

BITTERSWEET

A SINGLE DAD'S SWEETHEART PREQUEL

AMELIA WILDE

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Welcome to the free prequel to *Single Dad's Sweetheart*! I've never met two characters more in need of laughter and love than Shira and Wilder, and this 5,000-word prequel is a window into their heartache. This part is *not* a comedy, so if you're looking for more lighthearted fare, head straight to one of my single dad novels. *Sweetheart* will be ready for your Kindle on November 8, 2017. If you're on Goodreads, you can add this title to your TBR [here](#).

Sign up for my list and you'll be notified when *Single Dad's Sweetheart* drops...and you'll also get a free copy of my full-length bad boy novel *Hate Loving You*. Here's where you can go to download your book!

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Read on for a glimpse of the couple at the center of *Single Dad's Sweetheart*. If your heart aches for them already, fear not...their happily ever after is coming on November 8.

♡ amelia

PART I

SHIRA

1

SHIRA

The backyard of the frat house is drowning.
In beer.

There's beer *everywhere*. It's in cups on beer pong tables, pouring out of kegs, and sloshing out of red Solo cups. I clutch mine like a shield, but it's not helping.

I shouldn't be here.

It's the kind of fall day that everybody hopes for, including the cops. The gentle autumn sun means they don't have to wade around in the rain while they arrest the drunks who'll be fighting after the football game lets out, whether we win or lose. Honestly, it's an even chance. We have a quarterback this year who can scramble, which is more than I can say for last year's dud. Sack after sack, I tell you what.

But the guys here don't want to talk about the game. Sports seems like safe harbor. Nobody can fault me for knowing about the team or appreciating a clean tackle.

That's not what this is about.

This is about getting drunk and getting laid, and Perry, my roommate, *loves it*. Me? I'm glad I ran cross country for four years in high school. It means I can bolt if I have to.

I haven't told her yet that I'm still a virgin. She thinks we can both pick up guys here and have a wild time tonight. Not me. Not with *these* guys.

She wraps a hand around my upper arm and squeezes. "Shira, look. Look at him. Oh, my god, look at him."

"Look at who?"

There are frat boys all over the place, surging toward the kegs, swaggering through the yard, leaning in close to talk to girls above the thrumming bass of the music. They all look the same. Game-day shirts on. It's a Red Day, which means we're all wearing red shirts. In the stadium it makes a nice picture on TV.

"*Him.*" There's beer on Perry's breath. She's had two since we got here, and I haven't managed to take a sip. She raises one hand and points in front of us.

Oh. *Him.*

The angel walking through the yard. He could be a model. He looks like he plays a sport or maybe he likes the gym. It doesn't matter. The main effect is that his red t-shirt grips his biceps in a way that makes my gut go warm. Tall. Chestnut hair cut cleanly. He doesn't look sloppy, though he has a Solo cup too. His jaw looks like it could cut diamonds. I wonder what it'd be like to run my fingers down the line of it, to feel those strong hands wrapped around my waist.

I back up a step. He'll be coming for Perry. She's got her red t-shirt tied below her boobs, her flat stomach on display, tiny short-shorts on. Her dark hair gleams in a sheet down her shoulders and she is *workin'* it, a big, inviting smile on her face. "Go talk to him."

"I'm staying with *you*," she says, probably in a fit of drunken loyalty.

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My heart beats in a jagged rhythm. I should get out of here. I've got student tickets to the game, and the only way to get good seats is to show up early. "I'm going to head out," I say, but she ignores me. Where can I put my drink? I'm not going to dump it onto the lawn, for God's sake. The poor grass has seen enough of that. I cast around for somewhere to throw it away. This is how I'll make my escape.

I turn to go, but Perry keeps me in her clutches. "Perry, I—"

"Hi."

It's too late.

He's here.

And he's not talking to Perry.

He's talking to *me*.

Oh, god, he's *hot*. Tall. Handsome. Blue eyes blazing into mine, with a little half smile that reminds me of a movie star.

Get out. Get out get out getout.

"I was just leaving." I shout the words at the exact moment the music cuts out, and my voice rings into the relative quiet. Heat floods my face. I never should have come to this party in the first place. Chuckles break out around me.

"Go, then!" a guy slurs from a few feet away.

The Angel turns toward him with a scowl. "Shut the hell up, *pledge*. Treat the lady with respect if you want a bid."

