

CHASING SMOKE



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PIPER RAYNE®

CHASING SMOKE

THE MERCER FAMILY

PIPER RAYNE



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CHASING SMOKE

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ABOUT CHASING SMOKE

I've been running toward burning buildings for a decade. Then my best friend's widow smiled at me for the first time in two years, and I knew right then I was in trouble.

After Caleb died, I made a promise—I'd take care of his wife. Keep an eye on her. Check in on her. Make sure she kept on living.

Collins insists she's fine. She's not.

So when she finally agrees to let me help pull her out of her grief, I vow to stand beside her however long she needs me, no matter how much it costs me.

Collins isn't supposed to smile at me like she does. She's not supposed to let me in. And she definitely isn't supposed to be the best part of my day.

She was Caleb's. I know that.

The problem is, I can't stop wondering what it would be like if Collins wasn't just someone I was meant to protect.

But mine.

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PROLOGUE

EIGHTEEN MONTHS AGO...

Collins

My eyes crack open, and I roll over, stretching my arm, but my hand only meets with the coolness of unslept sheets. My chest jaws open, and the pit of loneliness swallows me up.

At least Caleb isn't far away, since he's only working at the Echo Lake Fire Station this month rather than down at the TEEEX Brayton Fire Training Field in Texas as a part-time instructor.

I slide over to Caleb's side of the bed, pushing my nose into his pillows, and inhale. His scent calms me somewhat, and my eyes drift closed as I try to fall back asleep.

Just as I'm getting comfortable, the doorbell rings, followed by insistent knocking.

Is that what awoke me in the first place?

The doorbell rings again and again and again.

Did Caleb forget his keys?

I glance at the clock. His shift doesn't end for another five hours.

That familiar lurch bottoms out my stomach, and a cold, clammy sweat breaks out over my skin. Pushing the covers off, I bolt out of bed and race from the bedroom.

I'm moving so fast, my fuzzy socks cause me to slide on the hardwood in the hallway, but I regain my footing, heading to the stairway. The doorbell rings again as I rush down the stairs, knowing now there's something majorly wrong. My foot slips and I grasp for the banister, catching myself before I slide ass-first down the rest of the stairs.

Those things are dangerous. You shouldn't wear them around the house.

I hear Caleb's lecture from last year in my head. I had been racing to the kitchen to get my tray of cookies that were about to burn, only for him to give me his cocky grin as he took the cookies out while I watched, splayed out on the floor. The sprained ankle should have made me throw the socks away, but they're so warm.

I don't bother checking who is behind the door before unlocking the deadbolt. A serial killer is a better alternative than who my gut is telling me.

I whip the door open, the cool spring air washing over my panicked face.

Ansel's fist is raised to knock again.

My gut twists, and hope dissipates. Why couldn't it have been a serial killer?

He's dressed in his firefighting gear, minus the helmet and jacket, meaning he was on shift tonight too. His hair is sweaty, his face dirty, but it's his red-rimmed eyes that splinter the first crack in my heart.

He doesn't have to open his mouth. He doesn't have to speak a word. His eyes say it all. The horror and shock, but mostly the gutted pain of having to deliver the news he's here to tell me.

"Is he dead?"

He shakes his head. "He's injured."

"Where?"

"Collins..." His jaw tightens, and he opens his mouth to continue.

"How bad?" The doorknob digs into my palm, and my fingers tingle with numbness.

"They life-flighted him to Portland. But..." He swallows hard, eyes filling with tears. "It's ba—"

His jaw clenches again, and he inhales. I don't want to hear anymore. Whatever it is, however bad he thinks it might be, Caleb is a fighter, and he's going to make it through tougher and stronger.

"Take me to him?"

"Okay... I'll drive you," Ansel says.

I race back up the stairs with no thoughts other than I need to get to my husband. I need to be there to see for myself what condition he's in.

I grab my jeans and sweater from yesterday, whipping off one fuzzy sock at a time, and run back down the stairs. At the door, I slide into my

boots and grab my purse, then hurry out, slamming the door shut behind me, not waiting for Ansel.

We're both silent. My thoughts have burrowed deep, considering seven hundred possibilities as to what I'll walk into at the Portland hospital.

He'll make it. He has to. He's too young. He's got his entire life ahead of him. We have our entire lives ahead of us. The haunting thought of us never having kids... a family like we planned. No, no. I will myself to push those thoughts out of my head.

It's Caleb. There's a reason why TEEX Brayton Fire Training Field wanted him. He's the best at what he does.

I glance at Ansel. His knuckles are white on the steering wheel, his eyes forward. Gone is my husband's boisterous best friend who takes nothing seriously.

No. Whatever Ansel thinks, he's wrong. Caleb will be okay.

I just need to get there, and when Caleb sees me and hears my voice, he'll fight to get back to me.

What feels like a lifetime later, we get to the hospital. Ansel goes to the nurses' station, and instantly his shoulders deflate. He circles around, and his eyes give it all away as they always do.

"NOOO..." I scream, crumbling to the floor.

Ansel rushes over to me, his arms pulling me into his chest.

I'm too late.

ONE

Ansel

I flop down on the barstool across from Fowler and drop a twenty on the counter. “Whiskey.”

He arches an eyebrow, his hand pausing from wiping down the bar top. “No lager?”

“Not strong enough.”

Fowler tosses the cloth under the bar and reaches for a glass. “Spill.”

My hand fists in my lap. “Ramsey got lieutenant.”

“Shit, man, that sucks.” He sets the glass on the bar top and grabs a bottle of whiskey. “You’ll get your chance soon.”

I shake my head. “Unlikely. Our department is small. We started at the same time. I’ll be trailing him my entire career, waiting for him to move up just so I can be his replacement.”

Fowler pours the whiskey into the glass.

“The worst part is I actually like the guy. He’ll do a great job, but I thought I had a shot at that promotion.”

In all honesty, I didn’t always take my firefighting career seriously, which could be why Ramsey got promoted over me, but that all changed eighteen months ago, when I realized I might not have the time on this earth to accomplish my goals.

Caleb.

His face flashes in my mind, but as I always do, I shake it out of my head, gripping the whiskey glass.

Fowler pushes a hand through his messy, dirty-blond hair. “Give me a minute.” Fowler walks out from behind the bar and heads to one of the tables in the main part of the pub.

Fowler is the other point in our triangle. Growing up, he, Caleb, and I were inseparable, doing everything together. While Caleb got married to Collins and built his life with her, Fowler and I became roommates.

Still pissed off that I didn’t get the promotion, I pull out my phone and search the Portland firefighting service website, heading to their job postings. A city would definitely give me more opportunities and the action I’d see.

Holy shit, they have a posting for a lieutenant.

Could I really leave Echo Lake, though? I love my family and the people in this small town. I’ve lived here my whole life. Portland isn’t crazy far away, but it’s not five minutes down the road either.

But I’ll always be chasing Ramsey’s tail, so maybe the only way to get ahead in my career is to leave. I could move up in the ranks in Portland, then maybe come back here and jump Ramsey from having more experience.

There’s something appealing about moving out of Echo Lake. Somewhere fresh with a lot fewer memories attached to every street, every place, every inch of the town.

There comes Caleb’s face front and center again.

Fowler rounds the bar and leans his forearms on the top in front of me. “You find out about Ramsey last night?”

I shake my head. “Nah, the B shift found out this afternoon. McMather called me on my way over here.” I take a sip of the whiskey, welcoming the burn down my throat.

“At least you didn’t have to brew all last night, I guess.”

I shrug. “I guess. Boring shift, though. The only call we got was from Mrs. Quinton, who swears she saw a spark on her Christmas tree lights. Then when we got there, she didn’t even have the lights plugged in.”

His forehead creases. “Why the hell would she call you then?”

“I think she was just lonely and wanted company. She had a whole spread of Christmas treats for us. The woman can bake, so it wasn’t a total loss. The only downside was having to fake being interested while she went through each and every spoon she’d collected on vacations with Coach Fred.”

“May he rest in peace,” Fowler murmurs.

“Playing football in the sky,” I say, and Fowler nods.

“He’s probably screaming at Caleb. ‘We ain’t building birdhouses out there!’” He mimics Coach Fred when he coached our peewee football team.

“My grandma takes better angles!” I down the rest of my whiskey.

“They don’t coach like him anymore.” Fowler grabs his water and takes a swig.

“Could you imagine if he had to give out a participation award?”

“I don’t know, he always said if you’re gonna be dumb, you better be tough.”

“Not sure that’s the uplifting coach speech the parents like nowadays.”

We laugh, and I wish I could go back to when it was the three of us joking around and causing havoc after practice, when we’d always try to swindle a sleepover at each other’s houses.

I twirl the empty glass in my hand. “She’s just lonely. No harm, no foul.” I shrug.

“Well, Coach would be happy you kept her busy for a little bit.”

Fowler’s right. He would.

I turn and look over my shoulder. “Seems like business is good for this time of year.”

This is the busiest I’ve seen the Pines since Fowler took it over from his. The summers are always hopping because of the large patio with tables that overlook the lake, but things are generally pretty quiet in Echo Lake during the winter months. Mainers tend to be like bears in the winter—they hibernate.

“Yeah, it makes the day go by quick, but I’m fucking done for by the time I leave here.”

My head tilts. “Why don’t you hire another employee?”

“You never know how long it will stay like this. I’ll have no choice come the summer, but things are a little lean right now, so I’m trying to get by without having to add to the staff I already have. Nothing worse than hiring someone you can’t afford.”

My forehead wrinkles. “If it’s so busy, how are things tight?”

His eyes shift away but fall right back to me. He’s hiding something, but he’ll tell me eventually, whenever he’s ready. “The usual—rising food costs, labor costs. You name it, it costs more.” Fowler nods at my phone that’s face up on the bar. “What were you brooding into your phone for?”

He's changing the subject, which is a sure sign something is going on with him, but I allow the distraction because that's how our friendship works. We try to solve things ourselves, but eventually we tell the other.

"Nothing, just mindless scrolling." A quick glance assures me the screen has timed out so it's black, and relief courses through me.

We're one and the same—both hiding something from the other.

I'm not sure why I'm hiding the Portland thing from him. It was a fleeting thought, and I would have heavy guilt if I left him here alone less than two years after Caleb left us for good.

I'd be betraying or disappointing my family and Fowler if I relocated. My sister, Sutton, left to go live in Nashville, and she's killing it as a high-end wedding planner. We always knew she'd venture out of Echo Lake, but me? For some reason, I feel as though everyone expects me to be a lifer.

My phone rings before Fowler can ask me any more questions, and Collins's name shines on the screen. Fowler sees it too and arches an eyebrow at me.

I swipe my thumb immediately and raise it to my ear. "Hey, Collins. How are you?"

"Um... good. You?" Her voice has a note of hesitancy, which is to be expected, I guess. Though I've told her many times to reach out to me if she needs anything, this is the first time she actually has.

"Just sitting here at the pub having a drink and shooting the shit with Fowler." I make eye contact with him.

He's leaning farther over the bar top, intently listening to my end of the conversation.

"Oh sorry. I don't want to bother you—"

"It's not a bother. What's up?"

There's a pause, and that's when I hear the distinctive chirp of a fire alarm in the background.

"My smoke alarm needs the battery changed, and I can't reach it with my kitchen chair. I need a ladder. I'm not sure where ours is."

I slide off the stool. "I'll be right over. Do you need me to pick up batteries too?"

"No, I have some. I think Caleb took our ladder on a job or something... I'm really sorry."

I hate that she sounds as though she thinks she's putting me out by calling me. This is what the best buddies of her deceased husband should be

doing. We should be helping her with everything. I probably should have been doing the monthly and yearly maintenance for her.

“I’ll be right there.” I hang up before she pushes me off.

“Everything okay?” Fowler picks up my glass and places it behind the bar.

“Yeah. One of her smoke alarms needs a battery change, and she can’t reach it. I’m going to grab the ladder from our place and go help her out.”

He nods. “Tell her I said hello.”

“Will do.” I knock on the counter, then turn to leave, grabbing my coat from the bar stool next to me.

I climb into my pickup truck, and the snow crunches under the tires as I make my way a few blocks from the pub off Main Street to Fowler’s and my house.

After grabbing the ladder from the garage, I put it in the cab of my pickup truck and head over to Cal... Collins’s place. It’s weird to think of their house as only Collins’s and not Caleb and Collins’s, but it’s been a year and a half since he passed, so I need to retrain my brain.

She lives just a few minutes’ drive outside of town on one of the country roads. Though she has neighbors, they’re not as close as they are in town.

Light spills out of her windows as I pull into her driveway. I push away all the memories of times I pulled into this driveway when Caleb and Collins used to host game nights and dinners. They’d often invite a bunch of the guys over from the firehouse to watch the Red Sox or Patriots. But those days have been over for a long time.

I get out of the truck and grab the ladder, then climb the stairs to the front door.

I’ve only been here one other time since Caleb died. It was a week after he passed when I came to check on Collins. She pushed me away and told me that she didn’t need anything from me, that she was fine and she’d reach out if and when she did. She never does, though.

The truth is, I’ve been avoiding their house. After that initial visit after Caleb’s death, I started dropping by the massage parlor where she works rather than coming here. Or I’d text her. Anything to avoid having to be here.

All I remember is that yawning pit in my stomach the night I came here, when I had to look her in the eye and tell her that her husband had been injured. I knew how bad his injuries were, and I wanted to warn her, but she

wouldn't hear me, didn't want me to confirm it. And that was her choice. So I drove her to the hospital only to find out he had died minutes before we got there.

I run my sweaty palms down my jeans, but there's not much I can do for the tightness in my chest as my finger reaches toward the doorbell.

At least not everything looks the same. It was the springtime then, but we're past Thanksgiving now, so there's plenty of snow on the ground and a cold wind whips against my cheeks.

I force myself to push the doorbell, allowing the ring to take me back to that night. And when Collins opens the door, her tentative smile says she might be thinking the same thing I am. That I'll never be able to come over to her house, ring her doorbell, without reliving her worst memory.

Our faces are etched with the same pain.

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TWO

Collins

I'm in the kitchen, pouring myself a tea, when the doorbell rings. My heartbeat picks up and my breath draws short, but I force myself to relax, drawing in a slow breath, holding it, and exhaling.

For almost a year after Caleb died, every time that damn doorbell rang, it would send me into a panic attack. These days, I just find it jarring. I really should uninstall it or get one of those fancy ones that plays a song.

I set the kettle down and walk from the kitchen to the entryway, steeling myself to see Ansel on the other side of that door.

Over the past eighteen months, I've learned what things might set me off. I no longer spend every day vacillating between crying jags and quiet depression, but some circumstances are harder than others. And I know swinging this door open to find Ansel on the other side will bring me back to the night Caleb died.

Even though I try to prepare myself, seeing him standing on my porch in the dark, just as he was that night, is a blow to the chest, stealing the air from my lungs. Rather than letting myself sink into that feeling, I force myself to catalog what's different about now versus then.

It's not spring. My porch isn't littered with potted plants and flowers. It's not warm air that hits my face, but rather the cold, bitter wind of winter. Ansel's not in his firefighter equipment, but he's dressed in jeans and his jacket like he used to be when he'd come over to watch a game or just hang out with us.

I struggle the most with looking into his eyes that—though still pained—aren't as desolate and despairing.

"Hey, thanks for coming." I force a smile and dodge any real eye contact.

The fire alarm in the family room chirps, welcoming him.

I tried about everything to get that thing to turn off. Every chair in the house, a broomstick, but I just wasn't tall enough, and I have no idea where Caleb left our ladder.

I wouldn't have called Ansel except for the fact that he's my last resort. Not because I don't like him. He was always Caleb's best friend, along with Fowler—and he was a good friend to me when Caleb brought me back here as his fiancée. But Ansel reminds me too much of the night that I lost my future. So I avoid him as best I can. I'm not sure he's so keen on seeing me either, since I'm the same reminder to him as he is to me.

My family lives across the country, and Caleb's parents moved out of Echo Lake two months after he died. My best friend, Nina, is a single mom who is probably busy with bedtime baths and routines on a weekday night. Besides, she's no taller than I am, and I doubt she has a ladder that can reach the alarm.

"Happy to help." Ansel shifts to the side of the doorway and grabs a ladder.

I hold the door open as he carries it inside. The fire alarm chirps again.

"How long has it been doing that?" he asks.

"Since I got home from work. Must've started sometime today."

He nods. "Do you know which one it is?"

I motion toward the family room. "I'm pretty sure it's the one in here."

He follows me into the room.

It took me about twenty minutes to isolate the one making the annoying chirp. Every time I thought I'd figured out where the sound was coming from, it went off again, and I'd second-guess myself.

Ansel positions the ladder under the smoke detector, and I hand him the battery to replace it with.

"Yeah, you were never reaching this one," he says, stepping on the first rung. He opens up the smoke alarm and takes out the battery. "How often are you changing the batteries in the smoke alarms?" He glances over his shoulder.

I look away. "Not often enough."

Caleb was responsible for this, and it's not something that's been on my radar. Another thing to add to the list of what's all on me.

Ansel turns around, ripping open the battery package. "Mind throwing this out for me?"

"Sure thing." I step forward and catch the packaging from him, then walk into the kitchen to throw it out.

When I return to the family room, Ansel's already closing the cover to the smoke detector.

"That should do it for—" He stops abruptly when the smoke detector beeps again. "The fuck?" He swings the cover open again, checking to make sure he's loaded the battery correctly, then pulls it back out before stepping down off the ladder. "I don't think the issue is the battery. I think it's a faulty detector."

"That can happen?"

"Rarely, but it can." He frowns and sets his hands on his hips. "I tell you what, I'll pick you up a new one tomorrow from Mercer Hardware. I'll replace the batteries on all your other smoke detectors while I'm here."

"You don't have to do that. I already feel bad enough that I interrupted your evening. I hope you weren't doing anything special when I called... no big date or anything, right?" I force a smile.

He rolls his eyes good-naturedly. "C'mon, not that much has changed since I saw you last."

His reference to the past is like a record scratch. I used to make fun of him for never settling down, but I'm not sure we can ever be as lighthearted with one another as we were.

"Fuck." He drops his chin and pushes a hand through his light brown hair. When he looks back up at me, his brown eyes swim with regret. "I'm sorry, Collins. I just... I don't know how to be around you without him. I don't know how to act."

My stomach swoops. "I know. I know..."

We're both quiet for a while, looking anywhere but at each other.

"I'm glad you called me for help tonight. I don't want it to be weird. I want us to be able to talk about Caleb."

Though his words drive a wedge in the fissure etched in my heart ever since Caleb died, I understand what he means.

When Caleb first died, I was surrounded by people who wanted to help support me, who wanted to see me through the worst of my grief. But time

marches on and people get back to their own lives, as they should. Slowly, people become afraid to ask, thinking they're bringing up something I don't want to talk about, but all that did was leave me with no one to talk with about Caleb.

It was as though the world went on and I was left behind. These days, no one brings up my deceased husband. But I suspect that maybe only Ansel, Fowler, and I feel his loss daily.

Maybe it would help me to stop avoiding the fact that my husband died and to delve into it more with the people who loved and lost him too. Maybe that could help get me out of this... stasis I've been in since he died.

"I... I don't want it to be weird either, Ansel."

Ansel did his best to support me after Caleb's death, and I pushed him away every time. Only now am I feeling bad about it, seeing the concern and sadness in his eyes. He probably needs someone to talk to too. I wonder if he and Fowler ever remember Caleb. The Ansel I knew before Caleb's death was always full of life and on the move. From the times I see him in town or around, he's not as extroverted as I remember.

"Maybe we can try to make it so it's not weird then?" He arches an eyebrow. "Maybe you won't push me away when I offer to lend you a hand?" The corner of his lips tilts up, lightening the mood.

I nod. "I can do that. Or I can try at least."

"Great, then the first thing you'll do is let me take care of these smoke detectors tomorrow."

Though the instinct rises up to tell him no, I'll figure it out, I force the words back down my throat. "I'd appreciate it."

"Look how easy that is." He smiles again. "The next thing is you can come to Baylor's birthday party this weekend."

"Ansel..."

"No is not the answer. It would be good for you to get out, socialize."

Caleb and I were a really social couple. Always having people over for dinner or game nights. Always stopping by the Whispering Pines Pub to hang out with Fowler. Looking back, it almost feels as though I was a different person. I can hardly remember what that version of myself felt like.

Still... the idea of being around all those people...

"Please, Collins?" He raises both eyebrows.

Something about the way he's looking at me doesn't allow me to say no.

I sigh, but nod. “Fine, I’ll stop by. But I probably won’t stay long.”

His smile lights up his whole face.

“Deal.” Ansel claps his hands together. “All right, you should be okay here without this fire alarm for one night since the rest of yours are fine. If you want, I can take care of it while you’re at work, that way I don’t have to be all up in your space when you get home.”

“All right. I’ll text you the code for the keypad. And let me know the details for Baylor’s birthday.”

He’s already walking toward the front door with his ladder. “Will do.”

“I really appreciate your help, Ansel.”

Maybe it’s the note of regret in my voice that has him looking over his shoulder at me. Regret only because I don’t have a husband here to help me. He presses his lips together, gives me a nod, then he’s out the door.

I lock it behind him, and my forehead falls to the wooden door.

That entire interaction felt harder than it should have. But he made good points, and if I’m honest with myself—really honest—I admit how much I hate the woman I’ve become.

THREE

Ansel

Being at Collins's house last night was jarring. And not just because of all the memories we made there, memories that only magnify the loss of my childhood best friend, but because of the stark difference in Collins *and* the house itself.

When I used to go over, it was always full of life—they'd have music playing, or Caleb would be screaming at some game on the television. There was laughter and fun. You'd always be met with the scent of whatever Collins was cooking, and Caleb never let anyone's hand be empty for more than three minutes after stepping through the door.

And this close to Christmas, there would be all kinds of holiday decor—both inside and outside their home. But she didn't even have a wreath up on the front door, let alone Christmas lights.

Walking in, I was met with... silence. And it felt suffocating.

Collins has changed, which is expected, but I don't even recognize who she is. She used to be warm and could talk with anyone—initiated it, in fact. Caleb was dragging her out of any social gathering because she used to feed on the energy of others.

Now... it's as if Collins decided to stop living too.

A part of me understands. Sometimes, even now, for a split second, I'll forget that he's gone and have an errant thought and pick up my phone to text him. *Caleb will get a kick out of this.* Then I'll catch myself and put my phone down, feeling as though someone scooped out my insides.

But he wouldn't want this for her. Caleb wouldn't want Collins to stay stuck in her grief and stop living altogether. He'd hate me for allowing her to lose herself the way she has.

I have to do something. He was the best friend a guy could ask for. I owe him at least this.

As I pull into the parking lot between Mercer Hardware and the Bait and Tackle Shop, I wave to the Thermos Crew—Jimmy, Clyde, and Sam, the stalwart sentries of Echo Lake.

For almost as long as I can remember, these three men have been out here in their lawn chairs, Thermoses full of coffee, acting as though they're watching over our town. They're really doing what they do best—gossiping.

Rain or shine, winter or summer, they're here.

Age is taking its toll, and they can't quite get in and out of their chairs like they used to, the lines on their faces are more like canyons these days, but they've still got their wits about them.

My boots crunch on the snow in the gravel lot as I climb out of my truck. "Hey, boys, what's shakin'?"

"Was just telling these two about the time Barb and I—may she rest in peace—" Clyde is the first to speak. No surprise there.

"May she rest in peace," the other two men echo as they always do.

"Drove the boys down to Florida for a family vacation. Probably about thirty, thirty-two years ago now. Got pulled over for speeding in Virginia." He pauses for a beat. "Or was it North Carolina? Can't be sure anymore, it was so long ago. This officer got out of his cruiser, and I swear to God I thought that—"

"Ansel probably has things to do. Why don't you save the rest of the story for the two of us?" Jimmy says, motioning to himself and Sam.

Clyde shrugs and leans back in his chair, using his glove-covered hands to bring the Thermos to his lips.

"Day off?" Jimmy asks.

"Yeah, I'm just here to get a smoke alarm and some batteries for Collins. Hers malfunctioned."

The three of them share a look.

"Surprised you'd even know about that," Sam says.

I chuckle. "Believe me, no one was more surprised than me that she called me for help. Guess months and months of trying to wear her down

finally worked.”

“How is she?” Jimmy’s voice holds that same sadness everyone’s does when they talk about Collins.

Of course she’s changed—everyone treats her like a grandmother’s china that already has frayed lines.

I shove my hands into the pockets of my jacket. “Hard to tell. She doesn’t say much.”

The three of them nod as though they expected that answer.

“Well, I’d better get going. You guys take care.” I start toward the building.

“Will we see you at poker on Saturday night?” Clyde asks.

I laugh and turn around, walking backward. “As much as I’d love to kick your ass per usual, I’m on shift early Sunday, so I’m going to have to pass.”

“Keep dreamin’, kid.” Clyde shakes his head.

I laugh harder and circle back around, opening the door of the hardware store.

Coming in here always feels like walking back in time. My uncle has owned Mercer Hardware since before he had to take in my siblings and me when I was nine. I spent a good part of my youth working here. All my siblings did, and not always by choice. Which is how I know exactly what aisle I need to go down.

