

the
Simple
Wild



a novel

**K.A.
TUCKER**

NATIONAL
BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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**THE
SIMPLE
WILD**

a novel

K.A. TUCKER

ATRIA PAPERBACK

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To Lia and Sadie,

The best things in your lives will never come simply. They'll always be worth it. But, ideally (for my sake), they'll have nothing to do with small planes.

Prologue



November 15, 1993

Anchorage, Alaska

Wren sets the two navy suitcases next to the stroller and then reaches for the cigarette precariously perched between his lips, taking a long, slow drag. He releases smoke into the frigid air. “Just these?”

“And the diaper bag.” I inhale the musky odor. I’ve always hated the smell of tobacco. I still do, except on Wren.

“Right. I’ll go and get that,” he says, dropping the cigarette to the snowy ground and crushing it with his boot. He clasps his callused hands together and blows into them as he rushes back out to the tarmac, shoulders curled inward, to where the Cessna that delivered us here awaits its hour-long flight home.

I quietly watch, huddled in my plush, down-filled coat against the icy wind, fiercely holding onto the resentment I’ve been carrying for months. If I don’t, I’ll quickly be overwhelmed by the pain of disappointment and impending loss, and I won’t be able to go through with this.

Wren returns and settles the hefty red bag on the asphalt, just as a grounds worker swings by to collect my belongings. They exchange pleasantries, as if this is just any other passenger delivery, before the man shuttles my things away.

Leaving us in tense silence.

“So, what time do you get in?” Wren finally asks, giving the perpetual brown scruff on his chin a scratch.

“Noon, tomorrow. Toronto time.” I pray Calla can handle ten hours of traveling without a meltdown. Though, that might distract me from having my own meltdown. At least the next plane is substantial, unlike the tiny things Wren

insists on flying. God, how on earth did I *ever* think marrying a born-and-bred bush pilot was a good idea?

Wren nods to himself, and then pulls our sleepy daughter out of the stroller and into his arms. “And you? Are you ready for your first big plane ride?” His wide grin for his daughter makes my heart twist.

For the hundredth time, I wonder if I’m being the selfish one. If I should grit my teeth and bear the misery, the isolation of Alaska. After all, *I* made the bed I’m running from now. My father was quick to remind me of that when I admitted to my parents that life with Wren isn’t as romantic as I’d convinced myself it would be. When I admitted that I’ve cried at least once a day for the past year, especially during the painfully long, cold, dark winter, when daylight is sparse. That I hate living in the last great American frontier; that I crave being close to my family and friends, and the urban bustle of my childhood. In my own country.

A deep frown line forms in Wren’s forehead as he plants a kiss on our happy, oblivious seventeen-month-old’s nose and sets her onto the ground. She struggles to toddle around, her stocky body bundled in a thick bubblegum-pink snowsuit to keep the icy wind at bay. “You know you don’t *have* to leave, Susan.”

As quickly as I’d been softening, I harden again. “And what? Stay here, and be miserable? Sit at home with Calla under a happy lamp while you’re out, risking your life for a bunch of strangers? I can’t do it anymore, Wren. Every day is harder than the last.” At first I thought it was postpartum depression, but after months of flying back and forth to Anchorage just to talk to a therapist and refill a prescription for antidepressants that did little more than make me sluggish, I’ve accepted that it has nothing to do with hormones. And here I was, naïve enough to think Alaskan winters would be manageable, having grown up in Toronto. That being married to the love of my life would outweigh the challenges of living here, of having a husband whose chances of dying at work on any given day are alarmingly high. That my adoration for this man—and the attraction between us—would be enough to overcome *anything* Alaska threw at me.

Wren slides his hands into the pockets of his navy checkered down vest, focusing his attention on the giant green pom-pom atop Calla’s knit hat.

“Have you at least *looked* into flights over Christmas?” I dare ask, my last-ditch attempt.

“I can’t take that much time off; you know that.”

“Wren, you own the company!” I throw an arm toward the plane he brought us to Anchorage in, to the ALASKA WILD logo across the body. There are plenty more with the same emblem that make up the Fletcher family business, a charter company left to him after his dad passed away five years ago. “You can do whatever the hell you want!”

“People are counting on me to be here.”

“I’m your wife! *I*’m counting on you! *We* are counting on you!” My voice cracks with emotion.