The other guy—he might as well be vermin, compared to the god standing in front of me—raises both hands. "Sorry," he says. He doesn't sound sorry. The music kicks back on and a cheer rises from the party.

Angel turns back to face us and I can feel Perry vibrating with excitement. "Are you two ladies enjoying yourselves?"

“Yes,” says Perry, turning her hips this way and that, subtle movements that I’ll only copy in the privacy of my own dorm room when she’s out with another one of her conquests. “This party is *amazing*. You’re in Beta Kappa then?”

He doesn’t take his eyes off me. He doesn’t so much as *glance* at her. I’m getting a sunburn from standing in his glow. “Dante Murray. Social Chair.” A slow grin spreads across his face. “I heard you were leaving.”

“Tell her to *stay*,” whines Perry, sidling up to him. “Why would you want to go anywhere but this party, Shira? It doesn’t make *sense*.”

“I’ll walk you out.”

“You don’t have to do that.” The words come fast. “I can find the back gate.” I point. “It’s right there.”

He considers me. “You’re headed to the game, right? I can tell by the way you’re not...sloppy.” He rolls his eyes a little, like he’s dismissing this entire party. The social chair? Dismissing the party? Didn’t he *plan* this? “I’m headed there too. We can go together.”

Perry’s mouth drops open. “There are TVs here, Shira, and *drinks*.”

“Here’s another one.” I press my cup into her free hand. “I’ll see you back at the dorm, okay? Text me if you need anything.”

My heart pounds, and my palms are slick. It was Perry’s idea to come to a frat party on game day. This shouldn’t go any farther. But Dante’s voice follows me out the back gate and onto the sidewalk.

“Hey! Slow down a second. What’s the hurry?”

Goose bumps rise up and down my arms. “I want a good seat at the game.” More than that, I want a chance to settle down. I’m breathless and hot. What was I *thinking*, taking that beer? If my parents ever found out—if the *police* ever found out—I’d be so screwed.

“Me, too.” He picks up the pace. “I know a shortcut across campus. Let’s go.”

“I—” I want to argue with him, but I also...don’t. He doesn’t have to pay attention to me. A guy like Dante? He doesn’t have to pay attention to anybody but the sorority queens. It’s my first year in college. I’m a nobody. “You’re sure you don’t have anybody else to go with?”

His eyes catch mine. “I want to go with you, Shira...”

My chest swells up with a strange, golden pride. “Shira Coleman,” I supply.

“Shira Coleman,” he says, tasting the words. “Tell me more.”

There's nothing to *tell*. I fumble for the words and come up with a laugh. "Why?"

"Why what?" Dante leads the way across the street, looking both ways. Fraternity Row is on the back-end of campus, separated from the stadium by a set of soccer fields, a row of classroom buildings, a strip of woods, and a massive cafeteria. "I saw you, and I want to know more."

I shouldn't be this pleased, but I can't help it. I spent extra time getting ready this morning. Perry wanted me to. I said it didn't matter—nobody at the game would be looking at me—but then she was dragging me across campus to a frat party and I was glad I'd taken the time to put on mascara.

"There's not much to know."

"I don't believe you for an instant." He cuts around one corner of a classroom building. "You're a junior, right?"

I laugh again. "No. Freshman. This is my first year at State."

He shakes his head. "Unbelievable. You look like—" He grins at me,

and it's wicked and appraising and sexy in a way I've never seen before. "You don't look like a freshman."

"Uh, thank you?"

"What's your major?"

"Interior design." I bite my lip. "I'm not sure about it, though."

"Classes aren't for you?"

"I thought it would be...different." I like the assignments where we render rooms in Photoshop. The Photoshop is great. The rooms? I don't care nearly as much as I thought I would.

"Most people switch," says Dante, steering us toward a wide lawn that leads into the woods. "At least once. I did. Journalism—" He makes a face. "—to engineering. Way better job prospects."

"I might switch." The words are slow coming out of my mouth. It's surreal, this little walk we're taking. Is he planning to sit with me at the game? He doesn't need to. "I'm not sure."

"You don't have to be sure." He smells good. Tendrils of his cologne waft through the air while he walks. Am I drunk? No. I'm not drunk. Maybe I'm drunk on *him*. The sunlight catches in his hair and I breathe in deep. *This* is what college is supposed to be about. A hot guy. A football game. A stroll in the early fall air...

