Brooklyn’s flight. She’s leaving this afternoon,” he said.

“Thanks.”

“She’s inside packing right now. We have to leave in an hour or so.”

“Okay.”

“Sorry her trip didn’t turn out the way you planned,” he said.

“It’s fine,” she replied. “It was more important get justice for Jett anyway.”

Stormy and Ryder dropped Brooklyn off at LAX Saturday afternoon and headed back to the condo. It had been a long, action-packed couple of days with Brooklyn and they were ready to relax.

“So what did you think of Brooklyn overall?” Stormy asked as they merged onto the freeway.

“She’s pretty cool,” he said. “I can see why you two are friends. You kind of complement each other.”

“I wish she’d move out here,” Stormy replied. “She was kind of open to the idea of it before, but after everything that went down, I think it just solidified her plans to stay in Coleville for the rest of her life.”

“I’m sure you’ll make new friends out here,” he said.

“I need to focus on getting a job first,” she said. “Then I can worry about making new friends.”

“What if you can’t find a job?” he asked.

Stormy looked at him as if his question was out of line, but she knew competition was fierce in bigger cities. She was only less than a year fresh out of nursing school with no real nursing job under her belt. She tried not to be too naïve about it, but she also didn’t want to feel hopeless.

“I hadn’t thought about that,” she said.

“You know you can stay with me

as long as you need to,” he reminded her. “In fact, I prefer you stay with me so I can keep you safe.”

“Thank you,” she said as she reached over and grabbed his hand. “You’re too good to me.”

He pulled her hand up to his lips and kissed it.

“Let’s cross our fingers that I get the job though. I don’t want to be dependent on you forever,” she said. “It feels wrong. I want to start making my own money.”

Ryder laughed. “I don’t mind. It’s okay. I like taking care of you. It’s what Jett would’ve wanted.”

The car ride grew quiet after the mention of Jett. He was constantly in

both of their thoughts, even if he wasn't always mentioned, but the mention of him always drew silence from each of them and reminded them of the turn of events that had brought them together.

As soon as they returned to the condo, Stormy retreated to Ryder's room to relax and try to take a quick nap. She wanted to prepare for her interview that next afternoon and had a lot of research to do on interview etiquette. She was determined to get that job and wanted it to be absolutely perfect.

Ryder decided to hang out in the living room and get some work done while she napped, only Stormy found herself tossing and turning the entire time. She was hot and then she was cold.

She was sweaty and then she was freezing. Her mind was racing, and she didn't know why. She wondered if maybe she just hadn't had time to process all the life changes that were happening so quickly. She wondered if Jett really would've wanted this life for her. She wondered if she was doing the right thing. She chalked it up to pre-interview jitters. She was looking for something to stress out about, she told herself. She shut her eyes and tried to relax.

The moment her eyes closed, her mind began to replay the night before like some kind of movie. She saw the images of Zander and the gun and Ryder's threats and Brooklyn being

pushed and Zander making sexual remarks about her and him trying to leave and being knocked out by all the men dressed in matching leather jackets.

She thought about how Ryder jumped her bones the night before, hardly taking no for an answer. Then she thought about Jett, lying dead in the cold, hard ground. He was too good to her. He would've wanted her to move on and live a safer life, not get wrapped back up into all the MC drama.

“It could take years,” she remembered Ryder saying.

She didn't know if she could wait that long to get out of that lifestyle. What if she fell in love with him? What if he changed his mind? She'd be his old lady

forever, always living on the edge, always living in fear.

For the first time all week, she felt like she had made a mistake. A huge, gaping, enormous mistake. She wanted to get out of there. To go back to Coleville, to forget any of this ever happened and to move on.

She heard his bedroom door open softly and shut, and she felt the weight of his body shift around on the opposite side of the bed as he crawled under the covers next to her. He slipped his arm around her waist and curled in close. Stormy wanted to throw up. Everything that had felt so good the night before, suddenly felt like poison.

She felt uncomfortable with his

touch, so she tried to nonchalantly wriggle away.

“You up?” he whispered.

“Yeah, now,” she lied. She didn’t want him to know she’d been lying there having second thoughts. “Done working?”

“Yeah, couldn’t get much done for some reason,” he said. He scooted in closer to her and nuzzled her neck before reaching up and turning her face towards his. He kissed her mouth, and Stormy felt sick again.

“I-I think I’m getting sick,” she said as she flung the covers off of her sweaty body. “You probably shouldn’t get close to me.”

Ryder looked crushed as he leaned

away and rolled himself back onto his side of the bed.

“Do you want me to run to the store and get you something?” he offered.

Stormy immediately saw her chance to leave and jumped on it.

“That would be so nice if you would?” she gave him her best, most innocent doe eyes. “I’ll text you what I need so you have a list when you go to the pharmacy.”

