

If You Only Knew

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Swoon READS

New York

A SWOON READS BOOK

An imprint of Feiwel and Friends and Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC
120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2019940970
ISBN 9781250314468 (hardcover) / ISBN 9781250314475 (ebook)

Book design by Liz Dresner

First edition, 2020

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Dedicated to MY Fab Five

COREY

For the last five years I'd lived by one simple rule: Stay alive. I put that rule to the test by making one simple statement. "This isn't a good idea."

Vance waited in the shadows, molding himself to them. The whites of his eyes narrowed. He clenched his jaw.

"I'm not asking for your opinion." He lifted the hem of his shirt and stuck his thumb into a belt loop. His piece glinted against the little bit of light filtering through the row of windows on the garage door.

I gripped the bat in my hand and gritted my teeth. Being in jail had rusted my instincts, short-circuited my sense of self-preservation. All I needed was the sight of Vance's gun to remind me of that.

"I know what I'm doing, Fowler. Right, boys?" His question echoed and fell around me as he nodded to Drew and Jaimie. They stood at the back of the detached garage in their matching black shirts and jeans, holding flashlights. Drew frowned, a grim line set across his mouth.

I cleared my face of all emotion, a blank canvas, tightening my hold on the bat in my hand, and tried to convince myself it wasn't created to hit baseballs, but rather elite sports cars.

"You know you want to. That lawyer deserves worse." Vance crept

closer to my ear, egging me on with his jittery presence. "Just one swing, right there on the front windshield."

Hopper didn't deserve it. Not really. Especially not after everything he did to get my sentence reduced. Which wasn't part of his job, considering he was the prosecuting attorney.

"Not like he can't afford another one," Jaimie taunted.

The words didn't offer me any comfort. My hands kept sweating, making my hold on the bat slick. I forced myself to shut off the danger sign flashing at the back of my head. This wasn't exactly how I planned on paying back Hopper for his kindness.

I rolled the bat back and forth, tossed it in the air, and watched it twist, the black ingrained logo showing its face with every turn. Vance's wide grin reflected across the shining surface of the car.

"A year in that hell. And for what? Nothing you did."

I almost snorted at that one. Maybe I hadn't done *exactly* what I was charged with, but I still picked the path that led me to the dank and dark cell.

"Corey, do it."

This time, it wasn't a question. Jaimie and Drew had already dumped out all the garbage onto the patio, spray-painted the back and side of the house, and broken a couple of windows. All the commotion was blocked out by the house party next door. When the lawyer was away, the neighbors came out to play.

I gripped the bat tighter and ground my teeth as I pictured the look on Mom's face every time she came to visit me in prison.

What the hell was I doing here?

Playing chameleon. Shifting colors. Changing back into one of them. If I didn't, I'd end up dead. Or worse.

"I mean, I could always get your mommy or brother to take your place." Vance's threat rang in my ears.

The sorrowful picture of Mom was replaced with an image of bleeding cuts zigzagged across her skin. The picture kept my cowardice at bay. A silent motivator. I lifted the bat and pulled back my arms.

My first swing landed on the windshield with a sick crunch. The broken glass webbed out from the point of impact, caving in.

"That's my boy." Vance smacked my back like a proud father who just watched his kid hit a home run.

My gut tightened, like my stomach had taken the hit, not the car. Sweat dotted my skin, clinging to the back of my neck. What the hell was wrong with me? I needed to get my head back in the game.

Vance unzipped the backpack he'd thrown onto the concrete floor when we'd first broken into the garage. He lifted a can of spray paint and tossed it to me. I thought they'd used all of them on the house.

"And that's not all." He tipped over the bag to show me the other cans he'd brought along. "Do your thing, Picasso."

I should have known. Vance had let me stay back while Drew and Jaimie worked on spraying the house and breaking windows earlier. He'd led me into a false sense of security, and now I knew why.

This was the finale. And I was conducting it.

I slipped on the painting mask and took in a deep breath. The familiar shape of the can held easier in my hand than the bat. The metal ball bearing clanged as I shook the can and squatted down. A hiss and my hands glided against the side of the car as I directed the flow of the paint, shaping it, creating. I was the master and the paint was my bitch.

Jaimie and Drew tipped over the boxes sitting on the metal shelves, the sound ricocheting against the walls. Papers flew around me; one landed on my head before floating to the floor. But I couldn't be bothered. I was in the zone. This was my aerosol-ridden heaven.

Every now and then, a crunch or squeal of broken glass managed to disturb my work but not enough to knock me out of the high I felt when painting.

Vance pulled out a cigarette and lit it, the flame flickering in the dark, showcasing the scar that sank on his left cheek. He never got his hands dirty with stuff like this. He made sure it got done, that we didn't back down.

I ground my teeth and went back to work, spraying the finishing touches to my masterpiece.

An ache lanced along my muscles. I stood up and rubbed my shoulders, pulling my hoodie up over my head. June nights in Pennsylvania could be suffocating, but I didn't want to risk being recognized and my dark sweatshirt did the job.

I cleared my throat. "We should get out of here."

Vance eyed me for a second, predatory in the dark. He smirked and said, "Good idea. It is getting kinda late."

I turned around and surveyed the wreckage: the crushed windshield of the Porsche, the flames I'd drawn on the black paint, shining, ready to carry it away into the sky. Maybe the badass work would make up a little for the rest of the car.

Drew and Jaimie had been busy while I'd painted. The trophies on the shelves were bent and broken. The headlights were smashed, the sides of the car so fragmented it seemed like it was hunching in on itself. They'd also turned over one of the shelves. A paint puddle formed on the ground by the back of the garage.

A sharp smile edged on the side of Vance's mouth. "We did good." He rubbed his hands together. "I think Hopper will get the message."

With caution coating our movements, we pulled up the door of the detached garage, the only way out. When we'd first arrived, there was still enough noise to cover our entrance, but the party had died

down and the night had stilled with the quiet ready to turn on us. We'd managed to get the door high enough for all of us to duck into the driveway when the sound of a motorcycle pulling in up front made us freeze.

"Shit, what's she doing here?" Vance muttered.

I yanked my eyes up to his, stomach plummeting. This was supposed to be an easy job, in and out. No witnesses. I should have known better. Fisting my hands, I squeezed until my arms shook, trying to calm the anxiety climbing higher.

The headlight bounced around as the girl maneuvered up the driveway and stopped in front of the garage, unaware of the mess surrounding her. A helmet hid her face behind the dark visor. She parked the motorcycle and turned it off. We ducked low as she slipped off the helmet and shook out her hair.

Vance gave the signal when she turned her back to us, and I blinked myself back to the damaged garage.

"Run!" I'd barely said the word when the girl twisted around and finally noticed us, her eyes widening.

"Hey! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

We scattered into the darkness. One of the guys slammed into my back while Jaimie ran into the girl, accidentally knocking her down. My foot stuck against an uneven part of the pavement, and I struck concrete with a thud. I sprang up and ran to the fence separating the house from the woods behind it.

"Stop!" The girl screamed again. "Wha-wha-what did you do?" The horror in her voice grabbed ahold of my instinct to flee.

My hands were around the top of the fence.

"Ah!" A short, high-pitched scream made me falter. "Ow, ow, ow." The girl hissed in pain.

I stared at the fence in front of me. My heart rate steadied, and I

gained control over my breathing. The girl let out another whimper, and my hands retreated to my sides.

Go. Just go.