For the first time ever, I'm starting to feel pretty sexy. Not like the scared eighteen-year-old I was when my parents dropped me off three weeks ago with a warning. "Everything hinges on your reputation," my dad said, his eyes boring into me while I stood in the doorway of my new dorm room. "Have a good time, Shira, but don't do anything that'll make people think twice about you." The jeans I'm wearing right now didn't make Dante think twice. They made him come right over.

The grass is damp under my shoes. Perry's wearing chunky heels. She doesn't have tickets to the game. But I'm wearing sneakers. I'm going

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to be standing for almost four hours. We cross over into the woods, but this part looks more like a thicket.

Dante presses a limb to the side. "Right through here, and we're at the east entrance. Shortest lines." His smile makes me feel *nice*. Is that a little *dimple* in his cheek? Slay me now.

I go with him.

Of course I do.

The sun comes through the fir trees, dappled on the ground, and it's *quiet* in here.

“Whoa,” I say as Dante lets the tree limb go. “It’s like a different world in here.”

“Right?” He sticks his hands in his pockets and looks around. “I like to come here to think. I love my brothers—” For a second I think he’s talking about *actual* brothers. But no. “—but that place is a madhouse more often than not.” He turns that thousand-watt smile on me again. “We can share, if you’d like. Come here whenever.”

“You own this place?” He can’t. There’s no possible way. This is campus property. What do I know? I’ve only been in college three weeks.

“Sure I do.”

I give it a second glance. We’re far off the main trail that cuts through. “You should spend more time on upkeep.”

He laughs. “I like the privacy.”

A strange pressure closes in on my ears, and I work my jaw to get them to pop. “That’s good, I guess. But this is a shortcut, right? You’ve got a path?”

He steps closer, taking his hands out of his pocket. “Don’t be angry.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I cross my arms over my chest.

“What would I have to be angry about?” I crack a smile. He’s playing around, that’s all. “Get me to those good seats.”

“I wanted a few minutes with you.” He raises one hand and brushes his fingertips against my cheek. “When I saw you standing there at the party, I—” He shakes his head. “I had to be alone with you.”

“That’s—” I let out an awkward laugh. “We don’t know each other.”

His eyes are so blue. I breathe in another lungful of his scent.

“We *will*.”

Then his hand tightens around the back of my head. His other hand comes up to lift my chin, forcing it upward, and then his mouth is on mine, hard and fierce.

“What—” I put both hands up to his chest, struggling for a breath. “I don’t want—”

His grip is firm on my jaw. “You *do* want,” he says. “I can tell.”

Then he’s kissing me again, and god help me, I don’t pull away. I’ve never had a man this *interested* before. I never had a high school boyfriend who kissed me this intensely. And Dante is *skilled*. His lips move against mine with what seems like real heat, real passion, and when he presses his tongue into my mouth I meet him, every movement. My whole body is alive with it. On fire with it. I’m finally awake after a lifetime of being asleep.

My nipples are hard against the fabric of my bra and I move against him. There’s no conscious thought, only the hard lines of his body

against mine, his arm wrapping around my back, holding me close, pinning me.

He breaks the kiss and I gasp in a breath. “Oh—” I raise my fingertips to my lips. “That was—” I have no words. “Can we come back to that later, after the game?” I crane my neck to look around him. Path. I need a path.

His laugh rings out through the trees. “After the *game*?” Another chuckle. “Oh, babe. We’re not done here.”

“*W*hat do you mean?” My nerves are jangling, from the kiss, from *everything*.

“I’m not done with you get.” Dante bends his head and kisses me again, his arm locking tight around my waist. It’s *rough* this time. Too rough. I push him away.

“Stop. I—” I know the general direction of campus. I can get there. “I want to go to the game. Are you going there or not?”

“Once we’re finished.”

“We’re *finished*,” I say, as firmly as I can. My voice shakes anyway.

“Baby, it’s going to be so good,” Dante says into my ear, and a shudder runs through me. “See? You’re excited. Just—” His other hand slips around to the front of my jeans. One quick jerk and he has the button open. He goes for the zipper.

“What are you—*stop*.”

“Relax. Enjoy it. You’re going to be *loose* for the game, I promise you that.” His fingers are down the front of my pants and it doesn’t feel

good. It doesn't feel good *at all*. Panic rises, thick and cold and choking. *I don't want this. Please, I don't want this.*

"Dante."

He's distracted, working against my jeans, but he flicks his eyes up to mine.

That's when I slap him.

Everything I can muster, I put into that slap.

