

# Prologue

## *Hal's letter*

Knox —

If you're reading this, then I'm gone and Marian finally got you to sit still long enough to open an envelope. That alone is worth the price of dying, so at least one of us came out ahead.

I'll skip the part where I tell you I forgive you for never coming. There's nothing to forgive. You were busy building your thing, and I was busy building mine, and we both told ourselves there'd be time. There wasn't. That's just business, and you were always better at that than me.

So, here's what I've got for you instead of a lecture.

I'm leaving you Larkspur. It's forty acres, with a barn that leans a little to the west, and the best dirt in the county if you know how to work it. You don't, not yet. I'm betting that you can learn because I've watched you from a distance all these years and I've never once seen you walk away from a problem you didn't understand. This place is a problem you don't understand and I'm counting on you staying with it.

You'll want to sell it, of course. It doesn't make money, it just makes work, and the two aren't the same, no matter what your board tells you. Sell it and you'll clear the books by Christmas and never think of me again. I know you, Knox, I know exactly how fast you can make a "problem" disappear.

I just don't think you will. I think if you stand in these rows for one season, the way I did the year I got here with nothing and no idea what I was going to do, you'll find something you've been missing and you won't want to admit you were missing it. I could be wrong. I've been wrong about wine, weather, and one marriage, so my record is spotty.

Two things and then I'll let you go.

One. There's a desk in the farmhouse, second drawer, full of my notebooks. They're the closest thing to me you'll get now. There's a lot in there I never said out loud.

Two. There's a woman named Frankie who has kept this place alive on nothing but her own two hands and a stubbornness that'll frighten you. She's the reason there's anything left to leave you. Whatever you decide, you'd be best to listen to her more than you talk. If you do only one thing I ask, do that one.

I'd have liked to know you. That's my one real regret, and I'm out of time to fix it, so I'm handing you Larkspur instead. Do better with it than I did.

— Hal

# Chapter 1

## Knox

Three days ago a woman named Marian Woods called my office and told me my great-uncle Hal was dead and had left me a farm. God help me, the first thing I felt wasn't grief. It was: I do not fucking have time for this.

I had the estate file read by midnight and a broker's number in my phone by morning. I'd been left forty acres, a farmhouse, a barn, a guest cabin, equipment worth about what you'd get for scrap, and four straight years of losses in a neat little column going the wrong direction.

A vineyard, of all the useless things a man could saddle you with from beyond the grave. The math struck me before emotions did. How many hours is this going to cost me.

I hate that about myself.

So, I did what I always do when I couldn't stand to feel. I turned the new inconvenience into a problem I could solve.

On paper it was a write-down with a nice view.

Drive out, put a price on it, hand it to a Realtor, be back in the city by two, and never think about the fact that I'd let the old man die alone waiting for a visit that a busy nephew kept meaning to make.

The road ran out of pavement a mile short of the place, and I slowed the car so I wouldn't tear the undercarriage out in the ruts, which is how the vineyard got its first shot in before I'd even parked. It made me pay attention, and I didn't want to. I wanted to price the land and leave.

I got out of the car annoyed, already looking for whoever was in charge so I could get this over with.

A man in his sixties, built like a fence post, was coiling a hose by the barn and watching me cross the yard like I was a dog he hadn't decided about.

I asked where I could find whoever ran the place. He looked at my shoes before meeting my gaze. Then he pointed down the nearest row of vines, said nothing at all, and went back to his hose. I thought, fine, all right, that's how it's going to be, and started walking.

The shoes were a problem immediately. They were Italian, they had never touched dirt in their pampered lives, and the dirt reminded them of that with every step. I kept walking toward the one thing on the property I hadn't been able to put a number on.

She was thirty yards down, working the vines with her back half to me, pulling leaves and dropping them fast and unhurried at the same time. She didn't turn around, though I know she heard me coming.

She was small, sun-browned, and had a cap shoved over dark hair. Her forearms were marked up from a hard season. She was still in a way I couldn't read and had a mouth that looked like it had never once said a word it didn't mean.

I noticed it before I could stop myself, and then I got a stupid flash of what it might taste like to be on the good side of that mouth, which was insane. The fact that it sat in a face that pulled at me harder than I was going to allow made it even worse.

I was standing in a dead man's dirt holding the deed to her whole life, and my body had picked that exact second to get interested. Great. Perfect. Just what I needed.

Most people are legible. I can tell what they've built around themselves and that tells me who they are. I read her and got nothing. She was a problem I had no way to measure, which was a feeling I'd spent a great deal of money and effort to avoid having.

I had the details from the file in my head. "Frances Sutton?"

"Frankie." Nothing soft in it, and she kept working. "Only my mother called me Frances, and she had the right. You don't."

I let it go. "Knox Mills. I own the property now."

"I know who you are." She moved to the next vine. "Hal talked about you. Not often, and not lately."

That one got in right under the ribs, exactly where she'd aimed it. She did it without raising her voice or looking up, which was something I'd learned to master and had never once experienced pointed in my direction.

I'd expected the careful politeness you get from people standing in front of the man holding the deed, but she gave me none

of it. Some cold professional part of me respected her for it even while the rest of me wanted to win.