He heaves a sigh and rubs the wrinkles from his brow. “We can’t keep going ’round in circles like this. You knew when you married me that Alaska is my home. You can’t just change your mind now and expect me to up and abandon my entire life.”

Hot tears burn against my cheeks. I furiously smear them away. “And what about *my* life? Am I the only one who’s ever going to sacrifice in this relationship?” I never planned on falling head over heels for an American charter pilot while I was in Vancouver for a bachelorette party, but I did, and since then, it’s been all on me to keep us together, and I’ve done it with the reckless fervor of a woman madly in love. I moved across the country to British Columbia and enrolled in a horticultural program, just so I could be closer to Alaska. And then, when I found out I was pregnant, I dropped out of school and moved to Wren’s hometown, so we could marry and raise our child together. Only, most days I feel like I’m a single parent, because Wren’s always at the damn airport, or in the air, or making plans to be.

And what am I left with? Dinner plates that grow cold from waiting, a toddler who asks for “Dada” incessantly, and this inhospitable subarctic soil that I’m lucky to grow weeds in. I’ve just kept on giving this man parts of me, not realizing that I was losing myself in the process.

Wren looks past me, watching a commercial plane as it takes off from the nearby international airport. He looks desperate to be back in the air, away from

this never-ending fight. “I want you to be happy. If going back to Toronto is what you need to do, then I’m not going to stop you.”

He’s right; we can’t keep doing this, especially if he’s not willing to sacrifice *anything* to keep me around. But how can he just let us go like this? When I announced that my ticket was one-way, he did little more than grunt. Then again, I shouldn’t be surprised. Expressing feelings has never been one of Wren’s strengths. But for him to simply fly us here and set our belongings on the cold, hard ground next to us . . .

Maybe he doesn’t love us *enough*.

I hope that my mother is right, and a few months without a wife to cook his meals and warm his bed will jog a change in perspective. He’ll realize that he can fly planes *anywhere*, including Toronto.

He’ll realize that he doesn’t want to live without us.

I take a deep breath. “I should go.”

He settles those sharp gray eyes on me, the ones that ensnared me four years ago. If I’d had any idea how much heartache the ruggedly handsome man who sat down next to me at a bar and ordered a bottle of Budweiser would cause . . . “So, I guess I’ll see you when you’re ready to come home.” There’s a rare touch of hoarseness to his voice, and it nearly breaks my resolve.

But I hang onto that one word to give me strength: “home.”

That’s just it: Alaska will never feel like my home. Either he truly doesn’t see that or he simply doesn’t want to.

I swallow against the painful ball in my throat. “Calla, say goodbye to your daddy.”

“Bye-bye, Da-da.” She scrunches her mitten-clad hand and gives him a toothy grin.

Obliviously happy as her mother’s heart breaks.

Chapter 1



July 26, 2018

That calculator's not mine.

I smile bitterly as I peruse the contents of the cardboard box—toothbrush, toothpaste, gym clothes, a tissue box, super-size bottle of Advil, cosmetics bag plus four loose lipsticks, hairspray, brush, and the six pairs of shoes that I kept under my desk—and note the pricey desktop calculator included. I convinced my manager that I needed it just last month. The security officer who was tasked with clearing out personal effects from my work space while I was busy getting fired from my job obviously mistook it for my own. Likely because “Calla Fletcher” is scrawled across the top in permanent black marker, an attempted ward against theft by my sly coworkers.

The bank paid for it, but screw them, I'm keeping it.

I hold onto the tiny shred of satisfaction that decision affords me as the subway sails through the Yonge line tunnel and I stare past my reflection in the glass, out into darkness. Desperately trying to ignore the prickle lodged in my throat.

It's so quiet and roomy on the TTC at this time of day, I had my pick of seats. I can't remember the last time that happened. For almost four years, I've been squeezing into jammed cars and holding my breath against the melding of body odors and constant jostling as I rode to and from work in rush-hour commuter hell.

But today's trip home is different.

Today, I had just finished shaking out and savoring the last drops of my Starbucks latte—venti-sized—and clicked Save on my morning Excel files when a meeting request with my boss appeared in my in-box, asking me to come down

to the Algonquin Room. I didn't think much of it, grabbing my banana and my notebook and trudging off to the small conference room on the second floor.

Where I found not only my boss, but my boss's boss and Sonja Fuentes from HR, who held a thick manila envelope between her swollen hands with my name scrawled over it.