His hand flies to his cheek. "*Bitch*," he spits, but it doesn't matter—I see the gap, and I run for it. He reaches for my sleeve but it slips through his fingers and I'm gone. I'm *gone*.

"Some shortcut," I choke out, crashing through the underbrush. It's not a very wide strip of forest, but wide enough that Dante could have had his way with me. And *then* some. Jesus. Why did I *go* with him? Why did I do that? My dad would be so disappointed. He would be so pissed. *I* would be so pissed. I played it safe all through high school...for this?

I sprint for campus. Dante wasn't lying about how close the stadium was, and now that I'm in the open air I can hear the crowds. There's a low buzz that moves over everything. People talking. People heading to the game.

I need to get inside. I dig into my pocket for my student ID. That's where the tickets are stored. If I can get into the stadium, nobody will be able to touch me. Nobody will be able to say that I let a man—

"Shira!"

The voice is familiar, cutting through the noise, and I skid to a stop. "Mom? Mom!" She's standing near a tent set up by the local bank where you can get free t-shirts if you enter a drawing. I didn't know they were coming to the game today. Oh, sweet relief.

She waves at me to come over. I jog over and throw my arms around

her. “Hi, honey. Dad thought it would be fun to surprise you. I hope you don’t mind.” I bury my face in her shoulder and catch my breath. She laughs, low and familiar. “Feeling homesick? I get it. I felt that way too.” After a minute she pushes me back and looks me up and down.

Her face slips into a frown. “Shira,” she whispers. “Your pants.” Her eyes dart around us. Oh, shit. “Fix those.” We both reach for them at the same time, our hands colliding. “Button must have come undone,” she mutters under her breath. “What would people think?” Zip. Button. Done. Her eyes meet mine and we share a look. *So strange*, the look says.

I want to tell her what happened. I don’t.

I want to cry. I smile instead.

I want to be sick. I swallow the feeling.

That was *so close*. Because I was *so stupid*.

She wraps her arm around me and pulls me to the table under the tent. “Free t-shirt?”

I scan the crowd for Dante. He wouldn’t try anything else. Would he? I take a deep breath. Steady. Don’t let anyone see. Don’t let anyone *know*. The adrenaline surges again. My heart beats fast.

“Sure,” I say, and I reach for a pen.

PART II

WILDER

“*N*ever needed anyone but you,” I sign into the mic, giving it my all.

The pressure bears down on my shoulders. This isn’t like when we were in college, playing for drunken crowds in dive bars. Our first record with Universal went double platinum. So did the second. The third has to blow them both out of the water.

God, who’d have thought it would be like this?

Brooklyn holds the last note on her violin. In the beginning, I didn’t think she was cut out to play with us. Then she kicked off her shoes and added a dimension I never thought possible to the music. She holds it, and then she lets it go, the practice space falling into silence.

There’s a pause.

Dodger, the drummer, speaks up first. “I hate it.”

“I hate it, except for the violin,” says Brooklyn, and then we’re all laughing.

“What the hell, guys?” I turn around and face all of them. “We’re *successful* now. We can’t go to shit because we’re sellouts.”

Crash, the lead guitarist, strums his guitar. “Tear it apart?”

I shrug. “We have time?”

“We don’t have time to put out a shitty record,” pipes up Andy, fiddling with his bass guitar. “And this song would convince everyone that we should quit the music business.”

“I’m not quitting the biz,” says Crash, waggling his eyebrows.

“Save it,” I tell him. “There’s no ladies here to impress.”

“Offense,” calls Brooklyn. She moves to the side of the space and picks up a bottle of water from the floor.

Crash dances toward her, swaying his hips. “Are you impressed now?”

“Ooh,” says Brooklyn, drinking the water with a sexy flair. “Yeah, baby. Show me more of that.”

Crash laughs and reaches for the guitar strings. He’s kind of a genius at the guitar. A genius, and a goofball.

“I’ll figure it out,” I tell them. “Back in five?”

“Make it ten,” says Dodger. “I need a sandwich.”

My stomach growls at the words. “Me too. Maybe—” My phone rings in my pocket. I pick it up without thinking. It’s an unknown number, but I always answer anyway. You never know what kind of celeb might be calling. These days, Pilot Five is in demand. My wife, Courtney, sometimes calls from shops she’s at. We might have made it big, but she still doesn’t want to replace her old iPhone. The battery is crap, but she’s holding out for the next version.

