

"A vivid and emotional journey that readers will remember for a long time."

—BOOKLIST STARRED REVIEW OF *THE ROADS WE FOLLOW*

The Voice We Find

... FOG HARBOR
... ROMANCE ...

CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

NICOLE DEESE

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“Deese’s latest is a beautiful story of faith, family, and the power of forgiveness. . . . [It] will appeal to women’s fiction readers as a Dolly Parton–esque tale of hard-won fame.”

—*Library Journal* starred review

“This is a vivid and emotional journey that readers will remember for a long time after it’s over.”

—*Booklist* starred review

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*The
Voice
We
Find*

Books by Nicole Deese

Before I Called You Mine

All That Really Matters

All That It Takes

The Words We Lost

The Roads We Follow

The Voice We Find

Novellas

Heartwood from The Kissing Tree:

Four Novellas Rooted in Timeless Love

▲ F O G H A R B O R
..... R O M A N C E

The
Voice
We
Find

N I C O L E D E E S E



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This book is dedicated to every
father, mother, sister, brother, spouse, relative, or friend
who has ever prayed for a prodigal's return home.
May your hearts be encouraged and your prayers be answered.

*“For I am convinced that neither death nor life,
neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future,
nor any powers, neither height nor depth
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God
that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

—Romans 8:38–39



August

I duck dive the nose of my surfboard under the next breaking wave using the same technique my dad endeavored to teach me back when I was a know-it-all punk who believed time was something to exhaust, not cherish. And back before I realized that practicing pop-ups with him at dawn wasn't a punishment, but a privilege. But I suppose that's the ugly truth about regrets: They never arrive until after it's too late.

I paddle hard for the next surf-worthy lineup, timing the enormous swell ahead with the same precision I once applied to mastering albums for artists in Los Angeles. As soon as I close in on the shoulder of the wave, my adrenaline surges. *Three, two, one.* I pop up on my board. Despite my muscle fatigue, my core holds taut, ready for one last battle for balance. Fiery heat licks the length of my spine as I pick up speed to ride the wave's power source.

The instant I slip into the pocket of the massive curl, the static in my brain is replaced by instinct. And it's this moment that is

both everything I crave and everything I need all at once. Here, in this temporary cocoon of peace, there are no overdue medical bills screaming for attention, no home-based business investments lacking clientele, and no teenage dependent relying on me to keep us afloat.

The familiar tremor in my quads urges me to ride this wave back to shore and recover on the beach with a bottle of electrolytes and a protein bar. Only I'm not ready to go back to the noise yet. *I never am.*

I maneuver the board and cut back into the pocket, riding high on the momentum and gaining confidence with every second I'm on top. But when the next swell crests and breaks, the calm inside my head begins to slip, uncovering each stressor I'd hoped to drown. A single misstep later and I'm on the wrong side of the churning foam.

I have less than a second to tuck my head before I'm plunged into the dark waters with a force that depletes my oxygen reserve. On impact, I tumble head over feet, plummeting deeper and deeper into the abyss of the Pacific until I'm nothing more than a disoriented tangle of heavy neoprene limbs and spasming lungs.

But it's silent down here.

An enticing, addictive, weightless kind of quiet.

And for a moment, I will the panic clawing for my next breath to stop.

I will it all to stop.

The regret. The pain. The guilt. The grief. The shame.

My bearings and vision grow dim as a single thought closes in:
What if I just let go?

The question barely has enough time to register before a spear of light illuminates the crashing waves above me, and with it, a primal, almost savage instinct takes over. *I can't leave my sister alone.*

I grasp for the leash around my ankle.

Desperation drives me as I climb the safety tether with a strength that consumes me. It's unnatural, and yet I'm positive it's the very thing keeping me alive. With every pull toward the light, the burn in my lungs intensifies. The urge to inhale is relentless as my vision spots and tunnels.

And then I see it: the shadowy outline of my board directly above me.

I break the surface.

I gasp for air, but I'm too weak to do anything more than cling to my board like the lifeline it is until I've recovered enough to float on my back and breathe.

It's okay.

It's okay.

It's okay.

I chant the words over and over again in my mind until I almost believe them.