Clenching my fists while fighting a snarl of annoyance with myself, I turned around and headed for her. Pulling my hoodie over my face, I hoped it would conceal me if I stuck to the shadows.

She held her leg while biting her lip, her jacket clinging to her curves. Her eyes narrowed and raked over me, the anger searing, making me forget for a second why I was there in the first place. Guilt held tightly to my stomach, but I pushed it away and held out my hands to let her know I wasn't planning on hurting her.

Vance and his guys were long gone. Reluctantly, I approached her. She scooted back on her butt.

"Don't even think about doing whatever you think you're going to do, because trust me when I say I know how to handle myself." She growled the words.

My steps faltered. *Shit.* I dropped my hand and realized how stupid I was being. Damn me for suddenly growing a conscience. Where had it been all those years before I went to jail?

"Are you okay?"

"Why the hell do you care?" She jumped up on her uninjured leg. She was several inches shorter than me but more than capable of glaring at me in a way that made me swallow hard.

She put some pressure on the injured leg as if daring me to challenge her words.

I moved my eyes to hers. "I'm sorry," I whispered before making a run for the fence again.

My hands scraped against the unvarnished wood. I gripped tightly, the splinters digging into my skin, braced a foot against the

fence, and lifted myself up and over, landing with a thump on the hard ground.

"I'm going to kill you! There's no way you're going to get away with this!"

The fence jolted, and I jumped up. She was trying to climb over.

"Stop! You're going to hurt yourself." I hit the fence with my palm.

"Why do you care?" she yelled.

Holy hell. Was I seriously having a conversation with some girl through a fence after vandalizing her house?

"Just be careful. And ice your ankle." Apparently, yes.

"Anything else?" Her tone hadn't lost the highest level of pissed off.

"I—I . . . I'm sorry."

"Not as sorry as you're going to be!" The fence jolted again.

That's what I got for trying to help. I lifted my hoodie back onto my head and ran through the shadowed forest.

TESSA

Reality crashed down on me in heavy waves. If I didn't surface soon, I might drown, so I forced myself to take a breath. Flipping on the light, I took an unsteady step to assess the damage. Our garage, which used to be immaculately laid out, sat in broken remnants—from the scattered pieces of paper and nails to the broken trophies sitting in glinting pieces. My eyes landed on Dad's Porsche, hunkered down like a deformed centerpiece.

I squeezed my eyes shut for a second, but when I opened them the car remained posed like a monument to the destruction. My belly did a flip, and I recognized that sinking sensation puddling around my feet because I had lived with it for the better part of a year. Guilt. I may not have been the one to break the car, but I couldn't help but blame myself for this somehow.

I stepped around the broken glass, and my heartbeat roared in my ears. The sight of the Porsche unburied memories I had tucked away, and I choked on my breath.

My body heated as the anger poured onto my skin. This wasn't happening. Slowly the ebbs of panic stopped pulsating, giving me room to push the memory where it belonged, deep within the past, into the furthest corner of my mind.

With a better grip on my reality, I dug out my phone. My fingers trembled. Dad's face hovered on the screen. He was at Graceland, the first vacation he'd taken since I could remember. I scrolled past him and found the number I needed, making the call.

"Tess, you okay?" Uncle Mike answered on the first ring.

"No. Someone broke into the garage and . . . you just need to get over here. Now."

"I'll be there right away."

Sometimes it paid to have an uncle who was also a detective.

I went over to the porch steps and sat down. The warmth of my jacket became unbearable, and I unzipped it and tossed it over the railing. In my head, I went over the details of the guy who stopped to make sure I was okay after one of his friends pushed me to the ground. It wasn't much because the shadows had covered his face, along with the ratty old hoodie he had worn, but I needed to do something until Uncle Mike got there.

I stared at what was left of the car. Dad's baby. He'd bought it after winning his first major case over a decade ago. Looking at it made the guilt bounce around like a Ping-Pong ball in my stomach, and I darted my eyes to the motorcycle.

Pushing myself up, I approached the motorcycle and ran a hand over the front. The metal sent a shiver up my arm despite the heat of the night. The pain in my ankle receded, and I managed to make it over without wincing. I lifted a leg over the side and sank into the seat, gripping the handles, letting the familiarity of it calm my heart.

Headlights wedged away the dark driveway and flashed across my face, into the damaged garage. Uncle Mike stepped out of the car, slamming the door behind him. In the passenger seat was his daughter, my cousin and best friend, Paige. I got off the bike, hands lingering on the handles, and headed for them.

"What happened?" Uncle Mike asked, smoothing a hand over his balding head.

Paige ran the length between us and pulled me into a hard hug. "Are you okay?" she asked. Her hazel eyes were wide when I stepped away from her. She didn't wait for my answer but instead hugged me again.

I let out a surprised wheeze.

"Paige, sweetheart, I think you're suffocating her." Uncle Mike put a hand on her shoulder and smiled, unable to hide the crease of worry between his brows. "She was right next to me when you called. I couldn't persuade her to stay home."

Paige finally let me go but kept an arm wrapped around my shoulders.

Uncle Mike sized up the damage. "Geez, this is crazy. I gotta call your dad."

"No!" I grabbed the phone out of his hand. Uncle Mike raised his brows. "He'll be home tomorrow. We'll deal with it then." I didn't want to interrupt his vacation.

Uncle Mike sighed and crossed his arms. "He'll kill me for it."

"You say that every time you keep something from him, but you're not dead yet." Uncle Mike was Dad's baby brother, and there was no way he'd ever hurt him. "It's my decision. I'll deal with the repercussions. Besides, you know how much he needs this."

"Are you sure, Tess?" Paige crossed her arms. Her dark-blond hair was up in a messy bun.

"Yes," I reassured them.

Uncle Mike glanced down at his phone. "I'll call the precinct and have someone come down and watch the house for the next couple of nights. I thought you were going for a short ride on the back road?"

"I came to check on Chewy." Paige was allergic to cats so I couldn't

bring her along while I stayed over at their place while Dad was on his trip. Thankfully I'd been able to bring Jiminy, my dog, over.

"Did you see anything?" Uncle Mike asked.

"Yeah, there were four of them. All dressed in black. Black pants, black hoodies, black shoes."

"Did you see anyone's face?"

I rubbed my arms up and down, suddenly cold. "No."

"Can you remember anything at all?" Uncle Mike urged. He took out his pen and pad. He never left home without them.

I shook my head. "I talked to one guy, but it was too dark to see his face."

The boy, whoever he was, had surprised me with the apology that escaped his lips. That and the fact that he'd turned around and checked on me when he was so close to escaping. The other three deserted him. They all ran down the driveway, and a few seconds later the roar of an engine and tires peeling out hit the night.

"Anything missing?" Uncle Mike tucked away his notepad and started toward the inside of the garage.

I stepped over broken glass and tossed paper. Paint was splattered in the back—pale yellow, the same hue as my bedroom. Dad and I had painted it a couple of years ago.

We walked along the side of the car and I stopped. Graffitied flames roared along the driver's side, up the back to the tail. They rose up high toward the top of the car, oddly mesmerizing and beautiful. I reached out a hand and touched the still-wet paint, and my fingers came away orange.

"That's interesting." Uncle Mike knelt down.

"More like rude," Paige said, standing behind us.

I squeezed the bridge of my nose and shut my eyes.

A second later, a police cruiser pulled up behind Uncle Mike's

Crown Victoria. Officer Jenkins stepped out, and I had to force myself not to react. Paige and I exchanged worried glances. The last time we had seen Jenkins was a night both my cousin and I wanted to forget. Uncle Mike walked over to him.