I give Uncle Roy a wave at the counter, where he’s talking on his phone. Per usual, he’s wearing a band T-shirt, and today it’s a white BTS shirt. I’m not sure he’s listened to all the musicians he wears T-shirts for, though he swears he does, even though there’s no rhyme or reason to the genres.

By the time I grab what I need and make it back to the counter, Uncle Roy is off the phone. “How’s it going, kid?”

“It’s going. All set for Baylor’s party tomorrow?” I set the smoke alarm and batteries on the counter.

He blows out a breath and shakes his head. “Can’t believe she’s gonna be six.”

“It’s unreal how fast the time goes.” It feels like just yesterday that Elliott told me he was going to be a father.

“Wait until you’re my age. Trust me, by then it feels like the grains of sand are just pouring down to the bottom of the hourglass.” He tells me the total and puts the items into a paper bag.

“I’ll take your word for it.” I pay for it and pocket my wallet. “Elliott says that Emelia is really going overboard with the party. Still weird to see him coupled up. Good, but weird after so many years.”

My brother finally allowed a woman other than his daughter into his life, and I couldn’t be happier with his choice. Emelia fits in the Mercer family.

“You’re next.” He passes me the bag over the counter.

“C’mon, you know it’s gonna take a special kind of girl to keep up with me.”

“Maybe if you slowed down, you’d give one half a chance at catching you.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” I arch an eyebrow.

I have no doubt that I’ll settle down someday, but I’m not looking for it. Right now, I’m content to keep things casual.

He rolls his eyes. “What are you up to today? I’m assuming you’re off.”

“Gonna hit the trails with some of the guys. Looking forward to testing out my new sled.” I upgraded my snowmobile in the fall, and this afternoon will be my first time taking it out.

“Just be careful.”

“I know,” I say with annoyance, as if I’m a teenager again. He says it anytime I do anything remotely fun.

“Do you?” His eyebrows pinch together.

I don’t bother answering. “See you at the party tomorrow.”

After saying a quick goodbye to the Thermos Crew, I toss the bag on the passenger side of my truck and head over to Collins’s place.

It doesn’t take me long to change the batteries in the smoke alarms and swap out the one in the family room.

I carry the ladder down the upper hallway to the primary bedroom. I left this room until last on purpose. It feels too personal to enter, but I remind myself that Caleb would want me to make sure that Collins is safest when she sleeps, so I enter anyway.

I’ve never been in here before, so I have no idea what it was like before his death, but if I had to guess, it probably looked exactly like this. Or damn close.

Looking around, you’d think Caleb was at the fire station and coming home after his shift. His cologne and watches, accompanied by loose change, rest on the dresser. In the corner is a wooden valet stand that still

has Caleb's dress uniform laid over it. It's an invasion of privacy, I know, but I can't stop myself from cracking open the closet, not surprised that it's filled with Caleb's clothes.

When I turn back around, I notice a book on the nightstand and check it out. As soon as I see the title, I know it must have been his. He was always into anything having to do with military history. A bookmark rests around two-thirds of the way, and for some reason, that—out of everything—is what makes my heart sink.

There's something so devastating about him not being able to finish that book.

The uncomfortable tickle in the back of my throat starts. The one I get whenever I think about someone I lost—my mom, my dad, and then my best friend.

I swallow past the pain and do what I always do whenever I'm confronted with my grief—push it away and think of something else. In this case, my thoughts go to Collins.

There's no way I can let her continue to live in the tomb she's created for herself.

I look up the number for the massage clinic where Collins works and book myself an appointment with her for after the holidays. I'm going to drag her out of the past kicking and screaming if I have to.

It's what Caleb would have wanted.

FOUR

Collins

Present in hand, I walk into Baylor's birthday party at the rec center.

It feels as if every head in the place swivels in my direction. There was a time when I would have basked under the attention, smiling and waving to everyone, happy to chat for endless hours with all my friends, but that part of me died with Caleb. I feel the gaping hole where that part of me used to be, but I also see it in their downturned eyes and sullen cheeks. They don't see the old Collins either.

I slap on what I hope appears to be a genuine smile and walk into the room.

Growing up as an army brat, constantly on the move, I got used to walking into a room full of strangers and smacking on a fake smile. But these people aren't strangers. Though maybe they feel a little more that way since I erected a wall between us shortly after Caleb died.

No one talks about the effort it takes to make others feel at ease. To reassure them you're eating, you're healthy, and while maybe not thriving, you're still getting up every day. It takes effort to make it look like you're okay. You'd think I'd be practiced at pretending I have it all together, but the truth is it takes so much effort that it's exhausting. Things that used to come naturally to me no longer do, and I don't know why.

I mean, I know *why*. My husband died before I was even thirty years old.

But why can't I seem to get back to who I was? Which is absurd, because I'm not her anymore. I'll never be that woman again. Maybe

there's a new version of myself just waiting to be discovered. Although I have no idea how to unearth her. It's been eighteen months, and there are days it feels like the accident happened yesterday.

All I know is that this constant performance of *okayness* is wearing thin. It's fraying at the edges and in danger of snapping any day. But people expect me to have moved on, so the performance continues, as painful as it is to act my way through social settings.

"Collins?"

The voice pulls me from my thoughts, and it's clear by the way it's said in the form of a question that this probably isn't the first time they've tried to get my attention.

I blink and turn to my right. "Hey, Elliott. I can't believe Baylor's getting so old. Thanks for having me."

I don't know Elliott super well, but I like him. He's always been decent to me. All the Mercers have been since I showed up on Caleb's arm in Echo Lake.

"Thanks for coming. I was so happy when Ansel told me that you agreed to swing by."

I give him a small smile. "Where's the birthday girl?"

He thumbs over his shoulder. "In the jumping castle. I haven't been able to get her out since we got here."

Emelia joins us, smiling. He wraps his arm around her waist. I've bumped into her around town and chatted a few times. She's a lovely person and an Echo Lake transplant. Since she and Elliott fell in love, she's moved here permanently.

The three of us chat for a minute before I get the uncomfortable feeling pressing against my skin that I often do these days. The one that tells me I'm forcing the pretense too hard and my mask is in danger of slipping at any moment.

At the first break in conversation, I ask, "Where can I put my present?" I hold up the gift wrapped in Barbie paper.

Ansel gave me the tip that Baylor is big on Barbies right now.

"There's a table against the wall over there." Emelia points off to her right. "I can take it for you." She moves out of Elliott's arm and holds out her hands.

I follow her line of sight and locate the table. "Oh no, I've got it. It was good to see you. Thanks again for having me."

The second I'm past them, the smile slips from my face.

I walk over to the present table and set it down on the pile of others, then I circle back around and take in the room. Everyone is talking and laughing as the children run circles around them. Peals of delight echo out of the bouncy castle. Everyone here looks as if they wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

God, I'd kill for just feeling neutral right now. Would love to not feel as if every step forward is weighed down by a thousand pounds pressing on my shoulders.

"I think I saw Nina with Jacob over near the bouncy castle."

Dottie stands next to me. We bonded over being transplants in Echo Lake the first time I went to her diner, Hollow Pine Café.

"Oh, thanks for the heads-up." I give her a smile that I hope doesn't appear practiced. "How are you?"

"Better than you, I'd say. You look like you could use one of my maple pecan cinnamon rolls. You should swing by the diner after this."

"Oh, I just didn't sleep well last night." What I don't tell her is that I don't sleep well *any* nights anymore.

For the first six months after he passed, I woke up in the middle of the night convinced I'd heard someone banging on my front door, reliving the night with Ansel banging on my door. The next six months, I couldn't roll over without the empty bed reminding me it's all mine now. And lately, it's been insomnia, lying awake wondering if I'll ever find myself again.

Dottie looks me over with a skeptical eye, red-stained lips twisting. "Even so, swing by some time. I don't see much of you anymore."

"All right, I will, I promise."

"Good, now that that's settled, I'm off to go flirt with Deacon. I love making a burly man blush."

I chuckle. "Last time I saw you, you told me you had to leave Las Vegas because your husband was hooking up with a coworker and refused to give you a divorce. Should you be flirting with another man?"

"Did I?" She tilts her head with a thoughtful expression. "Must have misspoke. I had to leave because all that dust in the desert was awful for my allergies." She winks, turns, and walks away.

I chuckle under my breath.

Dottie always makes up different reasons why she left Vegas. No one in town actually knows the real reason she left and landed here.

Looking away from Dottie's retreating back, I turn toward the jumping castle in search of Nina. When she moved to town, I met her at the bank, and we hit it off right away.

I spot her dark bob through the crowd and keep my eyes focused on her, not granting anyone else attention.

She smiles when she sees me coming and draws me into a hug when I finally reach her. "Glad to see you here."

"Ansel convinced me to come." I shrug.

"Ansel?" She arches an eyebrow, and I tell her what happened with the smoke detector. "Well, I, for one, am happy to see you. You can save me from making small talk with all the other parents hovering around the jumping castle, telling kids to move away from one another and not jump so high. Let's be honest, each of them is going to come out crying at least once." She hooks her arm through mine.

"Has Jacob been in there the whole time?"

"You know it."

"How's work going?"

Nina launches into a story about how she thought the bank was being robbed earlier this week, but it turned out to be a teenager from the nearby high school wearing a balaclava because he was participating in the senior assassin game and his target was in the bank. Which meant that the sheriff had to come, and it was an entire production.

"Don't they normally start that game in the spring, right before graduation?"

She shakes her head. "Apparently they're getting an early start this year. Something about the winner being crowned king and queen at the prom." Nina looks back at the jumping castle. "It's hard to imagine my sweet little boy being an idiot teenager like that someday."

A laugh bursts out of me. "Nina..."

She shrugs. "What? It's true. We were all idiots when we were teenagers. There's no way around it." Then she pivots to face me. "Want to swing by tonight after Jacob is in bed? We can hang out, drink some wine. You're welcome to spend the night in the spare room if you don't want to drive home."

It's a weird paradox... feeling lonely all the time and yet not wanting to be around anyone because it feels like too much effort to pretend I'm still the woman I was. That I'm okay. I've found it's just easier to be alone.

I shift on my feet. “I don’t know if tonight is the best night to—”

“What else are you going to do?” She crosses her arms.

Nina is easygoing to a point, but when she digs in on something, she really digs in. She’s not going to let this go. I should have just agreed.

“Not sure. Probably just go to bed early.”

She rolls her eyes. “It’s a Saturday night. You can come over. Please?” She brings her hands up into prayer pose.

“Fine, fine. I’ll come over.” I point at her. “But I probably won’t stay long.”

Nina raises both hands. “I’ll take what I can get.” She loops her arm back through mine.

I wish I felt as excited as she seems to be. It’s good for me. We used to have so much fun together.

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FIVE

Ansel

I stand in the corner of the party, staring at my phone screen displaying the email I composed on my laptop and saved in my drafts earlier today.

Even though I promised myself that I would think about it before I hit Send, I've felt as though my phone is burning a hole in the back pocket of my jeans ever since I arrived at the party. As if I've been walking around with a live bomb strapped to my body.

It's not like I'd be doing anything wrong by applying for the firefighter job in Portland. I'm an adult. I'm not married or in a relationship with anyone. I can make my own decisions for myself and my life. But for some reason, it doesn't feel easy to hit Send on my résumé and cover letter and officially apply for a job out of Echo Lake.

"You have the secrets to the universe in that thing or what?" Hollis stands next to me, nodding toward my phone.

I quickly shut off the screen. "I wish. I'd be a very rich man if that were the case."

Before he can respond, Elliott comes to stand on my other side.

"Good turnout." I nod at him, wanting to distract Hollis from asking about what's on my phone.

"Yeah, seems a little much to me, but Emelia insisted on going all out. This is her first birthday with Baylor, and she wasn't hearing my objections."

I scan the rec center, which doesn't look as though it holds the weekly bingo and bunco games. "I'd say she accomplished her mission."

Elliott smiles at Emelia arranging all the presents on the table in a neat pile. "Sure did."

It's the kind of smile I'd never seen on my older brother's face until Emelia came to town. Now he's pretty much obsessed with her. As is my niece.

Love looks good on him. He deserves happiness after the profound loss we both experienced as children.

"I have Baylor's present in the back of my truck," Hollis says. "Couldn't exactly wrap it, so I'll bring it in whenever she's going to open her presents."

I whip my head in his direction. "What'd you make her?"

My voice is accusatory because let's face it, I'm a competitive guy and I want to be Baylor's favorite uncle. If his gift is bigger, then he wins. Hollis is a talented woodworker, and he makes something for her every year.

"Emelia had mentioned how often Baylor wants her to play Barbies with her, so I made her a Barbie house. Like a dollhouse but a little bigger."

"She's gonna love that." Elliott squeezes Hollis's shoulder, then turns his attention to me. "She'll love what you got her too."

I roll my eyes. "Of course, it's better."

"What is it?" Hollis asks.

"You'll see."

They both share a look. Yeah, I didn't make her a Barbie house, so I'll just have to do what I always do and win her over with my fun uncle antics.

"I was glad to see Collins actually showed up," Elliott says.

"She came?" My gaze darts through the crowd, but I don't see her. I was so busy on my phone, I didn't catch her coming in.

"Yeah, she was over by the bouncy house with Nina last I saw."

I nod and push off the wall. "I should probably go say hello. I'll catch you guys later."

After a few steps forward, I spot her near the side of the bouncy castle, but just as I head in that direction, she breaks away from Nina and heads toward the food and drink tables.

I follow and come up beside her in front of the table, looking at the birthday cake. "Hungry or just avoiding conversation?"

She peeks at me, her shoulders slumped. "Is it that obvious?"

I frown. I wasn't being serious, but it seems I've stumbled onto something. "Everything okay?"

Collins seems to think better of what she said and tucks her long blond hair behind one ear, straightening her spine and lifting her chin a little. “I meant is it that obvious that I’m starving and want to dig into this cake?”

I shake my head. “Don’t do that.”

Her forehead wrinkles. “What?”

“Try to hide what you’re actually feeling.”

“I’m fine, Ansel.” There’s a hint of irritation in her tone, and she turns to face the table again.

“Collins...” I step beside her and rest my hand on her back, directing her to the side of the table. “Talk to me. What’s going on?”

“Nothing is going on. I’m just tired. Didn’t sleep well last night.”

She’s obviously lying about being fine—but she definitely looks tired—but I don’t call her out on it. She’s here, and I never thought that would happen.

“I’m glad you came then. Everything good with the smoke detectors? No more incessant chirping?”

Her lips tip up. “Yeah, no problems. Thanks again for helping me. I thought I was going to go crazy if I had to listen to that sound anymore.”

There’s a beat of awkward silence between us. Something that seems to happen almost every time I see her. I know why it’s there. It’s because we’re always avoiding the one thing we should be talking about, or the one person.

I open my mouth to speak, but she beats me to it.

“I’m going to get going. Thanks again for inviting me. Can you please give my best to Elliott and Emelia?”

Before I can respond, she whips around and disappears into the crowd.

I wrap my hand around the back of my neck, pulling.

It’s a good thing I booked that appointment with her after the holidays. I get the sense I’m not the only one feeling stuck these days. I need to change that. If she can’t help herself, I’ll do it for her. Hell, for both of us.

I’m not like Elliott—he hates change, coveting stability and routines. And I’m not like Hollis, who enjoys his solitude and likes his quiet life in the woods. Sutton left Echo Lake after college and hasn’t looked in her rearview mirror. So why do I feel like a traitor for wanting to apply for a position in Portland to further my career?

After a quick internal pep talk, I pull my phone from my back pocket, pull up my résumé, and hit Send.

There. It's done.

It's not like sending my résumé means I'll be moving tomorrow. It's just step one in a long process, and besides, even if I do get a call from them, I can always change my mind.

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SIX

Collins

When I logged into the computer this morning, I was surprised to see Ansel's name on my list of clients this afternoon. In all the years I've been working as a massage therapist in Echo Lake, he's never once come to see me.

I haven't seen him since Baylor's birthday party, not that I expected to. Less than a week after the party was Christmas, and the clinic was closed for a few days. I pretty much hibernated in my house the whole time except for running over to Nina's to give Jacob his gift before they left for her sister's.

I'm not sure why, but as I sanitize and prepare the room for Ansel's arrival, my hands tremble slightly. This used to happen early in my career, but it's not as if I don't know what I'm doing now. I'm comfortable with the process and my technique and ability.

When his appointment time arrives, I leave the dim treatment room and walk up the bright hallway to the front. I give Carly at reception a smile, then turn my attention to Ansel sitting in one of the chairs resting against the wall.

"Ansel, I'm ready for you." I keep my voice professional and wait for him to stand before I turn and head down the hallway, leading him to the massage room.

I hold the door open for him, and when he steps inside past me, the scent of his cologne wafts by me. I don't know what it is, but it smells good. He turns to face me, and I softly close the door behind us.

“I didn’t expect to see you today.” I clasp my hands in front of me.

“My lower back has been bugging me lately. Thought maybe you could help me out.” He rubs a spot on his back.

“Definitely. Did you do something to injure it? Was there an event you remember it happening?”

He shakes his head. “No, it’s more a general tightness than anything.”

I nod. “How often does it bother you?”

He shrugs. “Comes and goes.”

“All right, we’ll see what I can do. I’ll give you a minute to get undressed and lie face down on the table under the blanket.”

“Sounds good.” Ansel nods.

I turn and leave the room, listening to the rustling of clothes on the other side of the door. When I hear the familiar creak of someone getting up on the massage table, I wait the usual couple of minutes before I knock on the door. Ansel calls for me to come in, so I walk through.

“Is the room warm enough?” I step over to the table. The sheet covers the lower half of his body.

“Perfect.”

“Wonderful.” I sanitize my hands and grab the warm massage oil. “I’ll concentrate on your lower back, but do you want your legs and arms done as well?”

“If we have time, that’d be great.”

“All right. I’m going to get started. If anything hurts or is uncomfortable while I work, be sure to tell me.”

“Will do.”

I squirt some of the massage oil in my hands and rub them together before placing them on his back. I’m gentle at first, wanting to work up to more pressure.

When I first saw Ansel’s name, I thought it would be awkward or weird having my hands on Caleb’s best friend, but it feels like I’m working on any other client.

Ansel is quiet, only speaking when I check in with him on pressure and touch points.

I always take my cues from my client as to whether they want to chat or just relax, so I don’t try to draw Ansel into a conversation.

Everything seems okay with his back as far as I can tell. Nothing is especially tight, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t experiencing discomfort. The

equipment he carries at the firehouse weighs a ton.

“So, what did you do for the holidays? Anything exciting?” Ansel breaks the silence.

He doesn’t know it, but he’s the one pressing on a tender spot.

“I didn’t do much actually. Just holed up at home.”

His muscles stiffen under my hands. “You didn’t go home to visit your parents?”

“Didn’t see the point since I had to be back at work right after the holidays.”

Ansel is nice enough not to ask the obvious question—why didn’t they fly out to see me?

Surely Caleb told him I’m not close with my parents. They came for the funeral, stayed two days, and left. They’ve never felt the need to coddle me.

“How come you didn’t go hang with Nina?”

“She went out of town to her sister’s.” I lean my weight into my work when I find a small knot near Ansel’s shoulder. “What did you do?” Let’s just steer this conversation away from me.

“Elliott and Emelia hosted this year.”

“Is that a first for Elliott now that he has a woman in his life?” I chuckle.

Ansel laughs, and I take the time to put more oil on my hands. “You mean you can’t picture Elliott hosting a holiday dinner on his own?”

“No more than I can picture you doing it.”

We both laugh.

“Emelia did most of the work for sure. Sorry, Emelia and Baylor. She’s her little helper now.”

I smile although he can’t see me, running my hands up and down his back. “It’s obvious how much Baylor loves her, and vice versa, when I see them around town.”

“Yeah. Elliott really lucked out finding her.”

“Was Sutton able to come home?”

“Nah, she had some big client who wanted to get married on Christmas Eve, so she was stuck in Nashville.”

“Sounds like business is going well for her, though.”

“Very. She’s a hard woman to get a hold of these days.”

I’ve only met Sutton a few times over the years since she had already moved to Nashville when I moved here. She was always welcoming, but it

was clear to me that she's a driven person and Echo Lake might be a little too small for her.

I work on Ansel's legs. It's not until I inch the towel up his thighs that I feel the weirdness I expected, but I push through, acting as if nothing is amiss. We fall back into a comfortable silence while I work the muscles in his legs. By the time I'm done and walk up the table toward his head, I'm unsure whether he's even awake.

"Ansel, time to roll over."

"Mmm, okay."

My cheeks heat from the sexual sound he made low in his throat.

"I'll hold the blanket up a bit, and you can shuffle down the table so your head is on the table." I pick up the towel and turn my head away, something I've done a thousand times before.

Maybe it's weird, but I never think of my clients as naked under the sheet when I work on them. Not until now. Now, for some reason, I'm acutely aware that Ansel isn't dressed.

I hear him shift, and when the sounds stop, I ask, "All good?"

"Yup."

I turn to adjust the blanket, and I look down at him. He's not smiling like he normally is.

"What's wrong? Is something hurting?" A shot of panic hits me, afraid I aggravated something in his back.

"I hate the idea of you spending the holidays on your own. If I'd known, I would have invited you over to Elliott's."

"Oh." I blink and wave my hand. That's not what I was expecting him to say. "You're not responsible for me, Ansel. It's fine."

His frown deepens. "You spending Christmas alone is not fine, Collins." There's an injection of steel in his voice, and for some reason, that makes my back get up.

"I don't know if it's dawned on you, but I spend every night alone since..." I don't have it in me to say his name right now. I'm too raw.

The tension in his face drops, and I see realization creep in. Maybe he's never pictured what my life looks like now, maybe he has, I don't know. But I can tell that right now, some light bulb has gone off for him. I don't bother asking what it might be, though, because I really don't want to know what he's thinking or imagining.

So I bury my head and work on his arm. Silence stretches between us until it's razor-thin.

"You used to be so social. Maybe not the life of the party, but you enjoyed being around people. Liked to be in the mix."

Well, thanks, Ansel, just take a machete to the peaceful silence we were enjoying. Okay, not peaceful, but he doesn't have to just call it out like it is. The bruise he's been pressing on since the smoke detector is becoming a welt.

I remove my hands from him and toss them up at my sides. "You think I want to be like this?"

"I don't mean it like that. It's not a judgment." He pushes his hand through his hair. "I'm fucking this up."

"Are you the same person since Caleb died?" Just his name in this room undoes all the restraint I try to possess.

He startles. "Of course not."

"Then why are you judging me because I'm not?"

"I told you I wasn't judging you. It's just... Caleb wouldn't want you to live like this. So closed off from everyone."

Tears prick my eyes, but I suck them back. I don't know what to say. He's telling the truth, but I don't know what or how to do anything about it.

One thing is for sure: what I've been doing isn't working. I'm stuck in the same spot I was when Caleb died. Maybe not quite at the same pit of despair, but not far off. If I'm crawling out of my grief, it's at a snail's pace, and I'm not exactly helping myself by clawing at the dirt to pull myself up and out of it.

I stop what I'm doing and set down his hand. "I know he wouldn't. But I don't know how to be that person anymore. I'm not sure I'll ever be her again."

Ansel's gaze locks on me, and I force myself not to turn away from him. "Baby steps, that's how. One foot in front of the other even if you're only moving inches at a time."

It's not lost on me that I need to do something. I have nowhere to go. I'm certainly not going to join my parents where my dad is now stationed. Another new town that's unfamiliar, people who are unfamiliar, parents who are basically unfamiliar to me.

One of the things I was most excited about when I moved here with Caleb was to put down roots. I have to make it work in Echo Lake. Ansel's

right, I can't keep going on like this, but I don't know what to do. I'm tired of the isolation, though. Tired of being lonely.

"What would you have me do?"

Ansel sits up on the table, tucking the sheet in place. "Nothing huge at first. Just put yourself out there. Go out and do things with other people. Socialize a bit."

"The only close friend I have is Nina, and she has Jacob. She's not able to get out much."

Before Caleb died, I had a lot of acquaintances, mostly from his work. His fellow firefighters and their spouses. I don't think I'm ready to hang around them as a group. It would be too big a reminder of what it was like when he was alive. And I think I'm too much of a reminder of what can happen to their spouses on the job.

"Maybe there's a class you could join. Or a hobby you could pick up? Something you don't have to do with someone else?" He tilts his head and shrugs.

I twist my lips, hating to admit the truth. "I'm not sure I can do it on my own. I'd probably just come up with an excuse and never go." My cheeks heat with embarrassment.

Ansel straightens. "What if I joined you?"

I blink in surprise. "Why?"

He shrugs. "Why not?"

"I'm not going snowmobiling or ice fishing or anything like that."

He chuckles. "I know. Caleb always told me how much you hate the cold."

"In my defense, my dad was stationed in a lot of southern states when I was growing up. The kind of cold you guys think is normal is actually unnatural."

Ansel laughs again. "You never know. Maybe I'll get you to enjoy doing things outdoors in the winter."

"You'd be wasting your time."

"All right, I tell you what. You name it, and I'll do it with you. That way you don't have any excuse. I'll hold you accountable, force you to get out there."