Once the trembling in my chest subsides, I heave my upper body onto my surfboard and drag my dead-weight legs to follow suit. Though my body is thoroughly trashed, my mind fights to make sense of that suspended moment underwater. *How close was I to . . . ?* I don't allow myself to finish the question, but much like the waves rolling beneath me, my thoughts collide, one after another, and soon I'm picturing my sister outside the Welcome Lodge of Camp Wilson yesterday, waving good-bye.

The irony of our last conversation plays over in my mind.

I hadn't even put the gearshift fully into Park before I'd started in on her again. "*No surfing, no diving, no trampolines—on land or on water—*" I amended after I saw the glint of mischief in Gabby's dark brown eyes. "*No go-karts, no rock climbing, no mountain trails without adult supervision, and no horseback riding without a secure helmet.*"

"*Do you really think I'm going to forget your long list of no-no's the second you pull away?*" My sister fiddled with her right hearing aid in the visor mirror before moving on to her left side. "*I had a head injury, August. Not Alzheimer's. Besides, I know you wrote an entire essay to the camp nurse about me already.*" She flipped the visor closed and gave me a look that dared me to deny it. I couldn't.

"*I'm just saying, I know how difficult peer pressure can be at your age. It wasn't so long ago that I was sixteen, and—*"

"*Oh wow, okay. I'm gonna go now.*" She popped the passenger door open, and I felt a distinct pinch in the center of my chest.

“Wait, Gabs.” I placed a firm hand on her knee. *“If you need anything, and I mean anything at all, promise you’ll call me. I don’t care if it’s three in the morning or if you have to walk half a mile to find cell coverage—you call me, alright?”*

She stared at me for the longest time without saying a word and then finally laid her hand on top of mine, patting it twice. *“I’ll promise, but only if you promise me something, too.”* She raised both her eyebrows until I gave a slow nod in reply. *“You have four whole weeks without me at the house, so please go do something fun. Live a little. I better not come back and find you . . . well, like this.”* She pulled a sour expression I assumed was meant to represent me and then proceeded to drill her pointer finger into my cheek. *“Promise me you’ll free these dimples from the prison of your chronic grump face and find something real to smile about.”*

I batted her hand away, but she held my gaze until I said the words out loud. *“Fine,”* I sighed. *“I promise.”*

And then she was gone, hauling her overnight bags to the Welcome Lodge as if being away from home for longer than the one weekend a month she spends with Aunt Judy was a normal part of our routine.

As the memory fades, I blink the shore into focus. I’m much closer than I realized. And so is the familiar figure standing on the beach: Chip Stanton. My oldest friend, and the one person who never fails to show up when I’m at my worst. I have no idea why he’s here or how long he’s been waiting for me on that shore, but I stopped questioning Chip’s uncanny timing years ago.

The surf approaches quickly, and though I’m as prepared as I can be, gravity hurts. There’s no way around it, the hike back to my dad’s rebuilt 1972 Bronco—affectionately named Maverick—is really gonna suck.

On rubbery, boneless legs, I limp my board onto the dry sand where Chip, in his pressed chinos and loafers, shields his eyes from the sun’s glare. He’s never been a fan of the beach, which makes his appearance here all the more curious.

When I speak, my voice sounds as torched as my lungs feel.

“Hey.” I clear my throat. “If I’d known you were coming, I would have brought you my extra board.”

Given that roughly ninety percent of Chip’s worst fears reside in or around the ocean, I’ve spoken some version of this recycled joke more than a dozen times in the last decade. Only today, it falls flat.

“Dude, what happened out there?” He stalks toward me. “When your board surfaced without you . . . well, I thought . . .” He stops and blows out a hard breath. “Are you okay?” For all Chip’s idiosyncrasies and quirks, he’s not typically a worst-case-scenario guy. That’s my role.

For a split second, I consider telling him about the light, and the superhuman strength that propelled me to the surface long after I should have been unconscious. But I can barely understand it myself. I need more time to sort it out. So instead, I shake my head and bend to disconnect the leash from my ankle. “I’m good.”

Chip steps in to stabilize my board.

“I misjudged the size of the wave,” I explain. “Lost my footing.” Droplets of saltwater drip from the ends of my hair and disappear into the sand at my feet. I work to mask the shake in my legs, my arms, my hands, my voice. “Wipeouts always look worse from shore.” The lie is so easily spoken, and yet it rebels inside my chest with the force of a hammer strike. Seeing as my smile’s been out of commission for the better part of two years, I reach for the next best thing. “I’ll try to work on my performance for next time.”