"Do you think he'll say anything?" I whispered when Paige sidled up to me.

"No way. Not unless he wants to lose his job." Paige focused on the officer, who glanced at us with a grim expression before turning back to Uncle Mike.

That was answer enough for me. Jenkins didn't seem to want to be around as much as we didn't want him around.

"What about the inside of the house?" Uncle Mike called.

"I haven't checked."

Jenkins approached me. "Got the keys?"

I went to my jacket and took them out before handing them over. My fingers brushed his palm, and I suppressed a shudder.

Jenkins smirked at my glare and went up the stairs. We waited outside while he did a sweep of the house.

"It's all clear in there," Jenkins called before flipping on the backyard floodlights.

I squinted from the glare, raising my arm to block the light.

"Wow," I heard Uncle Mike say behind me.

I blinked a few times to clear the spots behind my eyes and sucked in a breath when I finally saw what Uncle Mike had. Spray paint covered the siding, still wet and dripping. Unlike the flames on the car, which were almost beautiful and obviously done with some sort of talent, the vile language and symbols that covered the house were juvenile at best.

Letting out a slow breath, I unclenched my hands.

"There is damage inside as well," Jenkins said. "Tessa, you might

want to take a look around to make sure nothing was stolen." I hated the way my name sounded when he said it.

"We'll come in with her," Paige piped up, grabbing my hand.

We walked inside with Jenkins leading the way. "Anything?" he asked, his dark blue uniform a contrast to the white walls of the house.

A uniformed officer hadn't been inside our home in years. Not since Uncle Mike got promoted. The reminder was a jolt running down my spine, causing me to freeze.

"Tess?" Paige encouraged.

I scanned the area. Nothing in the kitchen or living room looked out of place. I shook my head.

Jenkins raised a brow but didn't say anything before resuming his walk around our house. Our house. Not his. That was why it felt wrong. This was my space and him being here made it seem unfamiliar.

"Most of the damage is down this way," Jenkins said over his shoulder.

I pulled at the bottom of my shirt and followed him down the hall. We ended up outside my bedroom. The lights were already on, and I stood at the threshold staring at the glass scattered along my floor and the gaping hole that used to be my window. A brick lay on its side by my bed.

My throat closed, and I tried to swallow. I wanted to wash my skin of the whole night. I wanted to get back on Beauty and ride away from the sight in front of me, pretend like it never happened. Go back to that brief moment right before I got home when everything felt like it was finally right. Normal.

"Now are you ready to call Uncle Kent?" Paige rubbed my back up and down.

My phone chirped in my pocket before I could answer. Dad's face popped up on the screen.

"I guess that answers your question." I held it up for Paige to see.

Paige gave me a half-hearted smile before stepping away to give me some privacy. Jenkins only held his thumbs in his belt loops and stared at me. I turned away and prepared myself to answer the call. Dad would know right away that something was wrong, and I was going to have to be the one to ruin the trip of a lifetime.

I meant what I said to that kid before he jumped our fence. I wasn't going to give up. They weren't going to get away with what they did.

COREY

Three days later, I was still trying to convince myself nothing had happened on Friday. I never agreed to go out with Vance and his guys. I never broke into Hopper's garage. There wasn't some girl out there who wouldn't back down even after getting hurt. A girl who might have seen my face.

No. She didn't. She couldn't have. I was careful. The fact that the police hadn't shown up at my front door was a good sign. But the fear and doubt wouldn't stop warring in my head.

I flipped onto my back, my bed groaning in protest, and stared at the water-stained ceiling in my bedroom. The first few weeks after my release I'd slept on the floor because my bed felt too soft after a year on a mattress pad only a couple of inches thick. I had to train myself to sleep on what I used to think was the most uncomfortable bed in the world. Now it wasn't so bad. Weird how your view of the world changed like that when you spent time in a cage.

My phone buzzed underneath my pillow. I sat up and grabbed for it, glancing at the ID.

"Yeah?" No shaking in my voice. Control was always good when you were talking to the man in charge.

"Corey, I heard about Friday night."

I shifted in the bed, kicking the blankets off. "I'm not surprised." Nothing got past X. My dad's old boss. And mine since the age of fourteen.

I squeezed my eyes shut and covered them with my hand. "Did you know about his plan?" I asked.

Laughter streamed through the phone. I fisted the blanket. It wasn't so much hearing the proof that X got to live a normal life while I struggled to fix mine that got to me, but the fact that he had a family. People who loved him. Who knew him as someone other than the man that controlled Branson, Vance, and me.

"No. It's not my job to know. It's your job to find these things out and stop them before they escalate. Remember?"

I stiffened. How could I forget when the reminder followed me everywhere I went?

"I'm sorry, sir. I tried, but you know how Vance is when he gets those ideas in his head. He threatened my family's well-being so I followed along."

Vance always made sure I knew he held all the cards in his hand. Didn't used to be that way, but I didn't want to think about the past.

"Nevertheless, I'm worried about Hopper being an issue after that little stunt. He needs to stay in the dark about Vance's involvement."

Of course. It always came back to keeping Vance safe. X was big on protecting his family, including his idiotic nephew.

"How are you doing otherwise?" His stern tone turned warm suddenly. He knew how to get to me. "I haven't heard much from you since your release."

"I'm fine." My answer was more clipped. I didn't know how to talk to X after he abandoned me in that cell for a year. After everything.

"Good. I have to get going. Remember to rein in Vance."

"Yes. I will." I forced myself to keep breathing. Standing up, I

started pacing my room. My heart hammered, and the walls swam sideways. An invisible hand squeezed my throat. I leaned against the door for support.

I tossed the phone to the bed and pushed away from the wall, stepping toward the small window in my room where the white clouds brightened against the morning light.

Rein in Vance. How the hell was I supposed to do that? The last time I tried I ended up in jail.

I crossed the small room, counting ten steps from the door to my bed, and sat down, covering my face with my hands.

"Corey, get up! I made breakfast!" Mom called from the kitchen, startling me out of the haze fogging up my brain.

The old lady I shared a wall with banged on it. For someone who looked like she'd keel over any minute, she sure had great hearing.

"All right, I heard you!" Mom swept into my room and banged back. "When is that old bat finally going to kick the bucket?" She shook her head and put her hands on her hips.

I held back a smile.

"You okay?" Mom asked, plopping down on the bed next to me.

"What makes you think something's wrong?" The hollow in my voice probably didn't do me any favors.

Mom patted my knee. "Usually you make a crack about me giving that biddy a heart attack."

Not in the mood, I wanted to say. Instead I shrugged. "I'm good."

Mom removed her hand and glanced around my room. "You need to clean. Today. You know the rules, Corey. As long as you're living under my roof, you need to help take care of it."

"I know. I'm sorry. I will." My stomach grumbled as the smell of bacon wafted into the room.

In the hall, I collided with my little brother, Tim. He glared at me

before stomping into the kitchen. I wondered if I was that much of a douche when I was sixteen. Probably. Then again, at his age I was busy keeping tabs on Vance.

"Stan says he's coming over tomorrow to look at the air conditioner," Mom said.

I paused for a second. "That's nice of him."

Mom sighed. "The super is behind, and you know it would take at least another month for him to come by and fix it."

"I didn't say anything, Mom." I didn't want to argue with her.

"You know you're going to have to see him at some point."