Ryder climbed out of bed and grabbed his wallet and phone, shoving them in his pockets.

“I’m sorry you’re sick,” he said. “I hope you’re not sick for your job interview tomorrow.”

“I wouldn’t miss that for the world,” she lied.

She waited on pins and needles for him to leave and watched out the window for him to pull out of the parking garage. The moment she saw him rumbling away on his bike, she called a cab and high-tailed it out of there. Her heart raced as she pulled her luggage to the curb and waited for the yellow taxi to pull up.

As soon as the cab pulled up and the driver heaved her bags into the trunk, she looked both ways to make sure no one was around and climbed in the back. She slipped on her big, oversized sunglasses and held her head low. As soon as the driver rounded the next

corner, she saw Ryder in his car on his way back to the condo.

Her heart broke as she realized exactly what she was doing. She knew it was never good to make decisions when you were emotional or angry, but she couldn't spend another night lying next to someone she didn't feel right being with. She needed to get far away from that lifestyle.

As the taxi drove towards the airport, Stormy clutched her phone in her hand. She knew any minute now Ryder would be calling. He would probably walk in first, see the empty bed, and look around for her. When he wouldn't find her on the balcony, he'd probably run to the closet and see all of her

clothes that were once hung so neatly on wooden hangers were all gone. He'd see her toothbrush was missing and her perfume bottles all gone. He would know.

Her fingers shook as she looked up plane tickets on her phone and attempted to book something. She was prepared to stay the night at the airport if she had to. She just couldn't stay another night near Ryder.

She found a flight that left at six in the evening. It would put her back home around nine that night. She so badly wanted to text Brooklyn and ask her to wait for her, since she was just a couple hours behind her, but she knew Brooklyn was already mid-air. Besides, she didn't

want to hear Brooklyn say “I told you so”.

She knew there wasn't much in her bank account, but she had just enough to get home. She booked the ticket as fast as her fingers would allow her and then immediately dialed the only person she could think of that would be thrilled to see her: Hayden.

“Hey, Hayden,” she said. She tried to keep her composure, but she was sure he could hear the tears in her voice. “I need a favor.”

“Anything, Stormy, what is it?” he said on the other end. He was being so sweet to her, and it only made her feel worse about the way she left things with him.

“I need you to pick me up from the Kansas City airport tonight,” she said.

“At ten.”

“Of course,” he said. “Everything okay?”

Stormy tried her best to stay strong, but it all seemed to come out at once.

“No,” she said as she sobbed into the phone. “Please, just pick me up at ten. That’s all I need.”

“I’ll be there,” he said before hanging up.

CHAPTER 22

For the first time in weeks, seeing Hayden's face was like a breath of fresh air to Stormy. She never thought she'd be so happy to see him again. She thought for sure that chapter had been buried and gone for good, but she was wrong. Hayden was from a good family and lived a crime-free life. She knew with him, she wouldn't have to worry about thugs knocking on the door in the middle of the night or someone trying to gun him down for some reason. He felt like a safe place for her to run to in that moment.

She threw her arms around him and squeezed him tight the moment she saw him.

“Hey, hey,” he said to her as he held her. She was sure he was elated to have her back in his arms, let alone his life.

He placed his arm around her as they walked to the baggage claim, and he grabbed her overflowing luggage off the carousel and wheeled it towards his black Jeep, which was waiting outside.

It felt weird to be back in the Midwest. After only a week, L.A. was starting to feel like home. She missed the palm trees already, but she would never admit that.

She climbed into his car and slid onto the familiar, smooth leather seats and buckled up.

“So you going to tell me what

happened?” Hayden asked. “Did that asshole do anything to you? Did he hurt you?”

Stormy loved that Hayden was being so protective of her, but she didn't really want to get into it with him. If he only knew the things Ryder was capable of if he felt like Hayden was a threat.

“I don't feel like talking about it right now,” she said.

“I want to know if he hurt you. Did he lay a finger on you?” Hayden demanded. He kept looking over at her as if he was trying to read her face.

“No, not like that,” she said. “It's over between us. Let's just leave it at that. I want nothing to do with him ever again. That's all I'm going to say.”

Hayden turned the radio on low as they cruised back to Coleville. He stopped prodding and asking questions, and she stared out the window trying to wrap her head around how things could've gone so horribly wrong.

“I have nowhere to go,” she announced out of the blue. All day she didn't even think about not having a place to come home to. “I rented out my trailer to some guy.”

“Really?” Hayden asked with raised eyebrows. “You can stay with me. I actually have my own place now. An apartment on the north side of town.”

Stormy nodded with gratitude as tears filled her eyes, but all she really wanted was to go back home to the

house Jett had bought her.

Hayden pulled into the parking lot of his apartment building about an hour later and pulled her bags out of his trunk. She followed him to his front door and then inside. His place was spotless and neat, though he didn't have a ton of stuff. Some nearby boxes indicated that he had just moved in.