Chip ignores my sarcasm and scans the scarcely populated bay around us. Other than a few cars on the street and a couple kiteboarders on the opposite side of the tide pools, there’s no one else.

“Isn’t there some kind of warning in the Surfer’s Handbook about surfing alone?”

“Probably,” I quip. “I’m betting it’s right under the warning about wearing loafers in the sand.” I point to his shoe of choice. “Those are meant for a library, not a beach.”

He flexes the sandy toe of his shoe. “According to the website, these are considered a multipurpose loafer.”

“What website? BookNerdFashion.com?”

This earns me a laugh.

Chip has worked as an editor for a big publishing house in San Francisco since college, but the truth is, he’s one of those lucky guys who found a way to monetize the thing he loves most: reading. I suppose, in my own way, I was one of those guys once, too. Only, instead of books, it was music. Playing it, recording it, mixing it, producing it.

It’s strange to think that once upon a time music made up the bulk of my world. *Before Gabby*.

A cool breeze whips dry sand against our calves, and I motion to the backpack I left near a chunk of driftwood by the trail up to the Bronco. My body is in dire need of electrolytes. “How’d you know I’d be out here this morning?”

Years ago, I kept a consistent Saturday morning surfing routine, but my time for hobbies, as the sole guardian of a sixteen-year-old, is a rare luxury. There’s always something more pressing to focus on.

“Gabby’s away at camp,” Chip answers with a shrug before he takes my surfboard once again so I can swipe my backpack off the trail. I pull out my premixed drink and take a long pull as he continues. “When you didn’t respond to my text about grabbing breakfast this morning, I checked the surf conditions and tried my luck. As soon as I spotted Maverick, my rideshare driver pulled over and let me out.”

We’ve only just begun our trek, and already my legs have waved the white flag of surrender. Twenty-eight has never felt so old. “So you came all the way out for breakfast?” It’s certainly not the strangest thing he’s ever done, but the further we climb, the more I begin to crave a sausage omelet with a juicy side of bacon and hash browns smothered in—

“Not exactly,” Chip hedges from behind me. “Breakfast is just the vehicle to discuss a business opportunity with you.”

“How many timeshare presentations are involved in this business opportunity?” I toss back.

“None. Although, I hear Turks and Caicos is stunning.” He attempts to jog in the sand beside me, which only makes him look

like he's mimicking a slow-motion cartoon chase. "Actually, I was hoping we could discuss your recording studio."

I crane my neck and narrow a questioning gaze at him. I've been careful not to reveal too much when it comes to my work these days. Not because I don't trust him or because I'm attempting to save face—an impossible task considering the number of spit-wad wars we've engaged in over the years—but because Chip's the sort of guy who would auction off a kidney to help a friend in need. And I've been that friend more times than I care to admit since the accident.

"The recording market is different up here than it was in LA," I say with more ego than I intend as soon as my foot touches the pavement. "Finding the right clientele has been . . . challenging." It's why the bulk of my current workload is spent producing single EPs with run-of-the-mill studio musicians instead of engineering projects that could keep us afloat for an entire year.

"I'm sure that's true," he readily agrees. "California wine country is certainly not Hollywood." We're only steps away from Maverick when I sense him hesitating. "I'm also sure you've had more outgoing expenses than what you've let on for a while now." I don't confirm his suspicions, but Chip continues, undeterred. "I know you don't like talking about Gabby's prognosis, but I'm not ignorant enough to believe insurance has covered the bulk of her medical bills." He lowers his voice. "I know what you did to pay for her special hearing aids. And while that's commendable, there's only so many vintage guitars you can sell when it comes to—"

"Where is this going, Chip?" I can feel my defenses rising, and I'm certain Chip can, too. I grip my board and prepare to secure it to the roof of the Bronco.

"Audiobooks," he replies triumphantly.

I pause mid-lift and stare at him blankly. "Audiobooks."

"Yes." He holds out his hands. "Hear me out."

I say nothing as I swipe the damp hair from my eyes and hop onto the back bumper to tie down my board.

"Fog Harbor Books just gave me the green light to spearhead our first audiobook imprint, and you're my top pick for a producer.

I can do all the preproduction legwork—vetting the narrators and sending you demos so you can check the quality of their home studio equipment, and then once you approve them, I'd send you the raw cut recordings so you can do what you do best: produce a killer product."