"I'd like to walk the site," I said. "Get the lay of the asset before I list it. If there are efficiencies, I'd rather find them now than in a property report."

She straightened up then and looked at me, really looked. It was like I was being sized up by someone who lived in the same tax bracket I did.

"Efficiencies." She said the word like she was checking a berry for rot. "Let me save you the walk. This isn't a server farm. You can't refactor a Syrah vine or ship the harvest a quarter early to make a number. The fruit comes off when it's good and ready, the crew has been here longer than you've known this place existed, and the single thing keeping all of it alive is the kind of inefficient work you can't automate, which is people who give a damn."

She pulled one more leaf and dropped it at my feet. "You want the lay of the asset, here it is. It's not an asset. It was a man's whole life. Now it's forty acres of my work, and you're standing in the middle of the best of it in shoes that cost more than my press."

"Eleven thousand dollars," I said.

That got her, half a second. "What?"

"A new basket press. It's in the file, under the equipment you've been keeping alive past its service life."

I meant it as a point about the numbers. It came out as the closest thing to a peace offering I had, proving my peace offerings were drier than the earth we were standing on.

“So you read the file.” She said it like it was a bad taste in her mouth. “You just didn’t understand it.”

She picked up the bin at her feet and settled it on her hip. “Walk wherever you want, Mr. Mills. Watch the irrigation lines, don’t touch the fruit, and when you call your broker, do it out of earshot. I’ve got three weeks to bring in a harvest, and exactly none of them are yours.”

Then she turned her back on me and walked down the row toward the crush pad. She didn’t look to see if I was following because she already knew I wasn’t going to. Being read that fast by a stranger was a special kind of naked.

Everything she had said was intended to put me on the other side of a line that she had drawn, the city on one side and the real work on the other. She was right to draw it, and instead of the irritation I expected to feel, I realized I didn’t want to be on the side she’d put me on.

I’d always been the most informed person in a situation. I’d walked into this one knowing the acreage, the losses, the depreciation schedule, and not one single thing that mattered. She’d seen all of it in under a minute without stopping her work.

I looked around and, for the first time, I actually saw the place.

The rows ran downhill in long green lines heavy with fruit. The light came across them low and bright and it pricked the hair on the back of my neck without permission. The place smelled like warm dirt, cut leaves, and something sweet already going over into rot.

The yard told me the rest of the story. Bins were stacked and labeled. Tools hung in their places. A chalkboard by the

barn door was covered in numbers I didn't understand, which bothered me because reading numbers was the one thing I was always able to do.

The joke of it was that I owned more wine in a climate-controlled case back in Seattle than most of these people would pour in a year, and I couldn't have told you one bottle of it from the next. I'd driven out to sell forty acres of something I had no palate for and no business owning. Perfect.

This was a place run on almost no money and total discipline, the kind of operation I'd have paid a consultant a fortune to build into a business for me.

It had not missed a step in years, and it had done it broke. I respected that before I got to know who had been responsible for it.

Standing there, I understood exactly why Hal had loved it.

The vineyard did that to me. I hated it because I had driven out to sell this, and suddenly I felt like a man getting ready to auction off a house with the family still living inside.

Then the rest showed up. I never went to see him. Since I was a kid, he lived forty minutes up the road and I never once got in the goddamn car.

I told myself I'd go when the quarter settled, when the raise closed, when there was a window, but there was never a window. I built my whole life so there wouldn't be one.

Now he was gone and the number of times I'd shown up for him was zero. Zero. That's on me. Not on him. The distance was entirely my fault and I could practically see my name written by 'willful estrangement.'

Forty minutes. That's all it was. Forty minutes from my condo in Seattle, on roads I'd never once turned onto, past horse fields and hand-lettered signs and tasting rooms in old barns.

Hal had been down these roads hundreds of times while I sat on the thirty-first floor of a glass building running a company I'd built from scratch, too busy to come see the only person left on that side of my family. Being busy was the most respectable way to not show up for loved ones, and I'd made an art of it.

So, I stood there in my ruined shoes, in the middle of a working vineyard I apparently owned and prepared to sell, and been told, correctly, that I had no idea what I was looking at.

The move here was obvious. I could get in the car, call the broker, let the market handle a problem I had no business handling myself, and be back in the city by two like I'd planned. I could let a dead man's vineyard become a line item in someone else's life.

I'd made a career, an entire fortune, out of seeing the rational move and taking it before the other people had finished having their feelings about it.

I stood in the row a while longer instead, and watched Frankie in the distance against the light, the bin on her hip, the dust coming up behind her boots. My feet wouldn't move.

As I walked back to the car I told myself it was diligence, learning more about the place. Even then, some honest part of me way in the back knew that was a lie.

I knew it was going to be a problem, and I got in the car and called no one. I'd never in my life been more annoyed at myself for something I so thoroughly could not explain.

# Chapter 2

## Frankie

A week after I buried the only person who had ever stayed in my life for long enough to mean something, I was on my knees in the crush pad performing CPR on a dying press, because the fruit didn't give a single solitary damn about grief.

"Come on, you gorgeous antique." I had my whole arm in it up to the elbow. "You give me this harvest and I will oil you like a Roman emperor. You quit on me now and I swear to God I will sell you for scrap and dance."