“Wilder Felix,” I say into the phone, giving them my best golden rock-star voice. I’m expecting Courtney, maybe with a side of my daughter Isabella giggling in the background.

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“Mr. Felix, this is Maryanne Potter. I’m calling from the Los Angeles Police Department.”

“Okay,” I say. “What’s this about?” Is our studio space getting shut down? That would be pretty fucking weird.

“You’re the husband of Courtney Felix, yes?”

“That’s me.” I turn away from the rest of the bandmates. “Did something happen?”

There’s a squeal in the background that I recognize as Isabella. “We need you to come to Cedars-Sinai as soon as you can.”

I don’t walk out.

I run.

“It was a hit-and-run accident,” the doctor says, his words blurring together, hitting me all wrong. Jagged. Loud. My pulse is so furious in my ears that I can hardly make out what he’s saying. I don’t even remember driving here. “Your wife—she pushed the stroller out of the way, but—”

“Where is my daughter?”

“She’s here,” he says in what he probably thinks is a soothing tone. I can’t be soothed. I will never be soothed again, even if—

“Where is she?”

“With the officer, in the waiting area.” We’re charging toward somewhere. The emergency room? I don’t know where I parked. I don’t know whose *car* I took from the lot. Maybe Dodger threw me his keys. At least one of them came out after me. I remember their voices.

We make a left turn, then a right. A long hallway. Why is the hallway so long? Where is Courtney? All the information tumbling out of the doctor’s mouth is meaningless until I can see her.

A nurse’s station in the center of a crowd. Everyone is wearing

matching blue scrubs, hustling from one place to another. Emergency. The sign says Emergency and my stomach drops into the floor, into the earth, right through to the other side. I wanted to get here but every nerve screams that I should get out. That this is *wrong*.

“This way,” says the doctor. Some part of me recognizes that this is a giant square, rooms along the outer edge, and we’re heading toward the back. Past the nurses’ battle station. There’s another crowd up ahead, people hovering over a bed in a wide suite, the curtain pulled back.

We get to the curtain that separates the room from the rest of this place and the doctor turns back. “You’ll have to wait out here.”

“No problem,” says Crash. A strange *whoosh* of relief moves through me. I *didn’t* drive here. He must have driven me. He’s heading down a little hallway by the time I turn to see him.

The doctor moves into the room. “We have her husband,” he says to everyone else there, and they part like the Red Sea. For me. I’m the husband. And in the hospital bed is my wife, Courtney.

She looks peaceful, eyes closed. Or—she *would* look peaceful, if it weren’t for all the tubes and the wires surrounding her like a grotesque machine. *Oh, god, I can’t wait until this can come off and we can get out of here.* The thought pops into my brain and back out again. It could be a long time before she leaves.

There’s a silence around me, at least here in this room, a bubble that only extends as far as the curtain. I can hear everything, but the sound is on a delay. The beeping of the machines in the next rooms. Another doctor giving sharp orders to a nurse. A woman crying. A baby crying. Isabella.

I go to the side of the bed. One of Emily’s hands rests on top of her blanket. I take it in mine. I press it to my cheek. I take a deep breath.

Whatever this is, whatever this means, I can face it. *We* can face it.

“Okay,” I say to nobody in particular. “Okay.” The nurse on the other side of the bed, checking one of the machines, turns away.

The doctor’s voice cuts in. “Mr. Felix.”

“Yeah?”

“I know this is very difficult,” he says, and the gentleness in his voice doesn’t match with the warmth of Courtney’s hand. “We’re going to need to discuss organ donation.”

“*I*t’s okay,” comes a voice from the doorway.

How long have I been here? It doesn’t seem to matter, one way or another. One day can bleed into the next and the next and the next, for all I care. There is nothing to do but wait, and at the end of the waiting, there is nothing. There is despair.

“It’s all right, sweetie. Here’s Daddy.”

I make the effort to turn my head, and there she is, my baby, Isabella, red-faced and tired, her face buried in Brooklyn’s shoulder. She picks up her head. Fifteen months old, and she looks exhausted. “Daddy,” she says, and my entire soul breaks open.

I hold out my arms to her and she tumbles into them. Her weight against my chest is a wound and a salve and as she cuddles up I feel them on my face—the tears. I can’t stop them. I’ve long since stopped trying. A lifetime ago, I stopped trying. Courtney still breathes in the bed a few feet away, but it won’t last. I’ve been here for long enough to know that there’s not going to be a miracle.