I rubbed my shoulders and kept my mouth shut. Stan was an old friend of the family. I worked at his auto-body shop for a few years before my sentencing. Stan offered to look out for my mom and Tim afterward, and he kept his word. Coming by and bringing groceries, fixing Mom's car whenever it had problems, helping Tim with his homework. Things that I did before I got sent away. Since returning home, I struggled to find my place in the family.

Stan wasn't trying to push me out; he wanted to help. He cared about us. He cared about me even though I didn't deserve it, which was probably why I didn't want to see him. I was still ashamed of the things I had done. For using the job he gave me as a shield to hide my place in X's crew from my mom. For helping Vance by getting details on the cars Stan worked on for Vance's chop-shop scheme. The look on Mom's face when she came to the station after my arrest still haunted me.

"Did you hear about Mr. Hopper?" Mom asked, following me down the hall to our tiny kitchen.

I flinched. I hoped she didn't notice.

"What about him?"

Mom planted a kiss on Tim's cheek as he ate out of the pan.

"Dude, get a plate. You're not an animal," I said, handing him one. Tim wasn't amused and snatched at it.

"Apparently his home was vandalized Friday night. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

My stomach jumped, and I piled on the eggs.

"Corey." The firmness in her tone brought back too many memories. Ones I liked to forget. "Where were you Friday night?"

I turned to meet her gaze. "Nowhere. I was here."

Tim's brows pulled together. He shook his head and went back to eating.

I glanced one more time at my little brother, busy scarfing down breakfast. Tim was at home, but out cold, when I left the other night. From the expression on his face, he must have woken up at some point and found me gone.

"Mom, I was here." The food in my mouth turned bitter, and I kept my eyes focused on the plate.

"Are you sure?"

I chewed slowly, my shoulders tensing, trying to figure out what to say next.

"He was," Tim backed me up, mouth full.

My fork froze midbite. I didn't want Tim involved, which was why I hadn't deflected to him earlier. "Tim," I gave a low warning.

Tim didn't get the cue and took a swig of orange juice before continuing. "What? You were. I remember because we stayed up playing Xbox."

I ground my teeth together and dropped my fork. This was going too far. I didn't need my brother lying to my mom, too. Not that he had much of an example when it came to people being honest.

"Okay. If you say so. But if you know anything about what happened, you need to do the right thing."

Do the right thing. Mom spoke those words so often they were a part of her, streaming in my conscience whenever uncertainty coated a situation. Those were the words in my head when the police officer cuffed me and took me to the station.

Do the right thing. Do the right thing. The words rang in my ears, bubbling inside my head until it felt like it would pop off.

"Mom." I grabbed her wrist with a gentle tug. "I wasn't here Friday." I let out a breath and shut my eyes for a few seconds. It was time to be honest.

"What the hell, Core?" Tim glared at me.

Mom plopped back down on the seat. "What?" Her whispered word was covered in hurt.

I finally looked at her, and my ribs constricted and took a pounding with the disappointment hanging in her eyes.

"I'm sorry."

I was sorry. All the damn time. For the year in jail. Sorry for what I did at Hopper's. Sorry for what I put Mom and Tim through. Sorry for falling into the same trap as my dad. My heart hit against my chest hard, and my skin felt too tight, just like always whenever I thought about *him*.

When I got out of jail, I vowed to do right by my family, to make up for my mistakes. Instead I was doing exactly what I had done before: following orders. It clicked into place then, what I needed to do. How to make things right. How to protect my family. How to show my brother that I was better than he thought. How to save what little sliver of dignity that hadn't been stripped away.

How to escape Vance's control.

I cleared my throat. "I'll make it right. I promise."

I never stopped thinking about Mom and Tim while in jail. It was

hard not to let my mistakes fester, to kick myself for letting them down when I was surrounded by the reminders of my shortcomings on a daily basis. I couldn't take those things back, but maybe I could give them a clean slate. Away from me.

Tim stood up and walked over to the sliding door where our tiny balcony stood. The view wasn't much. Just gray buildings and a parking lot full of rusted and broken-down cars.

I stared at the squared shoulders and clenched fists of my brother, and I knew I was just like my father—a disappointment. It cemented my decision.

Mom pushed back her chair, face contorted in anger. "What were you thinking?" she hissed.

I pulled my arms back from the table and stared at the roll of paper towels at the center, preparing myself for the onslaught coming my way.

"After everything? How could you? You said you were out, Corey!" Mom raged. "What would your nana think?"

I closed my eyes at the mention of my grandfather, Mom's dad. The man who tried to do his best by us after Dad died. Nana passed away when I was twelve, before I went to X for a job. And I was glad he wasn't alive, because sometimes I thought that if he had lived to see what I had become it might have been the death of him.

"Don't." I ground out the words, "Don't bring him into this. I was only thinking about keeping you alive, Mom. That's all I ever think about." I pushed away from the table, chair scraping against the floor. I grabbed my plate and walked it to the kitchen sink, hands shaking. "It'll be fine. Don't worry." I placed the plate down and grabbed ahold of the counter and focused on breathing.

I turned around and stared at my brother, his eyes wide with fear

and sadness, and Mom's shaking shoulders. This was my life. From the outside it didn't appear to be a lot, but it was all I had and I'd be damned if I let anything happen to what little I had left.

I could handle going back to jail and sitting in a cell that was so cold it dug into my bones. The one that smelled like wet concrete and mold, where the only comfort I found was in knowing my family was safe.

"What do we do if you can't fix this?" Mom wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and finally faced me.

"You will be taken care of, Mom. No matter what. I'll make sure of it."

I grabbed my bike and exited the apartment. Mom and Tim didn't try to stop me. They'd be okay. They had Stan now. That gave me some solace.

Everything comes with a price. It took longer for me than most to realize the cost: freedom.

We struggled after Dad died. We had nothing, and the bills started to pile too high. So I did the only thing I could think of—I went to my dad's old boss for a job. Even at fourteen, I didn't take my responsibilities lightly. I knew in order to keep my family afloat I needed the job. I would succeed, unlike my father. And I did, for a while anyway.

I got comfortable with my way of life. That's when the trouble began.

I rode my bike with heavy legs, making it hard to pedal. I hated riding the thing around, but after I went to jail I made my mom sell my car and use the money to help pay for the lawyer's fees and other bills.

I took my time making my way around town, taking in the scents, the glare of the sun, letting myself feel all of it before it was too late. I stopped at the park and breathed in and out. Stared at the green,

soaking it all in. Trying to memorize it all for later. By the time I was done, the sun was high in the sky and the heat of the afternoon made my sweatshirt cling to my back. I had to get going.

I pedaled faster, the wind whipping at my face, wanting to get it over with already. The closer I got, the more the fear made me numb against the decision I had made. That happened sometimes when I got scared. Instead of making me freeze, it propelled me forward, further into the darkness, digging me deeper into the hole of bad choices.

When I got to the slanted driveway, the fear was what I leaned on to give me the courage for what I had to do next.

TESSA

My feet ached after hours of standing. My shift at Dr. Ford's vet office neared its end. I sat at the front counter, tapping my pen against the check-in clipboard, watching the clock on the wall. I needed to get home and help Dad with the house damage. I managed to convince him not to cancel the rest of his trip. He made me promise to stay away from the house until he got back last night so he could assess the damage for himself. I hated leaving him that morning to do it all on his own, but he insisted that he was fine and that I shouldn't call in sick.

"How you holding up?" Paige walked down from the back room where the animals were kept. She had doodie duty.