I sat across from them, listening dumbly while they took their turn giving a prepared speech—the bank recently introduced a new system that automated many tasks in my role as a risk analyst and therefore my position has been eliminated; I'm an exemplary employee and this is in no way a reflection of my performance; the company will provide me with ample support during the “transition.”

I might be the only person in the history of mankind to eat an entire banana while losing her job.

The “transition” would begin immediately. As in, I wasn't allowed to go back to my desk, to collect my things, or to say goodbye to my coworkers. I was to be walked down to the security desk like a criminal and handed my belongings in a box, then shown the curb. Standard protocol when letting go of bank employees, apparently.

Four years of fussing over spreadsheets until my eyes hurt and kissing egotistical traders' asses in hopes that I could count on a good word come promotion time, staying late to cover for other risk analysts, planning team-building activities that didn't involve used bowling shoes and all-you-can-eat MSG-laden buffets, and *just like that*, none of it matters. With one impromptu fifteen-minute meeting, I'm officially unemployed.

I knew the automated system was coming. I knew they would be reducing the number of risk analysts and redistributing work.

But I stupidly convinced myself that I was too valuable to be one that they'd let go.

How many other heads rolled today, anyway?

Was it just mine?

Oh my God. What if I'm the *only* one who lost their job?

I blink away the sudden swell of threatening tears, but a few manage to escape. With quick fingers, I fish out tissues and a compact mirror from the box

and set to gently dabbing at my eyes so as not to disturb my makeup.

The subway comes to a jolting stop and several passengers climb on, scattering like alley cats to grab a spot farthest away from anyone else. All except for a heavysset man in a sapphire blue uniform. He chooses the cherry-red seat kitty-corner to mine, dropping into it.

I angle my knees away to avoid them rubbing against his thigh.

He picks up the crinkled copy of *NOW Magazine* that someone cast aside on the seat next to him and begins fanning himself with it, releasing a heavy pastrami-scented sigh. “Maybe I should just hang out down here, where it’s cool. Gonna be a real stinker out there, with this humidity,” he murmurs to no one in particular, wiping at the beads of sweat running down his forehead with his palm, seemingly oblivious to the annoyance radiating off me.

I pretend I don’t hear him, because no sane person makes idle conversation on the subway, and pull out my phone to reread the text exchange with Corey from earlier, as I stood in a daze on Front Street, trying to process what had just transpired.

I just got fired.

Shit. I’m sorry.

Can we meet up for a coffee?

Can’t. Swamped. With clients all day.

Tonight?

We’ll see. Call you later?

The question mark on the end makes it sound like even a quick phone call to comfort his girlfriend is not guaranteed at this point. Granted, I know he’s been drowning in pressure lately. The ad agency he’s working for has had him slaving around the clock to try and appease their biggest—and most unruly—corporate client, and he needs to nail this campaign if he ever has a hope in hell of getting the promotion he’s been chasing for almost two years. I’ve only seen him twice in the past three weeks. I shouldn’t be surprised that he can’t just drop everything and meet me.

Still, my disappointment swells.

“You know, on days like this, I wish I were a woman. You ladies can get away with wearing a lot less.”

This time, the sweaty man *is* talking to me. And looking right at me, at the bare legs my black pencil skirt has afforded his view.

I offer him a flat gaze before squeezing my thighs together and shifting my body farther away, letting my long cinnamon-brown hair serve as a partial curtain for my face.

Finally, he seems to sense my mood. “Oh, you’ve had one of *those* days.” He points to the box of belongings on my lap. “Don’t worry, you’re not alone. I’ve seen more than a few people get walked out of office buildings over the years.”

I’d peg him for his early fifties, his wiry hair more salt than pepper and almost nonexistent on top. A quick glance at his shirt shows me a label that reads WILLIAMSONS CUSTODIAN CO. He must work for one of those cleaning businesses that companies like mine contract out. I’d see them when I worked late, leisurely pushing their carts along the cubicle aisles, trying not to disturb employees as they empty waste bins.

“I quit,” I lie as I slide the lid back on the box, covering it from his prying eyes. The wound to my pride is still far too fresh to be casually talking about it with complete strangers.

He smiles in a way that says he doesn’t believe me. “So, what’d you do, anyway?”

“Risk analyst for a bank.” Why am I still humoring this man’s need for conversation?

