

The
Way I
Hate
Him

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MEGHAN
QUINN

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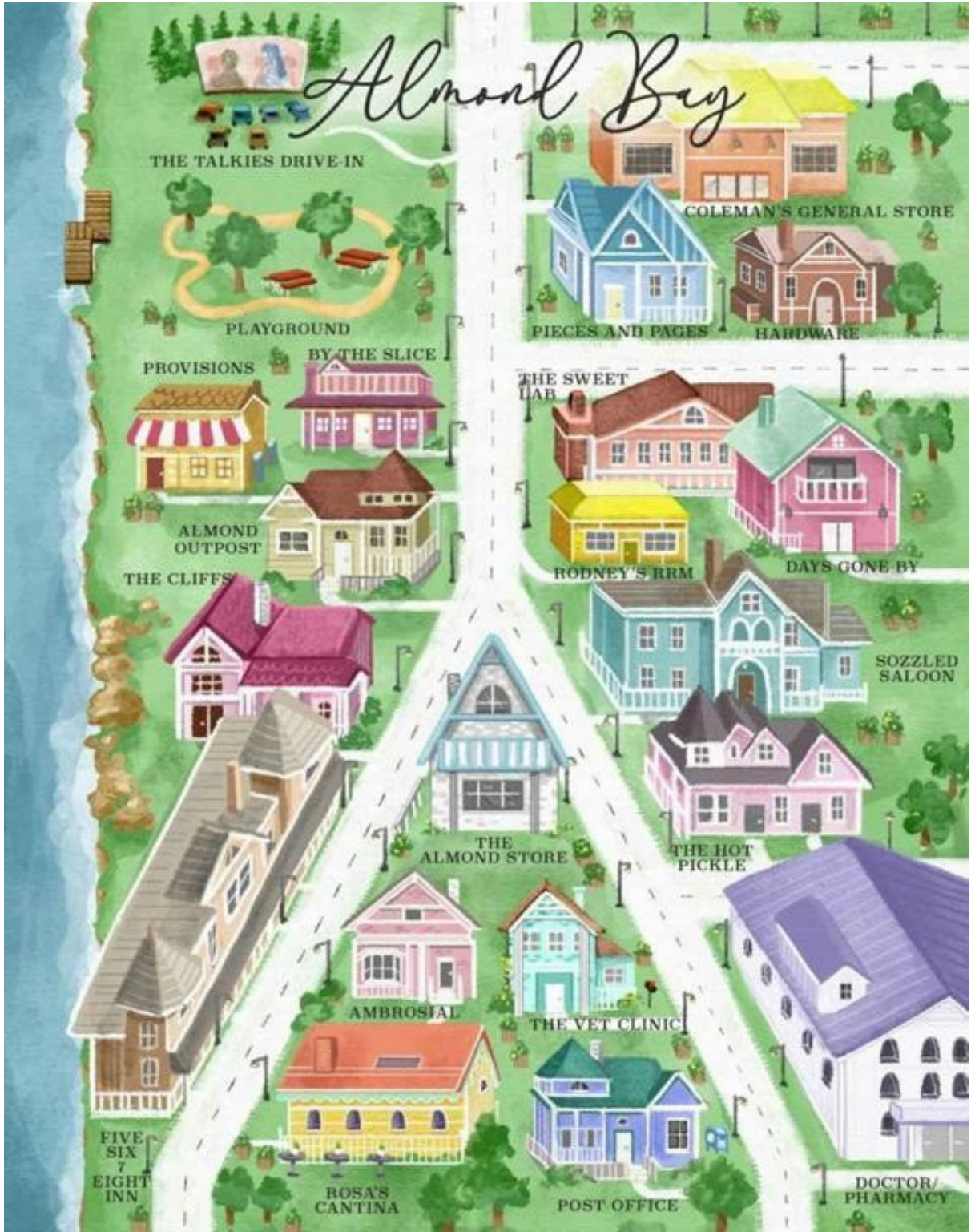
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Prologue

HAYES

“How good are you at giving head?”

The girl straddling my lap, tits bouncing in my face, a G-string being the only thing on her body, leans in with a smirk. “I’ve never had any complaints.”

I wet my lips and rest my head against the back of the couch. “Show me.”

A half-empty tequila bottle is on the coffee table in front of us, salt is sprinkled all over, and her tits are still wet from where I was licking the salt off. Lime wedges are scattered along the floor with her clothes and my shirt.

And . . . I’m not really feeling it.

Fuck, what’s her name again?

I know she told me . . .

Kendall?

Kinsey?

Kaliopé?

She scoots off my lap and kneels between my legs. Before she can undo my pants, I ask, “What’s your name again?”

Her big blue eyes stare up at me, and she seductively says, “Tara.”

Tara?

Oh fuck, I was way off.

A snort pops out of me because, Jesus, I couldn’t have been more wrong.

“Is there something wrong with my name?” she asks, sitting back on her heels.

“No.” I shake my head.

“Then why are you laughing?”

Yeah, dickhead, why are you laughing?

“Your hands tickled my dick,” I say because hell, I’m drunk and can barely hold it together. Her brow rises, and yeah, I realize the truth is probably better. “I thought your name was Kendall. I wasn’t close to guessing it correctly.”

Her brow pulls together with disdain. “Who the hell is Kendall?”