It shuddered, caught, and dropped into its grinding wheeze, which is the closest that machine and I ever got to love. It was fifty years old and held together with prayer and a part I machined myself because a new basket press runs eleven thousand dollars and I had, on a good day, about forty to my name.

The grief I felt didn't care about money or time either. It let me get elbow deep into a press, let me move forward, then

grabbed my ankle like a horror movie villain I thought I'd escaped.

The funeral and the private goodbyes didn't set it off, but a smell did. How stupidly frustrating. It struck right there, with the wasps on the fruit bins, because Hal used to stand right where I was kneeling, saying nothing, just watching me work, which I understood even at twenty-nine was the closest that man came to saying he loved you.

He hired me when I was full of theory and hadn't yet lost a night's sleep to a frost. He gave me his forty acres and said show me. I did, for four years.

Then he got sick and I showed him from a folding chair in a room at Cedar Court that smelled like the peppermints he kept in a dish. Every Sunday for three years, I brought photos of the rows, because he couldn't walk them. I gave him the weather report like gossip.

That's how real families work, at least the ones beyond blood. You show up, and you keep showing up, and one day it turns out showing up was the weight under the words you didn't say.

The last time I saw him with his eyes open, he told me the Syrah coming out of the barrels was going to surprise me this year. I never had the chance to bring him a bottle.

I kept waiting, because I wanted to watch his face. Now it would come out in October and I'd get to drink his surprise alone. The bottle I didn't bring would haunt me for the rest of my life.

The week since had been a blur of the practical, which is the only mercy grief gives you — a list long enough to hide behind. I called the people who needed calling.

I kept the crew paid out of an account that couldn't cover it. It had run on empty for years, and I'd kept the lights on the only way anyone keeps a dying farm alive — borrowed against it, season after season, until the bank held a note with a balloon coming due next October and a number on it I couldn't see my way to covering. I made the payments I could and lay awake over the ones I couldn't. I could run Larkspur in my sleep. Owning it was the one thing I'd never once been able to afford. I didn't sleep so much as lie down and wait to be allowed to get up again. And in the cracks, when there was nothing left to do with my hands, the anger came. Under the grief there was always anger; they came as a set and were focused at the disease, at the distance, and at a God who let it all happen.

Starting exactly a week ago, the anger also came at a man in Seattle I'd never met who was about to inherit the last thing I had left of Hal without earning a single inch of it.

Mac had come into this barn with his hat in his hands, which was the first sign of bad news. Mac would wear that hat in the shower. However, he took it off, indoors, and told me Hal was gone.

Then, before I'd even made any sense of it, he told me the rest. The place didn't go to me. It went to a great-nephew. Some tech guy in Seattle named Knox Mills, forty minutes up the road. A man who, in the entire time Hal was dying, had never once gotten in his car and driven out to see the man whose blood was in this dirt.

Not once. I'd have known. I knew every car that came up that gravel, and his never did.

I'd carried the bank's envelope out to the crush pad that morning meaning to open it, and hadn't. When I heard the tires on the gravel I folded it in half and pushed it into my back pocket without deciding to. Whatever the number was, it was mine to carry. It was the one thing left on this property that was still only mine, and I was not going to let another man see it before I did.

I heard the car that I didn't know come up my gravel, too fast, then it stopped in the wrong place. He came down the row toward me in a suit that cost more than my truck and a pair of Italian shoes that had clearly never met dirt.

The first thought I had was, oh, come ON.

I hated Knox Mills as a concept for a solid week before I ever saw his face. He was taking what I earned, after all. Then I saw his face, and God is not without a sense of humor, because it was a good one.

He was tall, dark, and put together like a problem. He had a jaw you could set a level against. I felt a hot little jolt of unwelcome warmth low in my belly. It wasn't what I wanted to feel about the man who'd come to sell my life.

I hated that even more than I hated him.

I didn't turn around. I kept pulling leaves like he wasn't worth the interruption, which took acting; every animal part of me had already looked at him and did not like how interested it was.

"Frances Sutton?"

I didn't even look up, just told him to call me Frankie.

He told me his name like I didn't know it. Knox Mills. I own the property now. Present tense, easy, a man reading a number off a page, and I wanted to put him through the destemmer.

So I used the only thing I had to work with, which was the truth. I told him Hal talked about him. Not often, not lately.

I wanted him to be a cardboard villain I could hate cleanly, a suit with a checkbook where a heart goes. That would have been so much easier to despise while my whole chest was one big open wound.

Instead, he stood there taking the hit like he knew he had it coming, and that wasn't what the enemy was supposed to do. He kept, infuriatingly, being a person, and I didn't have the room that week to hold one more complicated thing, so I decided, right there, to pretend I hadn't seen it.

He tried to treat the vineyard like a business and I'd cut him off and shoved him back over the line to villain until he flinched again and proved he'd read more than the acreage and the losses. That detail shifted the line between us again.

A man who noticed the right number was a dangerous kind of man to have on your land. I ended the conversation by reminding him he didn't understand what was in the file while telling myself no file could capture a place. Then I stormed away.

Mac was waiting for me near the crush pad, pretending to check a hose, which was his version of hovering.

"Well?" he said.