He nods, as if he knows exactly what that means. If you asked *me* what that meant four years ago when I was collecting my degree from the University of Toronto, I couldn’t have told you. But I was excited all the same when the job offer came through. It was my first step as a young professional female, the bottom rung of a corporate ladder in downtown Toronto. Half-decent pay with benefits and a pension, at a big bank. Plenty of boxes to check in the “good career” department, especially for a twenty-two-year-old woman, fresh out of school and good at math.

It wasn’t long before I came to realize that all being a risk analyst entails is throwing numbers into spreadsheet cells and making sure the answers that the formulas spit out are the ones you want. It’s little more than monkey work. Frankly, I’m bored out of my skull most days.

“So why’d you quit then?”

“I didn’t,” I finally admit through a shaky sigh. “You know, restructuring.”

“Oh, yeah. I know it well.” He pauses, studying me intently. “Did you love it, though?”

“Does *anyone* actually love their job?”

“You’re too young to be that cynical.” He chuckles. “Did you at least like the people you worked with?”

I think about my group. Mark, my micromanaging boss with chronic coffee breath who books meetings simply to validate his purpose and makes note of the minute you leave for lunch and the minute you return to your desk; and Tara, the obsessive Type A with no life outside of her job, who spends her weekends sending long-winded emails about process improvement suggestions with “Urgent! Action Required” subject lines to hijack everyone’s in-box first thing Monday morning. Raj and Adnan are nice enough, although they’ve never gone out for drinks after work and can’t accept a simple “Good morning, how are you?” from me without their faces turning beet red. And then there’s May, who sits one cubicle over, who *never* sends her dailies on time and who eats fermented cabbage at her desk, even though there’s an HR policy against bringing strongly scented food into the office. I have to leave my desk or spend ten minutes gagging.

Every.

Single.

Damn.

Day.

“Not really,” I admit. To be honest, I can’t remember the last time I didn’t have to drag myself out of bed, or didn’t watch the hours pass. I loved the feeling that came as I switched off my computer and grabbed my coat each night.

“Maybe being forced out is a good thing, then.” He grins at me.

“Yeah. Maybe.” Davisville station is approaching. With a sigh of relief that I can end this conversation without being overtly rude, I slip out of my seat. Balancing the cumbersome box in one arm, I hold onto the bar with a tight grip and wait for the subway to stop.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about it. You’re young.” The guy hefts his body out of his seat as the car comes to a jarring halt. “Those jobs are a dime a dozen. You could be swiping your access card at another bank in a couple weeks.”

He’s just trying to make me feel better. I offer him a tight but polite smile.

The doors open, and I step out onto the platform.

The man lumbers close behind. “You know, I was you, fifteen years ago, carrying my own box of things out of my downtown Toronto office. Sure was a big hit to my ego, but it was also a kick in the ass. I decided to take the severance and start a cleaning business with my brothers. Never thought that’d be my calling, but turns out it’s the best thing that ever happened to me. And I wouldn’t want to be doing anything else, even on the worst days.” He winks and waves the rolled-up newspaper in the air. “This is fate. You’ve got bigger and better things ahead of you, pretty lady. I can feel it.”

I stand on the platform, hugging my cardboard box, watching the enthusiastic custodian stroll toward the exit. He’s whistling as he tucks the paper into the recycling bin on his way, as if he’s *actually* happy with a life of cleaning toilets and mopping floors.

Maybe he’s right, though. Maybe losing my job today will end up being the best thing that could ever happen to me.

Giving my head a shake, I begin heading for the exit. I make it three steps before the bottom of my box gives way, scattering my belongings over the dirty concrete.



My skin is coated in a thin sheen of sweat by the time I trudge up the stone walkway of our house, a ten-minute walk from the station. Mom and I have lived here for the past fifteen years with my stepfather, Simon, who bought it at below-market from his aging parents, years before. A smart investment on his part, as the value of houses in Toronto continues to skyrocket. We routinely get real estate agents cold-calling us, looking for a chance to sell the substantial three-story Victorian, clad in brown brick and well situated on a sizeable corner lot.

It's been fully renovated over the years. The last appraisal put the place at over two million.

It's almost noon. All I want to do is take a long, hot shower while I cry, and then crawl into my bed and avoid people—well-meaning or otherwise—until tomorrow.

I'm almost at our front steps when the side entrance that leads to Simon's psychiatry practice opens and a mousy, middle-aged woman in an ill-fitting black pantsuit darts out, sobbing. Our eyes cross paths for a split second before she ducks her head and runs past me toward a green Neon.