Do I do this? Do I take this opportunity to get out of my own way? The idea that I can ever feel differently than I do right now seems absurd, but also really nice. And I owe it to myself and Caleb to at least try, right?

I chew on the inside of my cheek. “I don’t know...” It feels scary.

“Will you at least consider it?”

I draw in a deep breath and nod. “Sure, I will.” He arches an eyebrow, and I add, “I mean it, I really will.”

“I’m gonna hold you to that.”

From the smile on his face—half court jester, half challenge—I know he will.

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SEVEN

Collins

A few days after Ansel's massage, I'm at home, puttering around, not doing much of anything. I have a fire going in the fireplace, but I'm still chilly, so I head upstairs to grab a sweater.

I walk into my bedroom, and my gaze snags on Caleb's side of the room. His things are still on the nightstand in the same place they were the night he died. I pick them up every week to dust and set them down exactly in the same place as though they're some sort of shrine to him.

I shake my head and grab a sweater from the closet, but my vision snags on his clothing on the opposite side of mine. Leaning in, I bring the sleeve of one of his shirts to my nose, inhaling, but my shoulders sink—his scent is no longer woven between the fibers.

In the early days after his death, his scent would bring me comfort, followed quickly by despair. Right now, I don't know what I feel. Anguish and perhaps a bit of relief. The memories the scent of him would dredge up weren't always welcome. It felt too real. As though he should walk into the room at any moment.

It's partially my fault. I haven't been through Caleb's things since he died, haven't had the stomach to get rid of anything.

I think of what Ansel said on the massage table. *Caleb wouldn't want you to live like this.*

Maybe if I can't do it for myself, I can do it for Caleb. What if he's looking down at me from somewhere right now, shouting for me to get my shit together? To help myself. To stop being stuck.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I wrap my arms around a good chunk of the clothes, lift them from the hanging pole, and pull them from the closet.

I'm doing this. I have no idea whether I'll be able to force myself to get through all his clothes today, but Ansel said baby steps. This feels like more than a few of those, but even one garbage bag to donate would feel as if I accomplished something.

Deciding whether the first few items should be kept or donated is agonizing. I don't really have a system at first, and the first shirt I place on the side of the mattress to start a donation pile wraps guilt around me. How am I willing to give away a piece of Caleb when I've been left with so few?

But I can't keep all of his things forever. In the end, decades from now, I'll likely only have his firefighter uniforms and a few key pieces of clothing that hold memories for me.

I take the time to inspect each shirt and let the times he wore them wash over me. The hoodie he always wore whenever he made a bonfire out back still smells faintly of smoke. I set that in the keep pile. The threadbare high school gym T-shirt that he wore to wash his truck in the summer. That's a keeper too.

By the time I'm through the batch of clothing, I actually find myself with a small smile on my face. I'm used to trying to push away all my memories of my life with Caleb when they rear up, but somehow, when I willingly immerse myself in the past... it's not that it doesn't hurt. But it was nice remembering him and the times we've shared, the love we had.

What you resist persists.

It's something my yoga teacher back in Texas used to say.

I sit on the edge of the bed. Maybe that's the key. I need to stop trying to avoid the pain, push through it, and think of all the memories we shared.

It's not as if I'm not in pain anyway. I'll always carry the loss of my husband with me in some way for the rest of my life, but maybe if I work through the pain, it will be tolerable. Or tolerable enough to let me have some semblance of a life.

Before I can think better of it, I walk over to my nightstand, pick up my phone, and pull up Ansel's contact. My fingers hover over the screen, and I inhale a deep breath. Oh screw it, I'm not sure I can do this myself. At least at first.

ME

I'd like to take you up on your offer if you're still willing.

I set the phone back down and go back to sorting Caleb's clothes.

It doesn't take Ansel more than a few minutes to respond, my phone chirping on the nightstand.

ANSEL

Name the time and place

I have a brief moment of panic, not having any idea what to suggest, when I remember a flyer I saw at the post office the other day.

ME

I have one idea, but I'm not sure it's something you'll be into.

ANSEL

I'm in.

I switch over to my internet browser, find what I'm thinking of, and send him the link.

ANSEL

I might have to hang up my man card, but I'm your guy.

A frisson of nerves washes over me but also gratitude because I probably wouldn't be doing this if it weren't for his push. He always was a great friend to Caleb.

ME

Great. I'll meet you there about ten minutes before?

ANSEL

I'll be there.

I set my phone on the night table and pull some more of Caleb's clothes from the closet.

I soon have quite the donation pile going, so I opt to go to the garage to grab some contractor bags for the donations. There's no entry directly from the garage into the house, so I slide on my winter boots and throw a coat on, clutching it together as I brave the cold.

The brisk winter temperature steals the air from my lungs as I shlep down the stairs and punch in the code to open the garage. The door retracts,

and I sneak under it as it continues to rise, desperate for a little warmth.

I grab a few contractor bags out of the box on the end of the shelf, spotting Caleb's duffel bag from his last training trip to Texas. The plane had been delayed, and he had no time to unpack before he had to be at the station. Said he'd take care of it when he returned the next morning. There have been times I've seen it since then, but I didn't want to touch it.

Despite the cold, my hands go clammy as I squeeze the contractor bags in my fist. I walk over and pick up the duffel, beating off the dust that's collected on the top, and bring it back inside with me.

Once I'm inside, I lock the door, stomp the snow off my boots, and slide off my coat. The contractor bags and the duffel bag come upstairs with me.

I set the duffel bag in front of my nightstand and pile the clothes on the bed into the contractor bags.

The duffel feels like a set of eyes staring at me from the floor the entire time. Finally, when I'm done with the pile of clothes on the bed, I pick it up and set it on the mattress in front of me. And just stare at it.

I'm not entirely sure why going through this bag feels harder than the closet. Maybe because Caleb never got to unpack it himself? Or perhaps it's the fact that these are some of the last clothes he ever wore. And I'll have to run them through the laundry, maybe destroy his scent on them.

I remember the last time I did Caleb's laundry. Eleven days after the funeral, I did both of our laundry because I ran out of underwear.

The clothes were piled to the top of our shared laundry hamper and falling onto the floor. The first shirt I picked up out of the pile to wash almost broke me. It was the dual realization that this would be the last time I would ever have to do his laundry and the fact that he would never wear any of the clothes again. I'd never see the green shirt that made his eyes look like the forest outside. He'd never be in the kitchen on his morning off in the gray sweatpants that hung low and teased me as he made me breakfast.

Caleb wouldn't want you to live like this.

Ansel's words ring through my head, and my fingers reach for the zipper, sliding it back. Before I open the duffel to see inside, I swallow the lump in my throat, remembering Caleb would have wanted this.

There's pretty much what I would expect inside. Toiletries, socks, underwear, and changes of clothes. I pull everything out one by one, the materials still cool under my touch from being in the garage all this time.

I'm shocked that a rodent didn't decide to take up shelter inside.

I throw out the toiletries, even though it feels wrong on every level. But what am I going to do? Set them up in the bathroom as if he's going to return and use them someday?

I toss the shirts in the laundry basket to clean. I'll decide another day what I'll do with them. I stick my hand through the pockets of the three pairs of pants.

Caleb always left something in his pockets. I can't count the number of times I had to pick out pieces of Kleenex or paper from a receipt or grocery list from the inside of the washing machine. Despite me asking him to please check his pockets before he tossed his pants in the hamper, he would never remember. In turn, I made it a habit to always check his pants pockets before throwing them in the wash.

There's nothing in the first two pairs I check, so I toss them in the hamper. When my fingers close around a piece of paper in the pocket of the third pair of pants, a smile comes to my face, and there's a small ache in my chest at the familiarity of the moment.

He told me as a joke once, *"You'll miss it when I'm gone."*

I yelled back, *"I would not."*

But he was right. That usual irritation doesn't prick at me. I'm weirdly appreciative for this moment. The sadness quickly looms in, since this is the final time it will ever happen. What I wouldn't give to feel a hundred more pieces of paper in his pockets. If I could bring him back, I'd never give him hell again.

I sigh, pulling the paper from the pocket and unfolding it.

It's only a receipt. I had hoped it would be a note or something with his thoughts, or anything with his writing on it.

I read what he ate and remember him telling me about a place named Bubba's he went to every time he was in Texas, so I look at the top of the receipt. The address says Bubba's is in Temple, Texas.

Which is strange. Why would he be all the way up in Temple?

Temple is in the opposite direction he'd be driving to get to the airport, so it's not like he stopped for a bite on his way to or from the training center. Maybe he and some of the guys decided to go out one night or something.

It's just another thing in the long list of things I'll never be able to ask him.

I set the receipt on top of his dresser and place the pants in the laundry hamper. I think that's enough of a roller coaster for one day.

I drag the donation bags into the spare room and line them against the empty wall. I might have had the strength to go through all Caleb's clothes tonight, but that doesn't mean I have the strength to take the last step and drive them down to the donation center.

There's always tomorrow.

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EIGHT

Ansel

“Hey, handsome. Usually only see you in the morning.”

Dottie wipes down the counter. She’s in her fifties, though that’s a guess because I know better than to ask her. Her dyed blond hair is pulled back, and she has her lips painted in her signature bright red lipstick.

The café is much like its owner—eclectic. At least that’s how I’d describe a place that has a pink neon open sign, a mounted deer head, and a signed photograph of the Rat Pack on the wall.

“I missed you, what can I say?” I sit on one of the fixed stools in front of the counter.

She winks and tosses the cloth over her shoulder. “You look like maybe you could use a Reuben on rye.”

I chuckle. “Not tonight. Just here to grab a couple of drinks. Got somewhere to be.”

Not that I’m excited about what I’m doing tonight, but I’ll do anything if it helps Collins.

“I’ll let you off easy this time, but a growing boy needs to eat right, Ansel. Mark my words.”

“Growing boy?” I place my hand over my heart. “You insult me. I’m almost thirty-three, Dottie.”

“Doesn’t matter. All those muscles of yours need feeding. Now I got tables, what do you want?”

That’s why we love Dottie. She doesn’t do long conversations—probably because she likes secrets, like what brought her to Echo Lake.

“Can I get my usual mulled spiced cranberry juice and a peppermint white hot chocolate to go, please?”

Dottie’s head tips to the side, her eyebrows scrunching. “That’s Collins’s drink.”

Almost every time I’ve seen Collins during the winter months, she’s had a peppermint white hot chocolate in hand. Seemed like a safe bet.

I don’t plan on drinking tonight because I have to be at the firehouse early tomorrow morning, and it seems rude to show up empty-handed, even if I think she’s probably going to drink wine tonight.

“It is. We have plans tonight.”

Dottie’s mouth drops open for a moment, then she slowly nods. “Good for you. Finally got that girl to come back to the land of the living, did you?”

Her comment makes me want to cringe, but she’s not wrong. Collins hasn’t been living since Caleb died.

“I’m doing my best. It’s what Caleb would have wanted.”

“You can say that again. All right, give me a few minutes, and I’ll get your drinks together.”

She turns and gets to work as my phone buzzes in my coat pocket. I slide it out to see a text from Hollis.

HOLLIS

You coming to poker? Wanted to see if you need a lift. It’s my turn.

Uncle Roy has hosted a Saturday night poker game for as long as I can remember. It used to always be at his place, but then when Elliott had Baylor, we’d sometimes move the game over there so that he could put her down for the night before we started.

Usually, Hollis and I take turns being the designated driver.

ME

Not this week. I’m on shift.

He answers almost immediately.

HOLLIS

Shit. Guess I just have Elliott’s money to take this week then.

ME

You've just been on a lucky streak.

HOLLIS

For a decade?

Whatever helps you sleep at night.

I roll my eyes and don't respond, slipping the phone back into my coat pocket.

"You want a tray for these?" Dottie asks, sliding two to-go cups in front of me.

"Nah, I'm good. I'm just headed down the street." I pick them both up.

"You give Collins my best."

"Will do." I walk toward the door and push it open with my back, calling to Dottie, "Why'd you leave Vegas again, Dottie?"

"Skipped jury duty and the sheriff issued a warrant for me." She winks and smiles, and I turn to leave.

The snow crunches under my feet with every step down the sidewalk.

The Shoreline Studio is farther up Main Street, closer to the water. The streetlights still decorated with holiday greenery and red ribbons light my way, and I nod and smile at the few people I pass.

Growing up in Echo Lake means I know pretty much everyone in town. Something I have always enjoyed. If I take that Portland job, should I even be offered it, I won't know anyone. But if I can work my way up the chain of command there faster than I could in Echo Lake, there's a chance that I could come back here and fill a position ranked above Ramsey.

I spot Collins waiting outside the art gallery and pacing like someone who is contemplating how they can get out of this. She looks about seconds from bolting, but we're here and doing it. I'm going to make tonight fun, get her remembering doing fun things, and remind her how much she used to like being around other people.

My stomach grumbles when I pass the Birdhouse Bakery, the scent of Deacon's delicious confections filling the air.

"Hey," I say.

Collins startles, whipping around at my voice. She raises a mitten-covered hand in a small wave. "Hey. Hi."

"Let's get out of the cold?" I nod toward the gallery door.

Collins hesitates, biting her lip. Yeah, she wants to tell me she can't, but I'm going to try to persuade her the best I can.

"Oh no, I'm not letting you back out." I hold the drink out for her. "I know you're probably going to have wine tonight, but it didn't feel right getting myself something and not having anything for you."

She pulls her mitten off her one hand and takes the cup from me. "Thanks." Then she pulls open the tab on the lid and brings it up to her nose. Her eyes flick to mine. "My favorite. How did you know?"

I shrug. "You practically have one affixed to your hand every winter."

Her lips tip down. Not quite into a frown, but close.

"What's wrong?"

She gives her head a shake. "Nothing. I was just thinking of how Caleb could never get my order right. He'd always forget the white chocolate and get me regular." A sad sort of chuckle leaves her lips.

Silence follows in the wake of her invoking Caleb's name. It's always awkward whenever one of us brings him up. But that's exactly why we're doing this. So that she—and I'm realizing me—can move through this stage of grief.

So rather than say nothing, as I might have a few weeks ago, I say, "Caleb always had a shit memory. I remember his mom told him to go to the grocery store once when we were thirteen. He was supposed to get milk, ground beef, and pears. Instead, he came home with orange juice, chicken, and apples. His mom was so pissed and made us go back with a list."

We laugh at the memory, and in order to keep the mood light, I pull the gallery door open, motioning for Collins to go first.

The two of us walk through the gallery on the main floor toward the stairs at the back. Collins leads us upstairs, and when we reach the top, I see that the second floor houses a workshop space.

It's strange to realize that I've never been up here before, even though I was born and raised in Echo Lake.

Easels are set up around the room with small tables beside them that hold various paints and brushes. They're all angled to face the front where a single easel is placed in the center of the room. That must be where the art teacher will sit and demonstrate how to do whatever we're painting.

As expected, I'm the only man here. Five other women and a teenage girl stare at me with looks of surprise. But that's okay. I can handle a room full of women. I'm here to keep Collins company.

“Ansel Mercer, didn’t expect to see you here tonight.”

My head whips around to the other side of the room where a woman stands and straightens from being hunched over a cardboard box in the corner. Mrs. Galloway. My high school art teacher.

I raise my left hand. “Hi, Mrs. Galloway. I’m just keeping Collins company tonight.”

She crosses the room, her waist-length gray braid trailing behind her. I don’t think she’s cut her hair since I left high school.

“Hi, Collins, nice to meet you. I’m Rebecca Galloway, I own the studio.” She holds her hand out, and Collins accepts it.

“Thanks for having us tonight.”

Mrs. Galloway—sorry, she’s never going to be Rebecca to me—tilts her head at Collins. “Have you ever painted before?”

Collins shakes her head. “No, never. But I thought it might be fun to try.”

Mrs. Galloway glances at me and smiles. “Well, I’d like to say you’re in good hands with this one, but that’s not the case.” She gives me an affectionate smile and motions to the two empty workspaces at the back of the room. “Feel free to grab those two spots. We’re going to get started soon.”

“Thanks.” Collins’s eyebrows scrunch together, then she walks to one of the stations, and I head to the other. I’m in the middle of shrugging off my coat when Collins leans in and asks in a low voice, “What did she mean by that comment about you?”

I give her a wry smile. “She was my high school art teacher, and let’s just say I’m not Picasso.”

Her eyes narrow, and she leans in again, closer this time. The scent of her perfume washes over me, and I lean in a little closer, inhaling deeper.

I pull back. What the fuck was that?

I rapidly blink and realize I was too lost in my head and missed what she said. “Sorry?”

“It has to be more than you not being a good art student.”

A low chuckle leaves my lips. “She may have caught me making out with a girl in the supply closet once.”

Collins’s hand flies up to cover her mouth and stifle her laugh.

“It was Lacey Klein. She had double Ds—in high school. I couldn’t be expected to turn that down.”

She can't hold her laugh in any longer, and everyone in the room turns to look at us.

Collins's face reddens. She's obviously embarrassed being the center of attention, but it's worth it to see a genuine smile on her face again.

I'll make myself the clown a thousand times over if it means getting the old Collins back.

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NINE

Collins

Rebecca demonstrates the first step in the process of painting a sunset over a lake with trees on either side, then leaves us for a few minutes to complete it ourselves.

I opt to drink my peppermint white hot chocolate rather than the wine. It's my favorite, and I don't want it to go to waste. I also don't want Ansel to think I'm unappreciative of him taking the time to stop at the café and buy me one. It was a really thoughtful gesture.

I also really appreciate that Ansel isn't making a big deal out of being here tonight. The evening didn't start with a big conversation about why we're here or what we hope to accomplish. All I want is to enjoy an evening and not be so in my head. Not think of Caleb and what I've lost. Not feel guilty about trying to move on with my life. Just exist in the world the way I used to.

Other than a few stray thoughts about Caleb, I'm able to do just that. I mostly stay in the moment. It helps that Ansel is a terrible painter and is okay laughing at himself. Like, really awful. Rebecca's comment when we came in makes sense. Good thing what he lacks in artistic ability, he makes up in humor.

Soft music plays in the background as Rebecca shows us how to blend the colors in the sky, leaving us once again as she slowly looks over everyone's work around the room.

I glance at Ansel's canvas again. "Painting really isn't your thing, is it?"

One side of his lips tip up, appearing amused. “What was your first clue?”

Clocking Rebecca giving one of the other women some tips, I lean toward Ansel. “I can understand why you weren’t Rebecca’s favorite student now.”

Ansel chuckles. “Honestly? I only took that class because everyone knew it was stacked with girls.”

My eyes widen.

“Don’t judge. I was a hot-blooded teenage boy.”

“I’ll bet you three were a force to be reckoned with in high school. Did you guys ever like the same girl?”

Caleb told me a few stories about him, Ansel, and Fowler, and they always made me yearn for long-term friendships. Moving around all the time didn’t allow a lot of connections. Sure, there were always promises to write or call, but it all slowly died off. I was too busy trying to fit in at my new school, and they were trying to fill my hole in the friendship. To have not only one but two people who have known you through all the stages of your life and accept you without prejudices? I always envied that.

He shakes his head. “Surprisingly, no. Though we had a failsafe plan in case it ever did happen.”

I tilt my head, waiting for him to enlighten me.

“Whoever called dibs first got the girl.”

“Dibs?” My mouth drops open, and I playfully smack his arm. Unfortunately, I do so with the hand holding my paintbrush, and yellow paint flicks all over his dark jeans.

I’m stunned momentarily and afraid he’ll be upset, but he just laughs, staring down at the paint. A few of the other women look over their shoulders at us, and he purses his lips to try to stifle it.

“I’m so sorry.” My cheeks heat.

“I should’ve known you’d be trouble.” Rebecca’s voice makes both of us look up like misbehaved kindergarteners. She gives Ansel an exasperated expression.

Once a teacher, always a teacher, I guess.

“Actually, it’s my fault. I had a mishap with a paintbrush.” I point at Ansel’s lap and the yellow paint that appears nearly neon against his dark jeans.

“Ah, I see.” She walks behind us to peek at our paintings. “Collins, you’re doing a great job. Just keep working the paint while it’s wet to blend it some more.” She points at a part on the canvas that could use some work before stepping to the side to get a better look at Ansel’s painting. “Fifteen years, and it’s like nothing changed.”

She pats him on the shoulder before walking back to the front of the class to demonstrate the next step.

I lean toward Ansel. “I don’t think she likes you any better now.”

He grins at me conspiratorially. “Like she said, nothing’s changed.” He winks.

My stomach does something, but I’m not sure what. Before I can put too much thought into it, Rebecca is clapping to get our attention for the next step.

We’re quiet for the next little bit as we work on our paintings. I find myself concentrating, really wanting to do a good job, and Ansel seems to respect it because he doesn’t interrupt my work, but he’s barely doing much to his.

In fact, I’m the one who breaks the silence. “I... I went through some of Caleb’s clothes a few days ago. I couldn’t do it until now.” Nina is the only other person I’ve told.

“That’s great, Collins.” He squeezes my hand. “I’m sure that was difficult, though.”

I nod, biting my lower lip. “It was. I haven’t been able to bring myself to drop off the donation bags at the church yet though.”

His forehead wrinkles. “Hey, that’s okay. Progress is progress. At least you’re moving in the right direction.”

The words sting a bit—the thought that moving away from the few scraps of Caleb’s life I’m holding onto is the right direction. Ansel doesn’t mean it like that, but I think it’s a me thing.

Furthermore, he’s right. This needs to happen in order for me to move through the grief stages.

“That’s what I keep telling myself. Maybe in another eighteen months, I’ll be able to go through his office,” I say with a self-deprecating laugh.

“Don’t do that.”

The seriousness of his voice causes me to snap my gaze from the painting to him. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t act like what you’re dealing with isn’t hard. It’s one of the hardest things someone has to go through. If it takes you another eighteen months to go through his office, so be it. But I don’t think it will.” The confidence his voice holds makes me feel more inspired to do just that.

Ansel exerts the perfect mix of pressure and motivation to keep me moving forward.

Caleb wouldn’t want you to live like this.

Apparently, Ansel has the perfect words too, because that sentence has been running in my head since he said it.

“Thank you, Ansel.” I meet his gaze. “Thanks for doing this with me even though it’s not really your thing. It’s been nice to get out of my head and do something I enjoy for a while tonight.”

He smiles at me. “That’s what friends are for.”

We finish our paintings and thank Rebecca for her tutelage before we leave with the paintings in hand.

Once we’re outside in the cold winter air, Ansel looks down at his. “What do you think? Throw it out or set it on fire?”

I laugh. “C’mon, it’s not that bad.”

His eyebrows raise. “You’re nice, but it looks like a kindergartener painted it.” He nods toward mine. “Yours is amazing, though.”

I glance at my own. “It really is.”

The two of us laugh at my lack of being humble.

“This class is something I’ve always wanted to do. I didn’t realize I might actually be good at it.”

“I’m feeling a little inferior. I think I get to pick the next activity, choose something I know I’ll be better at.” He smiles. Ansel is always smiling. It’s nice.

“You’re still willing to tag along with me even after I dragged you here tonight?”

“Not sure if you noticed, but I have a pretty big ego. It can afford to take a few hits.”

I chuckle. “I’m parked here.” I motion toward my SUV on the other side of the street. “Well... have a good night.”

“All right, drive safe. We’ll talk soon.” He waves and walks down the street.

I watch him for a moment before I cross Main Street over to my SUV.

Tonight turned out better than I expected, and I have Ansel to thank for that.

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TEN

Collins

I ride the wave of positive energy after the painting class, deciding to tackle Caleb's office. Sure, I have more of his belongings to go through in our bedroom and bathroom, but the office will be a lot of work, so I might as well get started.

Even when Caleb was alive, I didn't come in here much. It was his man cave. His computer that he used to pay and organize not only our bills but also his side company's every month. All his books are stacked on the bookshelves, and a TV is mounted above the fireplace, a couch with two chairs on either side facing it. A dark wood desk scattered with papers faces the entry.

I can't remember the last time I stepped in here. Maybe six months ago. One day I just closed the door and didn't go back inside because it was so painful.

The rest of the house is heavily influenced by my decorating style, but this is all Caleb—dark, almost antique-looking furniture, an ornate area rug, and heavy maroon drapery hanging beside the windows. Everything is covered with a thin layer of dust, and guilt coats for not taking better care of his favorite room in the house.

I'm not even sure where to start. Not sure what I'll use this space for once I clear out Caleb's things. But that's a decision for another day.

I walk over to the desk. It seems like as good as any spot to start.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket the moment I sit in the desk chair. I smile, seeing Nina's name on the screen.

“Hey, how are you?”

“Jacob and I just finished making slime, so that was fun.”

Her sarcasm makes me laugh. “I’m sorry, did you say slime?”

“Yup.” She pops the p at the end. “Apparently it was all the rage, like, a decade ago, but one of his friends at school was watching YouTube and thought it was his job to get the whole kindergarten class into it,” she groans.

“What kindergartener is watching YouTube?” I pick up a pile of paper near my hand and glance at it, seeing that it’s a set of bills Caleb had paid and written confirmation numbers on. All of them pertain to his post digging company.

“Oh, sweet summer child, you wouldn’t believe how many kindergarteners are on YouTube.”

I chuckle. The familiar pang of regret that Caleb and I didn’t have a child tugs at my chest.