"My dad got me this place," he said. "Just living here while I finish up my last year of school."

"Thanks for letting me stay here," she sighed. "Thanks for picking me up."

"Stormy, you know I'd do anything for you," he said. "Anything. Seriously."

"I know," she said as she nodded. It was almost midnight and she

was glad that the long day was nearing an end.

“Do you care if I crash on your couch? I’m so tired,” she said.

“Make yourself at home,” he said. He stepped down the hall to retrieve a pillow and blanket for her and stood with his hands on his hips as he watched her get comfortable. “Let me know if you need anything. I’ll just be right down the hall.”

She flipped the light off and curled up on the couch. Never in a million years did she imagine she would be sleeping on her ex-boyfriend’s couch back in good, old Coleville. Just a day ago, she was lying in the arms of the man she thought was going to love her and

take care of her the way that Jett did. Her life was just getting started again, and now she had taken ten giant leaps backwards. Grief, guilt, and remorse had gotten the best of her when she least expected.

She reached into her purse on the floor and turned her phone on. She hadn't bothered checking it since she turned it off after she first boarded the plane back in L.A. It felt like an eternity as the phone took its sweet time firing up. Once the signal was found again and the screen was loaded, she saw that she had no less than ten missed calls from Ryder and various text messages, all saying he needed to talk to her, he missed her, he was worried about her,

and he was confused.

Her eyes burned hot again as tears streamed down her cheeks. She was too tired to cry any more than that, though, and passed out within minutes. She just wanted the day to be over.

The first thing she asked Hayden the next morning was to run her to the bank. She had seen Jett go into that bank many times before, but she never once asked him about their money situation. She knew he had some sort of account there, but she always let him take care of everything. He gave her cash anytime she needed it, which was all she knew. Given all the accusations and the shady business dealings he was involved in, she never found an appropriate time to

even ask him about his money. The last thing she wanted was for him to think it mattered. It was never about the money with Jett. Never.

Her flats lightly clicked on the hard, tiled floor of the bank as she nervously approached a teller.

“May I help you?” the teller asked in a flat tone as she looked Stormy up and down.

“Yes,” Stormy said. Her mouth was dry and her hands trembled. She wasn’t sure why she was so nervous, and she didn’t even know where to begin. “I needed to check into an account that was under my late husband’s name.”

“What’s the name?” the teller asked.

“His name was Jett Jacks,” she said. She hated saying the word “was”.

“I.D.?” the teller asked.

Stormy’s fingers fumbled around her wallet as she pulled out her driver’s license which clearly stated that her name was “Stormy Jacks.”

The teller typed in a few things on the keyboard and clicked a couple spots on the screen with her mouse. She picked up her phone and dialed someone and mumbled a few inaudible words.

“We’re going to have you meet with one of our personal bankers,” the teller said with an odd smile. She couldn’t even bring herself to take her eyes off the screen.

Stormy wondered if she was in

trouble or if Misty had her account flagged or frozen.

“Mrs. Jacks?” she heard a man’s voice say. She turned to see a tall, slender, gray-haired gentleman in a navy blue suit and red striped tie standing in the lobby. “This way, please.”

His smile was nice, but he still made her nervous. She could feel her brow sweating and her heart was racing as she followed him to his office.

“Please, have a seat,” he said as he motioned to a chair and closed the door. “Would you like anything to drink? Coffee? Tea? Water?”

“No, thank you,” she said. She was too scared to even think about drinking anything.

“Let me just pull you up here,” he said as he clicked around on his computer. “There we go.”

Stormy sat up straight in the chair and crossed her arms as she waited for him to say something.

“So,” he began. “You are what we call a Platinum Customer.”

“I am?” Stormy asked, puzzled. She felt a wave of relief rushing over her the minute she realized this private meeting was a good thing.

“Your husband left a pretty sizable account here, and you’re listed as his beneficiary,” he said. “Were you aware of that?”

“No,” Stormy said. “I wasn’t. I knew he had something here, but we

never discussed dollar amounts.”

The banker turned his screen to show her and pointed to a little box that held the numbers: \$397,699.08.

Stormy about fainted when she saw that Jett had left her an account with almost four hundred thousand dollars in it. She gripped onto the sides of the chair and repositioned herself as she cleared her throat. The banker could sense that she was uncomfortable.

“You really had no idea this account existed?” he asked, bewildered.

“No,” she said with a gulp. She couldn’t bring herself to say any more than that.

“Well, it’s all there,” he said. “Earning interest daily I might add. We

have it enrolled in our highest yielding savings account, reserved only for our Platinum Customers.”

“So no one can take that money?”

Stormy asked. “Like his mom?”

The banker looked confused. “No, you are his beneficiary. You are entitled to the full amount unless otherwise specified in his will.”