Paige gave me a look. "You were thinking doodie duty, weren't you?" Her flat expression only made the laughter bubbling in my chest pop out of my mouth. Paige rolled her eyes. "You are such a child sometimes," she huffed.

I held the clipboard up against my mouth, hiding my wide smile. "Oh, please, don't act like you weren't the one who came up with it."

Placing an elbow on the counter, I shifted my weight to my left leg because my right ankle was still a little sore from the other night.

Paige walked back to the sink and washed her hands, and I went to the computer to check our patient list for tomorrow. I'd already called in reminders to everyone, but Paige had to send out texts to those who had signed up to receive them.

After I got done with the checklist, I went back to staring at the front door and rolling a pen back and forth on the counter. I couldn't wait to get home and shower and wash the smell of wet dog off my skin. Not that I was complaining—I loved working at the vet office. It gave me the opportunity to interact with animals, my main passion after biking, and to learn more about being a veterinarian. Sheila Ford was an excellent mentor. Her love for her job got me excited about my own future.

Grabbing my phone out of my pants pocket, I checked my messages for the umpteenth time.

No text from Dad. I had asked him if I could bring anything home to eat for lunch and he hadn't responded. I fidgeted with the screen before typing out another message.

Dad???? FOOD???

It was very unlike him to not respond when the possibility of takeout was an option.

A soft meow caught my attention, and I glanced down the hall to the row of patient rooms in time to catch Mr. Morrison walking out with his fat gray cat, Barry. Dr. Ford trailed out behind him, her black dreads up in a ponytail.

"Make sure to give him the worm medication, and he will be just fine."

"Thank you, Doc." Mr. Morrison wobbled with Barry under his arm and lifted the cat up to his face. "You hear that, buddy? You're going to be fine."

I stifled a smile. Mr. Morrison came in often with Barry. He was a bit of a hypochondriac when it came to his cat. After Mr. Morrison checked out and paid for Barry's medicine, I officially clocked out.

"Tessa, you know you can take as much time off as you need if things at home need more attention." Dr. Ford picked up a chart, a mug full of sludge coffee in the other hand. She took a sip and the mug came away with a red lip stain.

"Thanks, Sheila. I'll let you know."

I grabbed my bag from under the counter and headed out the door, squinting against the bright sunlight. I walked to the car, head bent as I unzipped my bag to find my keys, when someone collided against my shoulder, jostling my movements.

"Whoa, Hopper. Watch where you're going much?"

I froze and my heart took stuttered beats. Sweat broke along the back of my neck. "Jared." I pursed my lips and met the familiar blue eyes. "What are you doing here?"

The sun glinted off Jared's streaked-blond hair. He wore his usual preppy style button-up and bro-shorts, as Paige referred to them.

"Looking for you, of course." His cocky smile made my stomach writhe, and not in a sexy way.

I grabbed my keys out of my bag and walked around him. "I told you to stop doing that." He quickly blocked my path to the car.

I threw my head back and groaned. "Would you please stop? This"—I pointed to him and then back to myself—"isn't going to happen. Not again."

Jared held up his hands in surrender. "Look, I'm sorry. Please, hear me out, Tessa. I'm not that guy anymore."

I gave him my best skeptical stare. "Move."

"Tess, please." He palmed his hands in a prayer position. No one

was going to answer that prayer, least of all me. "You always said people deserve a second chance."

A shot of anger hit my veins, but I resisted getting drunk on it. "Second chances are for people who own up to their mistakes." I kept my voice level.

Jared's face turned ten shades redder, and I knew I had struck a nerve. But he deserved it after using my own words against me to justify his actions.

"You know who my family is." He stepped closer. "I panicked. I'm sorry."

I placed my palm on his chest and pushed him away. I hated when he invaded my space like that. It was his go-to intimidation tactic. "You left me in the car, Jared! I woke up alone. Do you have any idea how scary that was? No, you don't, because you've never thought about anyone but yourself."

I stomped past him and yanked open the car door. "It's over, Jared," I tossed over my shoulder. "It was over the minute you decided to abandon me after you screwed up."

Sliding into the driver's seat, I slammed the door shut and turned on the ignition, driving out of the strip mall, tires squealing in protest.



By the time I got home, I'd forgotten all about lunch, still reeling from the run-in with my ex.

It turned out I didn't have anything to worry about. Uncle Mike and his husband, my uncle Steven, had brought over some pho from our favorite place, and there was enough left over for me as well. My appetite had taken a nosedive after seeing Jared, but I forced myself to eat and eventually the aromatic, spicy broth worked its magic, and I felt stable enough to help Dad.

Jiminy whined by the back door when I finished changing, and I pulled it open to let him out before running down the steps to where Dad stood in front of the open garage. Sweat dripped down his face. He'd gone on a run to calm himself down, but it appeared to have done little in that department. Instead, he seemed more agitated than before, pacing back and forth, rubbing the back of his neck, muttering to himself about some case he needed to get to and how he didn't have time for this BS.

I grabbed a trash bag and started working, hoping it would give him the push he needed to focus on the task at hand. The anxiety built higher along my nerves. It made it difficult to force past my own fears. The idea of Dad having another heart attack put my life into a crystalline resolution, highlighting all my mistakes, the ugly truths, and the guilt that floated right below the surface of my skin.

I chewed on my lip. The box fan Dad had set up inside the garage leveled out the temperature wavering inside of me. Small ripples of dread shuddered on my skin. I hadn't been inside the garage since the other night. I glanced at Dad quickly; the bags under his eyes were dark and his shoulders hunched over. Worry crested in my chest. I hated how much this weighed on him. I pictured him with the tubes that went through him last year at the hospital after he had his heart attack and fought back the tears clinging to the surface of my eyes.

Grabbing a broken trophy, I stuffed it into a garbage bag, ignoring the pain tracing circles around my chest whenever my eyes passed over Dad's Porsche.

"You don't have to do that, Tess," Dad said, his voice strained. His eyes didn't move away from the car.

I slipped the plastic bag in between my fingers, the elastic stretching against my skin, hoping the touch would help me forget that some idiots had dared to break into our place.

"It's okay, Dad. I don't mind."

He rubbed his head, breathing in and out of his nose, and finally pivoted to me. "You shouldn't be doing that. You act like you're not scared by what happened, kiddo, but I know it bothers you."

I spent last night jerking awake at phantom noises and then pacing the house with my baseball bat for any returning thugs. Not exactly sure what I would have done if the offenders had returned. I liked to think I picked up a thing or two watching way too many kung fu movies with Paige and her boyfriend, Alex, but I most likely would have ended up flailing around like a jellyfish.

"You don't have to be brave for my sake," Dad said.

"Says the man who sleeps with a gun under his pillow." A small corner of his lip twitched. I almost got him to smile. Since coming home, he'd mostly frowned and flared his nostrils. Dad was supposed to go back to work today, but he had let the office know he was taking one more day.

The back of Dad's shirt was drenched in sweat so I grabbed the bottle of water sitting on the workbench, handing it to him.

"Thanks," he mumbled before getting back to work.

I frowned at his inability to take a break and simply rest for more than a few seconds. Jiminy whined by my side, waiting for a pat. I bent down and hugged his black coat. The phone in my pocket buzzed.

Wanna go for a ride later? Alex is getting antsy being cooped up at work all the time.

I read over the text from Paige. I held back a laugh. Like they needed to even ask—I was always down for a ride.

"That Paige?" Dad asked, noticing the smile on my face. He took the garbage bag out of my hand. I nodded. "You should go inside and give her a call."

I tilted my head to the side and crossed my arms. "I can work, Dad. You can't get rid of me."