"He's going to sell it."

"You don't know that."

"Mac." I set the bin down harder than it deserved. "He said the word efficiencies to me. In Hal's rows. A week after." My

voice started to tremble and I shut it down. “He’s going to sell it. He’ll feel a little bad about it on the drive home, and that’s the whole story.”

Mac looked down the row to where the man was still standing in his ruined shoes, not leaving, and something crossed his weathered face that I chose to ignore. I’d already met my quota of complicated men for one morning.

I didn’t bother to watch Knox. I’d already read him perfectly. He was going to stand in that row a while, thrown off, because nobody had told him no in a long time.

Then he was going to get in his car and let a realtor and a spreadsheet do the actual killing so he’d never have to feel it. Men like that didn’t keep things they couldn’t use as profit or leverage.

By spring there’d be a sign at the road and some LLC turning Block C into a wedding venue with a photo wall.

I got back to the crush pad before I let my hands shake. I put them flat on the cold steel and I breathed.

I looked out over her, the whole of the vineyard, with the leaning barn and the hand-painted sign, the vines standing there in their patient green rows not knowing a single thing had changed, three weeks from the best fruit they’d given in years. Another surprise Hal would never taste.

I loved this. Not the way a normal person loved a job. I loved the land romantically and against all odds. Somehow, I’d never explained it to Hal.

The four a.m. cold, the wasps, the ache in my hands by noon, the smell of the fruit going over. Put me in a good row with a sharp pair of shears and I’d forget to be anything but happy.

It wasn't an asset. It was the one thing I ever had that made me glad to be alive at four in the morning.

I'd spent my whole life learning that nothing stayed. Not the towns, not the people who promised, not the roof you lived under and were dumb enough to call yours. Then one gruff old man with dirt under his nails gave me forty acres and a show me, and without either of us ever saying the word, he stayed.

He was the first thing in my life that I ever counted on. I'd built four years on that bedrock, and it turned out to be a man. Men died, and now his land was going to belong to a stranger who'd have to type Larkspur into a map app to find his own inheritance.

"Fine," I said, out loud, to the vines, to Hal, the dying press, and to the beautiful infuriating stranger still standing in my rows and couldn't hear me. My voice came out steadier than I was, which was the one genuinely useful thing that had happened.

"Then you're going to have to look me in the eye when you do it."

I hated, with everything I had left, that a stupid animal part of me had already decided I wouldn't entirely mind him looking.

# Chapter 3

## **Knox**

I'd told the whole world my entire adult life that I take the rational move faster than a lawyer. Instead, I'd lain awake in my condo, which suddenly felt like a hotel I'd forgotten I'd checked into. At some point around three in the morning, I'd ordered a pair of boots that could handle dirt with next-day delivery.

I had not let myself ask the obvious question about my purchase, even though it was in my head. That was the first sign of trouble.

The truth I wasn't admitting was dumber and simpler than boots. I didn't want the last connection I had to Hal ending with a phone call to a realtor. That's the whole reason I drove forty minutes at seven in the morning to sit in that kitchen and get ambushed.

One decent instinct, about a decade too late, dressed up as proper process so I wouldn't have to call it what it was.

The lawyer, Marian Woods, had called and said she needed to walk us through the will, this morning, at the property, both of us. Both of us. I didn't love the sound of that either, and I was about to find out why.

Frankie had the kitchen ready like she was preparing for a firing squad and folding her own blindfold. There was a ledger open on the table, a real one, hand-kept. She'd put it out on purpose, and made sure I knew it. It was a dare, look at what you inherited, city boy. Fine, I looked.

I'll admit the kitchen threw me a little, because it wasn't a farmhouse kitchen. It was hers. Mugs were on hooks and farm catalogs sat on the sill next to a half-dead plant she'd clearly decided to keep alive out of spite.

She'd been living here for the three years since Hal got sick, quietly making a cold house into a home she didn't own. I noticed it, hated that I did, and shoved it somewhere in the back of my mind to deal with never.

"Ms. Sutton."

"Mr. Mills. Nice shoes."

"They were on the way." I sat down at what was technically my own table without being asked, and read her ledger upside down. I got the whole story in about nine seconds thanks to muscle memory and practice.

Then something happened that I didn't plan.

The numbers weren't a story about a woman running a place into the ground. They were the opposite. Every line was a person spending nothing on herself and everything on the dirt, holding a dying operation together with her hands and refusing to let it show.

It was, in cold professional terms, some of the most disciplined out-of-money I'd ever seen.

"The losses aren't incompetence," I said, to Marian, which was a coward's compliment. "The place is run tight. This is underinvestment. Somebody stopped putting money in years ago and it's been eating itself to stay alive ever since."

"His name was Hal," Frankie said, hard. The money went to a room at Cedar Court where it should have gone, and here I sat in Hal's kitchen running forensics on his last three years of getting old while I was too busy to drive out to visit.

I shut up and let her have the point. She'd earned it. I'd earned the silence, and a good deal worse.

Then Marian opened a folder thick enough to prop a door and told me, in an even, unhurried voice, that I did not own the vineyard. Not outright.