Stormy thought for a while and realized that if Misty had the chance to wipe the account clean, she would’ve done so two months ago when Jett first died. There’s no way she would’ve left that money just sitting there for the taking.

“If you want, we can have you talk to an investment banker,” the president

stated. “We could get some good investments going and you could eventually live very comfortably off the interest of that money.”

“Thanks for the offer,” she said. “I need to do some thinking. Can you guarantee that no one can touch this money for now?”

“We can freeze the account if you want. Or we can split it into another account,” he said.

“Can you move it into an account that’s solely in my name?” she asked. Jett left her that money for a reason. He promised her she’d always be taken care of. It wasn’t even about the money for her, it was about creating a new life. This was a gift from Jett, and she was

going to travel the world with it one way or another. She'd be damned if she let Misty even have a chance at taking it back. She had already taken enough from her. If Misty got any whiff of this money, she'd be knocking on Stormy's door every day needing something.

“That we can do,” the banker said. He seemed pleasant and non-judgmental, and she appreciated that. He grabbed a logoed pen and an application and sat it on the desk in front of her.

As she filled out the paperwork, an unusually warm, happy feeling came over her. It wasn't about the money, it was about Jett taking care of her, just as he always promised her he would do. He was a man of his word until the very

end.

As soon as she finished her business, she returned to Hayden's Jeep which was waiting out in the parking lot.

"You all good?" he asked.

"Yep," Stormy said with her best poker face. She was going to tell no one about the money; not Brooklyn, not Hayden, and not even her parents. She would wait until the time was right, but for now, she needed to figure some things out.

Four hundred thousand dollars could go a long ways in Coleville. She could buy a house, a reliable vehicle, and take her time finding a good job. She could start fresh, which was all she really needed anyway.

CHAPTER 23

Two weeks had passed since Stormy had returned to Coleville. She was still shacking up with Hayden, but things were one-hundred percent platonic. Hayden was doing a great job at keeping her spirits high and keeping her distracted from everything that was going on.

Her second day back in town, she showed up at Brooklyn's place and got the much deserved lecture she so knew was coming to her. Brooklyn showed her some tough love, but ended her talk with a hug as always.

Her third day back in town, she showed up at her parents' house. They were shocked to see her, but not shocked

to hear that it didn't work out.

Amazingly they refrained from saying "I told you so" and pretended like nothing had happened. They asked very few questions and showed their support.

The rest of her days were spent palling around with Hayden, playing video games or watching movies with him, and engulfing books while Hayden was away at class. She helped decorate his place a little bit and cooked him some meals, but she kept her distance from him emotionally. He had become a good friend to her, which she hadn't expected.

Ryder had called her every single day for the first week, but then the calls suddenly stopped. Stormy wasn't sure if

she was relieved or bummed that the calls stopped. She was as confused as ever. Her head told her to stay far away from him, but her heart missed him more than anything. He didn't deserve to be left in the cold that way, but she had panicked. How could she explain that to him?

Most nights, she'd lie on the couch under the covers and think about all the sweet things Ryder had said to her or the passionate way he kissed her or how he wanted to take care of her. She thought about how he sought justice for Jett's killer, even though they were estranged. He never stopped loving his brother. Then she thought about how dangerous the MC life was and how she needed to

get far, far away from all of that. Still, for whatever crazy reason, she missed him, and it only got worse with each passing day.

She would never admit to anyone that she missed him, but it was all she thought about. She thought about him all day, every day. He was the first thing she thought of when she woke up and the last thing she thought of when she went to bed.

That Saturday night, Stormy and Hayden ordered pizza, drank cheap beer, and played video games. In the midst of one of the games, Stormy's phone lit up and buzzed on the table.

"It's that scumbag," Hayden seethed. "Let me answer it."

“No,” Stormy said, but it was too late. He had already picked up her phone and slid the bar across to answer it.

“Listen you little punk,” Hayden yelled. “Stop calling Stormy. She’s over you, man. Move on. You fucked up.”

“Hayden!” Stormy whined. “Why did you do that?”

Hayden pulled the phone away from his ear. “He hung up anyway.”

He sat the phone down and continued playing the video game like nothing had happened. For a split second, Stormy felt bad for Ryder. He probably just wanted to talk to her, to explain or apologize, and now he knew she was with Hayden. Obviously he didn’t know if they were back together,

but she was sure he assumed it. And for another second, she worried that Ryder might send someone after Hayden, thinking they were back together. She knew what Ryder was capable of. He had a lot of power and influence and connections.

She chugged the rest of her beer and tried to forget about it for a bit, but she couldn't help wanting to talk to Ryder. Her guilt and angst was fading with each passing day, and her self-control was wearing thin. She and Hayden were spending almost every single day together and she knew he would flip out if she reached out to Ryder in any way, shape, or form. He had grown more protective of her than

ever, and she was even noticing a possessive streak.