“You got me,” I say just as a knock sounds on my door, and my agent pops his head in. “Dude,” I say, gesturing to Kendall . . . I mean, Tara. Jesus Christ.

Ruben winces. “I have to talk to you.”

“It’s fine,” Tara says as she grabs her dress and stands. “I was leaving.”

My dick wants me to protest, but I don’t have it in me, so I watch as she slips her dress

over her head, shimmying it over her large tits. Such a shame. I would have had fun with her.

But I'll tell you one thing—I'm never fucking desperate for pussy. Ever.

I'm not the begging kind.

So if she wants to leave, I won't stop her.

And from the pause at the door and the glance over her shoulder at me, I know she wants me to stop her, to beg her to stay. Sorry, not going to fucking happen.

I lift two fingers to my forehead and offer a salute, causing her brows to turn down.

"You're an ass," she says as she pushes past Ruben and leaves.

Yeah, tell me something I don't know.

I lean forward with my elbows on my thighs as Ruben shuts the door to my dressing room and straightens his tie. The man is a killer in negotiations and the smartest man I know, but he's a goddamn dweeb. It's not the first time he's walked in on me with a girl, and it won't be the last, yet he still has the same nauseous and uncomfortable look.

I pour myself another shot of tequila but then lift the bottle to inspect it. We didn't drink that much. "Fuck." I sigh. "I think Matt's stealing from me."

Ruben steps closer and picks my shirt up off the ground. He folds it and gently sets it on the coffee table. "Your assistant?"

"Yeah," I answer. "Things keep going missing, and he's the only one besides you allowed in my private space." I lift an eyebrow. "Unless you're stealing from me?"

Utter shock and disgust cross Ruben's face. "You . . . you can't be serious." He tugs on the cuffs of his paisley button-up shirt. "I would never—"

"I'm kidding, Ruben." I toss the shot back and then lean against the couch again. "What's up?"

"Two things," he says, holding his fingers up. "Carlton called and wants to know when to expect the next album." I roll my eyes.

"Jesus Christ, I told him he'll get it when he gets it. I'm just finishing up his goddamn tour."

"That's what I told him, but since you've recently gone viral again, he wants to capitalize on that."

"I'm sure he does," I say. "Well, I have nothing, so he'll be waiting a while."

"Not even a single?"

"Ruben." I stand from the couch and snag the shirt he folded. "You know me better than anyone, do you think I have a single up my sleeve I can just release?"

"Didn't think so, but I thought I'd check." I slip my shirt on. "What would you like me to tell Carlton?"

"I'm working on it."

"Are you?" he asks.

"Nope," I answer, picking up my faded gray baseball hat. "But I will." After slipping it on backward, I grab my phone and place it in my pocket. "What's the second thing?"

Ruben hesitates. "Abel called."

That makes me pause and turn toward Ruben. "Why?"

"Your grandma fell again, fractured her hip. She's been asking for you. She thinks this is the end."

"She thinks every day is the end," I say.

Ruben keeps me from moving toward the door when he says, "Abel thinks she really misses you and will say anything to get you home." Ruben sighs. "I think you need to go back to Almond Bay."

Ahh . . . fuck.

Chapter One

HATTIE

“This is humiliating,” I say as I closely approach the place I grew up.

“Listen, no one knows that you failed your last semester. We went over this. You’re taking some time off,” my best friend Maggie says through the car speakers. “Earning a master’s degree isn’t easy.”

“Says who? It’s just like earning your bachelor’s.”

“I’m trying to help you out. Why won’t you let me do that?”

“Because you’re bullshitting me,” I say with a sigh. “God, Maggie, I don’t want to be here.”

“I told you, you could stay with me.”

“In your San Francisco studio apartment where you sleep on a futon because you’d rather have space for your thriving business?”

Yup, my best friend, Maggie, has a thriving wedding planning business. She’s been featured in many bridal magazines and is fully booked until next year. She’s been interviewed by a few key celebrities in the Bay Area who might just throw her business into the big leagues.

And she’s only twenty-three.

And then there’s me. Not that we should compare ourselves, but it’s hard not to when I see her living her dream, and I’m still trying to obtain a master’s in business management but flunking out.

What am I going to do with that degree? I have no idea . . . manage a business?

God, I’m so fucked.

“The futon is my friend,” Maggie says. “And I told you it folds out. There’s nothing like a good snuggle at night.”

“Not happening. Anyway, I haven’t seen Matt in a while. He’s returning from tour, and it would be good to rekindle our love.”

“Rekindle your love . . . You know, I’m in the business of love, and even hearing you say that is making me gag.”

“What do you want me to say? Fuck on every surface?”

“Ew, is that what you’re going to do?”

“Ew? Why did you say ew?” I ask.

“Because Matt gives me the ick. You could do so much better than him.”

“So you’ve said,” I say with a sigh as I turn onto Almond Ave, aka the main street of

Almond Bay, California.

Population 3,239, Almond Bay is on the Northern Californian coast, right above the not-so-famous bay in the shape of an almond. With one whole stoplight in town, we're best known as the birthplace and hometown of the great Ethel O'Donnell-Kerr. Haven't heard of her? Shame on you. Once a bright Broadway star notorious for her renowned leading role in *Annie Get Your Gun*, she spent over thirty-five years on stage and is now the proud owner of our town inn, Five Six Seven Eight. The unofficial town mayor, she makes it her business to know everyone else's business and then selectively spreads the news according to what the news is. Not to mention, she's the community event coordinator, therefore constantly puts on plays, dances, and activities to keep the town together. She's exhausting.