After tightening the last strap, I drop down to the pavement and open the back of the Bronco. All I want is to peel this wet suit off, pull on my dry clothes, and drive to food. But first, I need to address Chip's random request. "While I appreciate the thought, Chip, I'm a sound engineer. I work with bands. Singers. Musicians. Wannabe rappers with too much disposable income. I don't do read-a-thons."

"Listen, I get that you're overqualified," he challenges. "But that's what makes it so perfect. You're already set up with everything you could possibly need. Depending on the length of the book and the edits you might require, you could crank out several projects a month. It would be flexible hours you could work around your current studio clients and Gabby's schedule."

"I don't know the first thing about books."

"You don't have to know anything about books. Some of these narrators are award-winning actors—their talent is incredible. I'm telling you, this gig is custom-built for you. And the pay is pretty great, too."

"How much is 'pretty great'?"

I swear his left eye twitches as he tells me the cut I'd make per finished book. It's decent. Maybe even a tad better than decent. And by his grin, he knows I know it, too.

"What kind of commitment are we talking about here?"

Chip laughs. "How did I know that would be your next question?"

I toss my stack of dry clothes onto the bumper and yank the extended zipper pull on the back of my wet suit until it reaches the top of my swim trunks, then work to break the fabric's suction on my arms and chest.

Chip leans his back against the Bronco, facing the water as he speaks. "I could start you off with a ten-book contract. That's the

minimum I can offer as there's a good size list of bay-area producers who wouldn't turn this opportunity down. Once you complete the first contract, we can renegotiate terms."

Ten books. I multiply the number Chip gave me earlier by ten. That would go a long way in recovering some of our savings.

Just the thought eases something tight in my chest. When I became my sister's legal guardian overnight, I didn't have a clue how fast we'd burn through my life savings and the majority of the insurance policies our parents left to us. But between my relocation costs, funeral expenses, medical bills, and the home studio I was certain would take off just as soon as the dust settled on my renovations to our parents' detached garage . . . we're running dangerously low.

It's tempting to recall the cushy paychecks I left behind in Los Angeles and the recording studio that was more like a glorified amusement park for music and tech geeks everywhere, but I can't afford to linger there for long.

The few highlights of that life had cost me so much more than they ever gave.

And that life never could have included Gabby.

A sixteen-year-old girl mourning the loss of her parents needs security: a real home in a good neighborhood with familiar friends at a familiar school. Not to mention the world-renowned medical care she's received at Stanford Children's in the wake of everything else the accident stole from her.

I pause my undressing and peer at the back of Chip's head. "Is there really a market for people too lazy to read for themselves? I mean, I'm no expert here, but reading a book versus listening to one seem like two completely different experiences. Does it even count as reading?"

Chip whistles low. "I'd highly recommend never repeating that question, especially in the presence of a reader. Brawls have broken out over lesser aspersions in the publishing world. But to put it mildly, yes, audiobooks do count as reading. It's been proven multiple times over in multiple studies. The brain responds similarly to the power of a good book whether it's listened to with the ears or

read with the eyes. Plus, think about what an audiobook provides for a reader with a vision impairment.”

The word *impairment* thumps at my shame.

Inch by slow inch, I peel down the thick layer of neoprene suctioned to my quads and calves until I can finally step out of my suit. I’m standing in nothing but my swim trunks when a convertible of college-age girls drives by. I reach for my T-shirt, but not quickly enough. The car reverses until it stops on the street near my Bronco. The driver honks her horn, followed by the waves and catcalls of her passengers. A scrap of paper is tossed in our direction. It flutters to the ground.

In two quick moves, I yank on my shirt and reach for a towel to dry my sun-bleached hair. The *beep beep* of an oncoming car causes the convertible to squeal forward.

“Well, that was exciting.” Chip jogs around the front of the Bronco and picks up the paper from the road. He opens it.

“Samantha says to call her.” He shows me the scribbled phone number next to a blotted lipstick mark. He tries to hand it off to me, but I give him a stare that has him wadding it up in his fist. “You’re not interested. Got it.”

“My life is complicated enough as it is.” I slam the back hatch closed. “And that’s without the added stress and misery of dating.”

“Ya know, my offer might actually help you *uncomplicate* some things if you were willing to give it a chance.” He quirks an eyebrow. “But since we’re on the subject of dating, might I also suggest you stop thinking that every woman could be Vanessa in disguise.”