“I think I’m going to go to Brooklyn’s later,” Stormy said.

“Oh, really?” he asked. “Are you sure? It’s getting late and you’ve been drinking.”

“I’ve had one beer,” she said. “I’ll be fine in an hour.”

Their eyes were glued to the T.V. screen in front of them as they kept playing.

“It’s kind of late,” Hayden objected again. He really didn’t want her to leave. He wanted to keep her all to himself.

“I know,” she said. “I won’t be gone that long.”

Hayden was quiet, which Stormy knew wasn't a good thing, but then she had to remind herself that he wasn't her boyfriend. Even if he was her boyfriend, it wasn't his place to dictate when she could see her friends.

An hour later, Stormy was buzzing across town to Brooklyn's apartment. The last couple weeks since Brooklyn had returned back from L.A., she'd been going out less and less. Stormy suspected it had more to do with her horrible experience with Zander than anything else, but she didn't know for sure. Brooklyn was probably afraid to put herself out there again and trust another guy.

“How's it going?” Brooklyn said

as she let Stormy in. “No offense, but you look kind of rough.”

“Thanks,” Stormy said with a dry tone. She didn’t need Brooklyn to state the obvious. “I feel rough.”

Stormy took a seat in the recliner and released a big sigh.

“What’s on your mind? Spill,” Brooklyn instructed.

“Are you wanting to know if I’ve heard anything from Ryder?” Brooklyn asked. She nailed it.

Stormy nodded and looked at Brooklyn with pleading eyes.

“I wasn’t going to say anything, but he has called me a few times. He’s super depressed,” she said, though she seemed annoyed. “He talks about you

nonstop. He's really confused."

"Really?" Stormy said as a smile crept on her face.

"You're not thinking of going back to him, are you?" Brooklyn asked.

"Please tell me you're not going back there."

"I think I should at least give him an explanation, don't you? I didn't even give him that."

"The douchebag put you in danger," Brooklyn said as she crossed her arms. "Why do you want to go back to that? He put me in danger too."

"Call me crazy, but I almost don't think he's a bad guy," Stormy said as she cringed and waited for Brooklyn to bite her head off. "He had honorable

intentions.”

“Honorable intentions my ass. You always do this,” Brooklyn huffed. “You paint people the way you want them to be and not the way they actually are. You’re ignoring the facts here. We almost got shot that night and you know it.”

“I think I know him a little better than you,” Stormy snipped. “He wouldn’t have let anything bad happen. He had it all under control”

Brooklyn said. “You asked for my opinion. I’m giving it to you. Don’t get mad.”

“Sorry,” Stormy said. “I just have a million thoughts running through my head right now. And I miss him.”

“Of course you miss him. He was your knight in shining armor. He rescued you when you were at your lowest. He promised you things and whisked you off your feet. Of course you miss that. You miss that fantasy life he projected to you,” she replied. “And he reminded you of Jett.”

Stormy picked at her nails as she avoided Brooklyn’s glare. “I suppose you’re right.”

“I’m not trying to burst your bubble. I just think you need to think long and hard before you let him back in your life,” Brooklyn reiterated. “I thought you wanted to get out of that lifestyle, but here you are thinking about delving right back in.”

“I better get going,” Stormy said. “Hayden doesn’t want me out late.”

“Hayden doesn’t want you out late?” Brooklyn scoffed. “What is he, your father?”

“He’s been really protective of me lately,” Stormy defended him. “It’s weird. Whatever. He’s letting me stay with him, so I try not to argue with him.”

“You know, you can stay here too,” Brooklyn said. “I don’t know why you’d want to stay with freaking Hayden of all people.”

The thought of staying with Brooklyn had never even crossed her mind until then. She loved her to pieces but never thought she could actually live with her.

“Would you want me to live here with you?” Stormy asked. “I guess I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Yes, for the love of God,” Brooklyn said. “I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you away from Hayden. He’s freaking obsessed with you. It’s weird. He’s just trying to keep you all for himself. You’ve been back for two weeks, and this is the second time I’ve gotten to hang out with you alone.”

Brooklyn did have a point.

“Yeah, I probably do need to get away from Hayden,” she said. “It’s really confusing to be living with him, but I will say he’s been a perfect gentleman. He hasn’t even so much as tried to kiss me.”

“Aw, well isn’t that just lovely,” Brooklyn smirked. She was such a sarcastic bitch when she wanted to be. “Move in with me. Please.”

“Fine,” Stormy conceded. “I’ll bring my stuff over tomorrow morning. Let me break it to him gently.”

Brooklyn smiled big and wide as she was just thrilled to get Stormy away from Hayden one more time.

Stormy drove back to Hayden’s where he was sitting on the couch in the dark waiting for her.