But most importantly, Ethel O'Donnell-Kerr is the matron of the Peach Society.

If you look at Almond Bay from above, the roads connect like an A and have four corners on each end of town. Members of the Peach Society own these four corners. Let me break it down for you:

As you know, Ethel O'Donnell-Kerr owns Five Six Seven Eight. Located in the southeast part of town next to the cliffs that overlook the ocean. Beautiful location.

Second is Dr. Elizabeth Gomez's veterinary clinic. She's the loving, kindhearted lady who you'll find rolling around in the town's park with any animal that approaches her. The nicest of the four, her clinic is situated in the southwest part of town, right next to the post office and the pharmacy/doctor's office.

Third is Coleman's General Store, owned by Dee Dee Coleman in the northeast part of town. The general store has been passed down from generation to generation, and with every generation, it's been given a makeover. It currently has immaculate hardwood floors and beautiful shelving stockpiled with everything you might need. Dee Dee sets the gold standard of what's to be expected from the store owners in town.

And last, By the Slice in the town's northwest, next to the drive-in theater—which is subsequently owned by all four members of the Peach Society. Keesha Johnson is the owner of By the Slice, the pizza shop here in town. Known best for the dip varieties offered for her crisp crust, they range from ranch to honey to something a touch spicier. She has brought in multiple Food Network shows to try her pizza, which has put Almond Bay on the map as a food destination. We don't say that around Ethel, though, because as you know . . . Ethel is the main attraction.

These four cornerstones are the holy grail of Almond Bay as well as their owners. They decide what's allowed in town, hold every business to a high standard, and keep the residents in check.

And why are they called the Peach Society when clearly our town has gone all in on almonds? Because the cornerstones of our town, the holy grail of women, are all lesbians, and that's what they decided to call themselves.

I'm here for it.

"You're seriously going to stay with him?" Maggie asks, clearly disgusted with me.

Matt isn't *that* bad.

Sure, he's had his quirks, and it would be nice if he acknowledged me more when he's on tour. And maybe he forgot about my birthday once, but people get busy. I once forgot to tell him how much I liked his new Nikes when he sent me a picture, and according to him, I committed a sin. So we all apparently make mistakes.

"He's my boyfriend, so . . . yeah, I'll stay with him."

"Or, hear me out. You go to his place, break up with him, and seek refuge somewhere else, like . . . oh, I don't know . . . Hayes Farrow's house?"

"Maggie," I groan, fiercely annoyed with the mention of Hayes. The moment she found out I lived in the same town as the one . . . the only . . . Hayes Farrow—breaker of hearts and

delicious musician—she’s been clawing at me to go see him. “How many times do I have to tell you? We hate the man, according to my brother, and if anything, I’m a well-trusted sibling who will hate the people my sibling hates. Plus, Hayes Farrow is a giant dick.”

“Oooo, I bet he has a giant dick.” She never gives up. “And tell me this, if you’re supposed to hate him, how come I hear you listening to his music all the time?”

All the time is a bit of a stretch, but . . . *raises hand* guilty.

I might not like the guy. He might be one of the biggest assholes I know, and even though he was born and raised in Almond Bay as well, I refuse to acknowledge he’s more famous than Ethel O’Donnell-Kerr—even though he is—because where she has class and pizzazz, he has a backward hat and a grumpy scowl.

But with all that said, I can’t help but like his music. He has this sultry, seventies rock vibe which is my favorite genre of all time. He did a cover of Heart’s “Barracuda” that made my nipples hard. And thanks to the fact that he likes to wear these low V-cut shirts during his concerts showcasing the apparent muscles he’s grown over the past few years, he’s become a total heartthrob, filling up every social media platform with videos, pictures, interviews . . . and thirst traps. Even Maggie was drooling over a few collages she found on Instagram. To my dismay, she even reposted them on her stories.

You can’t escape him. He’s everywhere.

Clearing my throat, I say, “I barely listen to his stuff.” Lies, I have a secret Spotify playlist of his songs. “He’s overhyped. Not to mention, my boyfriend works for him as his assistant. Did you happen to forget that? If anything, I listen to his music to support my boyfriend.”

“I like that you’ve rationalized all of this in your head.”

“I haven’t rationalized anything,” I say, taking a right on Nutshell Drive toward Matt’s apartment. “I’m just stating the facts.”

“Whatever makes you feel better, Hattie.”

“Well, I’m getting close, so I should go.”

“Okay. I miss you already, and if you need anything, you know where to find me. I plan on coming up in a few weeks. I’ll reserve a room at the inn because there’s no way in hell I’m staying with you and Matt.”

There wouldn’t be enough room anyway.

“Sounds good.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too, girl,” I say before hanging up and pulling into the back parking lot of Matt’s apartment building—if that’s what you want to call it. It’s two houses broken up into apartments. Matt makes really good money, but he’s been wisely saving it rather than paying expensive rent or a mortgage.

He’s always been smart like that. We met back in high school. He’s a year older than me, and when he graduated and shipped off to San Francisco for school, I followed him. I’ve been waiting for him to pop the question, and I’m pretty sure he’s been waiting for me to finish school, which . . . well, I think we know how that’s going. He’s been traveling with Hayes anyway, so it’s not like a proposal was coming anytime soon.