“What can I bring?” says Brooklyn. Isabella’s arms are wrapped tight

around my neck. What time is it? I shift her enough to raise my wrist and squint at my watch. Shit, it's almost nine. What's she doing here?

"Brooke." My voice cracks on her name. "Why didn't you come get me?"

She moves in, pats my shoulder, rubbing it with a familiarity I'd only allow from the rest of the band. "We've got it under control, for the most part." Her hand goes still. "I came today because Court's relatives are here."

Oh, Jesus. I didn't call *anyone*. I didn't do anything that I was supposed to do.

"I got the numbers from your phone. I hope you don't mind."

"No." I clear my throat. It's tight and painful. "I don't mind."

"You want to come get some food?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Come get a coffee."

"No."

"Wilder, look at me."

I force myself to look up at Brooklyn.

"Give her parents some time? They just got in."

"All right."

I stand up with Isabella in my arms, but her body is relaxed, at peace. She's fallen asleep. I will carry her all night, if that's what she wants.

Court's parents are at the door to the room, hovering outside. Her mom has tears streaming down her face. "Oh, Wilder," she says. I nod at her. I know that's a fucking stupid thing to do, but the alternative is that I fall to my knees and wail in the middle of this hospital. We're not in emergency, not anymore. We're in a waiting room in intensive

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care. That's all it is, because she's not coming out again. I don't say any of this out loud.

"Going to get some coffee," I say. I let my mother-in-law wrap her arms around my neck, let my father-in-law pat me on the back, and then I let Brooklyn lead me away.

She's right. I have to eat.

The reason is sleeping on my shoulder right now.

“Give me an hour?”

“We’ll go to the playground,” says Brooklyn, shifting Isabella on her hip. Brooklyn’s eyes are puffy and red too, but she’s fucking stepping up, and I’ll never forget it. I’ll never forget this.

We left the hospital this morning.

Without Courtney.

There’ll be a funeral in three days. Her parents have taken the planning out of my hands, and that’s a good thing, because there’s no way on earth I could do it. Walking into my own house is hard enough. It’s a row house, narrow and old as fuck, but Courtney loved it. She loved the house and the cute neighborhood, even the shit I found completely obnoxious, like the guy on the corner with three dogs who are always barking. “They’re just so *excited*,” she’d say, laughing at the kitchen window while I scowled. They’re not barking now. It’s like they know.

There’s a park up the street, three blocks down, and I stand on the

sidewalk while Brooklyn buckles Isabella into her car seat. I don't know what happened to the stroller Courtney was using that day. The first responders probably left it behind. I could go back for it, I guess, but I couldn't put Isabella in it now.

A wild panic seizes my chest. "Be careful." My tone is too sharp, and Brooklyn stops, turns, faces me.

"We don't have to go," she says, searching my face. "We can stay right here while you go in. I'll wait as long as you need."

I swallow the lump in my throat. Isabella's been with Brooklyn and the guys for days. She doesn't need this from me. Not right now. I need to handle going inside while she toddles over the grass and gets pushed in a swing.

"No. Go ahead." Brooklyn cocks her head to the side, questioning. "I'll be okay."

"I have my phone," she says firmly. "Call if you want me to come back."

"All right."

She checks Isabella's car seat one more time, closes the door, and hops in the driver's side. She's gone before I'm ready.

Then I'm the freak standing out on the sidewalk, staring at nothing.

It's time to go in.

The key turns in the lock as easy as it ever did, but when I push open the door, the quiet almost kills me. It's reverent and still. A shrine to what came before.

I step in and close the door behind me.

I take a deep breath.

Oh, Jesus. It still smells like her. Like the life we had together.

I move through the entryway, where her rain jacket still hangs above

her boots, where that stupid little change bowl she got at the art fair still sits on a little table.

Courtney usually cleaned up before she went out, so the house is neat. There's so much neatness that every object is a stab to my heart, again and again. Her *Oprah* magazine of the month. The blanket she crocheted when she was pregnant with Isabella. The single bowl she left by the sink.

The note.

Wilder!

If you come back on a break I'm out with Isabella. Damn phone is never charged when I need it to be, but everything else is good. Focus on the album, okay? I know you meant to fix the squeaky wheel on the stroller but guess what, mister, I've got plans to stop by the bike shop on the way to the park. I know, I'm the perfect wife. I'll do this stuff. You be a rock star. Sound good?

I<3U,

Court