She must be a patient. I guess her appointment didn't go well. Or maybe it did. Simon always says that real breakthroughs don't come easily. Either way, it's comforting to know that I'm not the only one having a shitty day.

Once inside the house, I kick off my heels and let the faulty box fall to the floor, glad to finally be rid of it. Two of my forty-dollar lipsticks smashed on the concrete platform, and my left running shoe—from a brand-new pricey pair, no less—is still lying next to the subway tracks. I briefly considered climbing down to retrieve it, but then I imagined the ensuing headline: "Dejected Risk Analyst Leaps to Her Death," and I decided that that's not how I want to make the news.

"Hello?" my mom calls out from the kitchen.

I stifle my groan as my head falls back. *Crap*. That's right, it's Thursday. She doesn't go into the flower shop until two on Thursdays. "It's just me."

The hardwood floor creaks as she approaches, her rose-colored wrap skirt flowing breezily around her ankles with each step.

Simon follows close behind, in his usual plaid sweater vest, button-down, and pleated khaki pant combo. It doesn't matter how hot it is outside, he keeps the air frosty in here.

I stifle a second groan. I expected him to be home—he's almost *always* home—but I hoped he'd be tied up with his next patient and not hear me come in.

"What are you doing here?" Mom's frown grows as she looks from my face to the box on the floor. "What's that?"

Behind her, Simon looks equally concerned.

I'm forced to replay the dreadful morning for them, handing over the envelope with my severance package details, the lump in my throat swelling as I talk. I've done well, up until now, but I'm struggling to keep the tears at bay.

"Oh, honey! I'm so sorry!" My mom spears Simon with a glare and I know exactly why. Simon's best friend, Mike, is a VP at the bank. I got this job because of him. I wonder if Mike had any idea that I was on the chopping block. Did he warn Simon? Did Simon know how my day would turn out when I dropped my breakfast dishes into the dishwasher and waved goodbye to him this morning?

Simon has already put his reading glasses on to scan the severance paperwork.

Meanwhile, Mom wraps her arms around me and begins smoothing her hand over my hair, like she did when I was a small child in need of consoling. It's almost comical, given that I'm three inches taller than her. "Don't worry. This happens to all of us."

"No it doesn't! It hasn't happened to either of you!" Simon keeps complaining that he has more patients than he has hours in the day to treat them, and Mom has owned a successful flower shop on Yonge Street for the past eleven years.

"Well, no, but . . . it happened to your grandfather, and Simon's brother, Norman. And both sets of neighbors, don't forget about them!" She scrambles to find examples.

"Yeah, but they were all in, like, their *forties*! I'm only twenty-six!"

Mom gives me an exasperated look, but then the fine lines across her forehead deepen with her frown. "Who else lost their job?"

"I don't know. I didn't see anyone else at security." Is the rest of my team sitting around their desks, whispering about me at this very moment? Did *they* see it coming?

Her slender hands rub my shoulders affectionately. "Well, the place is *obviously* run by a bunch of idiots if they would let go of their best and brightest employee." Another eye-spear cast Simon's way, meant for Mike.

Of course she's going to say that. She's my mom. Still . . . it makes me feel marginally better.

I rest my head against her shoulder, finding comfort in the delicate scent of her floral perfume and the softness of her sleek, chin-length golden-brown bob,

as we quietly watch Simon peruse the paperwork, awaiting his verdict.

“Four months’ pay with benefits . . . retraining with an employment agency . . . looks fairly standard,” Simon says in that charming Hugh Grant-esque British accent that still lingers, even after thirty-odd years of living in Canada. “You’re in a good situation. You don’t have rent or a mortgage to worry about. Your bills are minimal.” He slides his glasses to the top of his thinning gray-haired head and settles his shrewd blue eyes on me. “But how does this make you feel?”

Simon is big on asking me how things make me feel, especially when he knows I don’t want to talk about it. He’s a psychiatrist and can’t help but psychoanalyze everything and everyone. Mom says it’s because he’s teaching me to always be comfortable with expressing my emotions. He’s been doing it since the first day I met him, when I was eight and he asked me how the thought of my mom having a boyfriend made me feel.

“I feel like I need to be alone.”

He nods once, in understanding. “Quite right.”

I collect my severance package and head for the stairs.