I can still remember when he got the job with Hayes. He told me to my face he didn’t care that there was bad blood between my family and Hayes, but he was taking the job. My brother, Ryland, went on and on about the lack of loyalty, my sister Aubree told me I needed to dump his ass immediately, and Cassidy . . . well, I can’t stomach thinking about her right now.

And with all that, I stayed with Matt because . . . because he’s my high school sweetheart. And you can’t fault the guy for getting a great job with a musician who, I hate to admit . . . is going somewhere. Well, I guess at this point, he’s already *gone somewhere*, made a splash,

and is living in the glory of his fame.

I turn off my car and head toward the back door of his apartment. I called him ahead of time to let him know I was coming. No one likes a surprise visitor. Also, I wanted to make sure he had time to clean up and shower. He's rabid when he sees me.

I knock on the back door, and as I wait for him to answer, I glance around the back of the building. Even for an apartment/townhome, it's pristine thanks to the Peach Society. I've seen Dee Dee walk around the town early on the weekends before the general store opens, taking notes in her notebook of who's not holding up their end of the town's beautification.

It might be frustrating for proprietors, but then again, the town is immaculate.

The door opens, pulling me out of my thoughts. Matt stands on the other side in a plain blue T-shirt and cargo shorts. His hair is longer than normal, and his face is freshly shaved, something I've never cared for.

"Hey," I say, smiling up at him.

He nods at me. "Good to see you, Hattie."

Good to see me? Uh, kind of formal, don't you think?

I move in for a hug, but to my horror, he palms my forehead, keeping me at a distance.

Excuse me, sir!

We don't stiff-arm each other.

I swat for him to pull me in closer, but he braces his arm, not allowing me an inch closer.

"What are you doing?" I ask him.

"Hattie, we have to talk."

I straighten up so he's no longer palming my head. "Why does that sound like you're going to break up with me?"

He sighs heavily. "Maybe you should come in."

"Matt," I say, confused. "Are you breaking up with me?"

"Unless you want the entire town to hear this, you might want to come inside."

Lips pursed together, my heart hammering in my chest, I reluctantly follow him inside. After we walk up the back steps to his second-floor apartment and enter his living room, he turns toward me.

"I've waited to tell you this long enough." He pauses for dramatic effect—because that's the kind of man he is. "I don't want to be with you anymore."

Well . . . God, that's a harsh way of putting it.

Couldn't he have sugarcoated it a bit?

And where is this coming from? Last I checked, we were . . . content. Sure, we haven't seen each other in a long time—he's been on tour, and I've been in school—but we've made long distance work.

"Is this because I live in San Francisco? I . . . I only have one semester left. I mean, I might have to do an extra one because of this last semester, but—"

"It's because I don't like you anymore."

Well, Jesus.

"You . . . you don't like me?" I ask, confused and caught off guard. Where's the consideration for my feelings?

He shakes his head. "No, I don't. I haven't found you entertaining for the past couple of months."

Uh . . . what's that?

Did he just say entertaining? Pardon me, but I wasn't aware that was part of my responsibilities as a girlfriend.

"Entertaining?" I ask in a low, steady voice. My hurt quickly subsides as anger rears its ugly head. "Oh, I wasn't aware that, as your girlfriend, my main duty was to entertain you."

"Don't do this," Matt says with an irritated sigh as he turns away.

“Do what?” I ask, tugging on his hand so he’s forced to face me.

“Be dramatic about this. Okay? Let’s be mature adults.”

“Mature adults? Matt, you’re breaking up with me because I haven’t entertained you enough. That’s not being a mature adult. That’s being a fuck wad who expects his girlfriend to dance like a monkey when he demands it.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

I put my hands on my hips. “Then what exactly did you mean?”

“You’ve just been . . . lackluster. Mopey. And it hasn’t been fun to be around you. Or on the phone with you.”

My eyes nearly pop out of my head. Mopey? Is he fucking kidding me?

“That’s because my fucking sister died!” I yell.

To his credit, he keeps his voice steady. “I understand that, but you were mopey before your sister died, and to be honest, I did the right thing and waited to break up with you after a couple of months. I wanted to break up with you before your sister died but waited.”

I sit back on my heels, raise my hands, and offer him the slowest clap known to man. “Well, pin a fucking rose on your nose, Matt. You are truly a hero.”

“See, I knew you were going to be like this,” Matt says as he moves toward the couch and flops down. “I knew you were going to be dramatic about it.”

“I’m not being dramatic.” I point at my chest. “This is a normal reaction for someone finding out their boyfriend of nearly eight years is breaking up with them . . . because he finds her boring.”

“I didn’t say boring,” he says, pointing his finger at me. “We had some good times, but just lately, you haven’t been fun, and now that we’re older, I’m afraid you’re settling, and I don’t want to settle. I want to be free. I want to be with someone who wants to do fun things, travel the country, get in trouble.”

“I’ve been in school,” I yell. “What did you want me to do? Skip class to go steal something from your boss?”

“See, that’s the kind of fun I’m talking about,” Matt says. “Remember the night we stole one of Hayes’s Grammys? That was a night to remember.”