“Anyway, what are you up to?” Nina asks.

“I decided that I’m going to go through Caleb’s office today.”

Silence descends over the line. “Wow, good for you. Do you want some help? I can drag Jacob and his slime over and give you a hand. Even if it’s just emotional support.”

I smile even though she can’t see me. “Thanks, but I’ve got this. I think today will be mostly going through bills and stuff. I’m starting with the desk.”

She blows out a breath. “First his clothes and now the office. I think it’s great, don’t get me wrong, but what’s with this quick turnaround?”

I understand why she’s asking. She’s been on me for the better part of a year, offering her assistance to help me go through some of this stuff.

“It was something Ansel said to me.”

“Oh, wow. What wisdom did the buff firefighter with the dreamy smile give that’s so much better than mine?”

I chuckle. Nina, like most of the women in town, has a crush on Ansel. Even though she’s single, she’d never act on it. She equates it to that saying *never meet your heroes*, but for her, it’s *never fuck your crushes*. I remember I once offered to set her up with him, and she told me she prefers to leave it in her imagination.

“He said that Caleb wouldn’t want me to live like this.”

“Damn, attractive and wise.” Her voice is low.

"I know, I know. That's why I started doing some stuff around the house. Figured that maybe if I make it less *our* home and more *my* home, it might help me feel less like I'm living in a time capsule, you know?"

"Makes perfect sense." There's pride in her voice through the receiver.

"What are you and Jacob up to for the rest of the weekend?"

"He has hockey practice tomorrow morning, but he has a birthday party for a boy in his class tonight. What psycho starts a six-year-old's birthday party at five o'clock? I'll never get him to bed with the amount of sugar running through his veins."

I laugh, remembering one time when I was babysitting him and we made ice cream sundaes. Jacob was jumping on his bed rather than lying down. That boy loves his sweets.

"Anyway, I was going to see if you wanted to come for dinner tomorrow night. I'm not making anything fancy, but we need to catch up."

"Sure thing, that'd be great. What can I bring?"

"Just yourself." Jacob calls for Nina in the background. "Shit, I've gotta go. Come over around four, okay?"

"See you then." I set my phone on the desk, and rather than relax back into the chair, I stay upright before I change my mind.

I sort through piles of bills that have long since been paid, organizing them a bit so I can file them in the large filing cabinet in the unfinished basement. Although Caleb was always on top of our bills and made sure everything was paid on time, he wasn't the most organized person when it comes to paperwork, as is evident from the stacks of loose papers.

I sort the electric bills into a pile, then do the same with the mortgage payments and Caleb's truck title from when we paid it off. Another thing I have to deal with.

I'm on a roll and can actually see the desktop when I come across a receipt for a hotel in Texas with no writing from Caleb saying he turned it in to the academy to be reimbursed. I'm setting the receipt in my miscellaneous pile to go through later when my eyes snag on the address of the hotel.

Galveston, Texas

I stare at it, trying to make sense of why Caleb would have been in Galveston. It borders the Gulf and is nowhere near College Station.

Flopping back in the chair, I stare at the receipt so hard it feels as if I could burn a hole through it.

Why was Caleb in Galveston, and why wouldn't he tell me?

Did he and I just forget?

In the last couple of years of our marriage, Caleb was coming and going all the time. I suppose it's possible that he told me and I forgot. Maybe he went to a station in Galveston to conduct local training or something...

But even as I think it, the words don't sit right in my belly. A queasy feeling washes over me. Call it female instinct, a gut feeling or whatever, but it's telling me that this is something I should look into.

But that intuition is quickly overshadowed by an immense amount of guilt I feel over questioning my dead husband's behavior when he's not here to answer for himself.

Part of me wants to pretend I never saw this receipt, while part of me wants to do more digging to shake loose a memory that would explain his stay there.

I decide to do neither. Setting the receipt down, I get up from the chair and leave the office, closing the door behind me.

I'm not sure I should have started on this quest to go through all of Caleb's things. Maybe I should have left things how they were.

ELEVEN

Ansel

It's been a week since I accompanied Collins to wine-and-paint night at the art gallery, and I haven't heard from her. Not that I expected us to make plans within days, but I should check up on her in case being out that night brought up stuff for her.

And so, I book another massage appointment under the guise of a sore lower back.

When she greets me in the waiting room, she has a wry expression as if maybe she knows my lower back isn't that sore. But once we get in the room and I'm face down on the table, she seems to take my fake concern seriously.

"Does it bother you every day, all day, or just when you're doing certain activities?" She spreads some massage oil on my back, and my muscles relax into her touch.

I worked hard at the gym today, and though my back didn't hurt, the massage feels good. "Comes and goes. I haven't really been able to pinpoint it to one thing specifically."

She continues working. My eyes drift closed in the companionable silence and the sensation of her working my muscles.

Eventually, I remind myself that what I'm here for isn't the massage. "You never called. When is our next adventure?"

Her hands still on my back before she continues, her touch slower. "Right, sorry about that."

That's all she says, and I'm not sure what to make of her response.

“If it’s because I embarrassed you with my painting, I apologize, but I swear if we do something closer to my wheelhouse, I’ll be a rock star at it.”

A low chuckle flows out of her, followed by a sigh.

“Collins, overt your eyes for a second because I’m going to flip over.”

“What? Oh—” she says when the sheet moves and I’m turning.

By the time I face the ceiling and sit up, her back is to me. I adjust the sheet so that all the goods are covered. “It’s safe to turn around.”

She has a wary expression on her face. “I’m not finished working on your back, Ansel.” She scolds me like a mother, at least what I remember from mine.

“Collins, what is it? Did the painting night bring up a bunch of stuff for you? I’m here to talk if you need it.”

She bites her lower lip, something I realize she does when she’s nervous or unsure.

“C’mon, tell me.” Out of instinct, I squeeze her wrist before pulling away.

“I had fun the other night. I really did. It was nice to feel lighter, if even for a few hours. That hasn’t happened in a long time. Even if I’m out in public, smiling and chatting with people... I’m usually acting. I always feel like I’m being dragged down. Paint night was the first time since Caleb’s death that I was able to be in the moment and felt closer to my old self again.” Her eyes are shiny in the dim light of the massage room.

“What’s bothering you then?”

Collins bites her lip again, nibbling.

“You can talk to me. What’s going on?”

She opens her mouth to say something, then closes it. I decide to give her a second to gather her thoughts rather than pressuring her.

“I went through Caleb’s office this weekend.”

I understand why that would be hard for her, in some ways harder than going through some of his clothes, since the office was all his. Everything in there, he picked out. He spent a lot of time there, and when some of the guys from the firehouse and I would go over, we’d often watch sports in there. He loved that room.

“I’m sure that was difficult. Must have surfaced a bunch of feelings,” I say carefully.

She nods, but I’m not sure that’s all there is to it.

“Did something else happen?” I don’t want to intrude too far, but I want her to know she can talk to me.

Collins studies me for a beat and shakes her head, eyes filling with unshed tears.

“Hey, hey.” I wrap my arms around her. “I miss him too. I know losing my best friend isn’t the same as losing your husband, but I’m here for you, all right?” I draw back and meet her eyes. “Whether that means you want to talk about him, or whether that means you don’t. Whatever you need, Collins. You don’t have to pretend to be okay around me.”

She bites her bottom lip and nods, though she looks as though there’s more on her mind.

I decide to change the subject. “Have you given any thought to what we should do on our next outing?”

She twists her mouth for a moment, appearing appreciative for the change of topic. “Did you see the new yoga studio that opened up on Main Street beside a Slice of Life?”

“Noticed the sign the other day.”

“I’m not sure whether you’d be up for it, but I checked it out online, and they have hot yoga. I used to do yoga a lot before I moved here, and I always found it relaxing and a good way to reduce stress.”

I shrug. “As long as it’s not Pilates. I’ve seen some of the videos on socials of men who thought they’d kill it and were immediately humbled.”

“I admire your willingness to make a fool out of yourself, Ansel.” She smiles, and I feel lighter knowing I’ve accomplished my task.

“Hey, how do you know I’m not going to kill it at hot yoga? Maybe I’ll surprise you.”

“If you’re anything like Caleb, you’re going to complain the whole time.”

I lean back on my hands and notice Collins’s gaze dip to my bare chest. Weirdly, I forgot that I’m sitting here shirtless, my lower half covered only by a sheet. “Caleb went to hot yoga with you?”

“I convinced him to try it with me back in Texas. He only went once, complained the whole time. I think he was having trouble keeping up, honestly.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Funny, Caleb never told Fowler and me.”

She smiles. “I’m sure he knew he’d never hear the end of it if he did.”

“Yeah, we would’ve busted his balls about it for years. Which reminds me, Fowler doesn’t need to know, okay?”

We both laugh.

“You should be fine. It’s just a beginner class. I think the one Caleb came to was intermediate.”

“I’ve got this, then.”

“We’ll see. You ready to roll back over and continue this massage?”

“As long as you promise not to avoid me for another week.” My eyebrows lift.

“Promise.”

“All right, you hold the sheet and I’ll flip back over.”

She does and turns her face away. I flip over and place my head back in the circle at the end of the table.

Mission accomplished.

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TWELVE

Collins

A couple of days after the massage, I meet Ansel at the yoga studio. I'm excited to go back to something that I used to really enjoy, but those nerves I had before the wine-and-paint night are making an appearance again.

God, have I really become such a hermit that going to a yoga class feels overwhelming? Maybe this is exactly what I need, exposure therapy of sorts.

Ansel steps in the studio and removes his coat, leaving him in a T-shirt and shorts. I meant to mention to him not to wear athletic pants since it's hot yoga, but it looks like he either did some research or thought of it himself.

I'm wearing a pair of dusty green biker shorts with a matching sports bra. Over the top, I have a thin, white, long-sleeved sweater that I'm sure I'll be ditching in a few minutes once I get too hot. Even in the heated waiting area, I'm not comfortable standing around in biker shorts and a sports bra.

"Hey, you ready to do this?" I smile at Ansel.

Truth is, I'm curious to see how he fares tonight. Not that I'm entirely confident in my own performance. It's been years since I've done yoga, though I've gone through spurts where I do some basic stretches before bed to keep myself limber.

"Why do I get the feeling you're doubting my athletic ability?" He narrows his eyes playfully.

I raise both hands. "I never said such a thing."

"Hmm, not sure you have to."

A woman who appears to be around our age with her red hair pulled back into a ponytail comes out into the waiting area. "All right, everyone, the studio is ready. Please come in and set up your station."

Ansel curses under his breath as the woman goes back into the studio.

I turn to look at him. "What's wrong?"

"That's Rachel Lindsay. I broke up with her in junior year and immediately started dating her cousin, and she's never let me forget it."

I bite my lip to not laugh in this serene area.

"Remember I told you about Mrs. Galloway catching me making out with a girl in the art supply closet?" he says, and I nod. "It was her cousin."

"Well, if it isn't the consequences of your own actions coming back to bite you in the ass."

He rolls his eyes in a good-natured way. "Just so you know, this still isn't going to affect my performance."

"Want to put a wager on that?" I place my hands on my hips.

Ansel grins. "Name it."

"If you don't fall flat on your face in there, you win, and if you do, I win."

He nods. "I'll take that bet. What are we playing for?" I open my mouth, but he continues. "If I win, you owe me a drink, and if you win, vice versa. We can swing by the Pines after."

Ansel uses the nickname a lot of people in town have for the pub Fowler owns.

I had planned to go home after this, but what's the harm in having a drink first? "All right, you've got yourself a deal."

We walk into the room, and I think I just entered a tropical rainforest. It's warm. Warmer than I remember. Since we were too busy razzing one another in the waiting room, Ansel and I take the last two mats on the far side of the studio. Rachel is all smiles at the front, watching all of us, but her smile drops when she clocks Ansel.

He blows out a breath and sits, crossing his legs on the mat like the women in the room. He doesn't seem uncomfortable about being the only guy, just like he was the only guy at the art gallery. I appreciate his willingness to be here even more. Although I'm pretty sure Ansel likes having the attention of women around him.

“Welcome to beginner yoga, everyone. I’m excited to have you all here. I’m your instructor, Rachel. I’ll be walking through the room to give you guidance, and you may feel me apply some gentle pressure or reposition you to help get you in the correct pose. If you’d prefer I not touch you at all, please feel free to say so, and I’ll be happy to oblige.” She looks around the room, her gaze sweeping past Ansel. When no one raises their hand, she continues. “Perfect. Let’s get started, shall we?”

“Sit tall on your mat, and I want you to focus on your breathing. Leave everything you came in here with outside that door. Inhale through the nose, exhale through the mouth.”

The room follows her instructions through the first few poses of cat-cow and child’s pose. I’m already sweating by the time Rachel tells us to move to downward dog and begins walking around the room.

The backs of my legs stretch and burn as I hold the pose. I’m so much more out of shape than I thought.

Rachel walks around as she talks about continuing to focus on our breath and planting our feet to the earth.

In my peripheral, I see her gently adjusting the woman’s pose next to me. “Great job,” she says in a soft, soothing voice as she passes me. She seems pleasant enough, until she stops by Ansel.

I turn my head slightly, intrigued to see how it plays out. Rachel moves his torso down with a firm push between his shoulder blades. Ansel grunts, and I press my lips together to stifle a laugh.

Rachel moves on to the front row, and I glance in his direction. He’s already looking in my direction with wide eyes and mouths, “What the fuck?”

A sharp burst of laughter escapes me, but I feign a cough to cover it up while Ansel grins.

We work through some more positions, and about halfway through the class, movement in my peripheral causes me to look at Ansel again. He’s stripping off his T-shirt. Like me, he’s sweating, his hair slicked and the muscles in his chest glistening.

An unfamiliar feeling tugs low in my belly, reminding me how long it’s been since I’ve had sex. I haven’t really missed it until right now, and I hate that it’s not Caleb I’m enjoying looking at but his best friend.

It’s not like I’ve never seen Ansel’s chest before. I mean, I’ve had my hands all over it during our massages. It’s probably less about him and more

about seeing a specimen as perfect as him outside of a professional setting.

He tosses the T-shirt on the floor beside him and starts to turn my way. I snap my gaze back to the front, focusing on Rachel demonstrating the next pose.

Sweat drips down my back and between my cleavage as she continues the class and we shift from one pose to another.

Near the end of the class, we're standing at the end of the mat, spines elongated and standing tall.

"Hands at heart center," Rachel says.

Ansel's hands go to the center of his chest, and he looks at me and mouths, "Heart center?"

I press my lips together and look back forward.

Do not engage.

"Inhale, sweep your arms overhead."

I sweep.

Ansel sweeps.

"Exhale. Fold forward."

I fold, and Ansel does the same.

"Halfway lift. Inhale."

I lift my torso to a flat back.

Ansel makes the smallest sound. Not a grunt, but a mix of displeasure and discomfort.

Do not look. Do not look.

"Exhale. Fold."

I look.

He's bent in half with his fingertips nowhere near the mat. They hover somewhere around mid-shin, his face a mask of concentration with a firm expression as if he's trying to convince his body to do something it's not supposed to do.

He catches me looking. "What?" he whispers.

"Nothing," I whisper back.

"You're laughing."

"I'm not." But I'm barely keeping my enjoyment contained.

"You're laughing inside."

I shake my head, amused, then shift my attention to the front of the class.

"Now let's move into downward dog."

I'm just getting into position when a thump rings out. I open my eyes and swivel my head. Ansel is on his stomach, flat like a starfish with his cheek pressed to the mat, facing me, and his arms splayed out on either side.

"Are you alive?" I whisper.

"Define alive."

A laugh punches out of me before I can stop it, and the woman in front of me gives us a dirty look. I press my mouth shut and stare at my mat.

"Now walk it back up," Rachel says.

Once I'm standing, my eyes veer to Ansel, still splayed on the floor. "You're missing the end of class." I keep my voice soft.

"I'm communing."

My chest moves up and down with a silent chuckle. "With the floor?"

He rolls to his side and looks at me. "With my regret."

I follow Rachel's instructions for the last few movements, my muscles enjoying the gentle stretches. When I glance at Ansel, he's still watching me. Not smiling or joking, just watching.

I shift my gaze to look forward again before sitting on my mat, hating that my belly is doing that butterfly thing. Doesn't it know Ansel is the last man that should make it flutter?

THIRTEEN

Ansel

Rachel gives me the once-over and a sharp nod as Collins and I walk out of the yoga studio into the waiting room.

Everyone thanks her as they walk past, but I don't bother because what I just experienced was a form of torture. I like to consider myself fit—I work out five times a week at the gym, I run on the treadmill—but I was not prepared for whatever the fuck just happened in that room.

Who knew stretching could be so strenuous?

"I didn't realize hot yoga meant it was going to feel like we were working out on the surface of the sun." I grab my water bottle from my cubby, downing half of it in one go.

Collins chuckles. Her cheeks are rosy, I'm sure from the heat, but I can't help but feel like some of it has to do with the excitement of doing something she once loved again.

"I probably should have warned you." She takes a drink from the stainless-steel bottle she brought.

I set my water down and use my towel to wipe the sweat from my body. "You still up for a drink?"

"That depends. Who's buying?" She arches an eyebrow.

"I think it's pretty obvious it's me, don't you think?"

"Oh, I don't know. You did pretty well until the end. And you didn't complain once." She smiles and undoes the tie on her wrap sweater, peeling it off her sticky skin, leaving her in only tight boxer shorts and a sports bra.

My gaze sweeps over her in appreciation before I realize she's not just another hot woman. She's my best friend's widow. Which means there's a big off-limits sign with barbed wire around her.

I quickly snap my gaze away.

Then I try to convince myself it's okay. She's just an attractive woman. Anyone with two eyes and a heartbeat could see that. I looked at her as a *woman* for a second, not Collins. I forgot myself, that's all. Not a big deal.

"I'm happy to admit defeat and pay for your drink as long as that is off our list from now on."

"One and done?" She reaches for her own towel.

"I think weights and running are more my lane."

Collins smiles. "Well, thanks for coming with me. I might see about a membership."

Pride fills my chest. That was the entire reason I wanted to do these activities with her, to get her more involved. "You should."

Her cheeks aren't as pink as when we first got out, but she averts her eyes. I want to tell her I admire her. What she's doing, pushing herself, is hard, but the effort is an admirable thing. But I think she's still embarrassed that we're doing this.

"Do you need to run home and change before we head to the Pines?"

She cringes. "Maybe. I forgot how sweaty you get in these classes. That okay?"

I shrug. "Sure. I'll have a quick shower too, then meet you there. That work?"

"Perfect."

As we say goodbye on the sidewalk, I watch her climb into her car before I walk to my house.

It's funny how you think you know someone, but now I see that maybe Collins was just Caleb's wife to me. Sure, they had us over plenty, but Caleb always pulled Fowler and me into his office, or outside to smoke a cigar. I never really got to know the woman Collins is. She's funny and friendly and kind-hearted. I'm not sure why it surprises me. Caleb locked her down pretty fast, showing up in Echo Lake engaged.

FOURTEEN

Ansel

A half hour later, I walk into the Pines and sit at one of the round high-top tables. Fowler gives me a chin lift from behind the bar. The Bruins are playing tonight so there are quite a few people in the pub. I nod and wave to a few but don't go over to their tables.

I'm busy watching the game when Fowler sidles up to the table, setting a coaster in front of me. "How's it going?"

"Good. You can toss another coaster down." I nod at the seat across from me.

"Who's the guest?" His eyebrows lift.

I get the suggestion. A seed of guilt blossoms inside me, not wanting Fowler to get the wrong idea. I'm pretty sure that feeling is only because of how I looked at Collins after hot yoga.

"Collins." Fowler arches an eyebrow, and I add, "We just finished hot yoga class and I lost a bet, so I'm buying her a drink."

Fowler's forehead creases, and he pushes his hand through his dirty-blond hair—his uncomfortable sign. He might as well be wearing a neon sign with *What the fuck are you doing?*

"Why are you hanging out with Collins?" And there's the slight judgmental tone.

Without telling him everything she's told me, I give him a quick rundown of my conversation with her when I went to replace the smoke detector. Just that she's struggling a little putting herself out there. I don't have to tell him much—the entire town of Echo Lake knows she's not who

she was before Caleb's death. The further I go on, the more he nods, understanding there are no ill intentions on my part.

"Is it working?" he asks.

"I think so. There's still some hesitancy, but she's doing things."

He nods, keeping his expression neutral. "What can I get you?"

"I'll wait until—oh, here she comes."

Collins walks through the door with her hair up in a messy bun. She's changed into a cream cable-knit sweater and jeans.

"Hey, how are you?" She and Fowler hug, then she sets her purse on an empty chair, sitting across from me.

"Good, yourself?"

Their conversation about the weather and how horrible I was at hot yoga all looks and sounds normal, but Fowler keeps running his hands through his hair as if he's uncomfortable. Which I guess is understandable since the three of us minus Caleb was never a thing.

"What can I get you guys?"

I motion for Collins to order first.

"Can I just have a glass of rosé, please?"

He nods and looks at me.

"The usual."

Fowler nods and heads behind the bar.

"I think I'm going to be sore in muscles I didn't even know I had tomorrow." I twist my neck side to side.

Collins rolls her eyes. "You'll be fine."

"You said it'd be easy," I say accusingly.

"I said it'd be good for you. There's a difference."

I shake my head. "Liar."

She chuckles. "Okay, maybe I didn't say that, but I did say it was a beginner class, and it was."

"Sure as hell didn't feel like a beginner class."

Before she can say anything, Fowler returns with our drinks.

"Thanks, man."

"Just holler if you guys need anything else." He checks on one of the tables to our right, but I catch his eyes shifting to us again. I'll talk to him later.

I raise my beer. "Cheers."

Collins lifts her wineglass and gently taps it to my bottle. “What do you have going on for the rest of the week?”

My mental calendar unrolls in my mind. “Gotta take my truck in for an oil change, I work, and then I might go ice fishing with one of the guys from the station. Then I’m thinking about driving down to the national park to go snowshoeing.”

“You sure keep yourself busy.” She sips from her glass, her lips wrapping around the edge.

I shrug. “I’m not much for sitting around. Never have been.”

I learned when I was a kid that too much sitting coincided with examining your feelings about all the shitty things in your life. No thanks.

“Speaking of trucks... I’m not sure what I should do with Caleb’s. It’s been sitting in the driveway ever since...”

“You don’t ever drive it?” I take a pull of my beer.

“No. It’s too big for me. My SUV is about as big as I can handle.”

It sounds like a euphemism, and she must realize it when she repeats the words in her head because she laughs, then I go right along with her.

“You know what I mean.” She leans back, shaking her head.

“I can talk to Earl Timbre about it when I’m there. If you’re planning to sell it, you should have it looked at since it’s been sitting so long. It might need a little maintenance.”

She nods fast a few times, her eyes on her wine.

I raise my hands. “No pressure, of course. Whenever you’re ready.”

“No, I think it’s time. I was just thinking how weird it will be to pull up to the house and not see it there, that’s all.”

“Do you—” I think better of what I was about to ask her and press my lips together.

“Do I what?” Her head tilts.

I sigh. “Do you ever forget that he’s gone? It doesn’t happen as much as it did right after he passed, but even now, sometimes I’ll find myself thinking *Caleb is gonna laugh at this* or *I can’t wait to see what Caleb thinks about this*.” The corners of her lips tip down, and I reach for her hand. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

She grips my hand back. “No, no. It’s fine. Actually... one thing I’ve realized since I became your pet project is that it’s kind of nice being able to speak about him in a way that doesn’t always have to do with his death.

And I've realized the more I do it, the easier it feels. I have you to thank for that."

She holds my gaze, and something passes between us. I'm not sure what, but it's meaningful and intense, so I divert my eyes to the hockey game. I slip my hand back to my side of the table.

"To answer your question, yeah. Sometimes that happens to me too. Mostly when I first wake up in the morning. There's a split second where I forget he's gone. Sometimes it feels like a gift, and other times it feels like a curse."

"That makes sense."

"It's one of the reasons I was thinking of selling the truck. Sometimes when I get home and I see it parked in the driveway, I forget for a split second and think *I can't wait to tell him about this client* like I used to when he was alive. I think it might help me move on if it's not there."

"All right." I clap my hands together. "We'll make it happen then. I'll talk to Earl Timbre down at the auto shop this week."

She smiles, but something is still straining the edges of her expression.

"Is there something else holding you back from moving on?" I quickly catch myself. "Not moving on, but you know what I mean. I—"

Collins raises her hand. "Ansel, it's fine. I know exactly what you mean. And it is moving on. It's moving on from the life I thought I'd have to the one I've been dealt."

I appreciate her graciousness since I wasn't trying to imply that she's leaving behind the memory of Caleb without a care. I'd never think that.

"But yeah, there is something bugging me. It's just..." She twists her lips, then waves it off. "Never mind."

"Come on, I did hot yoga for you. You can tell me."

She smiles, but I don't pull a laugh from her. "No, really, it's nothing."

I decide to drop it because it's clearly something she's not ready to discuss. I'll wait.

For now.

FIFTEEN

Collins

Ansel invited me to the weekly Saturday night poker game his family has, and because I've been enjoying this whole *step out of the box you've sealed yourself in the last eighteen months* thing, I agreed to go. Not because I'm any good at poker, but because for the first time in a very long time, the idea of being around people on a Saturday night is more appealing than holing myself up at home.