Hal hadn't left it to me, he'd left it in trust, for one year. I could not sell it, list it, subdivide it, borrow against it, or do one single useful thing with it for a full year from the day he died. Title stayed with the estate. With her, the lawyer, as trustee.

"Define the year," I said, and I kept my voice steady, despite the pressure that started climbing the back of my throat. It felt like the animal-sense certainty that I had been outplayed and the trap was already shut.

Marian cleared her throat. "It's in trust for a full year from the day he died. If you meet the conditions, the title goes to you cleanly and you can do whatever you'd like with it."

That took the air out of the room. To get the vineyard, I had to actually run the place, keep the crew paid, bring in this

harvest, and put real money into stopping the bleed. I also had to be here, physically, personally, in the dirt. Every day, for a year.

A man like me did not get his calendar taken away by a vineyard. My calendar ran my life. Its whole job was to leave nothing, so no one had a clean run at me, and now a dead man had reached up and wiped twelve months of it blank.

There was no number I could write, no call I could make, and no clause I could crack to get it back. No. No. I do not have time for this. I do not have a fucking year.

Under the no, was the quieter, worse fact that some part of me had already heard the sentence and gone strangely still, like something finally caught me. I was suddenly tired.

I read the page as fast as I'd read the ledger, and I felt my own face reveal a half-second slip. Frankie watched me catch it. She loved it. I'd have loved it too, in her chair.

"And who decides whether I've stewarded it?" I asked. "That's not a number. Somebody has to judge it."

"Two somebodies." Marian almost smiled. "Ms. Sutton and myself have the final ruling."

I turned and looked at the woman who'd told me yesterday she'd feed me to the destemmer, and understood everything a half-second before the lawyer said it.

"And if I fail," I said. "If I sell the fruit short or let the crew go or manage it from a distance and wait it out. It doesn't come to me. Who gets it?"

Marian looked at Frankie. "She does."

The kitchen went dead quiet. Somewhere out in the barn a radio was playing something with too much bass. The refriger-

ator kicked on, and I sat there and did the actual math, the kind that left the money out of it.

The person who decided whether I kept this vineyard was the same person who inherited it if I lost it. She had every reason in the world to want me to fail, and a year to make sure I did.

Any other week of my life I'd have admired it. It was a beautiful piece of work, the kind of clean, cornered structure I'd have built myself if I ever needed to force a man's hand, and Hal had built it against me with a legal pad, a failing body, and a better read on my character than I'd ever had on it.

He'd made my judge and my enemy the same woman, and dared me to earn her anyway.

"That's a conflict of interest," I said.

"That's your uncle," Frankie said. "He didn't build you a fair fight. He built you a real one."

Hal did this on purpose. Every line of it. While dying, he'd built a machine out of his own will designed for me, the nephew who turned everything into a number, sold it, and never looked back.

He knew I'd come to price it and run. He knew it well enough to make running impossible without losing, and losing means handing the thing he loved to the one person who'd earned it.

The old son of a bitch had read me from forty minutes away, for years, cleaner than the people I pay a fortune to read me. And he'd done it while I couldn't spare a single afternoon to drive out and sit at his bed and let him.

I didn't know whether to be furious at him or come apart, so I did neither, while both of them happened anyway, underneath, where nobody at the table could see.

That hit me hard, quietly, in front of the two women who did not need to see it. He'd known me well enough to build the perfect trap and I'd never once given him the chance to be known back.

He'd loved me enough to fight me from the grave. I'd been too busy to answer a phone.

This one, too, was fully my fault, and now the dead man had made me sign for it in installments, a year of them. It was one long overdue visit I was finally going to make whether I wanted to or not.

Frankie closed the ledger. She looked at me, and for once there wasn't a knife in it, just a look, tired, honest, and unbearably fair.

"Welcome to Larkspur, Mr. Mills. You've got a year to prove you're not what you look like. And I've got a year to hope you are, or hope you aren't, and I genuinely couldn't tell you right now which one I'm rooting for."

I looked back at her and, for the first time since Marian Woods said the word dead into my phone, I didn't have a single thing ready to say.

The terrible truth, the one I wasn't going to give either of them, was that some part of me way in the back, the same part that hadn't let me leave the row yesterday, had already stopped fighting the year. It heard you have to be here and felt something I had no business feeling while losing a year of the life I'd built.

It had felt like being let off the hook of my own life, and I hated that it felt good.

# Chapter 4

## **Knox**

Frankie left the house at four, and I stayed, because I couldn't come up with a good reason to go.

She'd shown me the desk on her way out. Second drawer, exactly where the letter said. "The notebooks are in there. They're yours to read. I'm not going to sit here and watch you do it." Then she took her truck down the road to a neighbor's and left me alone in the house.

I told myself I was staying to understand what I'd inherited before I decided anything, which was true, but was only half the reason. I honestly didn't want to get in the car. So, Knox, what is that really about?

The house was hers. She'd moved in when Hal went to Cedar Court to keep it lived-in, and it was her life all over. Her boots by the door, a barn jacket on a chair, a wall calendar in her handwriting, pick dates and frost warnings and a little skull-and-crossbones on some date in October.

I wasn't sure I wanted to know what that was about.

She'd also left his things right where Hal had left them. His canvas coat was on the hook, gone soft at the cuffs. His reading glasses were folded on the sill over the sink, where he'd probably have stood watching the grapes out the window while he brewed the coffee.