He shook his head. "Do whatever you want, sweetie. You always have," he said with a laugh.

Taking the bag back, I said, "Maybe you shouldn't have raised me to be so independent, then."

The words left a hole that wanted to expand into my chest. He was right. I did do what I wanted. All the time. At the cost of the ones I loved.

I closed my eyes and tried to fight the image floating in my head from the night of the crash. The sound of glass breaking, the unnatural way the car had turned, the look on Paige's face when she showed up—part fear, part disappointment.

Secrets brimmed and I was afraid they were going to start leaking out of me. Pain and rage radiated from my pores.

I gathered the rage and cradled in against my chest to help me get through the other feeling sitting right under it. Because anger I could do. Anger I could work with. It started when Mom left and connected all the way to the night of the accident. Always there, right at the top of the pyramid of emotions, the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. It was everything else, below the surface, I had a hard time with.

Dad and I worked in silence even though all I wanted was to come clean about the accident. But then I'd have to throw Paige under the bus, too. My mind kept going back to my guilt even though I tried to fight it with my anger, eating and digging deeper and deeper into my muscles. By the end of it, I would simply be bones and organs with the guilt keeping me standing.

It had to end at some point. Didn't it? I had to move on.

When I was about halfway through cleaning the garage, the sound of tires skidding against pavement caught my ears. I looked down the

driveway in time to catch a kid in a familiar dark sweatshirt come walking up to us.

"You have got to be kidding me." Also, a sweatshirt. In June. The guy was asking for a heatstroke.

He approached where I stood. Dad was busy in the back of the garage and had yet to notice him. His steps were cautious and hesitant, hands in pockets, no swagger in his walk. He stopped his approach and our eyes connected. I held in a breath and forced myself to blink, hoping I imagined the whole scenario. But there he stood, and my heart skipped in an agitated beat. I hadn't seen his face that night, but I recognized him anyway. From his walk, the length of his body, the curve of his shoulders.

He cleared his throat. "Mr. Hopper," he said, trying to catch Dad's attention. Jiminy barked a couple of times.

Dad had his arm raised, placing a bucket back on a high shelf. He turned his head and froze when he saw the guy standing in the sunlight while we remained in the shadowed garage.

My heart pounded, the feeling of unease settling between my ribs.

"Corey? What are you doing here?"

My whole body froze. "Wait. Dad, you know this guy?" I looked back and forth between the two of them.

Dad wiped his brow. "Yeah. Corey's the kid I told you about. The one I prosecuted last summer?" Dad's brows wrinkled. "Are you here to take me up on that offer?"

Last summer. Right. Last year Dad sent an eighteen-year-old kid to jail for drug possession. Nothing new—in fact the case was pretty cut-and-dried. Except Dad didn't think the kid was guilty. He thought this guy, Corey, took the fall for someone else and tried to cut him a deal. Corey refused to budge. Claimed he was guilty. Dad, the human

lie detector as I liked to call him, didn't believe him. They were at an impasse.

I remembered how frustrated Dad was, how it ate away at him. And then the heart attack happened and I forgot about the case; it got buried beneath the memories of fear and pain. Apparently, Dad hadn't forgotten.

Corey pocketed his hands. "No, sir. I'm here to turn myself in."

Dad stared, the silence cutting the space between them. "What do you mean?"

"It was me. I was the one who vandalized your home."

I took a moment to get a good look at Corey, anger filtering my vision. "What are you doing?" I asked. Why was he doing this? He could have easily gotten away with what he had done the other night. I never saw his face; there were no other leads.

Dad shook his head. "You did this?" He swept an arm across the open garage.

Corey nodded.

Dad's hands were in fists by his side. I could sense the rage building inside of him. He flared his nostrils. "Why?" he said through clenched teeth, stepping toward Corey.

My heart started to kick harder, and I dropped my arms to my sides, preparing myself for his next move.

Corey shrugged. "Because I was angry. Because I felt like it." There was no resolve behind his words.

Dad flew across the space between them and grabbed Corey by the collar, startling both of us. "Do you have any idea the kind of danger you put my daughter in?"

"Dad!" I tried to deter him from the direction he headed. Which was straight to Pissed-Off Town, one exit away from I'm-Going-to-Kill-You Ville.

"Tell me who else was involved."

Corey's face flushed red; his eyes contained a panic I'd seen a few times in my life. All from boys who'd come over to pick me up for a date. Fear. He looked so scared and young. He was simply a boy. A boy dumb enough to return to the scene of the crime.

I shook my head and tried to get rid of those thoughts. Corey should be scared after what he did. "Dad." I lifted my hand and placed it on his shoulder. "Calm down."

Beneath my fingers, the tension in Dad's body flexed in his muscles. "No, he needs to answer the question first." Everything he'd kept in the last forty-eight hours slowly came undone, all the frustration and anger and hurt.

"Dad, please," I pleaded. But he wasn't listening. "You have to. He's never going to talk when you're attempting to kill him. You're going to give yourself another heart attack." The panic in my voice shook through the grasp I had on it as I whispered in a harsh tone.

Dad turned to me, his face softening. His body relaxed, and I removed my hand from his shoulder.

"Is this how you pay me back for what I did for you?" Dad's body sagged in defeat. "Destroy my home, my sense of security, put my daughter at risk? You better tell me about the others before I take you down."

And there it was. Dad and his threats were as familiar as the freckles on my left forearm. The guy straightened, and his eyes roamed my face in a flash, then went back to Dad's. What was he doing here? Why wasn't he at home?

Whatever the reason, I knew one thing—it probably wasn't going to end well for either of us.

COREY

My throat squeezed tight, and I breathed through my nose. Hopper removed his hands from the collar of my sweatshirt, and I swallowed the pain before taking a full breath. My chest heaved heavy while Hopper and I eyed each other. I rubbed the back of my neck.

The girl, Tessa, kept staring at me. Her lips set in a straight, grim line.

"They cut your tongue out in jail?" Hopper's nostrils flared.

I shifted my gaze back to Hopper and fought the urge to turn around and run back home. I could go back and pretend like nothing happened. Continue following X's orders, continue being leashed to Vance, continue to try to calm him when he came up with some crazy scheme and then pay for it when I did. But I didn't want to spend what time I had being someone else's pawn anymore. I wanted to make one decision for myself. Even if it cost me my freedom, at least I had a say in it.

"It got out of hand, and that's my fault, sir. I came here because I want—no, I need—to make things right."

Hopper crossed his arms and stared me down. It reminded me of the first time we met at court. The intense way he held

himself, how he refused to drop his gaze. My quiet affirmation to the crime. I forced myself to pull my shoulders back and stand up straight. Hopper continued to size me up while I tried not to sweat bullets.

"Is this the guy you saw the other night, Tess?"

Tessa wrung her hands.

"Tessa?" Hopper urged.

I couldn't rip my gaze away from hers. My body fought the edgy adrenaline pushing sweat onto my skin.

"I'm sorry." What was it about the girl that made me constantly apologize?

"Yeah," she answered, clenching her jaw. "You've already said that. It's him."

"I'm sorry for how far it went. I'll pay you back for the damage, go to jail for it. It's fine. I deserve it."

Hopper let out a laugh. "Pay me back? You have any clue how much money it's going to cost to fix that car? Thousands of dollars. You got that kind of money?"

No, I didn't. I had some scraped together to keep our family afloat before I went to jail. Now I had next to nothing. The thought didn't bring that resounding sense of calm I needed; instead, it made my sweat stick to my clothes.