He offered to pick me up since he's driving Hollis anyway, though I did ask if he could help me with something, so he's coming to get me first.

After he tosses the last garbage bag full of donations into the rear of his truck, he turns to me. "That's the last one?" It's so cold, his breath comes out in a white puff.

"That's it."

He nods and walks to the passenger side of the truck, opening the door for me. I give him a small smile as I step up and climb in.

After Ansel gets in, he reverses down the driveway, his hand resting on my seat as he glances over his shoulder. Caleb used to always use his camera. This is hotter. *Oh my god, why am I comparing them?*

"How are you feeling?"

I never would have thought Ansel was a feelings guy, but he's always checking in on me, and it's nice.

Drawing in a breath, I let it out slowly. "It's time."

That's all I can really say. This is just another baby step in an effort to move forward with my life. There's no satisfaction in checking this box, but

it needs to be done.

We spend the rest of the drive in silence, but it's not uncomfortable. Ansel seems happy to leave me with my thoughts, which I appreciate.

He drives the truck around to the back of the church and pulls up so the back of his truck is lined up with the donation bin. The two of us get out, and he pulls the hitch down on his truck.

The plastic is cold as I grip it and drag the bag toward me.

"They're heavy, I can do it."

I look over my shoulder at Ansel. "Are you calling me weak? I might remind you that I stuffed all of them."

He snickers and holds up his hands. "Then by all means, I'll just sit on the edge and watch you do it. But if my Uncle Roy asks at poker, you sat in the warm cab, and I did it all myself."

He doesn't sit, though. He helps me, and I enjoy the humor he uses to get me through this moment.

I lift the bag from the truck and walk it over to the donation bin. I repeat the process two more times, Ansel doing the same amount.

As I put the final bag into the donation bin, tears spring to my eyes. I'm not even sure it's sadness. I think I'm overwhelmed.

Ansel draws me into a hug, and I wrap my arms around him without reservation, grateful for his comfort.

"You're doing the right thing for yourself. Even though it's hard, you are." Ansel's deep voice echoes through his chest and jacket where my ear is pressed.

"I don't even know why I'm upset." The unshed tears in my eyes fall when I blink, streaking down my face.

"Nothing about this is easy, Collins. Even something as simple sounding as dropping off clothes in a donation bin."

I nod into his chest, then pull away, meeting his gaze. "You're right."

"You need to give yourself some grace. Feel what you need to feel. You're doing great." His thumb brushes along my cheek, wiping a tear.

Our gazes lock and hold.

Neither of us look away, and my heart rate picks up speed. My gaze dips to Ansel's lips and back up to his chestnut eyes.

He clears his throat and steps back, his arms falling from around me. "Hollis will be texting soon if we don't go get him. He's insistent about being on time."

Heat floods my cheeks. “We can’t have it be on us that he’s late then.” I beeline for the truck, not giving Ansel the opportunity to open my door for me this time.

The drive to Hollis’s place is filled with deafening silence, and this time it’s not the comfortable kind.

When we pull into Elliott and Emelia’s driveway, I’m still thinking about what the hell that was between Ansel and me at the church drop-off. Am I really so starved for affection, for physical touch, that I’m looking to my dead husband’s best friend for it? What the hell is wrong with me? I’m disgusting.

Ansel’s being a good friend to Caleb and me, trying to get me out of this rut I ignored for too long, and I go and put him in an uncomfortable position like that. He’s probably regretting this whole agreement of ours.

It’s not as if I’ll never be in another relationship again or that I won’t remarry at some point. I’m only thirty, and I still do want kids someday. But Ansel is not that man. He never could be.

Maybe all this time we’re spending together, coupled with how supportive and understanding he is, messes with my head. Or maybe it’s because he knew Caleb as well as I did, and we share this connection of missing the one we both loved. I don’t know. But whatever it is, I need to get my shit together and not put him in an uncomfortable position like that ever again.

Ansel lets himself into the house, Hollis and me following. The three of us remove our coats and winter boots before heading in farther.

Elliott and Emelia are in the kitchen, along with Roy and the Thermos Crew—Clyde, Sam, and Jimmy. The guys are all sitting around the table, but Emelia nibbles on a carrot, leaning on the counter. Everyone says their hellos, and I’m appreciative that none of them makes a huge deal about me joining.

“I’m not playing tonight.” Emelia turns to me. “Don’t feel like you have to play if you don’t want to, Collins. We can just watch and silently judge. It’s just as much fun, but you still have money in your pocket at the end of the night.”

I chuckle and glance at Ansel, who appears unbothered, seemingly happy to ignore whatever happened, or didn’t, by the donation bins.

“I’ll watch with you.”

Emelia pushes off the counter. “Perfect. I’m glad you’re here to save me from all this testosterone.”

Ansel sits at the table across from Hollis while Emelia sets up two chairs at the opposite end of the table from where Roy sits. He deals while Elliott gets his brothers a beer.

“You sure you don’t want anything?” Emelia asks.

“I’m good for now, thanks.” Better to keep my wits about me tonight. I don’t need anything lowering my inhibitions.

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SIXTEEN

Ansel

We're a few hands deep, and the conversation flows as it always does. It's hard to get a word in between the Thermos Crew, honestly.

Collins has been chatting with Emelia at the opposite end of the table, which is nice to see. Maybe the two of them can become friends and not just acquaintances. Emelia can relate to someone who isn't a born-and-bred Echo Laker.

Collins's eyes lift to mine, and I glance at the cards in my hand, my mind going back to that almost kiss.

It was nothing. I'm probably imagining it. Neither of us said or did anything inappropriate. It was more about the energy surrounding us, the connection. Or just two grieving people consoling one another.

I'm brave enough to admit my view of Collins is changing. Every time we're together, she drifts a little further from being my best friend's widow. I've become protective of her. But also attracted to her, which makes me feel guilty as hell about both.

What kind of douchebag am I, thinking of her that way?

There's a good chance it's one-sided anyway. Why would Collins ever think of me in that way? The fact is she was married to an amazing man, the best guy really. I could never hope to come close to being the kind of man she needs.

I need to do what I've always done when something threatens to complicate my life—I need to shove it into the back of my mind and pretend it doesn't exist.

“Ansel,” Elliott snaps.

I blink, coming out of my thoughts. “What?”

He nods toward the center of the table. “You in or what?”

“Shit, sorry.” I purposely divert my eyes from Collins.

We play through another round that Hollis wins. I hate his cocky grin, but I have more important shit going on in my head. I roll my eyes and lift the beer I’ve been nursing to my mouth.

Everyone tosses their cards on the table toward my uncle.

The windows creak from what I assume is a strong burst of wind coming off the lake.

“Wind’s picking up,” Jimmy says.

“Supposed to snow in the morning.” Uncle Roy shuffles the cards.

“I remember there was this wicked storm one year,” Clyde says. “Might have been in ’88... maybe ’89. Wasn’t winter, but we were having an unusual cold spell that summer. I remember because Barb—”

“May she rest in peace,” all the old guys say in unison.

“She was going on and on about how she’d bought these new summer dresses that she hadn’t gotten to wear. Back then you had to drive all the way into—”

“The storm, Clyde,” Jimmy says, trying to keep him on track.

“I’m getting there. The wind was howling. That one took the Wilsons’ dock clean across the lake and I personally watched a canoe go airborne—”

“Kayak,” Sam clarifies.

Clyde waves him off. “Same difference. I watched it go airborne, fully airborne, until it landed about five hundred yards away.”

The rest of us share a look, knowing Clyde’s propensity to embellish a story.

“Helluva storm.” He shakes his head and looks gravely down at the table.

“I, for one, will be happy when winter is over,” Emelia says.

“Figured you’d be used to this kind of weather, coming from Alaska,” Uncle Roy says. He eats some chips from the bowl on the table, wiping the crumbs from the top of his mildly protruding belly and his worn-thin Pearl Jam T-shirt.

“You guys don’t know snow,” she says, and we all laugh. “I want to go out on the boat with Baylor. Elliott tells me she’s a little speed demon.”

I glance at my brother, and he might as well be one of those cartoon characters with two hearts springing out of his eyes. An uncomfortable feeling stirs in my belly that I can't describe. Not jealousy—I'm happy for my brother—but I wouldn't mind having what he has with Emelia.

Wait, did I actually think that? I really am fucked in the head.

Collins grows quiet about halfway through the night. It's not as if she were a chatterbox when we first arrived, but I see her retreating into herself, and I have no idea why.

When we're leaving, I can't help but wonder if inviting her here tonight was the right call because she's definitely in her head about something.

We say our goodbyes, and Emelia tells Collins she's going to reach out to her soon about a girls' night. Collins smiles and acts excited, but I've learned to tell when she's putting up a front.

I drop off Hollis first, and ten minutes later, I'm pulling into Collins's driveway. I get what she's saying about Caleb's truck. It's like a cold bucket of water seeing it and knowing what I felt for her only hours earlier. I'm a shitty best friend.

I leave the engine running because it's cold as fuck out, and I shift in my seat to face her. "Is everything okay? You got pretty quiet the longer the night went on."

She turns, her sad eyes meeting mine. "Did I come off as rude?"

I shake my head. "No, not at all. Everyone else probably thought you were quiet. I just know better. What's going on?"

She deeply sighs and stares at her fingers in her lap. "Watching your family interact tonight..."

"Were we too much? The ribbing can get a bit much at times, I know, but it's all in good fun."

She huffs out a quiet laugh. "Not at all. I just haven't been a part of that kind of dynamic in a while. And even then, I married into it. My parents were never big on affection. All of it just reminded me how lonely I am... was too."

My forehead wrinkles. "Was?"

She shakes her head and turns to look out the passenger window. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"Hey." I loosely grip her wrist. "C'mon. What did you mean by *was*?"

She turns, and now she's frowning. "The truth is that I was lonely before Caleb died." She squeezes her eyes shut, shaking her head again. "I

shouldn't be talking like this."

Confusion swims through my head. I always thought things were good with them. Did Caleb not feel comfortable talking to me about it, or did he figure I wouldn't understand for some reason?

"Collins, you don't have to hide how you feel just because he passed."

She nods as if considering whether she wants to tell me more. "He was gone a lot in Texas, Ansel, and even when he was home... I don't know. It was like he wasn't really here. Not like he was earlier in our marriage. He felt distant. Like his head was somewhere else all the time. We just weren't connecting." I get the impression she wants to say more, but she stops.

My chest aches from witnessing the pain on her face. I undo my seat belt and lean in over the console, really wanting her to hear me. "I'm sorry, Collins. I didn't know. He never said—"

She shrugs. "I just feel terrible speaking ill of him, especially to you."

Though I'm taken aback that they might have had marriage problems, since I never heard or saw any indication from Caleb that things were anything but amazing between them, I hate the idea of Collins feeling as though she can't express how she feels to anyone.

"You're not speaking ill of him, you're expressing your feelings. There's a difference."

She squeezes her eyes shut, and the pain etched on her face... fuck, I can't stand it.

I draw her into my arms and hold her tightly. "I'm sorry you were lonely. Are lonely, Collins, but you have me."

She squeezes me tighter, and my hand goes into her hair.

The energy shifts, and I know she feels it too because she stiffens in my hold, her breath releasing against my neck. She pulls back, but not all the way, our cheeks brushing, our breaths fanning together.

We stay with the sides of our noses touching, breathing each other's air for what feels like minutes but is really seconds. The air in the cab of my truck thickens and weighs around us like my favorite blanket.

Before I know it, my lips are on hers, swallowing her breathy moan when my tongue parts the seam of her lips. The moment our tongues meet, an electric jolt courses through my entire body. Collins clutches my jacket while my hand grips her hair tighter.

Our kiss quickly shifts from slow to desperate, neither one of us taking a breath. But as I'm about to grab her hips and swing her over the console

and onto my lap, she pulls away, gasping.

We both sit in the cab of my truck, chests heaving, staring at each other in the dim light. Collins's fingers move up to cover her lips, as if hers are tingling like mine, and horror overtakes her face.

"I have to go." She yanks the door handle and bolts from the cab, running up the front steps of her house and through her front door before I can process what we just did.

My eyes fall to the back of Caleb's truck, and my head falls forward. I've never felt more ashamed of who I am in my entire life.

"What can I say? I'm a complete and total asshole."

I pull out of their driveway and drive home, hoping this might have been all a nightmare, ignoring the fact I want to knock on her door and ask if I can kiss her again.

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SEVENTEEN

Ansel

A couple days after the kiss, I walk into the fire station, completely exhausted from tossing and turning every damn night.

Caleb's eyes follow me down the hall from his picture with a bronze plaque underneath, dedicated to his sacrifice.

After he passed, I couldn't bear to glance in its direction, the pain so raw and fresh. But as time went on, I've been able to stop and look at him, forcing myself to remember the good times we had. The memories got a little more sweet than bitter.

Now, I'm not sure I'll ever be able to look at it again, but only because of my own guilt.

I've felt sick to my stomach since Collins rushed out of my truck. I owe her an apology. What the fuck was I thinking by kissing her?

"Mercer, what's good?"

I nod at Gonzalez, who's just coming off shift, and walk into the common area of the fire hall.

Russo is at the stove, cooking up breakfast, and I'm thankful he always starts his shifts by making breakfast. The man could be a world-class diner chef if there were such a thing. My stomach rumbles from the scent of bacon and hash browns.

I notice a few stragglers from the departing shift hanging around to eat before they head home. Can't say I blame them.

"You win Saturday night?" Russo calls to me.

Everyone knows about and has tried to get in on my family's weekly poker games. Mostly because they think they can make easy money on the Thermos Crew. Little do they know.

"Down, but not all the way." I sit in the living area that's open to the kitchen.

"Want to lose the rest? We can get a game going tonight. I'm happy to make you part with your money," Fleming says, peeking around his phone with a shit-eating smirk.

We bust each other's balls as I look around the room. They'd all hate me if they knew I'd kissed Collins. They'd probably stand in line, all of them wanting their turn to kick my ass, and I can't even blame them.

Caleb was my best friend, my fellow firefighter, my brother.

Everything about that night is still etched in my brain.

We'd been called to a residential fire outside of town in the middle of the night. It was early spring, and the ground was muddy. I remember how my boots suctioned in the mud as Caleb and I approached the old house in search of the homeowner. A neighbor had reported the fire and that there was one person who lived inside who was unaccounted for.

Heading out to the call, we all knew that it had the potential to turn nasty. A lot of the homes built out there had balloon framing, allowing the walls to act as a sort of chimney that helped the fire move quickly.

Time was of the essence if we were going to save the homeowner.

Once we were inside, conditions deteriorated faster than expected. The fire was in the walls, not just the rooms.

I got that feeling—the one that every firefighter knows—the instinct that tells you things have shifted out of your favor. Caleb was in the lead. We were in the hallway, and visibility was near zero. I was about to tell him that my instincts were telling me we needed to retreat when we heard the loud thump.

To this day, I can't be sure whether it was the homeowner or the house itself. It's something I've run over in my mind again and again and again but still can't decipher. People underestimate how loud a raging fire can be, how fast you have to make decisions.

I'd give anything to change mine from that night.

Caleb took the sound as a sign of life and wanted to push forward. My gut was telling me—no! Retreat, retreat! But I pushed the feeling back

because it was Caleb. He was more skilled than me. Hell, he was teaching down at TEEX. He knew what he was doing.

Sure, some said he was too aggressive, but he was a good one, and his instincts never failed. Not once.

I trusted him and his knowledge.

We pushed farther into the home to what I'd learn later was the primary bedroom, and we found the homeowner. We started to extract him, and the floor gave way. With no warning. There one minute, gone the next.

Caleb screamed through the comms. When I turned and looked, I couldn't reach him through the smoke and the wreckage, so I sent out the Mayday. I hauled the homeowner up and out of the house while the team went in to retrieve Caleb.

Was it my moment's hesitation in the hallway that had put Caleb in that exact spot for the floor to give way at that moment? If I hadn't hesitated—or better yet, if I'd listened to my instincts and pushed back—would he still be alive?

This is the question that has haunted me for almost two years.

Then the homeowner died anyway, and it felt like it was all for nothing.

"What do you think, Mercer? You up for it?"

Fleming's voice drags me from the memory.

"Sorry?"

"Asked if you wanted to hit the sleds later this week."

"Yeah, sure. Sounds good."

Keeping busy is good. Has always been good for me. Keeps me from having too much time to think.

I couldn't save Caleb. If I'd listened to myself, Caleb would still be alive and happily married, and I wouldn't have fucking kissed his wife.

I'm the guy who fails the people I care about, just like my father. I failed Caleb in life, and now I'm failing him in death with my emerging feelings for his widow. I'll fail Collins eventually too. I probably already have failed by kissing her when all I'm supposed to be doing is helping her move on with her life.

"Food's ready," Russo calls, and everyone descends on the kitchen like a pack of wolves.

After I'm done eating, I pull out my phone. Anything to keep myself distracted until we start our daily chores.

Checking my email, my thumb is still on an email from Portland Fire and Rescue. I'm nervous to click it open, unsure whether I want it to be good or bad news.

I press on the email and see that they're reaching out to schedule an interview.

Maybe this is a sign that my idea of moving up the ranks in Portland is a good one. Get far away from here and Collins, because nothing good will come of me staying here now.

I type a response, letting them know the days I'm available for an interview, and click off my screen before shoving my phone back in my pocket.

There. Maybe if I'm away from the people I care about, I won't hurt them.

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EIGHTEEN

Collins

It's been a few days since I kissed Ansel in his truck.

I've thought about that kiss many times over. To my shame, not always with regret. Because if I'm honest with myself, a part of me enjoyed the kiss.

I knew my attraction to Ansel was forming, even if he is the worst person in the world for me to be attracted to. And beyond that, it felt too nice being desired by a man again.

I haven't thought of sex since Caleb passed, but somehow, spending time with Ansel has brought my libido back to life. Which is wholly inconvenient.

Neither of us has reached out to the other. It seems we've both retreated into our corners, but the time will eventually come when we have to talk about what happened. And why. And what our plans are.

That's the scary part. The why.

Sure, I could pretend it was a momentary lapse of judgment and chalk it up to two people who share the same grief mixing up their emotions and making a mistake. But that would be a lie. At least on my part.

And the next time I was with Ansel, those feelings would still be lingering, hanging over our heads like a dense fog.

I'm not sure what to do.

I haven't even told Nina what happened. I don't know why. I was going to, but I couldn't get the words past my lips. Maybe for the same reason I

haven't told her about the hotel invoice I found. Because I'm embarrassed. How would I not have seen the signs if Caleb were cheating?

Pushing the thoughts from my head, I park my SUV and slip on my winter hat. I ordered takeout from the Pines to pick up on my way home. I'm not in the mood to cook for myself tonight.

I tried for a little while, but not only is cooking for one depressing.

It's still cold out, but there's no wind tonight, so the temperature feels more bearable. I'm almost to the front of the pub when the door opens and Ansel steps out. We both come to a stop, our upper bodies bending back slightly. Our eyes lock for a beat, and both of us open our mouths.

I guess this is happening now. Awesome. And right where all the Echo Lake residents hibernate during the winter.

"Hey," I say.

He clears his throat and steps forward. "How are you?"

"Good." I nod as if that can convince us both. "Good. You?"

Ansel shoves his hands into the pockets of his coat. "Fine."

We're quiet for another beat, then we both begin talking at once.

"Ansel, I know we need to—"

"I've been meaning to call—"

We both stop abruptly and chuckle.

I motion to him with my hand. "Sorry, you go first."

"I owe you an apology." He quickly glances around, making sure we're alone, before stepping closer. "I shouldn't have kissed you."

That's what I expected from him. There was no reality in which I thought he was going to tell me it was anything other than a mistake. And he's probably right. But if that's the case, why does it feel like each of his words is a bullet breaking through skin?

I don't want to be a regret. I already fear I was to Caleb if what I suspect is true.

Before he said the words, I wasn't sure what I wanted with him, but now I know. Because the first thing I felt wasn't relief, but disappointment.

"Don't apologize, Ansel."

He shakes his head. "I put you in a shit position, and it's not right. I'm supposed to be helping you move on. It's what Caleb would have wanted. I'm not supposed to be making your life more complicated."

The mention of Caleb's name is like the slash of a whip, leaving a welt on my skin. "My life was already complicated."

He gives me a solemn nod. "I know. And now I've made it more so. Can we just forget it ever happened?"

I step forward, covering more distance between us. "Is that what you want?"

I'm not sure why I'm pushing him. Maybe because I want the truth? Maybe because I want him to admit to me what I'm afraid to admit to myself... that there's something between us? That in spending time with each other, more than a friendship took root.

He looks away from me. "It doesn't matter what I want. There's no world in which an *us* is okay."

"It's that easy for you to forget?" My voice betrays the hurt I feel, and I hate the vulnerability it brings into our conversation.

Ansel pulls a hand from his pocket and pushes it through his hair. "Why are you pushing this? You ran out of that truck as fast as you could. I thought you'd be relieved I want to forget it."

I study his handsome features for a moment, noticing the tightness in them. The hint of despair mixed with hope in his eyes. "I was upset because..." I exhale. "I enjoyed it. And I wasn't sure what that said about me."

"And now?" he asks, taking another step toward me.

"I'm not sure, but I don't want to forget it."

Relief washes over his face. His hand grips my jacket and he pulls me into an embrace, his face tucked into the crook of my neck, breathing me in. "This is wrong. How I feel is wrong, Collins."

I hear pain and struggle in his voice. How much whatever he's feeling is costing him. But I didn't need to hear it to know what it's costing him because it's costing me the same.

"What does this mean?" he whispers.

"I don't know, I haven't figured that out."

He pulls back slightly and trails his nose along my jaw then up so the sides of our noses brush.

Up.

Down.

Up.

Down.

It's a kiss that's not a kiss because our lips aren't actually touching. Close, but not quite.

“Will you come to my place? I think we should talk.”

The sound of boots crunching snow has us pulling away from each other. We both glance to the side and see Emelia approaching with Baylor’s backpack.

Ansel steps completely away from me, gesturing to her. “Elliott and Emelia just announced their engagement.”

“Oh my gosh, congratulations.” I pull Emelia into an embrace, ignoring her pale face and surprise at seeing Ansel and me.

“Thank you. We’re excited.”

“As you should be.” I look between the two of them. “Is Elliott inside?”

They both nod.

“I’ll be sure to give him my congratulations too. I was just headed in to pick up some takeout and ran into Ansel.” I closely watch her reaction to my words but don’t get the impression that she saw anything untoward.

“Great, I’ll come in with you.” Emelia steps over to the door, holding it open for me.

“See you later, Ansel.” I widen my eyes at him before following Emelia inside.

I find Elliott and give him my congratulations. The two of them make a great couple. My phone vibrates in my purse, and I’d put money on the fact that it’s Ansel. I resist the urge to reach for my phone while talking to Elliott and Emelia.

They invite me to stay, but I decline, quickly grabbing my takeout from Fowler at the bar and getting out of there.

Ansel is entering again as I’m leaving, and as I pass him, the backs of his fingers brush against mine. A shiver races up my arm. Not a good sign at all.

When I’m tucked inside my SUV with the heat on, I pull my phone from my purse to find a text message from Ansel.

ANSEL

As soon as I’m done, I’ll head over to your place.

I draw in a deep breath and brace myself for what this will mean. A million questions crowd my mind, but I shove them aside. The pull toward Ansel is stronger.

NINETEEN

Ansel

I'm happy for my brother and his fiancée, but I couldn't get out of the Pines fast enough.

The moment I spotted my opening, I took the opportunity, citing the fact that I need to drive to Portland tomorrow to meet with a guy who went to high school with us. It's partially true. I am meeting up with Ryan, but he's not the reason I'm making the trip. He's just a bonus, with my interview being the priority.

I head straight over to Collins's, but when I hit the brakes, Caleb's truck is a reminder of all the reasons I shouldn't be here. Still, it's not enough to stop me from getting out of my car and going to the front door.

My weight shifts from one foot to the other as I wait for Collins to answer, wanting to get rid of the haunting feeling as if Caleb were in his truck, staring me down.

She opens the door wearing a pair of black leggings, big fluffy socks, and an oversized sweater that's slid off one shoulder, revealing her bra strap. Her blond hair is pulled into a ponytail with pieces framing her face. She looks comfortable and never more beautiful.

Yeah, I'm fucked.

She gives me a shy smile and doesn't say anything, stepping out of the way for me to walk in. I inhale a deep breath and walk through the archway, ignoring all the thoughts in my head that this is a terrible idea.

"Thanks." I slide out of my boots and step off the entry mat.

Collins leads me into the family room, where the lights are dim and she has a fire going. The television is at a low volume. She's watching a show that appears to be about a baseball team.

I motion toward the screen. "You like baseball?"

I don't know why I'm asking. I guess because it's as good a way as any to put off the actual conversation that we need to have.

"I like romance books about baseball. And I like TV shows they make based on those books even more." She lets out a self-deprecating chuckle and sits on one end of the sofa.

Not sure where I should sit, I decide to sit in the middle. We're adults. We're not junior high kids who need distance to have an awkward conversation. We can do this. As right and wrong as it feels.