“And so fucking illegal. You’re lucky we didn’t get in trouble.”

“But that’s what I’m talking about, that kind of fun.”

“Felon fun?” I ask. “Is that what you want? To be a felon? Because if that’s the case, have a good life, Matt. Not interested.”

He rolls his eyes. “You’ve become such a square, Hattie.”

“I’m not a goddamn square. You’re going through some sort of pre-midlife crisis. I’m sorry if I’ve been mopey and not fun, but that happens when your closest sister has stage four breast cancer, and you have to watch her slowly die. So yeah, maybe I wasn’t fucking fun.”

“Thank you for admitting it.” He throws his hands up in the air as if he just won the battle and is relieved.

And for a second, I have this out-of-body experience as I stare at Matt, the man I thought I’d marry one day. Yeah, we’ve had our ups and downs, and we might have been drifting apart lately, but I still loved him . . . but this man standing in front of me, this is a different man. This isn’t the man I fell in love with.

He’s cruel.

He’s rude.

He’s inconsiderate.

He’s . . . as Maggie put it so eloquently, he’s the ick.

And I can’t believe I’m finally seeing it. Talk about rose-colored glasses. Cassidy never liked Matt. Maggie has never liked him. Ryland tolerated him, and Aubree told me to dump him back in high school. It’s taken me this long to realize what kind of character he has, so

what the hell does that say about me?

After a bout of silence, he stands from the couch, presses his hands into a triangle, and says, "Anyway, I'm moving out, so you're going to have to grab your stuff and get it out of here."

"You're moving? You didn't plan on telling me?"

"I did. I'm telling you now."

Nearly growling with frustration over my stupidity for liking this man, I push past him, stiff-arming my hand into his shoulder to get him out of the way, and grab an empty box on the couch.

"Hey," he bemoans as he rubs his shoulder. "You don't need to get physical."

"That was barely on the blip of what I could do to you, Matt, and unless you want to find out the full extent of my physicality, I suggest you give me ten minutes to myself to grab my shit and leave."

He slowly nods, eyes on me. "So I'm guessing you won't want to be friends with me after this?"

Add moron to the list of things that Matt is.

Moronic ick.

Yup, couldn't have said it better.

"Friends?" I scoff. "Matt, I'll be spending the next year of my life manifesting the shit out of you losing your testicles by an inmate you meet on your first day in jail after committing one of your felonies you seem to find joy in."

His face falls flat. "Don't you fucking dare."

I press my fingers to my temples and squeeze my eyes tight like a child. "Thank you, universe, for introducing Matt to Homer, the inmate with the vise grip, and popping Matt's testicles right off his body."

"Stop that," Matt yells, pulling my hands from my head.

"It's out there, beware." I twiddle my fingers at him.

"You know, I'm glad I broke up with you. You're all kinds of fucked up."

"Ha, pot calling the kettle black, Matt."

With my box back in my hand, I move toward the bedroom, and before entering, I look over my shoulder. "Ten minutes. Get out of my face, or I'll call my brother, and he'll take care of you for me."

Knowing Matt is absolutely terrified of Ryland, he descends the stairs in a hurry, shutting the door behind him.

What a fuckwit.

I'm not entertaining enough . . . who says that to another human being? Let alone someone they're supposed to love. The standards these days, sheesh.

I sigh and lean against the doorway of the meager bedroom, staring into the nearly empty room, with just a few of my things on the unmade bed as well as a box full of his possessions. He's been planning this all along and couldn't have even given me a heads-up as I drove here. My biggest concern in seeing him was that he showered, and now . . . this is what I'm dealing with.

You're better off.

You didn't even love him that much either. The past couple of months, he's shown his true colors. He wasn't there for me like a boyfriend should have been while I dealt with losing Cassidy. I blamed it on his work schedule, when in reality, I should have blamed it on his lack of concern.

As much as my pride might be hurting at the moment, I know deep down this is probably for the best.

Doesn't make me any less bitter, though. Nope . . . I'm going to ride that bitter train for as

long as I can.

I move into the bedroom, set my box on the bed, and start piling my items in it.

Oh, how nice of him, giving me all the pictures he has of us together, as if I'd want the reminder of his idiotic face.

No, thank you.

I toss the pictures in the trash and then sift through the rest of the junk he assumed was mine.

Some cosmetics.

A book I bought for him that he never read because heaven forbid, he does something other than look at his phone.

A broken iPhone charger. Pleasant.

A few pens from different hotels he's stayed at. What on earth? Toss.

A pair of his boxers. *Is he for real?*

And two of my shirts that I will in fact be keeping because they're vintage rock band shirts, and I've been looking for these. But the rest, mainly the boxers and the pens, can be shoved into his box.

Speaking of his box . . .

Curious as to what he considers his, I thumb through the box that he has marked as his. Let's see what he has in here . . . Oh . . . oh my, would you look at that. These aren't his things. These aren't my things, no . . . these are his boss's things.

A signed Hayes Farrow album, his first. A hat that looks like his. Some T-shirts. I move aside the shirts and find a few bottles of tequila—unfortunately, a drink I know Hayes likes to consume. What is this? Some sort of fanboy box? *What the hell is Matt doing with all these things?*

I paw through it a little bit more, and then a flash of gold . . . the Grammy.

Holy crap.

I pull it out of the box and examine it.

Best New Artist: Hayes Farrow.