"I didn't think so." Hopper took a step forward. "Are you still involved with the same people as before?"

A peace offering. That was what he was giving me. If only I could partake. "It doesn't matter. It was my idea to begin with. The other guys were following my orders. Call the cops. Put me away. I can handle that, but I'm not ratting anyone out for my mistakes."

There it was. The confession to seal the deal. Now I had to wait to find out my fate. My hands grew unsteady, the reminder of the

cold I could never shake loose in that jail cell creeping up on me. I clenched them, tensing my arms to keep the shakes away.

"Corey?" Hopper's voice was pleading.

I flicked my eyes away from him to the garage.

Mistake.

The car was a tragedy. I couldn't see my paint job from where I stood. The house itself was a mess. They'd picked up most of the trash the guys dumped everywhere, but the spray-paint job would take a while to paint over.

"Do you know what's going to happen if you plead guilty to this? You already have a felony drug charge on your record. There's no coming back from this. If you're confessing for someone else, you need to tell me. I can cut you a deal. No time served."

My nonanswer was answer enough. I didn't understand him. He was pissed earlier, wanted-to-kill-me pissed, but now he seemed almost reluctant to call it in.

I didn't want to go back to jail, but if it meant I got away from Vance and kept my family safe, then I could do it.

"Dad." Tessa's voice cut through my thoughts. It was loud, but soft. The other night when she yelled at us, it boomed, carried the fear of God in it, I swear. It was still there—that sense of authority, self-assurance. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Hopper gave me a quick, pitying glance. He studied me like I was some pathetic beaten dog that followed him home, one he didn't want to turn away, one he wanted to invite in and take care of. Maybe I was that pathetic dog, but I could take care of myself.

Hopper and Tessa went into the garage. Their whispered conversation carried over to me.

"I can see the wheels turning in your head, Dad." Tessa shot me a furrowed expression. "What are you thinking?"

I turned my back to them to give them some privacy. Their dog sat by my feet, his big brown eyes studying me. He whined and scooted closer to me, seeking a pat or belly rub. Snatches of whispered conversation caught my ears. One question in particular snagged there.

"Do you trust him?" Tessa's question made me flinch.

Did Hopper trust me? At some point while he visited me in jail our relationship started to grow into some form of it, but I all but destroyed that on Friday night. I turned back to the garage. Whatever they were discussing started to take too long, and I needed to get out of there. I had a few things to take care of before I headed back to prison. I had to call my mom, tell her what was going on. I had to apologize to Tim and let him know that I loved him, encourage him to keep trying at school. Then there was Stan. I needed to make sure he'd continue to take care of my family in my absence.

Hopper placed a hand on his hip and took a turn around the garage. His eyes met mine. The back of my neck prickled, and I turned my gaze to Tessa, who stood staring at me with not only a steady fierceness but also an unfamiliar expression. Part of me thought it was doubt or maybe even guilt. But I had no idea what she had to doubt about me; I confessed. And she sure as hell didn't have anything to feel guilty about.

She chewed on her lower lip and lifted a shoulder. "Okay."

Hopper pulled his daughter in for a short hug and retraced his steps to me. The heat of the day rose, and the sun became a glare in my line of vision. I blinked a few times and forced myself to swallow the bile threatening to rise up my throat.

"Can you wait a few minutes before making the call? I have some things to take care of before they take me away." I turned around and started to make my way to the bike.

"Corey, I'm not turning you in."

Hopper's words sliced through my movements.

"What?" I forced myself to turn back around. The question hung in the air, and it tightened its hold on my chest.

"This isn't you, Corey. I don't believe for one second the kid I got to know while he was in prison is capable of this kind of malice. Not unless someone else is calling the shots."

Shit. This wasn't going how I thought it would go at all. Hopper was throwing my whole plan in the trash with his bleeding heart.

"You're going to fix this." Hopper gestured to the house. "Like community service."

"And what does your daughter think of this idea?"

Tessa studied her nails. "I don't trust you, but I do trust my dad." She dropped her hand and finally met my gaze.

I stood near them but still on the outside, contemplating whether I should jump on my bicycle and make my escape or whether I should stay and hear Hopper out on his insane idea.

"What do you say, Corey? Unless you want me to call the cops. I can do that, too. If that's what you really want."

What did I really want?

A tremor climbed up my legs. Maybe it was hope. I couldn't remember the last time that sensation took place. Probably before my dad died. Back when things were simple and all I really wanted was to paint every day. Hopper and his daughter waited, expectation and doubt molding their stances.

I thought about my mom, Tim; I thought about new beginnings and doing something for myself for the first time in a long time. I thought about finally taking my destiny back into my hands.

"Okay. Yeah. I'll do it."

TESSA

Jiminy's tail wagged back and forth. He barked happily a few times. Little traitor. Corey bent down and patted him quickly before standing back up. His lip twitched but he held back the smile and I studied him. His black hair hung loose around his ears, falling over his dark eyes. I made my way down to his nose, slightly crooked, probably from having it broken. His tan skin shimmered in the light and some scruff covered his jawline. I didn't know what to make of him—a guy who came to confess his sins, to take responsibility for his actions despite the consequences.

My stomach twisted with the familiar aching of guilt. Brushing away a loose tendril of my hair, I shifted my focus to Dad. He stood a few feet away from Corey with his arms crossed, wearing an expression caught between relief and worry. I knew the moment he offered to cut Corey a deal that he wasn't going to turn him in. Giving people second chances was Dad's thing. I pushed away memories of my mom and the many times she spiraled.

The guilt harrowed into me because Mom wasn't the only one who spiraled at one time. My own mistakes filled up pages.

I wanted a different me to step up and take responsibility for my actions, to make things right. Then there stood this guy, Corey, who

had already paid for his wrongs and had willingly come back to do so again. He was brave. Braver than I could ever be, I admitted reluctantly.

Corey did the one thing I had yet to: confess. And that had to count for something. When he first arrived, I wanted nothing more than for the police to throw him in a cell and toss away the key, but spending even a few minutes with him made me realize things were more complicated than what they appeared on the surface.

Wasn't I evidence of that?

That was when the idea for the community service had formed in my head. Maybe helping Corey would help free me from the mistakes of my own past. Getting Dad to agree hadn't taken much persuasion on my part.

Corey, of course, didn't need to know any of that. I didn't want him to. We didn't owe anything to each other, and I planned on avoiding him as much as possible while he did his community service.

Corey shifted his weight and pocketed his hands. "When do I start?"

"Tomorrow." Dad held out his hand for a shake. Corey stared, wide-eyed, but shook it.

Dad went back to grab the bag of garbage from earlier and proceeded to dump out the contents.

"Dad, what are you—"

He pointed a finger at Corey. "Part of our agreement is that you have to clean up all of this."

I held back an eye roll.

Corey's stance was a complete one-eighty from earlier. Less afraid and more . . . not confident, but as if he had been standing farther away from us, a dark smudge in the distance, and we were finally closing in on him, the vision clearing.

"I'll be here. And I know you said I can't help with the car, but I'd

like to try." Corey cleared his throat. "I have a friend, Stan; he owns a body shop."

Dad raised a brow at me. I raised mine to him. A slight shake to his head and Dad turned his attention back to Corey. "Okay. Thanks for the referral. Also, I will be here with you at all times. Those are the conditions. Do you agree to them?"

Corey nodded. "Yes, sir."