“Susan? Isn’t there something else you ought to mention?” I hear him whisper.

“Not now!” she hisses in response.

When I glance back, the two of them are communicating through a series of glares, waggling eyebrows, and pointed stares. They’re notorious for doing this. It’s amusing . . . when it has nothing to do with me. “What’s going on?”

Mom offers a tight smile and says in a light voice, “It’s nothing. We can talk about it later, when things have settled down for you.”

I sigh. “Just tell me.”

Finally, Mom relents. “There was a call today.” She hesitates. “From Alaska.”

Unease settles into my spine. I only know one person in Alaska, and I haven’t talked to him in twelve years. “What does he want?”

“I don’t know. I missed getting to the phone, and he didn’t leave a message.”

“So then it’s nothing.”

Her tight brow tells me she doesn’t think it’s nothing. Even when we were on speaking terms, my dad was never the one to make the effort, to work out the

time difference and pick up the phone to say hello. “Maybe you should give him a call.”

“Tomorrow.” I continue up the stairs. “I can only handle so much disappointment for one day.”

And my father has already delivered enough to last me a lifetime.

Chapter 2



“Going out?” Simon checks his watch. He can’t fathom the idea of leaving the house at eleven P.M. to see friends, but he’s fifty-six years old and doesn’t leave the house much, period, unless my mother forces him. His idea of entertainment is pouring himself a glass of sherry and catching up on the latest BBC documentary.

“I figured I may as well.”

Simon peers over his glasses at me, doing a quick, fatherly scan of my outfit before shifting his gaze back to his book. I decided on my shortest, tightest black dress and my highest heels for tonight. In any other situation, the combination would be considered escort-worthy, but on a sweltering Thursday night on Richmond Street in July, it’s practically standard uniform.

Simon rarely comments on my clothing choices, though, and I’m thankful for that. Lord knows what meaning he could find in tonight’s ensemble. An ego boost after my pride’s been trounced? An outcry for love and attention maybe? Deeply seeded daddy issues?

“With the usual suspects?”

“No. They’re all away. Just Diana tonight.” And Aaron, I’m sure. One can’t be at a club for too long without the other. My best friend will demand a girls’ night out and then act like it’s a complete coincidence that her boyfriend shows up, even though I watched her text him our exact location a half hour before.

“No Corey?”

“He’s working late,” I mutter, unable to hide my annoyance. He wants to hook up on Saturday, though. So we can “de-stress,” his latest text said. That’s code for “get laid.” Normally, a message like that wouldn’t bother me. But today is different. Today, it bothers me. The fact that he can’t even spare ten minutes to call and make sure I’m okay after getting the axe is a growing thorn in my

thoughts. When did he become so focused on his career, in his bid for promotion, that I became a clear runner-up?

And how hadn't I noticed it sooner?

Simon's mouth curves into a frown. "I saw that photograph in the rubbish. The one of you two from last summer."

"It got mangled when the box broke."

"It's a nice picture."

"Yeah." It was taken last June at my friend Talia's cottage on Lake Joe, the same cottage where Corey and I had met a month before when he was visiting a friend's place three doors down for the long May weekend. We crossed paths on kayaks early that Saturday morning, in a quiet part of an otherwise bustling lake, slowing to float beside each other and exchange "gonna be a great day!" pleasantries. It was his silky blond curls that caught my attention; it was his mesmerizing smile and easygoing laugh that held it. I was even more thrilled when I found out he lived in High Park and worked only eight minutes away from my office.

By the time we paddled back to our respective shores side by side, we'd made plans to meet up for lunch. By the time the bonfire in Talia's pit was burning that night, we were playfully smearing melted marshmallow across each other's lips.

In the picture, we're sitting on a pile of craggy gray rocks that creep out into the lake. Hundred-year-old pine trees tower in the background. Corey's long, lanky arms are wrapped around my shoulders and we're both smiling wide, completely enamored with each other. That was back when we saw each other at least four times a week, when we'd make all our plans based around each other's schedules, when he responded to my texts with cheesy quips within thirty seconds of me hitting Send, and he'd order flowers from my mom's florist shop every week and have her put them by my bedside table—which solidified her adoration for him almost instantly. Back when I had to push him away—giggling, of course—as he stole another last kiss, no matter who was watching.

But somewhere along the line, things have changed. The flowers don't come every week anymore; the text responses sometimes take hours. And the kisses only come as a prelude to more.