I remember seeing him accept this on stage. He was wearing a black suit with a white button-up shirt, the first three buttons undone, showing off the leather necklace with a silver pendant he wears everywhere. He combed his hand through his hair in disbelief as he stared down at it and thanked his grandma for buying him his first guitar.

And then . . . Matt and I stole it.

Well, I didn't really steal it. I was an accomplice. I held the door open for Matt. I wasn't sure what he was doing until we were in the car, and he pulled it out of his suit jacket.

I've felt bad knowing Matt has had it even though Hayes Farrow is the scum of the earth.

Even the scum of the earth deserves their *well-earned* trophies.

Eyeing the box of my things and the fanboy box, I make the executive decision. I toss my shirts in the fanboy box along with the Grammy, and as I clutch it close to my chest, I head toward the staircase.

There can't possibly be anything in this apartment that I care about—oh wait, my puzzles.

I pause in the living room and set the box down. Confused by the liquor bottles Matt collected, I pull them out of the box, making some room, and put them in the box on the bed I left behind. I then open the cabinets under the TV and spot three of my puzzles stacked neatly together.

Oh noooo, I'm not leaving my puzzles with Matt. Grant him hours of entertainment? No fucking way.

And he said I wasn't entertaining. Clearly, he forgot about these purchases.

I slip my puzzles into my box, then head back down the stairs and open the door to the outside. Matt stares down at his phone—shocker—while sitting on the stone wall that encases

the parking lot behind the buildings. He glances up. "That was quick."

"It smelled like you in there, and it was sickening. The quicker I could leave, the better."

"You used to like the way I smell," he says, for God knows what reason. Maybe he's starting to have regrets.

"Well, things change. Just like you changed your feelings about me, your signature scent has also changed. Quite musky smelling if you ask me, like an old bottled-up fart."

His expression melts into irritation. "Once again, very mature, Hattie."

"Glad I could be of service," I say as I stick my box in my car and open the driver's side door. "And for the record," I say loud enough in case anyone wants to listen. "You're terrible at giving oral, you couldn't find my clit if it knocked you on the nose, and your penis is crooked, and not in a good way. It felt more like trying to wrangle a bent pencil in my vagina than getting pounded by a beefy salami."

"Oh, fuck off." He points his finger at me. "I made you come every goddamn time."

"It's called faking it, Matt." And with that, I turn my car on and drive off, his steaming face in my rearview mirror.

Task number one of making him feel inferior, done.

Now, task number two . . . get him fired.

Chapter Two

HAYES

I forgot how quiet it was here.

I've been on the go for the last goddamn year with the tour, interviews, and promotions with all my sponsors that I forgot what it meant to sit in a quiet spot and listen to nature around me.

I arrived back in Almond Bay yesterday and stopped by to see my grandma first thing. As expected, she was as happy as she ever is. Just as I thought, she'd lured me back to Almond Bay, knowing damn well I was done with my tour. I probably would have come back anyway. I enjoy the calm, and I need calm right now with my label breathing down my neck.

When I arrived, she gave me her signature hug and kiss, and then we sat down on her balcony that overlooks the town while her aide brought us tea. I offered to grab it, but she told me to sit down—and I listened to Gran bitch to me about the Peach Society for two solid hours.

Gran has NEVER gotten along with Ethel O'Donnell-Kerr. Something about stealing her man back in the day. She won't go into it because it makes her too upset, and Gran makes it a point not to rage—she says it brings on too many wrinkles. She also doesn't like how Ethel claims the top celebrity card in Almond Bay because, as Gran says, I'm more of a household name than Ethel could ever dream.

I made sure Gran was comfortable, spoke to her aide, Roseanne, and then headed back to my place, about ten minutes up the coast. Just far enough away from Almond Bay to offer me my sought-after privacy.

I purchased the coastal home a few years ago and renovated the entire thing, swapping out the bright white palette for deep grays, blacks, and greens, along with concrete floors and sophisticated leather furniture. I designed the entire renovation, focusing on bringing darkness to the tall windows and nature inside with fresh plants that I pay my buddy Abel once a week to water. At first, he wouldn't take payment, but after a month of heading to my place, he changed his mind. Not like the man needs money as the doctor and owner of the pharmacy in town. He's sitting pretty. But he's not a fool. He's not going to perform a task for free for over a year.

He also keeps a close eye on my grandma while I'm gone and makes biweekly checkups to make sure she's doing okay.

A light wind blows through the tall bushes surrounding my porch as I lean against my black Adirondack chair. It feels good to take a break for a second, step away from the tour,

and be back in Almond Bay, even though more tragic than good things have happened here. My childhood wasn't anything a child should experience.

Yelling.

Emotional abuse.

Abandonment.

I had to grow up sooner than any child should, and I truly believe I'm where I am today because of the one person who wouldn't give up on me, my gran. It's why I bought a house here, so when I was taking a break from the fast life, I could come back, visit with her, and have a place just outside of Almond Bay to relax. *So why did I need to be persuaded to return this time?*

Probably because I'm so fucking lost, I don't even know what I need in my life to be happy—but let's not get into that.

Even though I'm here to write some songs, there's a household full of boxes and mailings that have to be sifted through, organized, and dealt with. A task my assistant would have taken care of, but unfortunately for me, I fired him this morning for stealing. He tried to claim I needed to keep him on because he had to support his girlfriend, who had just failed out of school and didn't have a job, but I told him to take his sob story somewhere else.