He shudders, and I flash him a look that conveys exactly what I think of discussing my ex so early in the morning. I’m starving, but even the sound of her name brings back memories so nauseating they nearly kill my appetite altogether.

“Fine,” he chuckles. “If I swear not to bring her up again, will you at least *consider* producing for Fog Harbor Audio? I’ll need an answer soon.”

When I nod in acknowledgment, Chip strides to the passenger side and climbs in. But instead of moving closer to the SUV, I take a

final glance at the water, as if in a private consultation with the ocean. But there is no mystery to the decision I will make. Spoiler: It's not one where I keep trying to resuscitate a dying dream. The hours I've logged in a production studio don't matter, nor do the artists who've publicly recognized my creative ingenuity. *That* August Tate doesn't exist anymore. Truth is, he hasn't existed since the day he got the worst phone call of his life and took custody of his adopted sister.

I might have declined opportunities in the name of ego and pride in the past, but I'm not foolish enough to do it again. I have enough regrets. So I cut my gaze from the ocean, yank open the driver's side door, and accept the lifeline my friend anticipated I'd need even before he watched my head go under water.

2



Sophie

The instant my rideshare driver unloads my suitcases from the trunk of his Kia Sportage, I'm tempted to ask if he'll please put them back and take me somewhere else. But thanks to the many hours I've spent processing my massive life setback with my best friend, I'm too self-aware to mistake a different destination for what I really want: a different future than the one in front of me.

Right on cue, the phone I'd slipped into the pocket of my long skirt buzzes. And I know it's her before I even check the screen.

Dana:

You in Cali now? Did Phantom do okay on the long flights? How did the reunion go with your family? Also, I don't know how it's possible to miss you this much already when it's only been twelve hours. I just got home from tech rehearsal, but I'll be up for a bit if you want to chat. Xoxo.

It's not every day a text brings tears to my eyes, but I suppose it's also not every day I say good-bye to the best friend I've ever had and move across the country, either. I shoot back a quick reply, assuring her all is well and that I'll text her in the morning. There's no possible way she's not bone-tired after a full day of tech rehearsals. It wouldn't be fair or kind of me to ask her to wait up. I wonder how long it will take us to adjust to living in two different time zones . . . not to mention two totally different worlds.

I work to silence the pang of loss reverberating in the pit of my belly. This may not be the outcome either of us wanted after my acting career took a sharp nose dive, but I'll never forget how hard Dana fought for me to stay with her in New York. Even going so far as to take on my share of the rent to try and buy me as much time as possible on my job hunt. Ultimately, in the current economy and with living expenses what they are, not even our combined efforts were enough. Which is why I'm standing in the middle of the same brick driveway I pulled out of eight years ago on my eighteenth birthday.

The pathetic *meow* coming from my back—or rather, from inside the clear cat carrier strapped to my back—reminds me I'm not the only one who's traveled across the country today.

“Okay, Phantom, I hear ya, buddy.” I banish my mental pity party and try instead to focus on the positives I'd rehearsed during our long flights here. I grip the handles of my roller bags and start for the moss-covered chateau at the front of the winery, my childhood home. Hanging lanterns illuminate the path in the dusky light, and I veer my suitcases around the large ceramic fountain where I used to sing with my Gigi while she planted poppies and marigolds under the welcome sign for Bentley Vineyards. She'd tell me to take the melody so she could harmonize with me. And at the end of every song, she'd say the same thing: “*The joy in your voice is a precious gift from God, Sophie. I pray you'll share it with the world someday.*” The reminder causes my chest to ache. Memories of my grandma Greta—Gigi, as I called her—have always brought me comfort, and considering her fingerprints can be found everywhere at—

I halt to a stop and feel poor Phantom press into my spine. My eyes widen and then promptly narrow as I read and then reread the new words on the welcome sign: *Wilder Wines: Same vintage taste; new modern twist.*

I rotate in a complete circle, and my long eyelet skirt flares out as I look for clues to indicate my tired travel eyes aren't playing tricks on me. Of all the glowing reports my mother has shared regarding the changes my brother has made to the winery since my father's semi-retirement two years ago—she'd failed to mention a full re-branding of Gigi's legacy.