She'd just built her life on top of his and hadn't moved anything of his out of the way to do it. Better than I would have, I'm sure.

I own a condo worth more than this entire county and there is not one thing in it that would tell someone a damn thing about me. I noticed that while standing in her kitchen, and I hated it. She had her life laid out while I folded mine, labelled it, and slid some parts into folders I never had to look at. At the very back was the fucking man named Adrian.

This was back at the start, when Evan and I were young and stupid enough to try to build a company on a handshake. We both were naive enough to think that if we brought in the right people, we didn't need to micromanage them. We clearly didn't know shit.

Evan wanted to bring in Adrian because he was Evan's friend. I objected because Adrian didn't pass my bullshit detector. I let Evan talk me out of it, because I trusted Evan, not Adrian. I took his trust of Adrian over my own gut, even though my gut was screaming. I called it paranoia.

Adrian built the client relationship that we were building the company around. A big one, and it would have given us real credibility. He did it well and the client was a key part of us closing a big round of money.

Then one day, Adrian left and took the client with him. I wanted to go after him, take him down, and get the client back. He'd fucked us, and I didn't want to let him get away with it.

But the lawyers, charging us a fucking fortune, told us it was all clean. He hadn't violated any agreement, he just left, started his own company, and the client loved him enough to follow him.

All clean and legal, but in doing it, he cratered a funding round that damn near killed the company in its earliest days.

I still felt it in my gut eighteen years later. There was nothing I could do. Nothing. I was a man who fixed shit, and there was no fix. No lever, no clause, no call.

I didn't come out of it a better judge of people. Instead, I built systems and processes that couldn't betray me. I turned the company into a well-oiled and well-protected machine that couldn't turn on me, and it worked beautifully.

But all that cold machinery left me alone, because I couldn't call systems and machines when I needed to talk about how my great-uncle died. I'd protected myself so well that a man like Adrian could never take me down again, and somewhere in there I'd turned into a man that someone like Hal, couldn't reach either. The damn walls kept everyone out entirely.

After Adrian I made a quiet decision, the kind you don't notice you're making, that I was never going to need a person that much again. Eighteen years later I was standing in a dead man's kitchen, in a house somebody had kept warm on purpose, looking at the bill for it.

I opened the drawer with the notebooks and found dozens of them. They were held together in bunches with rubber bands

by year, showing decades of them. They had cheap cardboard covers that were furred from being opened out in the weather.

I took the top one and sat down in his chair and started reading, and Hal started to become a real person to me about two decades too late.

They weren't a diary, he wasn't like that. They were about the work and the vineyard, day by day, written into the page so hard that it left indents under the pencil marks. *Bud break Block A, four days early. Rain coming, can smell it. Ordered barrels, too expensive, ordered them anyway.*

He put in the weather, yields, what broke, and what it cost to fix it. It was forty years of him paying close attention to his land and his work and folded into it, the details of the rest of his life.

I picked up a more recent one and started reading: March. *Knees are shot. Told Frankie it was the cold. She didn't believe me, brought me a stool for the pruning and didn't say a word about why. Good hand, that one. Better than I was at her age, and I was pretty good.*

I read it over twice. He'd put her name in his notebook years before she was ever on my radar. The later the notebook, the worse the years became, the shorter the entries, and the more often her name showed up. One more reminder that I'd really fucked this one up.

There was a whole section in there about a single block of Syrah, old vines he'd babied through a bad decade, and he wrote about it with love like a cherished pet. *Syrah's going to be something this year. If it comes in like I think, that's the one that finally tells them what she can do.*

By she, he meant Frankie. He'd been nursing along a wine he knew he wouldn't live to drink, betting that three years later, it would say something about Frankie. She could run this place into the black in five years if she had two nickels and somebody who'd get out of her way. Trouble is I'm the one in her way, and I can't afford to go.

She'd been straight with me across that kitchen table. She'd watched all this in slow motion for years, the money going to keep him alive and the vineyard going quietly under, with her hands tied the whole time. She'd loved him too much to leave.

I sat there in the dark and read his love for the place, and his unspoken love for Frankie. Forty years of it, in pencil, and I fell into my normal habit of comparing.

I'd built something a thousand times the size of this place, but I'd never written anything down that I'd want a stranger to find after I was gone. Hal ran forty acres quietly into the ground and left behind a record of a life so full it was more than I could get my head around.

I ran an empire, and the real parts of my life would fit on an index card. That felt like shit.

Then I looked for myself in the notebooks.

It took a while. It was near the back of a notebook two years old, along with the weather: *Thought about calling the boy again. Didn't. A man that busy doesn't need his old great-uncle reminding him there's a place out here he's never seen. He'll come when he comes.*

There wasn't any anger in it, and that's what broke me. If he'd been bitter, I'd have known how to handle it. But Hal wasn't

angry. He'd just let me off the hook years before I ever showed up and gone on writing about the rain.

I'd held a grudge about Adrian and turned it into a whole fortress to keep shit out of my life. Then I came here eight days after Hal stopped being able to know it. It sat in my gut and burned.