“I was worried,” he said as she walked in the front door.

“Ha, why?” Stormy laughed. “I was at Brooklyn’s for one hour. You knew where I was.”

His possessiveness was really starting to get old.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Never mind. I’m just glad you’re home.”

“I’m going to go to bed if that’s okay,” Stormy said as she stared at the couch he was sitting on. “It’s almost midnight.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Hayden said. He stood up, lingered for a bit, then made his way back to his bedroom and shut the door.

Stormy dreaded telling him the next morning that she was moving out. He’d been so good to her the last couple weeks, but she didn’t want to get his hopes up. She couldn’t live with him any longer. She didn’t like how almost

greedy he was becoming about her. It was almost bizarre and it freaked her out.

CHAPTER 24

Sunday morning was a breath of fresh air. Stormy had broken the news to Hayden as gently as she could, but she still knew she had dashed his hopes of getting back together anytime soon. He took it exactly the way she thought he would and closed himself off as she grabbed her things and left. He didn't even so much as tell her goodbye.

She loaded her bags up into her rusty, red car and drove across town to Brooklyn's place. She clutched onto her phone as she thought about calling Ryder. It seemed insane and she was sure Brooklyn would flip out if she knew, but she wanted to hear his voice again. She missed him. She missed him

so much it hurt, but she knew it was over between them.

It was for the better, she told herself a million times. It was simply how it had to be.

“Hey, roomie!” she said as she let herself in to Brooklyn’s place. “Happy moving in day. Sorry I don’t have a lot of stuff.”

Stormy dropped her things by the door as she attempted to catch her breath. Climbing three flights of stairs with three pieces of luggage was no easy feat.

“Let me help you,” Brooklyn said as she grabbed one of the bags and threw it on the bed in the spare room. “We need to decorate this room.”

Stormy stared at the pale, off-white walls that surrounded them. She collapsed on the bed and rubbed her hand along the comforter. This was going to be her new home for the time being.

“What’s wrong?” Brooklyn asked. “We can get you new bedding.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Stormy said as she fought back a couple rogue tears. “Just thinking about stuff.”

“Did you hear that?” Brooklyn asked. “I think someone just knocked on the door. Who the hell would come over at nine on a Sunday morning?”

Stormy stayed in the room as she unzipped her bags and began hanging her things up in the closet. She heard

Brooklyn shriek, so she ran out to see what the fuss was about.

Standing in the doorway was Ryder, bag over his shoulder,

“Stormy, I had no idea he was coming,” Brooklyn mumbled with a big frown on her face.

“I see that,” Stormy replied.

Her heart dropped to her stomach and she lost her breath. He took the wind right out of her. She backed up and braced herself against the wall as he reluctantly stepped towards her.

“Stormy,” he said. “I-I...”

He couldn't bring himself to finish whatever it was he was trying to say. She couldn't bring herself to say a word to him. She didn't know if she was

happy or appalled that he had just shown up in Coleville uninvited and unannounced.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Can I talk to you?” he asked. He took no more steps towards her as he cemented himself firmly just inside the doorway with his hands in his pockets.

“I guess,” Stormy said. He had traveled all that way, and the least she could’ve done was hear him out. “Since you’re here.”

Ryder looked around the small apartment.

“Where should we go?” he asked.

She thought about taking a drive with him, but she wanted him to be on

her turf. She didn't want to be behind the wheel with him in case he tried anything. He had a bit of a crazy, desperate, lonely look in his eyes. She'd never seen anything like it before, not even in poor, pathetic Hayden.

“We can go into my room,” she said.

He followed her down the hallway to the last door on the right, where they sat down on the edge of the bed. He looked around at the empty, white walls and at her suitcases which were half unpacked and lying open-faced on the bed.

“I just moved in this morning. Like five minutes ago,” Stormy dead-panned. “So, you had something you wanted to

say?”

Ryder took a deep breath. “I want to know what happened.”

“Nothing. Everything.”

“Okay, um, I just wanted an explanation from you,” he continued. “I can’t move forward with my life and give up on you until I know what I did wrong.”

Stormy crossed her arms and scooted a little away from him as she looked him square in his gorgeous, hazel eyes. “You did nothing wrong. The issues are with me, not you.”

“I miss you, Stormy,” he said. “Every day when I wake up and you’re not there, it’s so hard. I’m not me anymore. I’m not me without you.”

There's this huge, gaping void in my life where you used to be."

Stormy rolled her eyes.

"Sweet talk me all you want," she said. "It doesn't change the facts."

"What facts?"

"The club life," she said. "I can't do it anymore."

"So here's the deal," he said as he looked her in the eyes. He reached for her hand and then quickly withdrew his, realizing it probably wasn't the best time. "Everything I've told you has been the truth. I'm getting out. I'm trying."