Befuddled, I approach the arched wooden doors of an estate I used to call Gigi's castle before we moved in with her when I was just six years old. My parents took on the bulk of the vineyard's responsibilities and eventually the small winery she'd started out of necessity in the late '60s. Before I push open the door, I begin the deconstruction process of transforming Fanciful Stage Sophie back into Family Winery Sophie. I take off my favorite dangly earrings and the secondhand vintage scarf I've wrapped through my hair like a headband, then step into a dimly lit grand foyer, one that looks as if it's already been tucked into bed with no plans to awaken till morning.

"Hello?" My voice echoes through the vast foyer with the same level of uncertainty as Belle when she first entered Beast's castle. Although Belle, at least, had magical furniture to keep her company.

"Mom? Dad?" Though my parents moved into a luxury condo only a short distance away after my brother and his wife took over the private living quarters upstairs in the east wing, I'm still hopeful they might be here to greet me. After all, I haven't seen either of them since my brother's wedding in Maui just over two years ago.

My footsteps reverberate in the wide empty corridor as the setting sun sweeps in from the large, west-facing windows overlooking the vineyard and tasting room. Golden light glistens on the high-gloss hardwoods of the main floor as I take an inventory of the modern tobacco-colored furniture that's replaced Gigi's carefully

curated antiques. Everything is stone and leather, dark colors and straight lines. *Cold*, I think. Everything looks so cold.

A knot forms in my lower abdomen as I think of my mother having to part with Gigi's possessions after so many years. There are few battles I ever saw her engage in as a child, especially if the opponent was my headstrong father. And maybe that's why the loss of my grandmother hits me so hard in this moment. It was much easier to ignore the circumstances I left behind when I lived three thousand miles away.

I watch the way the shadows bend and move across the floors, remembering how Gigi used to shine them so I could practice my twirling. She always had a meticulous eye for detail, as well as a particular aspiration to keep her winery small and sustainable despite the pull of the booming industry around us. Unfortunately, after she died, my father and brother had other plans.

I spare a final glance into the parlor and then into the formal dining and living areas that, for a steep price, can be rented out to private wedding parties and special gatherings. When I see there are no lights aglow in the staff kitchen and can't make out a single muffled voice within the residence, I realize what I probably should have known all along: There is no one waiting for me.

It's not as if I'd been expecting some big sentimental homecoming, but I suppose there's nothing like the silence of a six-thousand-square-foot mansion to remind you of the reasons you moved away in the first place.

I roll my luggage to a stop at the base of the stairs, figuring I'll have to finagle them up the steps one at a time, when I see the door to my father's old study framed in light. Of all the family members I'll be reconnecting with during my stay here, it's my father's protégé who I've lost the largest amount of sleep over: my brother.

And it looks as if he's the only one here.

Gingerly, I slip off each strap of my backpack and ease Phantom's bag to the floor. I reach into one of the arm holes and scratch his fluffy black head and white ear. "Just a few more minutes. I promise." I smooth my hand over his back and help him get comfortable

again. The vet I brought him to after I'd found him on the street outside the theater estimated his age at ten. But right now the poor geezer looks as if he's lived all nine of his lives, plus a few extra. "Believe me when I say it's for the best to wait on making any formal introductions tonight."

I lift my timid gaze to the staircase and straighten my rumpled blouse and flowy skirt. A dozen or so hours ago when this day began, Dana had described my travel outfit as *enchanting*. Now it looks as if . . . well, as if I've been traveling for twelve hours.

As I take the stairs to the office Jasper now inhabits, the anxiety I've pushed down for weeks rushes in at once. Though I've tried to explain my apprehension to Dana numerous times, my words never come out right. On paper, my brother is the celebrated golden boy I've never been able to measure up to in the eyes of our parents and their affluent friends. I was often made to feel like the quirky, over-dramatic secondborn who struggled in all the areas that seemed to come naturally to my distinguished older sibling. But the thing is, even after that golden boy grew up to become a golden son, husband, and respected business mogul, he's never shown any interest in becoming a golden brother. Jasper's never really shown an interest in being a brother at all.

I pause at the top of the stairs, remembering one of the last conversations I'd had with my father, standing right here. He'd thundered out of his office, fisting my hard-won acceptance letter from NYU Tisch School of the Arts and demanding that I "stop this silly nonsense at once" even though it had taken me months to record and edit my audition videos and meet the requirements to apply online.