There was that *sir* again. I didn't even call my own father *sir*. It was weird to align my previous image of Corey with the one he presented to us now. The kid who vandalized our home and had a police record to the one who referred to my father as *sir*.

"Good."

Corey's lips lifted into a small smile, and his whole face changed. I stared at him for a second, taken aback. He glanced at me with a question in his raised brow.

"Come on, let's get inside." Dad started walking away.

"Just a minute." I made a face at Dad when he hesitated.

He rolled his eyes. "Come on, Jiminy," he said, before walking into the house with Jiminy trailing after him.

"Thank you for agreeing to this." Corey's cheeks were red. He scratched the back of his head and pulled the string around his neck tighter, as if to hide himself within the hoodie. But it was too late—I saw him, and he wasn't fooling anyone with that crap.

"There's really no need." The hood fell back, no longer shadowing his face. "My dad can't do all the work by himself. My uncles would help, but he'd never accept it. And I didn't want whatever would have happened to you on his conscience. He already has enough to lose sleep over."

"I understand." He ran a hand through his hair, and the scar on his brow came into view.

I scrutinized Corey. He didn't back down from my stare. A small wisp of a breeze blew through the backyard, alleviating some of the pressure from the heat bearing down on us. After a minute, the intensity grew, warmth flushing along my body. I forced myself to look away. The first thing that caught my eye was the Porsche. I closed my eyes for a second.

When I opened them, Corey stared at me like he was trying to figure out a puzzle. I remembered suddenly that this was the guy who ruined my dad's car with his gang. I stiffened when the realization of what I had done hit me. Corey was in a gang. A gang he still associated with. And my dad and I had just given him an open invitation into our house.

My stomach flipped uneasily. "What?" I snarled.

A wounded expression crossed his face, but it cleared quickly and that barrier he seemed to have built around himself came into full view.

"Nothing. I guess I'll see you around." Corey lifted up his bike and rode off.

I ran up the porch steps and into the house as soon as the bike disappeared around the corner of our driveway. Dad stood by the kitchen sink, taking a long gulp of water.

"Why didn't you try to talk me out of that crazy idea?" I slammed the door behind me.

Dad gave me a look. "Did you really want to see him get carted away to jail?"

"It's not like he hasn't been through it before," I muttered.

Dad placed his cup in the sink and walked over to the freezer. I stood in silence while he took out a carton of ice cream.

"Dad, you know that's not a good idea." I hurried over to him to grab the carton, but he slipped it under his arm like it was a football and dodged my attempts.

"After the last couple of days, I think I deserve some ice cream, kiddo." He shuffled around the kitchen and grabbed a spoon before dropping down onto a seat at the kitchen table.

"To answer your previous question, no, I didn't want to watch Corey get carted away to jail. But I just realized that we have no idea what we got ourselves into. Like at all. I mean, why didn't you want to turn him over in the first place?" I started tugging at my shirt, then tapping my foot.

"Having second thoughts?" Dad said, looking at my foot.

I let out a breath. "Yeah. Kind of. Please help me not completely freak out."

Dad took a bite of the almond praline, his favorite flavor.

"Tessa, I can't help who I am. Corey did what he did because of the people he hangs out with."

He'd voiced my objections. The ones that had been inconveniently absent when I talked to my dad earlier.

I swung an arm up in the air. "You're not helping. What makes you think they're not going to come after us? Dad, that is a very real possibility. If Corey is lying about being the one who went after you, then someone else was pulling the strings."

Dad paused. "You're right. I didn't think that part through."

"Wow, are you admitting you're wrong? That's new. Wait, has hell frozen over? Am I dead?" I hadn't thought it through, either, but I wasn't going to admit it to him when he had so willingly owned up to it for both of us.

Dad shook his head. "Stop it, Tessa Marie. We'll figure this out when he comes over tomorrow. I resent that you don't think I can protect you."

I snorted. "Dad, seriously? You do realize a bunch of goons vandalized our home just the other day."

Dad placed his spoon in the carton. "Look, this neighborhood is safe. This is the first time anything like this has happened here. It's shaken up a lot of people. There's a neighborhood watch already being organized, and the police are increasing their presence in the area. They would have to be completely stupid to come back. But you're right, I need to discuss this with Corey. If there's any danger of his friends coming back here, then I'll call the whole thing off."

"And call the cops on him?"

Dad shook his head. "No. I don't think I can do that. You saw him, Tess. That kid is not some hardened criminal. He's trying to fix his mistakes. I'll figure something out."

I worried my lower lip and tapped my foot again.

"Whatever you have to say, say it now, Tess." Dad folded his hands.

"Can you tell me more about his case like you said you would?"

"What do you want to know?"

I groaned and walked over to the table, taking the seat next to his. "Everything."

Dad nodded thoughtfully. He took another bite of ice cream, and I fought the impatience weaving into my movements, making me shake my leg. I knew better than to push my dad when he was having a moment with his ice cream. It would only backfire.

"The police station got an anonymous phone call last spring. Someone had a tip about a guy selling drugs. He provided the license plate and make of the car for the officers. It was Corey's car. They pulled him over and searched the vehicle."

"What did they find?" I urged.

"A couple of ounces of pot. Even though it's been decriminalized in certain parts of the state, it's still illegal in Branson and that was all the cops needed to take him in. With kids like Corey, it really doesn't take much."

My heart sank. Dad knew what he was talking about because he'd lived through it himself when he was younger. He and Uncle Mike grew up with next to nothing. They built new lives and left the old ones behind. Dad always said it was because of perseverance and a whole lot of luck. This was one of the reasons he tried to help out kids in similar circumstances as much as he could. Not that he went easy on everyone, but when he spotted a chance to better a person's life, he took it.

"And why exactly don't you think Corey's guilty?"

Dad pushed the ice-cream carton to the middle of the table. I grabbed the spoon and took a bite.

"When the officers pulled him over, Corey didn't even hesitate and followed instructions. He's probably familiar with what happens to kids like him if they show even a little bit of resistance, unfortunately. He didn't say a word on the way to the station. He confessed to possession before questioning even began. When I saw him for the first time in the courtroom, he looked like the kind of kid that had already accepted that life wasn't going to deal him any easy hands."

Dad swallowed. I reached over and touched his hand. He pursed his lips in a sad smile.

"I know what that's like. How it feels to be so hopeless. So I decided to talk to him, see if there was any way I could help him. But he was resigned to his fate. I did what I could, spoke with the judge about a reduced sentence. Seeing as how it was his first offense, it wasn't too difficult."

"And you visited him in jail."

He lifted a shoulder. "A few times. After I got out of the hospital, I wanted to check on him. I offered him a job when he got out. He didn't seem interested, but he was polite and didn't refuse my visits. He even showed me some of his artwork."

I leaned back against my chair. "Is he the one that painted those flames on the car?"

"I'm sure. I didn't put it together until he got here. But it was definitely him. Corey has a lot of potential, and it shouldn't be wasted just because of the circumstances he was born into."

I let out a breath, processing the information Dad had shared about Corey. I thought hearing about Corey's history would help ease my mind. It had. I trusted Dad, and once he got the answer from Corey about his gang tomorrow, I would put him out of my mind.

I had other things to focus on. Like trying to figure out how to live with my secret with only a couple of months left before college. The one that wouldn't let go of its hold on me no matter how hard I tried to forget. I thought I had put it behind me, but now with the break-in, it was resurging, threatening to pull me under. I needed to get a grip. Otherwise the walls I had carefully crafted along my heart would collapse, and I didn't know if I could survive what happened after.