"Hah," Stormy laughed. "Right. That's what you say because you know I want to hear it. I know how hard it is to walk away from the only life you've

known, from all that power and money and influence.”

“No, I’m serious,” he said. His eyes were desperate. “I’m the reason my brother died. If I had never gotten mixed up in Hellfire, he would still be here. I want to change my life. I need to. I can’t do it alone.”

“Why can’t you do it alone? You’ve done everything else alone,” she said.

“Everything changed when I met you. That’s when I knew for sure I wanted out.” He folded his hands nervously in his lap and stared at the ground. “I didn’t expect to fall for you. I didn’t expect to find some sweet, naïve, innocent, genuine young woman. Girls

like you don't usually get mixed up with guys like me or Jett."

Stormy looked at his face again, which was now twisted painfully. She could tell he was hurting emotionally.

"When I started falling in love with you and asked you to move out west to be with me, I meant it," he said.

"You were falling in love with me?" Stormy asked. They had never used the L-word before.

"Yeah, couldn't you tell?" he asked. "I thought it was so obvious."

Stormy bit her lip as she wanted to inch closer to him, but she held back.

"My brother died and you have nothing," he said. "If you don't want to be with me, at least let me take care of

you. I can support you. I have to make it up to you somehow. I know he didn't have a life insurance policy or anything.”

Stormy thought about the four hundred thousand dollars sitting in a bank account. She refused to let him know she knew about it.

“Thanks for the offer,” she said. She stood up and placed her hands on her hips as she looked towards the doorway. “I don't need you to take care of me, Ryder. That's for coming out here to talk to me though.”

It pained her to turn him away like that, but a small part of her wanted to just move on without him while another small part of her wanted him to fight

harder for her.

“S-so, that’s it?” he stammered.

“What did you expect?” Stormy asked, wild-eyed.

“I don’t know, I thought maybe we could start getting back on track,” he said. “I hoped anyway.”

“Ryder, I want to be with you so bad that it hurts!” Stormy screamed at him. “You have no idea what you’ve put me through by loving me. I want to be with you. I want to be with you. I want to pick up exactly where we left off. I just can’t. Not while you’re with Hellfire.”

Ryder hung his head and rubbed his eyes as he fought off tears. Stormy felt crushed. She hated seeing him so hurt, but she couldn’t give in to him.

“Do you know how confusing this is for me?” she asked him. “I was falling so hard for you, and in the blink of an eye I realized it wasn’t fair to Jett, and I couldn’t be put in that kind of danger ever again. Jett never put me in any kind of danger.”

“You did know me, Stormy,” he said. “I never would have jeopardized your safety. That night with Zander was perfectly planned out. I knew the guys were right outside the door the entire time. Zander’s too much of a pussy to do anything to you in front of me anyway. I had you. I was right there.”

“You should go,” she said as she fought back tears as she remembered the trauma of that night. “I’m sorry, Ryder.”

He stood up slowly and rubbed his hands along his strong jawline as he tilted his head back and took a deep breath. He said nothing as he walked out.

She heard Ryder and Zander exchange a few words out in the living room and then she listened as the front door opened and closed. She peeked out her third floor window as she watched him walk to a rental car in the parking lot and drive off. He was gone. Just like that. And Stormy immediately regretted it.

She slammed her bedroom door and threw herself onto her bed, sobbing her heart out into a stack of pillows.

If she made the right decision, she

wondered, why did it hurt so bad?

CHAPTER 25

Stormy had made up her mind. She was going to give Ryder another shot. She couldn't spend the rest of her life wondering what would have happened if she would have believed him.

He didn't have to take care of her. He didn't have to confess his love to her. He didn't have to fly out to check on her or to beg for her forgiveness, but he did. He did all of those things not knowing how she would react, and she reacted in the worst way possible. He didn't deserve that.

She still had his condo key on her keychain. She could easily fly out there and surprise him. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach at the thought of seeing the

expression on his face when she would show up at his place. She imagined the big bear hug she would receive and the endless, tender Ryder kisses coming her way.

She packed her bags and found a flight for the following day. She wouldn't land until late Monday, but that was okay. She was positive he'd be at home doing nothing on a Monday night anyway.

Stormy dolled herself up Monday afternoon. She air dried her thick, curly, brown hair and took her time applying makeup. She shaved her legs and spritzed on some perfume, even though it was going to be many, long hours before she'd see him again. She was obsessed

about reuniting with him. She thought about nothing else.

As she traveled down the interstate towards the airport an hour later, she rolled her windows down and blasted her favorite mixed C.D. She couldn't have wiped the smile off her face if she tried.

She checked in at the airport, made it through security, and found her gate. She boarded the plane with the other passengers and let several people go ahead of her simply because she was in an amazing mood that nothing on earth could shatter. She hadn't felt so happy in weeks.