He spent the last part of his life half-hoping I'd come up to see him, and every time I didn't, he didn't get angry. He gave me a reasonable excuse. Like my not coming was a fucking scheduling conflict and not a choice I made, over and over again. I'd made the bullshit decision to treat the last family I had on that side as something I'd get to once I had a clear spot in my calendar.

He'd given me the kindest possible version of my own failure, right there in his notebooks, and I did not deserve a word of it. I couldn't pay him back for that kindness. He forgave a debt I hadn't even had the decency to remember I'd created.

I sat there with his worn notebook in my hands, and something came up in me that I hadn't felt in a very long time. I was glad there was no one there to see it because it was not very pulled together and it made me feel like shit. I didn't care. It started behind my eyes and in my chest, and it pretty much overwhelmed me.

I sat in his chair until it was black outside.

Every analysis that I had done said the right move hadn't changed: list it in spring, take the write-down, and get back to the company that actually needed me. A vineyard I inherited by accident is not a reason to blow up my business.

I went through the numbers again out of pure habit and it all came out the same way they did that morning. For what may have been the first time in my adult life, the analysis didn't move me at all.

I wasn't going to sleep in Hal's bed and I wasn't going to sleep in Frankie's house, that was clear.

There was a guest cabin across the yard with one room, a bed, a desk, and a window looking out at the vineyard. I carried my bag down there and I took the two-year-old notebook with me, the one he'd mentioned me in, though I couldn't say why. I set it on the desk where I'd see it first thing in the morning.

The cabin was smaller than the closet in my condo, but I hadn't been in a room that felt like it meant something to me like this one did in years. It was so quiet, all I could hear was the noise of the wind and the dry sound of the vines moving. I really didn't know what to do with my feelings, and that threw me off more than I'd admit.

I stood there in that cabin, in the middle of a piece of land I now owned, or would, but hadn't done anything to earn. I understood, against every analysis I had done, that I was staying.

# Chapter 5

## Frankie

Four days of having a billionaire in my guest cabin, and I'd learned four things about Knox Mills. I resented every one of them.

One, he got up before I did. I wanted to say that was physically impossible. Two, he'd swapped his whole Seattle wardrobe overnight for work clothes that still somehow looked ironed, like there was a concierge line at Carhartt nobody had told me about.

Three, he asked questions. Real ones, with follow-ups, which is the single most annoying thing a man you've decided to hate can do to you.

And four, he wrote everything down in a notebook. Hal's exact habit, in his grandnephew's hands, and every time I caught him at it something moved in my chest that I didn't plan to discuss with anyone, including myself.

He'd cornered me at the crush pad that first morning, before I'd finished my coffee, which was a war crime.

"I'd like to help," he said.

I didn't look up from the destemmer I was cleaning. "Do you know what this is?"

"No."

"Do you know what any of it is?"

"No. That's why I'd like to help. I learn fast," he said simply, no charm, like he was reading a number off a screen. "I've read the trust. I have to run this place for a year or I lose it to you, and I don't like losing things. You'd rather it didn't die on your watch. They might be different goals, but they point the same way for now."

It was a humiliatingly good argument. I hated that it was coming from a man whose boots still had the creases from the box.

"Fine," I said, because the other option was admitting out loud that I couldn't do it alone, and I would sooner eat the destemmer. "But we do it my way. You don't touch a vine, a tank, or a barrel unless I say so. You lift what I point at. And you save the questions for after because if you narrate at me, I will end you. Mac will help me hide the body. Junie will bake a cake for the wake."

"Understood." He didn't smile. "That the usual orientation, or do I rate special treatment?"

"Special treatment. You're welcome."

He looked down and wrote in the notebook.

"You're writing that down."

"Everything."

So, that was the deal, struck over a destemmer, between the two least trusting people in the Pacific Northwest going at it like a hostage exchange.

He stayed out of my way during crush. He didn't touch the fruit unless I said to. He did what I told him, when I told him, no arguing in the moment. In exchange, I showed him what Larkspur actually needed to stop dying. The real version, not the one I dressed up for the bank.

Marian was right about one damn thing. If this man was going to decide the fate of the place I'd bled for, I'd rather he did it knowing exactly what he was killing.

I told myself it was strategy. It was also, honestly, that I needed the hands.

So, we worked for four days on the vineyard, running on coffee and adrenaline. I fell in time with the noise of crush, the destemmer's rattle, the pump's slow thud, and Junie singing off-key in the tasting room she was scrubbing down.

Knox learned fast, like he'd said. He hauled and sorted, asked his questions and wrote the answers down, and never once asked the same thing twice.

By the third day, Diego had stopped watching him like he'd steal the forklift. By the fourth, Mac let him carry a full bin without hovering, which from Mac was basically adoption papers.

The worst part was that he was good company. He didn't need to fill a silence. He worked, he listened, and he didn't pretend to be anything he wasn't. It was the most attractive thing a person could be for me, and he did it by accident, doing my dead mentor's work like he'd been born to it.

Every night he walked back to the cabin. Every morning he was already out there before me. Somewhere in those four days, the space he took up in my day started feeling like a habit, which scared me a hell of a lot more than the occupation had.

On the fourth night, somewhere around nine o'clock, I ended up with his arm six inches from mine, both of us swearing at the press.