My father was not a yeller by nature, but I suppose that's because nobody ever dared to disobey him. I certainly never had. But I was even more certain that if I forced myself into the mold he'd created for me, it wouldn't stop there. "*You will go to Stanford like your brother, and you will let this foolishness go, do you hear me? I told your mother she would regret indulging you in this drama hogwash, and I was right. But I won't stand for it another minute. I did not raise you to become a glorified showgirl, and I certainly will not pay for it.*" He tore

my letter in half and flung it over the railing. For a man so opposed to dramatics, he put on quite the show when he wanted to. “*Your future is here. End of story. Now go get dressed for dinner.*”

It takes more courage than it should to blink the memory away and knock on a door I was rarely welcomed through growing up. But now that my father has passed the baton off to Jasper, I’ve been given little choice as he’s now the official gatekeeper to the next six months of my life.

“Come in.”

I push the door open, and immediately I feel myself shrink back into the insecure teenager I’d hoped I left behind. There are only five years between Jasper and me, but in many ways, he’s always felt like an equal to our father.

“Hello, Sophie.” There’s a smirky smile on my brother’s face as he takes me in from behind his desk. The setting should feel familiar, given how my father occupied this same space eighty-plus hours a week when I was growing up. But unlike the renovations made to the downstairs, I can’t discern what’s been upgraded versus what’s twenty years old. My gaze makes a quick zigzag from the imported liquor that sits high on the shelf behind his desk, to the leather recliner in the corner, and then finally to the small wooden table displaying a magazine on an easel.

My brother’s sharp jawline and intimidating brown eyes steal my focus. He’s there, on the front cover of *Wine Spectator Magazine*. Another professional victory, another milestone of success met. Another reminder that Jasper has always belonged here.

“H-hi,” I say around the thickness in my throat. “I just got in.” The statement is so obvious I wish I could rewind the last fifteen seconds of this interaction and start over with the same level of confidence I possess on stage. Or rather, the same confidence I *used* to possess on stage. “I didn’t want to bother you, but I figured I should check in tonight so I don’t startle someone when I come out of my bedroom in the morning.”

I once took a class on the power of microexpression during my studies, but my brother’s blur the lines of several categories. When at

last he gestures to the chair across from him, I note that the creases around his eyes appear agreeable enough. “Please, take a seat. I’d offer you something from the kitchen, but our staff has already gone home for the evening.”

“That’s alright.” I take a seat, trying to ease the tension in my shoulders. “I grabbed a bite before I left the airport. I’m more tired than anything else. It’s been a long day.”

“By the sound of your email, it’s been a long few months.” His piercing eyes appraise me with the same unsympathetic gaze of our father’s. “It’s a shame things didn’t work out for you in New York.”

But New York is quite possibly the last thing I want to discuss with my brother. I grip and twist my hands in my lap. “Do you know if Mom and Dad are planning to stop by tomorrow?”

“I’m afraid they left yesterday and will be gone for close to four weeks.” He studies me. “I assured Mom you’d understand, considering my request for them to take my place on a networking cruise to the Mediterranean was rather . . . recent.”

I blink, working hard to process this new information. He’d asked them to leave the same week I was coming home? “They’re networking for Bentley Vineyards?”

“No,” Jasper says with what sounds like a hint of pity in his voice. “They’re networking for Wilder Wines. Bentley Vineyards was phased out at the end of last year.”

“When was that decided?” When he quirks an eyebrow at my boldness, I rephrase. “I just mean, I thought Gigi’s trust required a vote on any matter that affects the winery’s future.”

Due to a long-standing grudge held between Gigi and my father, she’d changed the structure of her estate to prohibit him from being one of four appointed trustees near the end of her life, limiting his power and control. Those trustees are named as Mr. Adams—Gigi’s original attorney—my mother, my brother, and me. Though I forfeited my position and vote, as well as all my financial gains, the second I drove away from the winery. A fact my father recited at length when I told him that the acting hobby I loved had become the future I wanted to pursue.

My brother leans back in his expensive chair. “It does, and we did. It was a majority vote in favor of the rebranding.”

Meaning that my mother, once again, cowed to the men in her life in order to keep them happy. Nothing new there.