As the engines started up and the plane taxied to the runway, her heart felt

warm and full. She knew she was headed in the right direction. She knew she was making the right choice. Every time she listened to her head, it pulled her way from love. Whenever she listened to her heart, it pointed her directly back towards it.

She tried to read some magazines during the flight, but her mind would only focus on Ryder. She imagined his lips, his hair, his eyes, his strong, tatted arms. She wanted him so bad, and she missed him so much it hurt. She checked her watch every ten or fifteen minutes as time seemed to stand still as they flew through the air.

They landed at LAX around ten that night, and she wasted no time hailing

a cab and hightailing it to Ryder's condo. The city lights and swaying palm trees seemed to envelope her, welcoming her back home. She missed the city more than she ever thought possible, but she wondered if it was more because Ryder felt like home to her than anything else.

She decided to trust and believe that he would leave Hellfire as soon as he could. She knew there were repercussions for leaving the club, and he had to be careful about it. She couldn't expect him just to say he quit and walk away. She was naïve to think it worked that way in the first place.

She thought about what she wanted to tell him when she first saw him. She

imagined jumping into his arms. She thought about smothering his gorgeous face with a million kisses and telling him, for the very first time, that she loved him.

The taxi dropped her off in front of Ryder's building and pulled her luggage from the trunk. She thanked him and paid as she grabbed her keys and made her way inside. Her heart was beating a million beats a minute. She wanted to run as fast as she could, but she didn't want to be all out of breath or disheveled for their sweet reunion. She walked as fast as her little feet would take her as her suitcase with the loose wheel clicked rhythmically behind her.

Minutes later, she was finally

standing in front of Ryder's door. She sat her things down, fluffed her hair in a mirror in the hallway, and pulled out the cherry Chapstick from her purse and slicked on a fresh coat.

She thought about knocking and letting him come to her, but she decided just to surprise him since she had a key. She slipped the key in the lock and twisted it, and the door swung open. She kicked her shoes off so they wouldn't make a sound on the spotless, shiny concrete floors, and she tiptoed town the hall towards his bedroom.

It was half past ten o'clock and the condo was pitch black. She was sure she'd find him in bed sleeping. She quietly opened his bedroom door and

saw the light forming around his bathroom door. She heard the faint sound of the shower running and realized he was taking a shower.

Perfect, she thought to herself as she decided to climb under the covers and wait for him. It seemed a little creepy, but she was too excited to think straight.

She sauntered over to his bed. The room was dark, but with the glow of light flooding from around the bathroom door, she couldn't see just enough. She stripped down and climbed under the covers, flicking on the bedside lamp beside her.

Her heart pounded as she waited for him to come out of the bathroom.

Each second that went by felt like eternity.

The water from the shower shut off and Ryder emerged two seconds later with a towel wrapped around his waist. He stopped dead in his tracks the moment he saw her sitting in his bed.

“Stormy!” he yelled out as he ran over to her. “Is this real? Are you really here?”

His leaned down and pressed his mouth against hers, hard, and she ran her fingers through his still damp hair.

“I’m here, baby,” she said with a smile while she kissed him back. “I came back for you.”

He dropped his towel and climbed into bed next to her, his hands gripping

her bare hips and pulling her body closer into his. He kissed her neck and then worked his way down to her collarbone as his hands traced down her soft arms.

She tossed her head back and he climbed on top of her, dominating her like he did the last time. She loved his alpha male bedside manner.

“I’m never letting you go,” he said. His smooth body pressed against hers, and in that moment they were one.

“I’ll never leave you again,” she replied, breathless, hot, and bothered. She loved his hands and how they travelled up and down her body. She ached for him. It had been too long, and she couldn’t ignore her feelings

anymore. She had to do whatever it took to be with him, even if it meant staying in the MC life for a bit longer. She had to trust him to keep her safe, and she had to believe him when he said he would leave the club as soon as he could.

He was soon lying on top of her, his face buried in her mess of dark curls, and his arms spreading her legs wide. He pressed his hardened cock deep inside her, ramming her hard and passionately. He was hungry for her. He wanted to be inside her. He wanted to take her and keep her all for his own.

“You’re mine forever,” he said. “I love you, Stormy.”

“I know,” she replied as her nails dug deep into his arms. She leaned up

and nibbled on his ear as he thrust away. “I love you too.”

He continued making love to her the rest of the night. He didn't want to stop. She didn't want it to end either. She resolved once and for all that her heart belonged to Ryder Jacks, and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Blakeley Wilde is a writer with a passion for gripping story lines that zig and zag and leave you wanting to turn the next page. She lives in a cozy little house with her hot firefighter husband on a lake in the middle of nowhere, and most nights she writes out on the back deck to the sound of the crickets. She loves to get lost in her stories and hopes that you do too!

Lastly, loved the story? Blakeley would be forever grateful if you took time to write a review!