The press picked that night for its most dramatic collapse yet. Mid-pressing, a full basket of the first white of the season loaded, and the ratchet froze solid with a groan like the whole machine was giving up on life.

If it seized with the cake half-pressed I'd lose the batch, and I couldn't afford that. So, I climbed halfway into a fifty-year-old machine and threatened its life.

"Listen to me, you rusted antique," I told it, up to my elbow in its guts. "You quit on me tonight, in front of him, of all people, and I will sell you to a scrapyard for parts and salt the ground where you stood."

Behind me, Knox made a small sound that he turned into a cough about half a second too late. At least he had the sense not to laugh out loud.

"It's the pawl," I said, mostly to myself, elbow-deep. "The spring's gone. I have to hold the ratchet off while I reset it or it'll kick back and take my hand with it. So I need you to—"

"Tell me where."

I showed him. He put his hands on the long lever where I wanted them, and I felt him take the weight. He held the whole furious tension of the ratchet off my fingers while I worked the pawl back into its seat.

His forearms were right next to mine. I discovered I had opinions about his forearms. Those could wait for later. Or never.

We stayed like that a minute longer than was necessary. His arms bracketed mine, the heat of him brushed my shoulder, both of us breathed the sharp smell of the grapes while cursing a machine that had chosen the worst possible night to die.

"This thing belongs in a landfill," he said through his teeth, taking the strain.

"It belongs to me, and I can't afford the landfill or a new one, so hold the damn lever."

"I am."

I hated the lack of rush in my body. This was a repair, completed, then done, but the closeness of him snuck up on me. His dry answers and his willingness to get dirty chipped away at it, until every accidental touch felt too close to intimate. I felt it show up and I told it to leave, but it didn't. Part of me was glad it didn't.

"Hold it," I said. "Do not let it slip."

"I won't."

Knox held the dying press open with nothing but will and good shoulders while I reset the spring by feel. When the pawl finally caught and bit, the whole thing shuddered and the pressure came off. I turned to tell him he could let go.

Except he was right there.

Closer than I'd thought, because I'd been watching my hands and not the six inches between us that had quietly become three. His face was inches from mine, flushed from holding the lever,

a streak of purple along his jaw where he'd wiped sweat with the back of his wrist.

He smelled like crushed grapes, clean sweat, and something else that was just him. It buzzed along my nerves as strong as wine. I hated it.

He was looking at my mouth. So, I looked at his, which was a mistake. I hadn't let myself look at his lips and now they were three inches away and slightly open and I couldn't make myself look anywhere else.

Neither of us was breathing right. The barn was dead quiet, even the press was holding still. I felt him tighten the leash on his control. Heat was coming off his chest, and he was close enough that half an inch would have put me against it.

His hand had come off the lever and it hovered at my waist. It was close enough that I could feel the presence of it through my shirt, and every part of me wanted to lean that half inch toward him before I could vote on the matter.

His fingers curled, barely, like they were doing it unconsciously. His eyes dropped from mine to my mouth again and stayed there.

I knew exactly what I wanted, and it wasn't only a kiss. I wanted his mouth and his weight and those ruined hands where they had no business being, wanted it low and sudden and with none of the four years of careful I'd built around myself.

My whole body had gone tight and traitorous, leaning on that half inch like it had already voted without me.

I watched him want it. I watched the change in his face get overruled by the part of him that was being careful, and I knew that if I closed the last of that distance, he wouldn't stop me.

But he'd given me the choice, and there was a half-second in there where the smart move and what I wanted stopped being the same thing. I'd never trusted myself in a half-second like that and my body was winning.

He pulled back first.

Barely, a beat too late to pretend it hadn't happened, and a beat too early for me to find out what I'd have done if he hadn't. He stepped back, put a respectable amount of air between us, and said, in a voice that was almost level, "The press is fixed."

"The press is temporarily lied to," I said, because if I didn't make a joke I'd say what I was feeling out loud. "It'll die again by Thursday."

"Then I'll hold it again on Thursday."

That was the problem with Knox. I understood it all for the first time, standing there in my barn with my heart going like a rabbit. He fixed problems, reliably, and kept showing up for the ugly, unglamorous, breaking parts of a vineyard he came here to sell.

I could armor up against the part of him that wanted to take Larkspur from me, but I had no defense at all against him if, God help us both, he came to love it as much as I did. That one I hadn't planned for.

*Hal, you menace, I thought. You didn't leave me a dare. You left me a door to something, and you knew I never learned how to keep one shut.*

"Go to bed, Mr. Mills," I said.

He looked at me one more second. Then he did the smartest thing he'd done since arriving, he left. I heard the cabin door close across the yard a minute later.

I didn't move for a while. My hands were still keeping busy with the press. I could still feel the heat where his hand had almost been. That was somehow worse than if he'd just touched me and gotten it over with.

I'd kept this place and myself shut down tight for the last four years, and this guy had walked into my barn and had, without laying a single finger on me, gotten to me anyway.

I stood there and thought about the new problem he'd created, and that one was going to be a whole lot harder to fix. Underneath the thinking, the part of me I'd have denied under oath was just standing in the dark wanting him to cross the yard again and finish the thing neither of us had started.