Once I'm seated, Collins bites her bottom lip. She's as nervous as I am to have this conversation.

"I know you said that I didn't need to apologize, but I do."

Her head tilts, and a line forms between her brows.

"Regardless of what I felt, or what I think might be happening between us, I shouldn't have sprung a kiss on you like that. I should've talked to you about it first."

She nods. "Was..." Collins pauses, biting her lip again. "Was it just about the kiss for you, or..."

I take her hands. "No. Absolutely not. I wouldn't do that just because I was attracted to you. It's more than that. Since we've been spending time together, it feels like something has shifted between us. It went from friendship to something...more."

She nods as I speak. "I feel it too."

I swallow hard and squeeze her hands. "So what do we do?"

"It's not something I expected to happen." Her voice is soft and melodic.

"Me either."

"I didn't look at you as more than a friend until very recently." She bites her lip, and my gaze goes there, cataloging the way her tongue peeks out after she releases it, almost as though she's soothing the spot where her teeth were pressed.

"Same." I nod.

"I feel so guilty about it." Her eyes get a little glossy.

"Me too. It's almost unbearable."

Collins squeezes her eyes shut for a moment. "Do you think this feeling would ever go away?"

"I'm not sure." I could say with time this thing I feel for her would go away, but I'm pretty positive it wouldn't.

We look at each other for a moment, the tension between us thickening.

I clear my throat. "So... do we ignore it, these feelings we're both having, or do we do something about them?" I'm almost afraid to ask the question, because I'm honestly not sure how I hope she answers.

"Let's say we explored these feelings... I wouldn't want anyone to know. At least, not right away."

"We keep it between the two of us?"

"Maybe it will fizzle out." She leans closer to me.

"No point in bringing other people into it if that's the case." I inch forward, my eyes lowering to her lips.

"No matter what happens, I want to remain friends." Her face grows closer, and all I can think about is her lips on mine.

"If people found out, they'd judge us." I swallow the lump in my throat.

"Is it worth the risk?" Her tongue slides along her bottom lip.

Damn, I want that tongue in my mouth.

"I think it is." I hold my breath, waiting for her answer. She has to be in agreement.

"I do too."

Thank fuck.

I bring my hand up and around her neck, drawing her face to mine. Our lips meet, and all my anxiety about if this is right or if we should really test these waters evaporates. Nothing has ever felt more right. I slip my tongue in her mouth, and she inches closer. The sounds she's making... fuck, I'm done for. Our tongues fight for dominance, but then she ultimately hands it over to me.

I lift her by the waist and bring her over so that she's straddling me. Her fingers dive into my hair as she grinds against my hardening cock in my jeans. With one hand holding her face and the other gripping the curve of her ass, I push her tighter to my pelvis, eliciting a glorious moan from her.

She tastes like perfection, and the feel of her pressed against me, her tits rubbing against my chest, is nearly euphoric.

I drift my hand down from her face to her breast, my thumb brushing along her pert nipple underneath her thin sweater. I pluck it between my

thumb and finger, and she yelps into my mouth, grinding down hard on my stiff cock.

It's both heaven and hell every time she bears her weight down on me.

"I want to make you feel good." I punch up with my hips, and her head drops back.

Her elongated neck is too tempting, so I kiss a path up her neck as I stroke her nipple with my thumb. Her hip movements increase in not only speed but strength, and I swear my cock is nearly bursting out of my jeans. But this pleasure isn't about me.

"You're so beautiful," I whisper in the shell of her ear. "And sexy." I bite on the lobe, and she groans, her fingernails scraping along my neck.

I can tell she's chasing an orgasm by the intensity of her movements, and there's nothing I want more than to see her fall apart right now. To let go of everything and just feel.

"I want to watch you come, Collins. Take what you need to get there. I need to see it."

I'm a desperate man with a singular focus. I lift my hips just enough to provide a little more friction for her.

When I pull back, desperate to watch, her eyes are closed and her head is thrown back, hands on my shoulders. She grinds against me as her fingertips push into my shirt. I have no doubt that if I were shirtless right now, I'd be left with crescent-shaped indents in my skin.

Her movements grow jerky, then she holds her breath for a beat and cries out, her body rising and falling a few times.

I can't take my eyes off her.

Then she curls in on herself, falling forward so her head is buried in my neck. Her labored breathing hitches.

I graze my fingers up and down her spine. "Fuck, that was hot."

She straightens and looks at me, face flushed as if she's embarrassed now that the moment is over.

"Don't you dare do that." I cup her face in both hands.

"Do what?"

"Act sheepish. It was hot as fuck."

She meets my gaze. "Really?"

"Yeah, really."

Collins shifts her weight, and I cringe at the movement on my still-hard cock.

She frowns. “I don’t think I’m ready to have sex—with anyone.” She adds the last bit quickly.

I tuck some of the hairs framing her face behind her ear. “There’s no rush, Collins. We take this as fast or as slow as you want.”

“But what about...” She nods down toward my bulge.

“Don’t worry about me.” Though the first thing I’m going to do when I get home is jerk-off to memories of her dry-fucking me.

“Okay.”

I kiss her forehead. “I should probably go, though. I have an early morning.”

That, and if I stay any longer, I may have to go to the bathroom and take care of myself.

“You on shift?”

The mention of my job brings the two of us out of our lust haze, and she gently shifts to the side and slides off my lap.

For a moment, Caleb’s face is all I see, and I don’t dare look around at the pictures of them, or the couch that he told me they fought over for a half hour before Collins eventually gave in. Now I’ve made his wife come as she rode my dick.

Stellar friend there, Ansel.

“I have to drive into Portland tomorrow.” I’m not sure why, but I don’t want to tell Collins the real reason why. I have no idea what will happen, and I’m not sure I even want the job. I don’t want anyone to know yet. So I’ll tell her the same thing I told my family when they asked. “I made plans with a guy who used to go to high school with us.”

She accepts my answer easily, which makes me feel like a piece of shit. But it’s just an interview, and a first interview at that. There isn’t a lot to say about it.

“That sounds fun.” She gives me an earnest smile. “Does all this mean you’re done accompanying me to events?”

“Never. I’m not sure what this is exactly, but I still want you to move forward. Do you have something in mind?”

“Maybe...”

I chuckle. “That reaction doesn’t sound like it’s going to fare well for me.”

She laughs. “I saw that the bookstore has a book club meeting coming up in a few days. I’ve already read the book, but I’d need to skim for a

refresher.”

My eyes narrow a fraction. “What kind of book club?”

Her gaze swings away from mine, and she bites her lip. None of this is a good sign for me. “It’s a romance book club.”

“Romance?” My eyebrows raise. “You understand that I’ve never read a romance novel in my life, right?”

She places her hands together in prayer pose. “You wouldn’t have to. I mean, unless you want to, but I know you wouldn’t have that much time. You could just sit there with me, not add anything.”

“What’s the name of the book?” She tells me, and I scroll through my audiobook app. “All right, I’ll listen to it to and from Portland. Don’t want anyone thinking that I have anything against romance books.”

She claps her hands. “Thank you.”

Her eyes sparkle, and a warm feeling invades my chest.

“You’re lucky you’re so damn cute.” I lean forward and place a chaste kiss on her lips.

When I pull back, it feels right and natural. Not like I’m stabbing my best friend in the back.

I push the thought away. For now.

My dick is still half erect, so I discreetly adjust myself on the way to the door while Collins follows. I spin around at the door. It’s a little awkward, standing at her door saying goodbye the first time after the dynamic of our relationship has changed. Have we made a mistake in crossing the line?

“The socks are cute, by the way.” I point at her feet. The words just tumble out of me, and I feel like a bit of a dumbass complimenting her socks, but Collins’s smile is warm.

“Thanks.”

“Text me the details about the book club.”

She nods, hands fidgeting in front of her. “Will do.”

Unsure, I place a quick kiss on her cheek. “I’ll see you then.”

And then I leave.

As I back out of the driveway, I know I’ve been honest, but I’m still not sure that what just happened was the right thing to do.

TWENTY

Collins

The next day, I text Nina to see if I can swing by that evening. I need to debrief with my best friend about what happened with Ansel last night. I'm afraid of what she might think, what she might say, but I can't keep it to myself anymore. I need to talk to someone about these decisions I'm making.

I couldn't get last night out of my head all day. I was distracted at work, second-guessing whether confessing my feelings to Ansel was the right thing to do, even though I can't stop the thoughts of dry-humping him on my couch from giving me a little bolt of electricity between my thighs every time.

"All right, he's down for the count." Nina joins me in her living room after putting Jacob to bed.

I'm nestled in the corner of her couch with a glass of white wine. She takes the other end of the couch and rests her back against the armrest so that we're facing each other.

"So, are you going to tell me what you're doing here?" She arches a dark eyebrow.

My own draw down. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I know you didn't ask to come here tonight because you were bored or wanted company."

"Maybe I just wanted to hang with my best friend."

She tilts her head. "You haven't done that since before Caleb died." I open my mouth to speak, but she raises both hands. "I get it, I understand

why. And if that's all you're here for, then that's cool. But I suspect that something is going on."

I sigh, shoulders slumping. "There's something I need to talk to you about."

She gives me a smug smile, and I toss the pillow at her. She laughs but sobers quickly. "Collins, you know I'm here for you. Now what's going on?"

I sip my wine for courage. "You know how Ansel has been coming to all these activities with me to keep me company and get me out in the world again?" I wait until she nods before I continue. "Something happened the other night, and then again last night."

Her eyes go wide, and her head tips down.

"We kissed in his truck when he dropped me off one night, and then last night we made out on my couch."

It sounds so juvenile, phrasing it like that, but there's zero chance I'm going to tell Nina I came from grinding on his lap while fully clothed like a cat in heat.

I cringe and await her judgment.

"Is he a good kisser?"

"Nina!"

"What? I have to live vicariously through you."

"Nina, I just told you that I made out with my deceased husband's best friend."

"Exactly."

I shake my head. "That's not the point."

"Stop avoiding the question and answer."

"Yes, all right. He's a great kisser." Probably the best kisser I've ever made out with, but I'm not going to say that. It's disrespectful to Caleb.

She throws her head back and laughs, kicking her feet. "I knew it, I knew it! He just has that look, you know?"

I do know now, although I never thought that about Caleb, but I give her a look as if I have no idea what she's talking about.

"I still can't believe it happened." My eyes close, and my lips press together.

"But you want it to happen again, right?" She tosses that pillow back at me, and it hits me on the head.

"Does it matter? It shouldn't have happened in the first place."

"I know you, Collins. If I had to guess, this isn't just about physical attraction, am I right?" she says, and I nod. "That's what I thought."

"The more time we spend together, the more I feel drawn to him. He's a good man. I enjoy spending time with him, and you'd have to be blind not to see how good-looking he is."

"Amen to that." Her eyebrows draw up to her hairline.

"But what will people think? I mean, I don't even know what this really is or what it has the potential of becoming, but I can't pretend that there won't be some backlash."

She nods. Echo Lake is small, and the Mercer family is a big deal here because of Roy. "Did you have any kind of romantic feelings for Ansel before Caleb died?"

I shake my head. "No. Never."

Nina shrugs. "Well then, you didn't do anything wrong. It's been eighteen months."

"I know, but what will other people think?" I take a healthy sip of my wine.

"Fuck 'em."

I slap a hand over my mouth to stop my wine from squirting out. I manage to swallow it. "What?"

"Screw anyone who thinks it's their job to judge you. You guys have done nothing wrong, and the people who *really* know you will know that's the truth."

I bite my lip. "I don't know if I can handle everyone's judgment. Just the thought makes me want to pack up the house and move."

Though I hate to admit it, it's the truth. I'd love to be more like Nina and not care what other people think of me, but it's just not who I am.

"You've already survived something even worse." Her eyes hold mine.

She's right. Losing my husband so young is the hardest thing I've ever had to get through.

The hotel invoice comes to mind, but I don't mention it to her. I'm not sure why. I've already admitted that I have feelings for my dead husband's best friend. What could be worse than that?

Finding out your dead husband was cheating on you, and you had no idea.

I push the thought away as soon as it enters my brain.

"All that said... I think you should be careful."

“What do you mean?” That isn’t what I expected her to say.

She blows out a breath and reaches for her wineglass on the coffee table. “You’ve been through so much, and you’ve only just begun to dig yourself out from under all that grief.” Her free hand goes up. “Which I think is amazing, absolutely. You need to move forward with your life. But I think you should take your time before you fall for someone—whether that be Ansel or someone else.”

“You think I’m not ready?”

Her lips press together for a beat. “No. I don’t. And maybe I’m wrong, but you were stuck for so long that I just want to make sure you’re not using Ansel as a distraction.” Nina rocks her head back and forth. “Regardless of how worthy a distraction he might be.”

I allow her words to settle for a moment, sitting with them and seeing how they feel. She has a point. Things are moving quickly. If I’m going to do this with Ansel, I need to be sure.

Absolutely sure.

Because there will be consequences. For both of us. And none of them good.

I nod at her. “How will I know when I’m actually ready?”

She sips her wine, thinking, and when I think an idea pops into her head, she sits up ramrod straight. “How about a checklist?”

My forehead wrinkles. “A checklist?”

“Yeah.” She bolts up off the couch, almost spilling her wine, then downs it and sets the empty glass on the table before she rushes off to the kitchen.

She returns with a pen and a pad of paper. She’s really serious about this checklist thing.

I, too, finish off my wine. I have a feeling I’m going to need a bit of a buzz to get through this.

“We can do different categories and figure out something you have to accomplish in each of them before you can sleep with Ansel.” She sits down, leaning forward with the pen in hand.

“I told you it’s not just about fooling around with him.”

“Sure, but isn’t that the real prize?” She arches an eyebrow, and my face heats. “The way I see it, you need to reclaim your life. Let’s start with four goals: one for yourself, one for your house, one for your community, and one for your future.”

My head drops back. “Nina, I don’t know.”

“You’re doing this, Collins. As your best friend, I want to see you happy. But if you rush into this thing with Ansel too fast, it’s going to crash.” She holds my gaze, and I nod. “Great, glad we’re on the same page.”

“As if you gave me a choice,” I grumble, even if I understand her point.

“All right, for your reclaiming your sense of self... maybe you could cut and dye your hair or something? Get a fresh new look?”

I finger the end of my French braid. “I don’t want to change my hair.”

“Agreed. You have amazing hair. That was the wine talking.”

I chuckle.

“How about you take yourself on a date? Go to a restaurant and eat alone. Or take yourself to the movies.” Her eyes are wide and excited.

“I didn’t even do that kind of thing before Caleb passed away.”

We’re both quiet for a moment, trying to think of an alternative.

She’s staring at the paper, then her head bolts up, and she gives me a huge smile. Yeah, I’m not going to like whatever she’s about to suggest.

“Whhaaatt?” I whine.

Her gaze flicks to my hand, and she cringes. “Maybe the goal should be for you to take off your wedding rings.”

I hold up my left hand, looking at my wedding rings. I cover it with my right hand. Neither of us says anything, and Nina patiently waits for my reaction.

My eyes burn, but I blink back the tears. It’s not as though I haven’t thought about it, and I know it has to happen at some point. I can’t wear them for the next fifty years. A new husband wouldn’t really understand me wearing my dead husband’s ring. But the idea of sliding them off, only to be looked upon when I’m feeling nostalgic, seems impossible. I haven’t taken these off since we got married. Not when I sleep. Not when I shower.

The anxiety racing through me confirms that Nina is right. I’m not at all ready to move on to a new romantic relationship.

She gives me one quick nod and silently writes it on the piece of paper.

We work through the other three categories, and after another half an hour, I have the final list in my hand.

Collins’s Reclaiming Her Life Checklist

Sense of self: Stop wearing wedding rings

House: Redecorate one room

Community: Host a get-together

My future: Write Caleb a letter

I draw in a deep breath, reading them over.

“You got this,” Nina says.

I nod, still staring at the paper. “I know you’re right about this. Is it bad that I’m not looking forward to it, though?”

She shakes her head. “Of course not. But you’re a strong woman. Besides, just think of the prize waiting for you at the end. One prime and ready male specimen that half the women in Echo Lake dream about.”

I narrow my eyes, and she laughs.

Now I have to figure out a plan of how I can resist Ansel for however long it takes me to cross off these items from the list.

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TWENTY-ONE

Ansel

We decided that I'd pick Collins up for the book club meeting, but she texted me earlier today and asked if I could pick her up a little early because she has something she wants to talk to me about.

That didn't sound promising.

Did she somehow find out what I actually went to Portland for? I don't know how she would. No one knows.

The only alternative is that she's changed her mind about us, which I hope isn't the case since she's all I've thought about the entire trip there and back.

The interview went well, I think. It's not as though they tell you much while you're there. I'll just have to wait to see if I'm selected for the second round of interviews. If that happens, I might have to consider what I'd actually do if I were offered a job with Portland Fire and Rescue.

But that day is not today.

I shove my hands in my pockets as I walk up the stairs to Collins's front door. She opens it before I have a chance to knock, and her tentative smile says she's nervous.

"Everything okay?" I walk into the house, and she shuts the door behind me.

"Why would you ask that?" She comes around to stand in front of me.

I tilt my head and tuck a piece of hair behind her ear. "You keep biting your bottom lip. It means you're nervous."

I attempt to pull her in by the waist, but she steps back, and my stomach does a nosedive.

Fuck. She's regretting our last encounter.

I understand and I'll respect it, but fuck, I don't have to like it. I also feel like a total douchebag for putting her in the position to regret it in the first place.

I step back as well to give her some space and shove my hands back in my pockets. "What did you want to talk about?" I try to keep my voice even.

"I need to discuss what happened the last time we were together... it can't happen again."

And there it is.

I nod and break her gaze, staring at my boots. "Got it. Yeah, I shouldn't have ever kissed you in the first place." When I finally have the courage to look up at her, we lock eyes. "I'm really sorry, Collins."

"Oh... no... I'm messing this up." She steps forward and grips my upper arms. My head raises, and there's a soft smile on her lips. "I'm not looking for an apology or to completely turn away from whatever this is between us. I just need to step back for a moment."

Relief rushes through me, and that should probably concern me. "All right. I told you this can go at whatever pace you need it to."

She nods over and over. "I talked to Nina about what happened."

I swallow past the growing lump in my throat. I can only imagine what her best friend thought about us fooling around. "What did she say?"

"She thinks I'm not ready to get into a romantic relationship with anyone right now. And... I agree with her." She looks sheepish.

Elliott would have a field day with me on this one. I can just hear him. "*You convinced your best friend's widow that there were feelings between the two of you? You're out of your mind.*"

I nod. This is for the best. We won't have to deal with other people knowing or other people's judgments. And most of all, I won't have to worry about being the one to let her down.

I'm about to respond when she pulls a piece of paper from under her purse on the entryway table and holds it out to me.

"What's this?" I open it.

"It's a list of things I need to do before we can... you know." Her cheeks get that beautiful shade of pink. "Maybe it's silly, but I think if I can

do all of these things, then I'll be ready."

I read the list. Each one feels like a punch in the gut, and by the time I'm done reading, I'm breathless. It's a stark reminder of how fucked up this entire situation between us is.

I gently fold it back up and hold it out to her. "It's a good list."

"You think it's dumb." Her shoulders deflate, and she draws back.

"Not at all." I step forward to cover the space she just put between us, then remember myself. When in the hell did I need to be touching her to feel like I was offering real comfort? "I mean it, it's a good list. I think Nina is right. We should probably put the brakes on whatever this is. Until you're in a better place emotionally."

Collins nods with a sad sort of look. "All right. Let me just grab my coat, and I'm ready to go."

She does, then locks up the house, and I walk over to open the passenger door of the truck for her. Just because there's no prospect of being physical with her again doesn't mean I'm not going to act like a gentleman.

Once she's inside, I walk around the front of the truck, ignoring Caleb's truck and how disappointed he would be in me, then get in the driver's side.

"Thanks for coming to this with me tonight."

I reverse down her driveway, but I quickly glance at her. "It's no problem. I told you, I'm here for you whether there's something going on between us or not."

The small smile she gives me makes me want to lean over and kiss her. Instead, I grip the steering wheel harder.

"Were you able to listen to the book on your drive to Portland?"

"I was, yeah."

"Did you hate it?"

I glance over, and she's cringing. "What's not to like? Secret societies, billionaire brothers, and lots of sex."

She chuckles.

I put on my left blinker at the stop sign. "Honestly, I didn't even know books were that graphic. I had to keep turning my radio down at stoplights, afraid someone walking by would hear it."

"I probably should have warned you." She fully laughs—at my expense, I can tell. I don't mind. "How was your visit with your friend?"

The reminder that she doesn't know the real reason I was in Portland sobers my mood. I hate liars, and I hate lying. But I don't want to put my hope for a new job into the universe and then see the disappointment on other people's faces when I don't get it.

"He's good. Nothing much new with him." I give her a smile.
That's it, I'm going to hell.

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TWENTY-TWO

Collins

We walk into the Spine & Spirit, where folding chairs are set up in a small circle at the front of the store. A few women are already seated, and the owner, Greta Goldstein, stands just outside the circle, chatting with the group.

I've always liked this shop. It's older without appearing old. Instead, it has a sort of rustic charm with wooden shelves that are scratched and chipped in places from decades of moving books on and off the shelves. It always smells like pumpkin spice or cinnamon, regardless of the time of year, and Greta always has hanging lights strewn across the ceiling that cast a warm yellow hue across the surfaces.

"Collins. Ansel." Greta claps her hands and excuses herself from the others. "Are you joining us for book club?"

"We are." I turn and look back at Ansel, a big smile on my face. "Well, I am. I sort of forced Ansel to come so I wouldn't have to come alone."

"I listened to the audiobook."

"And that counts." Greta nods, reassuring him. "Have a seat. We're happy you could both join us."

Ansel walks around me and sits in one of the empty chairs.

The ride over here was a little strained. Although I think Ansel understands where I'm coming from, he might not like going slow either. Or maybe he has his own reservations now that he's had time to sit with the idea of the two of us. I could ask, but that's not going to move us forward.

I'd rather just work on getting through my list, and we can figure *us* out afterward.

I move into the circle, smiling at the other three ladies, and sit down beside Ansel.

"Collins, Ansel, this is Maude, Carrie, and Lisa."

They each say a quick hello, and Ansel and I return ours.

Maude is most likely in her eighties, despite the fact that her hair has been dyed with streaks of purple and pink. Carrie and Lisa are eighteen-year-old best friends heading to college in the fall. They're from Harvest Cove and make the drive here because their local bookstore has a book club, but all they ever discuss is literary fiction, which—according to them—is just mid.

I've never been a part of a book club before, but it's pretty much what I expected. Everyone talks about their impressions of the book, what they liked, what they didn't. Greta has some questions prepared that she wants to chat about, and even Ansel chimes in a few times.

It's well-known around town that Greta got her boobs done a few months ago, and I've noticed that since then, she likes to show them off. I would too if I had a set like hers. Every time I see her around town, she's wearing a tight-fitting shirt or something with a deep V that highlights them. Tonight she has more than a few buttons undone on her shirt, and every time she leans over to reach for her reusable water bottle on the floor beside her chair, she gives us all an eyeful.

Funny enough, I notice Ansel's attention turn to the bookshelves after the first time. I catch his eye the third time, and we share a secret smirk. Which feels nice after the ride here.

As we get close to wrapping up, Greta claps her hands together with excitement. "Collins and Ansel, you're new here, but we do something at the end of every book club where we each open the book to a random page, read that page, then discuss it as a group. We like the randomness of it. You never know what you're going to get to chat about."

The other three women nod and murmur their assent.

"Ansel, why don't you go first?" Greta motions toward him.

He shifts in his seat, clearly uncomfortable. Which, yeah, this is unexpected. "I listened to the audiobook, so I don't have a paperback copy."

"You can borrow mine." I pass him my paperback copy that has all my annotations and sticky tabs in it.

He gives me a look like *gee, thanks*, and I struggle not to laugh. He clearly doesn't want to do this—whether it's the reading aloud part or the fact that it's a romance or that he's center stage, I don't know. But it's fun to watch him squirm.

Ansel opens the book to a random page and looks at it. "I'm not sure I should read this." He looks up uncertainly and glances at Carrie and Lisa.

Greta waves away his concern. "Sure, you should. We've all read the book. Nothing is going to be a surprise."

"Um..."

"Don't be shy, Ansel." Greta chuckles.

He clears his throat. "All right, uh... here goes nothing. *Fuck, the idea of sinking into her, having my way with her, here, now, in the middle of the night is almost my undoing. But some small shred of decency I seem to have when it comes to her prevents me from doing so. My eyes snap open and meet hers. 'Have you ever had a man feast on your cunt?'*"

Carrie and Lisa giggle, and I press my lips together to stop myself from laughing.

Ansel's cheeks redden as he continues to look at the book with rapt attention. "*My blunt words hit their target, and she blinks, momentarily stunned by my crass question. That's nothing. If she only knew. 'Um... yeah. A couple times in college.'* I scoff. 'I'm not talking about some little college shit who doesn't know what to do with his tongue. I'm talking about a man, a man who knows how to work your clit with his tongue like he's a maestro. Who knows how to curl his fingers when he fucks you with them so that you see stars. A man who will lap at you like he'll never be able to get enough of your taste. Who feels like he'll die if you don't come all over his face.'"