Which has put me in a tough situation.

My phone chimes, and I glance down at the screen. *Ruben.*

Fucking hell, I can't escape it. Not even for a morning.

"Hello?" I answer.

"Hayes, I just received a complaint from Matt that you fired him. Is this true?"

"He did not fucking call you." The balls on that guy.

"He did. Begged me to put in a good word for you. Claims he has to support his girlfriend or something? What's going on?"

"Said the same bullshit to me," I say. "And the answer is no. The fuck was stealing from me."

"Do you know that for sure?"

"Ninety-nine percent positive," I say. "I have camera footage of him and a girl leaving my house one night. I noticed my Grammy was missing after that. I didn't want to assume it was Matt, but he was the only one with access to my house. I decided to watch him carefully, and that's when I noticed things going missing. Tequila, shirts, hats. Pretty sure he was collecting the shit to sell and make more money."

"Do you want me to press charges?" Ruben asks.

"No, but tell the fuck that I will if he keeps bothering us. Tell him he's fucking lucky it's me he's dealing with and not someone else."

"I'll take care of this, don't worry." Ruben clears his throat. "Are you in Almond Bay now?"

"Yeah, saw Gran yesterday. She's looking good. Plan on catching up with Abel later."

"And maybe there's some writing going on as well?" Ruben not so nonchalantly presses.

"Dude, I'm going to fire you if you keep pressuring me."

"We just need something. A scrap of something. Anything to hold over the label."

"I know." I drag my hand over my face as a red car pulls into my driveway. "I'll work on it. Hey, someone is here. I have to go."

"Okay, keep me updated, and I'll take care of Matt. Want me to look for his replacement?"

"No," I answer right before hanging up.

I set my phone down on the armrest and remain seated as I watch the car door open. Because of the bushes lining my sidewalk, I can't get a good look at who it is until a box is hoisted in front of the person, and they start walking toward me.

Her tan, toned legs come into view first.
Pristinely white sneakers.
Olive-green spandex shorts.
An oversized sweatshirt.
Her face is blocked, but I do notice a long, honey-blond ponytail swishing back and forth.
I stay seated, observing as she sets the box in front of my door . . . and that's when I get the first look at her.

Holy shit.

Fucking Hattie Rowley.

What the hell is she doing here?

Pretty sure her brother would have a goddamn heart attack if he knew she was at my doorstep.

Can't remember the last time I saw her, but hell, she's grown up, that's for damn sure. Filled out in all the right places, her hair slicked back into a tight ponytail, an effortless glow to her cheeks, and long, black lashes framing what I know are intense green eyes. All the Rowley kids have them.

She reaches into the box and pulls up a piece of paper and a pen. She faces away from me, giving me the perfect view of her ass as she writes something on the paper. Wasn't she going to school in San Francisco?

Wonder if she still is or if she moved back here after Cassidy passed?

She was dearly loved by the town and by her siblings, and her passing rocked the town. From what Gran told me in one of our weekly talks, Ryland was given custody of Cassidy's four-year-old daughter, MacKenzie, and Aubree, their sister, took over The Almond Store and Cassidy's farm. Both of them have been struggling with the new responsibilities.

Maybe Hattie's back here to help.

When she's done writing, she sticks the paper in the box, and I take that moment to ask, "What did you write?"

She leaps about a foot in the air before falling to the right, up against the house, hand clutching her chest.

"Jesus fucking Christ," she breathes out, her shoulders nearly kissing her ears from shock. When she spots me in my chair, she says, "Have you been sitting there the whole time?"

"Yup," I answer as I stand. Her eyes fall to my bare chest for a moment before they pop back up to my face.

"You've just been sitting there, watching me?"

"Wanted to know what you were doing before I made you aware of my presence."

"That's some freaky shit," she says, pointing her finger at me.

Tilting my head to the side and studying her, I say, "It's Hailey, right?"

I know damn well it's Hattie, but I pretend I don't know to hold the upper hand, especially against a Rowley.

Her eyes narrow as she corrects me. "Hattie."

"That's right, Ryland's sister." I give her a quick once-over. "Does your brother know you've crossed over into enemy territory?"

"He doesn't, not that I'd need his permission." She sticks her chin up. *I get it. You're not intimidated. Never have been.*

"What's with the box?" I ask, nodding toward it.

"Some things I thought you might want. My ex-boyfriend, Matt, your assistant, stole them from you."

Matt was dating Hattie Rowley? How the hell did he manage that? Sorry to say, but she's way out of his league. And why didn't I know they were dating? *Probably because the tool has never spoken about her or even let on that he had a girlfriend.*

Wait . . . was she the one he was talking about? Failed out of college, doesn't have a job? Is that why she's back here in Almond Bay? I thought it was because of her sister, but this is a new development. And the fucker lied to me, saying they were still together when clearly, they're not.

Lying and stealing. Thank God I fired him.

I glance at the box, taking in the contents. "I never owned puzzles."

"Oh, those are mine." She snags the boxes and holds them close to her chest. "So anyway, if you want to fire him, I highly suggest it."