Before I can comment further, my eye catches on the eerie artwork to the left of the table with the displayed magazine. Framed in a raw, dark wood, the abstract painting holds randomized textures and patterns of a neutral palette. With the exception of a blood-red smattering that divides the canvas in half.

“It’s one of a kind,” Jasper acknowledges as he stands. “All of Donnell’s paintings are. It’s what makes them so valuable.” Hands clasped behind his back, he strolls over to it. “It’s subtle yet profound, each stroke a testament of the artist’s skillful eye and to the technique he’s mastered with the manipulation of light and dark from every angle.” His gaze cuts back to mine. “The English translation of the title from Italian is ‘Blood and Shadows.’”

“I didn’t know you’d taken an interest in art.”

His smile is loaded when he says, “Eight years is a long time to be away from home.” He moves toward the desk, leaning against its surface directly across from me. Even at the late hour, his slacks and dress shirt remain free of wrinkles. “Upon closer inspection, you’ll find we’ve evolved on nearly every front since you left, and it’s my top priority to make sure things continue on in that direction. Without any unnecessary distraction.” Jasper lets the word linger between us. “Your current financial situation is unfortunate, Sophie, but you were the one who made the choice to disengage from this family and from the industry we’ve invested in.” His stare is unblinking, and I’m one-hundred-percent sure that if he wasn’t bound to the rules of the Bentley trust, I wouldn’t even be sitting here. “So let’s both do each other a favor and not pretend like you’ve come back for any other reason than to collect your share of the biannual payout from the trust before you’re on your way again.”

Shame pricks my cheeks because I wish I could deny it. But the hard truth is I’m broke and homeless and in desperate need of a career path that won’t cause me to freeze every time the lights go

out. “I’ll do my best to be a valued employee in the time I’m here. I’ve gained quite a bit of experience working in the food service industry between shows, so I’m confident I can assume almost any position here with minimal training.” Per the conditions of the trust, I must work for the family a minimum of twenty hours per week for a duration of at least six months in order to receive a single cent of the next biannual payout. It’s a substantial amount of money. Enough to pay my debts and start over somewhere new as long as I invest it well.

“Also,” I add with my best attempt at a smile despite his scowl, “I really appreciate being able to stay at the house while I’m here.” There’s no way I’d be able to pay current rent prices in the area on the minimal wages I’ll be earning until the payout hits my account next January. “My old bedroom will be plenty of space for me and—”

“Actually,” he cuts me off, “your old room was recently remodeled into a home gym. I’ll be sure to have Natalie provide you with a schedule of the various remodeling projects we have going on this summer. For now, she’s made accommodations for you in the pool house.”

My lips part and then close. “The winery has a pool?”

“It’s currently in progress.” He pushes off the edge of the desk. “I suggest you invest in a good white noise machine if you intend to sleep past six.” He takes a seat at his computer again and taps his mouse. “Starting Monday afternoon, you’ll work in the tasting room and report directly to Natalie. She’ll handle your hours and set up your direct deposit for every other Friday, as well as provide you detailed instructions on how to check out a vehicle from our fleet, given you don’t have your own means of transportation. That is, after you renew your California driver’s license.”

Despite the low dip in my stomach at the mention of a sister-in-law who’s felt as much like a stranger to me as my own brother, I’m in no position to negotiate anything. And Jasper knows it. Without his signature, confirming I’ve met all the outlined conditions, my share of the trust payout will be denied, and I’ll have absolutely nothing to show for what will likely be the toughest six months of my life.

“Thank you” is all I can say as I stand to leave.

With a final glance in my direction, he nods. “Please close the door behind you.”

On the way out, I collect my cat and bags and trail down a new path to a pool house I hadn’t known existed until a few minutes ago. The tiny cottage-like structure sits twenty feet from a giant crater in the earth wrapped in neon orange fencing. If only I could protect the hollow center in my chest in a similar fashion.

As soon as I open the door and flick on the light inside my new living quarters, I take in the functional yet soulless outbuilding. I swallow back the raw emotion lodged in my throat and try to imagine what Dana would say if she were here with me. It’s not hard. I know she’d tell me to start by adding the colors and patterns I love to these blank walls while encouraging me to *make this space my own*.

But Dana is three thousand miles away, and this space isn’t mine. Nothing here will ever be mine.

On a sigh, I unzip the cat backpack and reach for Phantom. Snuggling him close to my chest, I sit on the bed and fight back tears. “Welcome home.”