I press my thighs together, hearing his low voice saying dirty words.

"*By the time I'm done talking, her pupils are practically blown out. Instead of scaring her off, I've done the opposite. I've turned us both on. 'I've never had that,' she whispers. 'But I want it.' Her hands slip up under my shirt, and she slides her shorts down until they land around her ankles on the grass. 'Will you show me what that's like?'*"

I swear he could narrate audiobooks and all the women would be swooning. Has he always sounded like this?

"*Jesus Christ. How can she be so sweet and sexy all at once? It's a paradox I'm desperate to decode. The scent of her arousal wafts toward me,*

and my cock twitches. I have to taste her. I have to. Fuck the consequences. Because there are always consequences. But if she thinks she's in control here, she's wrong. I'm going to show her who owns her body." He finishes the page, lifts his head, and looks right to me. He meets my eyes, a slow smile tugging at his lips, as though he's daring me to pretend I wasn't affected.

"Well done," Maude says, breaking the spell, clapping.

I'm not sure, but I think I can speak for everyone in the room that it's sad this will probably be the first and last book club Ansel attends.

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TWENTY-THREE

Ansel

Saturday night I'm off, so I decide to attend the poker game at my uncle's house. I could use the distraction, honestly.

Ever since book club, Collins hasn't left my mind. There's nothing quite like verbalizing everything out loud that you want to do to the woman sitting beside you in a room full of women. Plus, there's the fact that Collins has made it clear that she has her own agenda to accomplish before anything more can happen between us.

Which I understand and support, but that doesn't mean it's easy to set aside my feelings or my libido.

Tonight, the only people in attendance are Hollis, Uncle Roy, Clyde, Sam, Jimmy, Fowler, and me. He took a rare night off from the pub, trusting his two bartenders to handle the Saturday night crowd. It's cold and snowy, so more than likely, most people won't venture outside anyway.

It's Hollis's turn to drive, so he, Fowler, and I walk into the house, not bothering to knock. Every time I walk into this place, it feels like a time warp—my uncle hasn't changed a thing since we all lived here. It almost feels as though I'm a child again, which always brings the feeling of quiet discomfort that makes me want to stay busy, keep moving lest I have to examine it too closely.

The table in the entryway is the same one my uncle picked up at a local flea market one summer. The dish that all of our keys overflowed only holds my uncle's now. The same brown sofa I took the cushions off of to build forts for Sutton and Hollis sits in the living room. And the stripe of black

Sharpie that Hollis adorned the oak kitchen table with is still there, though a little faded with the passage of time.

“Hey, guys, sit.” My uncle waves us into the dining room. “Clyde was just telling us about the time he had a shot with Miss Rhode Island back in high school.”

The three of us laugh because we’re all very aware of Clyde’s penchant for exaggerating.

“Any reason Miss Rhode Island was hanging out in Maine?” Fowler asks with a smirk as he sits at the table.

“She was in the area visiting her friend.”

“Was her friend Miss Maine?” I ask, covering my mouth to keep myself from laughing. “Anyone else want a beer?”

Hollis and Fowler raise their hands. I head into the kitchen, open the old puke-green fridge, and grab three beers. I can’t believe this thing still works.

“It was, in fact,” Clyde says.

The entire room roars with laughter.

After I deliver the beers, I sit, and Uncle Roy deals out the cards. We’re mostly quiet as the game starts, but after the first round, the conversation picks up again.

“Bet is to you,” my uncle says to Clyde.

He’s halfway through a story he’s been telling for about three minutes. I’m not sure what it’s about.

“—this was maybe ’76, ’77 at the most. Around the time the Bait Shop changed hands. The first time it changed hands. To the second set of Abbotts, not the first.”

“There were two sets of Abbotts?” Fowler asks before taking a pull of his beer.

“There were. Strangest thing really—”

“Your bet, Clyde,” my uncle repeats without looking up from his cards.

Clyde makes an annoyed expression. “I’m getting to it.”

The front door opens, slams, then the click of heels sounds on the tile entryway.

All of us share a look like *who the hell could that be?*

The heels come to a stop at the doorway that combines the living and dining room.

She's dyed her brown hair a sort of strawberry-blond, there are bags under her eyes, and her clothes are rumpled. But she's got the same blue eyes as Elliott. The same aura of *don't fuck with me*. The same straight set to her spine that makes her appear as though she's expecting some kind of confrontation whenever she walks into a room.

"Sutton?" That's all Hollis says before his chair skids on the floor and he's headed her way.

She crosses the room, and they meet somewhere in the middle. He hugs her without saying anything for what feels like a long time. She doesn't say anything either, just lets her forehead rest on his shoulder for a beat.

As siblings, we're all close, but growing up, Elliott and I shared a room and were closest in age, so we were tight. Sutton and Hollis have their own bond. Sometimes I wonder if it's because neither of them have any memories of our mother, unlike Elliott and me.

They pull away from each other, then she's headed to the table.

I get up and hug her. "What are you doing here?"

She looks me over when she pulls away. "Can I ever feel the love. It's a wonder I don't come home more often." She waves when the old guys start to push their chairs back. "Don't get up, everybody."

Sutton walks around the table to give a side-hug to everyone but Fowler and our uncle. With Uncle Roy, she gives him a quick kiss on the top of his head that he leans into a bit, but he doesn't take his eyes off the cards. Then with Fowler, she just says hey and gives him the once-over as though she's making note of what may have changed since the last time she was home.

"I have to pee." She disappears down the hallway, then we hear the bathroom door close.

Hollis grabs her a beer and sits back down. He gives me a look, then we both turn to look at our uncle. He looks up from his cards at the two of us but doesn't say anything. We're all thinking the same thing. *Why is she home?* Sutton doesn't just drop in for a visit. In the last five years, she's never come home on a whim.

We hear the bathroom door open, and all our eyes snap back down to our cards, lest Sutton come in and think we were talking about her and rip us apart.

She looks around the table. "Where's Elliott?" She takes the beer from Hollis, immediately bringing it to her lips.

“At home with Emelia and Baylor. Some of Emelia’s family is visiting.” I set down my cards.

“Shit. There goes my idea of staying in the bunkie.” She crosses her arms and looks at our uncle with an arched eyebrow.

“You can use your old room,” Roy says.

“Is my old room intact, or did you turn it into a shrine for all the band T-shirts?”

“It’s still your room,” Roy says, nodding.

“How long are you staying?” Jimmy asks.

“Not sure yet.” She smiles, and it’s the smile I know well from my sister. The one that doesn’t invite you to ask any more questions. “Nice welcome home. Trying to get rid of me already?”

“‘Course not,” Roy says. “All of you have a room here when you need it. You know that.”

We’re all thrilled to have her home, but we can’t show it. That’s how it is with Sutton. And maybe I wouldn’t care and I’d tell her how happy I am to have her home if I didn’t think she’s here because something’s going on with her. And not something good.

“All right, I just drove in from Nashville, so I’m going to have a shower. If any of you interrupt me, I’ll bite you.” She laughs, takes a swig of her beer, and leaves the room.

“Want me to carry your suitcase up for you?” Hollis asks.

Sutton glances over her shoulder with a cutting look. Far be it from Hollis to offer to help with anything. She leaves the room, and we can hear her dragging her suitcase up the stairs, one thud at a time.

Uncle Roy inhales a deep breath. He’ll always offer us a place, but I think he’s enjoyed his alone time after raising four kids that aren’t his.

The three of us Mercers share another look, then we get back to poker, just the way my sister would want it.

TWENTY-FOUR

Ansel

Sutton only joined us for a few minutes after she was out of the shower, saying she was tired from a day of traveling and needed to sleep. I'm sure that was true on some level, but I also question whether it was an avoidance tactic.

Guess we'll see in the coming days how open she is about why she's really home.

I did all right tonight, but Hollis won the most rounds. He did that thing he always does, making it seem as if he's not really paying that much attention when in reality, he's quietly cataloging everyone's moods and movements.

He drops Fowler and me off at our place just off Main Street, and we call out a thank you to him as we head up the driveway. Fowler is to the door first, so he punches in the code to the lock and swings the front door open.

I've debated talking to him about this thing with Collins that may or may not ever turn into an actual thing. Part of me wants to keep it to myself until I know for certain this thing has legs. That would certainly be the easier thing to do, but I feel like I need to talk to someone, and he's my best friend. The only best friend I have left. Of everyone, he's the person I'm most concerned may have a problem with the idea of something going on between Collins and me.

I step inside and lock the door behind us.

“Any idea what Sutton is doing home?” He pulls off his boots and hooks his coat on the rack in the entryway.

I shake my head. “None. Had no idea she was coming.”

“Been a while since she’s been back.”

“Sure has. Something’s up.” I set my boots on the mat next to his and take off my coat. “Not sure what, but something sure as hell is. Sutton doesn’t come home for visits without giving us a heads up first.”

He grunts and heads into the kitchen.

I stand still for a second, working it through my head. How will I phrase it? What will I say? What do I do if he reacts badly. Eventually, I work up the courage to follow him, and he’s filling a glass of water.

“I wanted to talk to you about something.” There. It’s out there, and I can’t take it back.

He glances over his shoulder, shutting off the faucet, then turns around and leans his back against the counter, glass in hand. “What’s up?”

Clearing my throat, I slide into a kitchen chair.

When I don’t say anything for a beat, Fowler’s forehead wrinkles, and he pushes off the counter, taking the chair across from me. “Everything okay?”

“I guess, yeah, I just...”

Maybe I should’ve waited to have this conversation when we weren’t already more than a few beers deep. We’re not drunk, but I suddenly feel as if I can’t collect my thoughts. I don’t know how to say this without feeling like the world’s biggest douchebag.

But maybe that’s my penance for what I’ve done. Who I’m falling for.

I need Fowler to understand how this came about, that it was never either of our intentions for this attraction to develop between us. But I fear that nothing I say will make him understand me liking our dead best friend’s wife.

“So, you know how I’ve been spending time with Collins, right?”

“Yeah...” There’s a wary note in his tone. He already suspects. Maybe because I am a douchebag and he expects this shitty behavior from me.

“We both know what she’s been through and how much she changed after Caleb’s death.”

He nods. “Yeah.”

No improvement in the tone. Got it. I’m the asshole here.

“I knew Caleb would want her to move on with her life as best she could. That’s why I agreed to accompany her to all the stuff she wants to do—it was clear she wouldn’t do it on her own. And Nina is always tied up with Jacob, so that made it difficult for her to go do all that stuff.”

He sips his water and crosses his arms, then nods again, looking at me with an apprehensive expression.

I blow out a breath. “Anyway, we’ve gotten closer, and I’ve gotten to know her in a way that’s different than I knew her as Caleb’s wife.”

The glass stills in Fowler’s hands. My stomach twists in knots. I swear to God I might throw up all over this kitchen table before I can get this all out.

“Cut to the chase, Ansel.” His tone is now stone-cold. I’m not surprised. To him, this looks completely different than what it is.

“We’ve developed feelings for each other.”

Silence. For just a beat. He actually lowers the glass to the table in a calm manner. Maybe this will go better than I expected.

“Are you fucking serious?” he yells.

Nope. I was dead wrong.

My face heats in shame, and I drop my gaze.

“You and Collins? Seriously?”

Shaking my head, I slowly lift it to make eye contact again. “Neither of us expected this, you have to know that.”

He pushes away from the table, the chair tipping behind him and crashing to the floor. “But you pursued these feelings.”

I drop my elbows to the table and push my hands through my hair.

“You’re hooking up with the widow of our best friend, Ansel.”

My head snaps up. “We’re not hooking up. It’s not like that.”

He crosses his arms and stares down his nose at me. “Have you been physical with her?”

I’m not going to tell him about Collins getting off while fully clothed on my lap. He doesn’t need the particulars.

“We’ve kissed... made out. Once,” I quickly add.

Fowler scoffs and shakes his head as if I’m the world’s biggest piece of shit. “Oh, well if that’s all, then what’s the big deal, right? Our best friend died, and now you’re going to what? Ride off into the sunset with his widow?”

I slam my hands on the table and stand. "I don't know what's going to happen. We're taking a step back for the time being. But you're acting like I don't know how fucked up this situation is. Do you think I want to feel this way about her? Do you? Believe me, my life would be much easier if I didn't feel anything."

He points at me. "You should have cut it off before anything happened between you guys. It never should've gotten this far."

"I tried!" My arms fly up from my sides. "I tried, damn it, I did."

"Apparently not hard enough." He storms from the room. Seconds later, his bedroom door slams.

I drop my head into my hands. I deserved that.

If Fowler can't accept it, what chance do we have with everyone else?

THE NEXT MORNING, I'M GETTING THE COFFEEMAKER GOING WHEN THE telltale creak in the floor sounds of someone at the threshold of the room. I still, knowing it's Fowler.

A dull headache thrums behind my eyes because I barely slept last night.

"Coffee?" I ask without turning around.

"Yeah, sure."

I open the cupboard door in front of me and pull out another mug while the coffee brews. Since I haven't heard the floor creak again, I know he's still there, but I don't turn around until the coffee is done brewing and I've poured some into his mug.

Turning, I hold it out for him.

"Thanks." He accepts it and takes a sip.

I walk over to the fridge to put some cream in mine.

When I turn around, I'm about to leave the kitchen when Fowler says, "I'm ready to talk."

Halting in place, I slowly turn around. The truth is, I understand why he feels like he does, but at the same time, a part of me is pissed at him because he has to know that I would have avoided this had I seen it coming.

With a sigh, I sit at the kitchen table. He sits across from me. We're in the same positions we were in last night, but his temper has dissipated.

Which is how Fowler usually is, but I had my doubts it would go that way this time around. This isn't the same as the time I told him I'd do his paper route and didn't, only for him to get his ass handed to him by Mr. Creager.

"I'm sorry I popped off last night."

I blink in surprise. That's not what I expected him to say. I assumed he was going to recite all the reasons this is a bad idea.

"You caught me by surprise. I wasn't expecting you to tell me you had feelings for Collins."

I open my mouth to speak, but he raises his hand, so I shut it, bringing my coffee to my lips.

"I worried when you told me what you two were doing." Of course he did, because I'm Ansel Mercer, the one who's never looking for a relationship. "Once I had a moment to think about it..." His shoulders slump and he leans forward on the table. "I know you. I know you're probably torn up about it, and that's why you wanted to talk to me about it last night, and all I did was jump down your throat."

"I know it's fucked up. I understand you being pissed, Fowler. I expected that reaction to an extent. It just hurt so much because you said out loud everything I'm already thinking." I lean back in the chair. "What kind of monster am I?"

He stares at me for an uncomfortable beat. "So let's talk about it."

I shift in my seat. "It's fine. We don't have to."

"Let's not do this back and forth. Just tell me what's going on."

"Nothing, actually. At least not right now."

His forehead wrinkles, and I tell him about Collins's checklist and how we've decided to remain friends until she's checked off everything.

He nods as I speak. "At least one of you is thinking with your brain."

I tilt my head, and he smiles. Is he really giving me shit right now?

"Seriously, if you guys are gonna do this, you have to be sure."

"I know." I nod. I get it, I do, but if she's willing to give us a try once she's done, we have a lot to figure out together.

"People will have thoughts, opinions."

"I know."

We're both quiet for a beat.

"Did you have any feelings for her before Caleb passed away?"

"What? How—"

He holds up his hands. "I have to ask, man. I mean, that changes things." He looks honestly conflicted that he had to ask the question.

"I swear on my life, I didn't. I never looked at her that way until we started spending time together, and I got to know her and not her as Caleb's wife. She's different than I think we thought. I mean, she's nice and all that, but I don't..." I shrug, unsure how to explain it. "Like, we knew her through Caleb more than actually knew her. Through his stories. Does that make sense?"

He cups his mug between both hands and nods at it while I speak. "Yeah."

In hindsight, Collins always seemed more in the backdrop when I was over there. Maybe because we were always doing guy things. Watch a game, grill out, play cornhole. And maybe since neither Fowler nor I had a woman to bring over, I felt I knew Collins only from whatever Caleb said and not actually that I knew her. Their relationship was different than Elliott and Emelia's, where Elliott rarely does anything without Emelia. Caleb preferred to go out with just Fowler and me.

"Tell me the truth. Do you think I should tell Collins that we can't be together, no matter if she works through her list or not?"

He slowly raises his head and meets my eye, shrugging. "I think you both deserve happiness..."

"That's not an answer to my question." I arch an eyebrow.

"I think the whole thing is complicated. Hell, Caleb was complicated."

I half frown. I've never thought of Caleb as particularly complicated.

Fowler continues, "But life is weird sometimes, and yeah, you guys will have to take some bullshit from some people if you're a couple, but in the end, if that's what makes the two of you happy, then who gives a shit? Not to mention, they'll get over it. He died eighteen months ago."

"Do you think... do you think he'd hate me for it?" A painful lump forms in my throat, and I can barely push out the words.

"Honestly." He stares at his coffee. "I think if anyone would understand, he would."

True. Caleb also fell for Collins. He knew what a wonderful woman she is.

I nod, appreciating him talking to me.

"Just be careful. And really know what you're doing."

His warning rings through my head. I don't want to hurt Collins. God, I'd rather die than do that after all she's been through. But it's not like I can exactly say that I know we'll go the distance at this point.

The old fear of disappointing someone I care about rears up, and my dad's face flashes in my head.

"I don't want to hurt her."

He gives me a solemn nod. "I know you don't. You're a good guy, Ansel, but sometimes good guys make bad decisions. Just make damn sure this isn't one of those times."

"I know." Maybe Collins isn't the only one who has some things to work through before we move forward. "Obviously, this stays between us."

He pretends to rip a piece of duct tape and place it over his mouth. The same thing all three of us did when we were sworn by the other to keep a secret. "To the grave."

I can tell he's still not completely on board with this idea, but he's giving me room to figure it out and doesn't hate me for it.

"Thanks, man."

I feel better for talking to him about this, but sometimes when Fowler and I share these moments, it just feels like a reminder of the missing person who would have been at this table with us, ripping off his own piece of duct tape and placing it over his mouth. Our trio is now a duo, and even after almost two years, I haven't processed it completely.

TWENTY-FIVE

Collins

I was surprised and happy when Emelia called me to invite me to a girls' night out. Apparently, Sutton is back in town and suggested it, and Emelia thought to include me.

I'm not sure how well Emelia knows Sutton since she and Elliott haven't been together all that long and Sutton lives in Nashville, but I've met Sutton only a handful of times, and that was early in my marriage with Caleb. I haven't seen her since his funeral.

When Emelia was on the phone pondering what to do, I suggested they come over to my place. I'm the only one who isn't living with someone or has a child at home. And hosting would allow me to check one thing off my list.

After I got off the phone with Emelia, I immediately called Nina and told her that she had to find a babysitter and join us. She's under strict instructions not to say or allude to anything about Ansel given that the other two people in attendance are his sister and future sister-in-law. I can't be sure, but I assume he hasn't told them.

Tonight, Nina is already here, and Emelia and Sutton are due to be dropped off by Elliott soon.

"Stop fussing, everything looks amazing," Nina says, sitting at the kitchen table with her legs crossed and a wineglass in her hand.

I turn away from rearranging the food I prepared and have displayed across the kitchen counter. "I'm nervous."

Caleb and I used to host a lot. It was second nature, and I loved doing it. But we were usually hosting large groups of people, mostly couples or all the guys from the fire station. I've never hosted a girls' night. I haven't actually had a bunch of women I considered my friends to host something like that with. So it feels as if my future social life rides on tonight.

"I know you are. Here." Nina walks over, takes one of the empty wineglasses I have ready on the counter, and pours me a glass of red wine, shoving it in my hand. "Have a few sips and take the edge off before they get here."

The doorbell rings as I'm taking my first sip.

I really need to disable that doorbell.

I push away the memory of that night and swing open the door. "Hey, come on in."

Sutton looks much the same except she's a little older and her brown hair is now dyed a shade of strawberry-blond.

She gives me a hug when she enters the house. "It's so good to see you. How are you?"

Her affection throws me for a moment. I used to be so practiced at the hugs when someone offered me their condolences and the words to say back to theirs, but it's been a while since it's happened.

In the end, I just say, "Thank you."

Emelia gives me a quick hug hello and walks into the house to say hello to Nina. I introduce Nina and Sutton, since Nina moved here after Sutton left for Nashville.

"What can I get you to drink? There's red and white wine. I also have some beer and some seltzers in the fridge. Or if you prefer a cocktail, I can make you one. I have most of what I might need, I think."

Sutton looks over the amount of food strewn across the counter. "This is quite the spread you have here."

"I may have gone a little overboard."

"Are you kidding? No way. I'm looking at all of this and wondering what you ladies are all going to eat." She pops one of the grapes from the charcuterie board into her mouth.

I chuckle.

"I'll have a glass of white, please. Whatever kind, I'm not picky." Emelia walks over to the counter.

"Same for me," Sutton says.

I pour them their wine while Emelia pops one of the goat cheese and cranberry puff pastries into her mouth.

“Oh my god, this is delicious,” she mumbles as she chews.

“Collins knows how to throw a get-together. She’s always a great host.” Nina winks.

“Emelia, you have to try these candied dates,” Sutton says, calling her over.

Emelia steps over to where Sutton is and pops one in her mouth, moaning. “You’re going to have to teach me your ways.”

“You don’t cook?” I ask, handing her and Sutton their glasses of wine.

Emelia shrugs. “I mean, I do. But I’m not sure you can call it cooking, and the kitchen looks like a bomb went off when I’m done. Most of the time, Elliott does the cooking.”

“Ah, he’s used to it. Been cooking for all of us since he was a teenager.” Sutton sips her wine.

“Did he teach you to cook?” I ask her.

“Are you kidding?” Sutton’s eyebrows practically hit her hairline. “I’ve existed solely on UberEats for years.”

She and Emelia turn to look at Nina.

She raises the hand not holding the wineglass. “I have a kid in kindergarten, and state law demands I keep him fed and watered, so Mr. Freezer and I make a pretty good team.”

We all laugh.

“Seems like we’re all in good company then. Cheers to that.” I raise my glass, and we all clink ours together.

A couple of hours later, we’re a few bottles deep, and Nina is describing, with great attention to detail, her hookup with a guy she met at a banking conference last year.

“It was so weird. It was like fast, fast, slow. Fast, slow, fast. Slow, slow, fast. Like, keep a steady rhythm, man. At least give my orgasm a fighting chance.”

Emelia and I are practically rolling off our chairs laughing, tears nearly streaming out of our eyes. My stomach hurts from laughing so much. I can’t remember the last time I felt this light and free.

Ansel’s face flashes through my mind, but I push the memory away even if my eyes go to the couch. I’m not supposed to be thinking about him. I’m supposed to be working on myself.

“At least you got to the sex part,” Sutton says. “One guy I messed around with came back to my place and started crying after we were both undressed because he said my nipples looked like his ex’s. We ended up putting our clothes back on, and I helped him develop a step-by-step plan for him to win her back.”

“Did it work?” I ask before sipping my wine.

“Engaged a month later. I planned their wedding last year.”

“Maybe you should be a matchmaker, not a wedding planner,” Nina says.

“Trust me, I should not. I’m good with a plan of action, but not the follow-through. She tips her head back and finishes the last of the wine in her glass. “All right, Emelia. You’re up.”

“I don’t think you want to hear what your brother and I do on the loun—”

“Yeah, no.” Sutton dramatically covers her ears. “Spare me, please. I’ll never be able to look him in the eyes again.”

Everyone’s heads turn in my direction.

“Sorry, guys. I haven’t been with anyone since Caleb.” I feel my cheeks heat as I think more about Ansel, hoping they don’t see my blush.

“Fair enough,” Sutton says and stands from the couch. “I’m getting a refill. Anyone else?”

I appreciate them not looking at me with pity or sadness and not asking more questions. It would only bring down the mood, and it wouldn’t change anything anyway.

Nina hands her empty glass to Sutton, but Emelia and I wave off the offer.

This should probably be my last glass. I already know I’m going to be suffering in the morning. A hangover will be worth it tomorrow, even with my packed schedule of massages.

Something about coming together with a group of women, discussing your shared experiences, is unlike anything else. It’s a feeling of being seen in a way that I don’t think the opposite sex can ever really fulfill for you.

Sutton returns with a wineglass in each hand, passing one to Nina on the couch, then taking a seat beside her.

“How long are you going to be in town?” Nina asks.

Sutton stills. “Not sure yet.”

“Please... you have to move here,” Emelia says with a bit of a whine to her voice. “It’s just me, Baylor, and all the boys. Don’t leave me with them.” She flops backward so her back is pressed to the area rug.

Sutton laughs. “You have Collins and Nina to back you up.”

Emelia pops back up off the floor. “That’s true. You guys are my new besties, all right? I have no friends in this town.”

“Done.” I clink my wineglass with hers and sip.

“Trust me, I know your pain, Em. I grew up with them all, remember?” Sutton rolls her eyes.

“Do you have any siblings?” Emelia asks me.

I shake my head. “Nope, I was an only child and an army brat.”

“That sounds like it has the potential to be a brutal combo,” Sutton says.