I glance down at the box and then back up at her. Almond Bay was a weird place to grow up. There were always odd things happening around town. Like one day, a naked man rode down Almond Ave on a unicycle, and no one blinked an eye. Or the time The Talkies—our drive-in theater—showed a porn film for precisely one minute and thirteen seconds. Everyone just laughed about it. It wouldn't be abnormal for someone to drop off a box of stuff and request their boyfriend be fired. I'm just surprised it's coming from a Rowley, the least eccentric family in town.

Then again, from what I've observed, Hattie has always been different.

"Why would I fire him over a few T-shirts?"

Her eyes fall to the box. "Shit, those are mine too." She picks them up, and what I see underneath makes my teeth clench.

My Grammy.

I knew the fucker stole it.

Keeping it cool, I bring my attention back to her. "How long have you dated Matt?"

"Since high school, and if you're going to judge me about being with him, he wasn't an anus back then. He took over that title just recently."

"I see." I glance back at the box. "You know, I have video footage of the night my Grammy was stolen." I bring my gaze back to her and catch the widening of her eyes and the clench of her mouth. Just what I thought. Fucking guilty. "And Matt wasn't alone."

"It wasn't me. Whatever you're thinking, I had nothing to do with it." Hell, is she bad at lying.

"Funny, my cameras tell me differently." They actually don't, but I love watching her squirm.

Her mouth falls open, appalled, but she quickly closes it. Her eyes study me, gauging her next move. A few seconds go by, silence falling between us, and then in a flash, she turns on her heel and bolts to her car.

She's not going to get away that easily. Not on my fucking watch.

"Run all you want, but the sheriff will know where to find you."

That makes her pause and slowly turn back toward me. "You wouldn't."

"Wouldn't I?" I ask. "You're a Rowley. Pretty sure we're supposed to hate each other. What would stop me from calling the police and reporting this? I have cameras all over this goddamn house currently recording this conversation. You're caught."

The color drains from her face, and the bravado she had only a few minutes ago has vanished. "Don't call the sheriff," she says, looking scared for a moment. "My family has been through a lot lately, and I don't think my brother could take well, needing to bail me out of anything."

I don't think he could, either. Does he even know about her school—if it's even true? I know Ryland well enough to understand he wouldn't take failing out of school lightly, especially one of his sisters.

I nod toward the house. "Why don't you come in, and we can discuss our options?"

"Options?" she asks, her eyebrow raised.

"Yeah, options." I bend down and pick up the box of stolen items and then open the front

door. “I suggest you follow me. I’m not opposed to calling the sheriff. He’s a huge fan.” I smile broadly, which makes her lips flatten in disgust.

Grumbling under her breath, she follows me into my house, puzzles and shirts in hand, and I kick the door shut when she’s fully in. I set the box of contraband on the entryway floor and head toward my kitchen, but when she doesn’t move, I say, “Come in. I won’t bite . . . at least not yet.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” She’s about to approach me when she stops and adds, “If that’s some sexual innuendo, I’m going to tell you right now, I don’t even like to be bit when having sex. I think it’s weird, also . . . if you think I’m going to be some concubine for you, you better think of something else.”

I turn on my coffee machine and say, “You clearly haven’t been bitten by the right person. That much is true when we think about who you just dated.” I choose a coffee pod—donut shop—and I put it in the machine and start it up. I lean against the counter and face her. “And I could do better when it comes to concubines.”

That makes her anger rear up, her mouth twitching with irritation. “You would be so lucky to have me in your bed.”

I give her a smooth once-over, my hand running along my jaw, and reply, “Debatable.”

“Ugh, you’re such an asshole. No wonder no one likes you.”

“Interesting. I have a fan club of over three million people who would challenge you on that statement.”

“They’re fans. They don’t count.”

I take in my home and then say, “I’m pretty sure they do, since they’re the ones who funded this house you’re standing in and helped me earn the Grammy you stole.”

“Matt stole it, not me. I was just . . . there.”

“Is that the story you’re going to tell the cops?”

“I thought you weren’t going to tell the cops,” she says.

“Never promised that. Said we had to talk about options.”

“Well, what are these stupid options you speak of?” she impatiently replies.

“Why don’t you come in farther, set your shirts and puzzles down, and take a seat? Want some coffee?”

“No,” she answers. “You might poison it.”

“With you watching me make it?”

“I don’t know what you have in those coffee pods. They could be pre-poisoned.”

“I see that we’re acting rational. Good to know,” I reply, full of sarcasm. I pick up my coffee and grab some almond creamer from the fridge—yeah, I live in Almond Bay and drink almond creamer. It’s good.

“Never would have seen you as a creamer kind of guy.”

“Oh, I cream a lot,” I say as she takes a seat on an island chair right across from me.

She sets her puzzles and T-shirts down and rolls her eyes. “You’re disgusting.”

“Or honest?”

“Disgusting.” She folds her arms and says, “Now tell me these options so I can get the hell out of here and never return. My skin is starting to feel itchy.”

Can we say dramatic?

But despite that, what are the options? Because right now, I have no idea what I’m doing other than not letting her slip away just yet. Call it the feud with her brother, but having one of Ryland’s sisters in my clutches feels nice . . . like I have a momentary upper hand over this battle I’ve been unwillingly fighting for over a decade. Not to mention, given my lack of an assistant, I feel like I could use her. I have a room full of boxes and letters from fans that need to be answered. It might work out perfectly.

“You want options?” I ask.