I chuckle. “It had its moments.”

Nina pops up off the couch. “Let’s do something fun.”

She glances at me, and I can tell she’s changing the focus to save me from having to steer anywhere near the topic of my family or Caleb. I appreciate her more than she’ll ever know.

“Let’s put some music on.” Nina walks over to the portable speaker on the shelf and brings it over, setting it on the coffee table. “Collins, you always have party playlists ready to go. Put something on.”

Something I always prided myself on was having the right music for the occasion. I’m a firm believer that the wrong music can break an event.

“As long as it’s not country. I need a Nashville break,” Sutton says.

“All right.” I lean to the side and pull my phone from the back pocket of my jeans. “What are you guys feeling?”

“Let’s see what you’ve got.” Sutton pats the cushion next to her on the couch.

I get up to sit beside her, feeling myself list to the side a bit. Once I’m seated, I pull up my streaming app, go to my playlists, and scroll through them slowly. Emelia and Nina talk about something Jacob did last week while the two of us try to figure out the music.

“What’s that one?” Sutton points at the playlist titled *Where’s My Chucks*.

“That’s ’90s grunge.”

“Nope.” She shakes her head, and I continue to scroll.

“This one?” She points at the *Rollin’ on 22s* playlist.

“It’s ’90s hip-hop.”

Her chuckle rings in my ear. “You have something for the ’90s?”

“Caleb used to listen to a lot of ’90s music.”

For the first time in a long time, there’s no angst or pain associated with the memory. In fact, I find that it feels good to think about him fixing things in the house with the music playing.

My phone dings, and the banner comes down from the top indicating that I’ve received a text from Ansel.

“Ansel? What’s my brother texting you for?”

Emelia turns, as does Nina, toward us.

“What?” My heart rate picks up so fast I feel dizzy.

It’s not a secret to anyone in town that Ansel has been accompanying me on some outings, so I could probably use that as an excuse, but we don’t have anything else planned at the moment. We’re trying to keep our distance until I work through my list.

“Oh, probably wondering when he can get in for a massage. He’s been a few times because he tweaked his back.” I keep my gaze steadily on the phone screen, trying like hell to act nonchalant.

I feel Sutton look at me for a few beats, but I resist the urge to meet her gaze, knowing she’ll see right through me. Sutton lets the topic go, and we settle on a *Pajama Party* playlist I made ages ago, and the dance party commences.

After a while, curiosity gets the better of me, and I excuse myself to go to the bathroom. As soon as I’m locked inside, I pull my phone from my back pocket and check Ansel’s text.

ANSEL

Haven’t talked in a few days. Hope you’re doing okay.

I smile at the screen. Should I be smiling? Maybe part of this trying to find my way back to myself means I’m not supposed to feel any kind of affection at all toward Ansel until I’ve done my checklist.

It’s been a few days since I’ve talked to him, though I’ve wanted to reach out a bunch of times.

ME

Girls’ night at my place tonight. Already checked one thing off my list!

He texts back right away, almost as though he's been waiting by the phone for me to respond.

ANSEL

Look at you go! Star student.

It's probably the wine, but I want to stay in this bathroom and text him something flirty. Prolong this back and forth between us. But that's not going to help us get to the endgame. So I slide my phone back into my pocket, unlock the door, and get back to my girls' night.

If things with Ansel progress, I want to make sure I'm ready for it.

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TWENTY-SIX

Ansel

It wasn't until Collins decided that she needed to step back that I realized how much I enjoyed spending time with her. I'd look forward to our conversations, her laughter, and hearing her stories.

She steps into the waiting area wearing her scrubs, and all I want to do is kiss her.

"Ansel, I'm ready for you." She glances at Carly, the receptionist, and smiles.

I probably shouldn't be here. She might take my appointment as me pushing her for something she's not ready for. In reality, I just want to check in and make sure she's okay. It's not lost on me that this checklist she's working through could bring up a lot of shit for her.

Once we're in her massage room with the door closed behind us, I turn to her. "I hope it's okay that I'm here." I thumb over my shoulder. "If it's not, I can make up an excuse and leave. I'll just tell the receptionist I'm not feeling well or something."

She gives me a soft smile that puts me at ease. "It's fine, Ansel. I'm glad to see you."

I lean forward but step back before I lose all control and take her in my arms. Almost.

The only way I stop myself is by remembering that this short-term pain will hopefully be rewarded with a long-term gain.

"Is your back still bothering you?" Her head tilts.

"Yeah, my lower back feels strained again." Another white lie.

“Let me help you with that. You know the drill.” She motions to the table and walks to the door.

A couple of minutes later, her soft knock lands on the door after I’m face down on the table and under the sheet.

“Come in.”

I hear the door open, then she dims the lights further, moving around the room, getting everything set up. My body is acutely aware of everywhere she moves in a way it never has been before. It’s as if the hair on my body is magnetized and she’s the magnet—it moves in the directions she’s in.

“Let me know how the pressure is and if anything is painful as I go.”

I murmur an acknowledgment, then her hands are on me, spreading the warm massage oil over my back. There’s nothing sexual about what she’s doing, but my dick isn’t getting the message. It twitches underneath me against the table.

Willing myself not to behave like some creep, I take my thoughts in a different direction, determined not to get a fucking hard-on. “I heard back from Earl Timbre about the truck.”

She left the keys under the mat for me, and I took it in last week. Picked it up from her place. The hardest drive of my life. It still smelled like him and all his shit was still in the center console. Receipts from almost two years ago and his phone charger cord, but the worst was a note from Collins telling him she loved him and would miss him.

“He said it needs a bit of work done, but nothing major. He actually said he might know someone interested in buying it. Had a customer in a few weeks ago who mentioned looking for a secondhand truck.”

“Really? That would be great.” Though I can’t see her, I hear the appreciation in her voice.

“You might be able to do better on the open market, I’m not sure.”

“I don’t want to drag it out. If your guy knows someone, I’d rather go that route.”

I nod into the circle holding my head upright. “All right. I’ll text him after this and tell him to sell it.”

“Thanks, Ansel. I owe you one.”

Her words are innocent, but my mind makes all kinds of leaps into dirty territory of how she could pay me back. Again, I try to shut it down.

We’re quiet for a while until she tells me to flip over. Collins holds the sheet up, and I move so that I’m face up and position myself lower on the

table.

“All good.”

She lowers the blanket, then turns around, meeting my eyes. It’s suddenly very apparent that we’re in a dim room with light music playing in the background, and I’m completely naked. I swallow hard.

I break the silence. “So... one item checked off the list.”

This is the reason I’m here. To make sure she’s good. Not to delve into my fantasies of what we might do in here alone if things were different.

She picks up my right arm and massages my upper arm. “Yup. Apologies for texting you so late that night. The wine had been flowing.”

I open my eyes and meet her gaze. “You don’t have to apologize, Collins. You can text me whenever you want.”

She gives me a firm nod, then goes back to massaging my arm.

“How are you doing?”

Collins shrugs and moves down to my forearm. “I’m okay. Girls’ night was a lot of fun. It reminded me how much I enjoy hosting people at my place. Looked a little different than when Caleb and I used to do it, but it was good to figure out that there’s still something I enjoy about it.”

The tightness in my chest loosens. “I’m glad to hear that.”

Her gaze flicks to mine again and holds. “I’m sorry I haven’t been in touch.” She licks her bottom lip, and my attention is drawn there.

“You don’t need to apologize.”

Her hands work their way down to my hands.

“Is this cheating?” I ask.

She frowns, pulling on and massaging my fingers, one at a time. “What do you mean?”

“I know I’m supposed to be giving you space.”

“I didn’t say we couldn’t talk. We’re still friends. Honestly, if I was avoiding you, it was because I thought it might make it easier to keep us from... well, you know.”

It’s too dim in here to tell if she’s blushing, but if I had to put money on it, I’d say she is.

“Can I make a confession?” I grip her hand, forcing her to stop what she’s doing.

Her gaze flicks over to meet mine. She nods.

“My back doesn’t really bother me. Even before. That was just a ruse to come and see if you were okay.”

“Can I make a confession?” She smiles.

I nod.

“I had a feeling.” Her grin widens, and we both laugh.

Unable to resist, I sit up on the table, shifting so my legs hang over the side. The thin sheet still covers my lap, though just barely. I take her hand again and pull her between my legs.

“I’ve missed you,” I can’t resist telling her, though maybe I should. Maybe it would make it easier to remember that I’m supposed to be giving her space.

“I’ve missed you too.”

I close my eyes and drop my forehead to hers. God, what a rush hearing her say those words to me. I didn’t realize how much I needed to hear them. To know I’m not alone in this. My lips tingle with the need to press them to hers. But I need to respect her wishes, so I hold back.

Then her lips meet mine.

Breathing her in, I deepen the kiss, pushing one hand into her hair while the other rests on the crook of her neck. My hand skates down over her breast, and she arches into my touch. I can feel the turgid peak of her nipple through the fabric, and I brush my thumb back and forth over it.

She moans into my mouth as that same hand slides lower to the waistband of her scrubs. My finger dips just beyond the band and I pull away from her, asking for her permission before I go further.

When she nods, my hand slides lower, down below her underwear and between her legs. Collins lets out a sigh when the pads of my fingers touch her tight bud, then she presses her lips to mine again.

She’s so wet and warm under my touch. I’d give anything right now to be able to taste her, but before I can tell her, she strips away the sheet from my lap, and her hand wraps around my length.

Holy fuck.

She runs her hand up and down my shaft, and the massage oil on her palm... holy shit... she’s killing me with how easy she’s gliding up and down.

I deepen our kiss, using the hand pushed into her hair to direct her where I want her, while my hand between her legs slides farther down until I’m plunging one, then two fingers into her. Jesus, she’s tight. I can only imagine what she’d feel like with my cock stretching her open.

Her grip tightens around me, and I use the heel of my hand against her clit. Precum leaks out of the tip of my cock, and she uses her thumb to swipe it all around the sensitive head.

I pull back from our kiss so that I can look at her. We hold each other's gazes, neither of us daring to look away.

She strokes me while I work her between the legs. Her breathing picks up, as does mine.

My cock hardens further in her grip. I'm so close to letting go, but she *will* come first. Increasing the pressure on her clit, I move my heel in a circular motion and feel her tighten around my fingers. She's almost there. Almost... almost...

Finally, Collins comes apart around my fingers, a strangled cry rising from her throat while she soaks my hand. I let go right after, coating my stomach and her hand. We kiss again, pouring our desire and emotion into it until she finally breaks away.

I gently slip my hand from under her scrubs, and she removes her fist from around me, moving over to the counter on the wall. She washes her hands, then returns with a warm washcloth that I use to clean my stomach and my hands. Collins takes it from me and tosses it into the basket for soiled linens in the corner.

I arrange the sheet back over my lap in case she feels weird about what just happened. I can't read her.

"I don't think that was supposed to happen yet, was it?" I try to keep my voice light, but I'm in uncharted territory here.

She looks away sheepishly. I'm sure her cheeks are flushed. "We didn't sleep together. That's something."

I arch an eyebrow. "Is that the new benchmark?"

We both laugh, and I offer her my hand. She accepts, and I pull her into me.

"Tell me. How are you feeling about what just happened?" I tuck an errant hair behind her ear.

"I don't feel bad about it..."

I don't speak, letting her get her thoughts together for a moment.

"I know I need to make sure I'm ready for a relationship before we move forward, but I don't know. That felt right. I don't think that's a bad thing."

I nod, agreeing but never wanting to push my opinions on her.

“But it probably shouldn’t happen again until I’ve worked through my list.”

I nod again, despite knowing that will be hard to accomplish. I cup her chin and give her a chaste kiss. “Sorry, couldn’t resist.” I raise both hands. “Last time until you give me the green light. Promise.”

And I intend to keep that promise, no matter how many times I need to beat off.

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TWENTY-SEVEN

Ansel

I'm working today, but I'm not on shift. Instead, we're hosting an open house to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the station's build.

My sister arrives with Elliott, Emelia, and Baylor and beelines it over to me as soon as she spots me.

I'm manning the table with all the pamphlets about fire safety. Needless to say, my table is *not* busy, while the table that has all the firetruck-shaped cookies and cake hasn't seen a second of peace. It could be worse. I could be one of the guys working the firetruck itself. They won't know a moment's peace all afternoon with the number of kids cycling through here.

Sutton's getup reminds me a little of Emelia when she first landed in town—professional, unapproachable. She's wearing a pair of black dress pants and a cream sweater I'd bet my right nut is cashmere. No one would think she's originally from around here.

"Hey, sis. How's it going?" I lift the soda I've been nursing to my lips and take a sip.

"So, how long have you been messing around with Collins?"

I choke on my drink, a few sprays falling to the table. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Cut the bullshit." She crosses her arms and raises her perfectly arched eyebrows.

I study her for a minute and see that look on her face. The one that tells me she's not going to let this go no matter what I say. She's the cat hovering over me, and I'm the shaking mouse in the corner.

Gripping her elbow, I lead her off to the side, away from everyone else. "For the record, we're not messing around."

She scoffs. "You're something."

With a sigh, I push my hand through my hair. "It started because I was trying to help her get on with her life after Caleb died. She was stuck. Wasn't doing any of the things she did before he died, any of the things that used to bring her happiness. Caleb wouldn't want her to live like that."

"And it changed... when, big brother?"

I go on to explain how our feelings for each other deepened and expanded past friendship. "We haven't slept together."

She laughs.

"We haven't. We've only... had heavy make-out sessions if you have to know."

"Ew... I don't want any details." She pretends to choke.

God knows I don't want to know anything about her sex life.

"Are you guys, like, together... in secret?"

I glance over her shoulder at Uncle Roy, then back at my sister. I'm not sure what his reaction would be to this whole thing. "Yes, no, not really? She wanted to take a step back. Wants to be sure if something happens between us that she's ready. Obviously, being who I am only complicates the entire process further."

I don't mention Collins's checklist to my sister. I've already mentioned it to Fowler, and that feels like enough people knowing Collins's business.

"I'll say." Her hardened expression softens. "How are you dealing with the fact that she's Caleb's widow?"

My stomach curdles. But Sutton is always direct, so I expect nothing less. "Shitty, to say the least."

Sutton nods. "Understandable. Lot to unpack there."

"There was never anything going on before Caleb died."

"Oh please, Ansel. We all have our own shit ways of dealing with what happened when we were younger, but yours has never been to be a douchebag and sleep with your friends' women."

"As long as you know that."

"I do, but that doesn't mean you don't have issues. Seems like Elliott's figured his out. You need to be sure you have too so that she doesn't get hurt... again."

I huff. "How do you know I'm not going to be the one who gets hurt?"

She rolls her eyes in that irritating-as-fuck way she always does. “Sure, yeah, okay, I’ll play your game. So neither of you gets hurt.”

I shake my head. “I have no desire to hurt her.”

“I know that. But are you guys really ready for the backlash that might come your way because of this?” She looks around the station. “All of these men are not going to be happy.”

“She’s worth it. At least for me. She needs to make that decision for herself, but I think she already has.” I lift my chin. “So, how’d you find out?”

She smirks, then shrugs. “I’m the observant Mercer.”

“That’s Hollis.”

She waves her hand and shakes her head.

“You can’t tell anyone, obviously.”

“I’m not an idiot, Ansel.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out. It’s a message from Collins letting me know that she won’t be coming by. I told her about the event and invited her to join everyone here, but I didn’t think she’d want to come. It’s a lot, asking the widow of a firefighter to come down to the station.

“How is Collins?” she says in a sing-song voice that only grates on my nerves.

I look up after typing out my response. “Who’s to say it’s her?”

“Only a woman could give you a dopey grin like that.” She points and circles her finger in front of my face.

I roll my eyes. “She’s just telling me she’s not going to make it today. I invited her, but for obvious reasons, it would be difficult for her to be here.”

Sutton nods. “She’s been through a lot. Just make sure you don’t put her through more.”

“You’re *my* sister. You’re supposed to be on *my* side.” I point at myself.

“I am your sister. And I am looking out for you, because if you hurt her, you’ll never forgive yourself.”

I get it now. “All right, all right. Message delivered.”

“Good.”

We chat for a few more minutes, and every time I even venture close to the subject of what she’s doing back, she deftly changes the subject. I guess there will be a time when I’m calling her out.

When she moves on, I go back to the table I'm manning for the event. I stand for at least another twenty minutes before someone finally comes along. This time it's Uncle Roy. Today he's wearing a T-shirt that says, *I Beg Your Parton*, with a picture of Dolly Parton's face on it.

"Have you thought about bunk beds?" he asks.

"Excuse me."

"So your sister can move in with you. The two of you in the same room. Like old times."

"I never shared with Sutton," I remind him. "Elliott and I shared a room."

He narrows his eyes at me. "I'm not losing my mind, Ansel."

I chuckle, understanding. "Oh... your precious little girl is driving you crazy, is it?"

He grips the back of his neck. "I forgot how much shit she comes with. My bathroom counter is covered with all her lotions and potions, and she's thrown out all my favorite stuff from the fridge. All this talk about cholesterol and how too much salt isn't good for me and I should be focusing on protein and fiber." He waves his hand in an agitated way. "Something about macro something or other."

I press my lips together to keep from laughing. "She's just looking out for your health. Wants you to live a long life."

He scoffs. "I'm telling her I'm going on walks, partially to get away from her nitpicking, but I just go to the diner and have Dottie feed me the food I want. I don't know how much longer I can stand it. She needs something to keep her busy. Some other project that's not me."

I raise both hands. "Well, we have a two-bedroom, and I'm not keen on cuddling up with Fowler. Not to mention, Sutton isn't a couch girl."

He chuckles. "That's for sure. She already ordered a new mattress. Said her old one was too lumpy."

"How long is she planning on staying?"

"Haven't asked. You know what she's like, but if she's buying a mattress..."

We both chance a look over at her.

"Good to have her back, though." Uncle Roy has the proud dad look on his face. He should. He raised us.

I think about the conversation she and I just shared. "Yeah, it is."

Sutton can be hard, but she looks out for all of us.

Roy thumbs over his shoulder. “I’m gonna go snag a piece of cake while she’s distracted. I’ll see you later, kid.”

He walks to the table with the cake, but as soon as he grabs a piece, Sutton’s heels click along the floor, and she swipes it from his hand. He looks over at me with a dramatic preschooler-type frown as she hands the piece to the next kid who walks by.

I chuckle into my fist.

A half hour later, I’m bored, so I pull out my phone. I check my email and am surprised to see Portland Fire and Rescue asking if I’m available to come in for a second interview.

Holy shit. When I hadn’t already heard from them, I’d assumed I hadn’t made it to the next round. Excitement wars with trepidation in my gut. I can’t tell whether I’m relieved or disappointed to have made it to the next round. Things have changed so much since I first applied—in ways I could have never predicted. Things that change what I ultimately want.

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TWENTY-EIGHT

Collins

The next item to tackle on my list is making the house my own. I'd like to start with a new kitchen table. Caleb picked it out, and it's so modern it's an eyesore. We went back and forth for an hour in that showroom, and ultimately, I relented. But I should start with the space that feels most like him, so I decide to revamp the primary bedroom. Everywhere I look, all I see is Caleb and memories of the two of us. Even though I've gone through his clothes and boxed up his personal items. The space still feels like us, and since there's now only me, it's time for a change.

So that's what I'm doing rather than going to the event down at the fire station. Ansel invited me, and I really considered going, but it just feels like too much right now. Being around the fire station again—the equipment, the smell, the people we used to host in our home. That's not adding the layer of Ansel, of course. Of hiding whatever this is between us in front of the people he works with.

I'm starting my transformation by painting the walls. I've already ordered new bedding online, and I chose a pale blue for walls that's present in some of the florals on the comforter. Bye-bye beige. Caleb really liked this color, but I was never a fan.

Next, I plan to swap out the lights on the nightstands and find some new curtains for windows, along with a new area rug, then find some art that works with the new color scheme. I think that after all those changes, it will feel like *my* bedroom. There's something intensely sad about that.

Since I'm doing this on my own, my plan is to work in sections, one wall at a time.

I pull the drawers from the dresser and set them on the bed so that I can shift the shell of the dresser away from the wall. It's a step forward, but it's also a goodbye to the life I thought I'd have, to the man I used to share this room with.

The thought of the hotel invoice floats to mind, and I push it away. I've gotten good at not addressing that whole gut feeling.

The paint is already in the paint tray, and after the drawers are all off my bed, I shimmy the dresser from the wall and place the drop sheet on the floor. My AirPods go in my ears next, and I press Play on one of my favorite playlists.

I'm only working for a few minutes when the ding of a text comes in, so I walk over to the dresser where my phone sits, and I pick it up to see a message from Ansel.

ANSEL

No problem. Totally understand. Let me know if you change your mind about needing help.

ME

Think I'm good, but thanks.

He offered his help, but I told him that I think this is something I need to do on my own. One great thing about Ansel, besides the way he looks, is that he doesn't push. He'll make it known that he's available to help, but he won't force his assistance.

I set the phone down and go back to painting the wall. When I'm done with that wall, I get to work on the wall with the other dresser on it, removing the drawers so I can muscle the dresser away from the wall.

Cutting in and then rolling the paint onto the walls has a meditative quality to it, and my mind starts to wander, bouncing between memories of Caleb and the present day with Ansel. I've noticed lately that when the memories of Caleb hit me, they no longer feel hard like rocks. More like a tennis ball. I don't think they'll ever feel like a feather, but if I can get to the point that they feel like a pillow, I'll be happy.

Eventually, my thoughts go to Ansel and what things might be like between us after I finish my checklist. Could there be a future?

What will sleeping with him be like? It's not like I was a virgin when I met Caleb, but I'd only had a few partners. Plus, it's been years since I slept with anyone else. Will it feel awkward? Judging by what's already happened between Ansel and me, I'd say no, but who knows?

I imagine how people might react if they see us around town together. Will they be supportive or judgmental? Will they think something was going on between us when Caleb was alive?

What kinds of things will we do together, and what side of the bed will he want to sleep on?

There are so many questions I don't have the answers to.

Including why Caleb was in Galveston.

I shut down my subconscious.

Finally, I wonder how Ansel's coworkers will react. These are some of the same men and women Caleb and I used to have over at our house. How will they respond to Ansel taking Caleb's place in that regard?

And then there's the one question I've been afraid to examine—can I really be with a man who does the same job as my deceased husband? The job that killed him and made me a widow? Can I spend my nights worrying that the worst is going to happen, especially now that I know firsthand that it can and does? I want to think that I'm brave enough, but what if I'm not?

This is how it goes—my mind cycling through a series of memories, worries, and projections into the future as I finish the dresser wall.

When that wall is done, I move to the opposite wall, which houses the nightstands and the bed. I'm going to have to slide the mattress and box spring off the bed and lean them against the one wall I haven't tackled yet in order to move the bed frame, and I've been dreading it. For this part, I actually could have used Ansel's help.

I tackle the nightstands first, so I remove the drawers from mine and set them in front of the dresser since I'll be moving the mattress. After I've moved the nightstand out of the way, I go over to move Caleb's.

The book he was reading when he passed away is still there, bookmark in place, along with some other personal items. I set them all on top of the dresser, then pull out the top drawer, the middle, and the bottom, placing them all out of the way. I lift the nightstand to move it, and something on the floor catches my eye. I still.

My stomach drops and shatters on the floor. At least that's what it feels like.

A cell phone.

A cell phone that my husband was clearly trying to hide.

With shaking fingers, I abandon the nightstand and bend to pick up the phone. Once it's in my hands, I sit on the bed, staring at it. Pressure builds in my throat and between my eyes.

Why would Caleb have a secret cell phone?

That's the question running through my mind, but in my gut, I know the reason. I knew it weeks ago with that receipt from the hotel and most likely that diner receipt too. The answer is what I've been running from since I found that invoice in his office. Back then, I didn't want to know. I wasn't ready to confirm my fear. Now, I *need* to know.

But I can't do it alone.

I could call Nina, but there's only one person I want by my side, and it's another person who knew Caleb as well as I did—or thought I did, I suppose. So I set down the phone, then go grab my own and punch out a message.

ME

Would you be able to come to my place when you're done? I need you.

And I do. It's not as if I wasn't aware of how much Ansel has supported me over the past couple of months, but it's only now that I realize how much I've truly come to want him at my side.

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TWENTY-NINE

Ansel

I *need you.*
I *need you.*
I *need you.*

Those three words on my screen repeat in my head over and over and over as I drive as fast as I can over to Collins's place. My back wheels skid out from under me, and I'm forced to slow down. It's starting to snow, even though we're approaching the end of winter.

Those three words were just typed letters on a screen, but I could feel the desperation in them. I'm not sure if something happened or whether maybe Collins is just finding it harder to change over the primary bedroom to her own space, but something is wrong. And if I had to guess, I'd say it's very wrong, because Collins has made it clear that she needs distance from me, but here she is, telling me to come over because she needs me.

I'd planned to reach out to her and see if I could swing by anyway when I was done because I want to tell her about the potential of a job offer in Portland. I can't exactly put her on the spot and ask her how serious she sees this thing between us becoming, not this early on, especially when we haven't even had time to see what *this* is. But at the same time, I don't like feeling as though I'm keeping something from her. I want her to know I'm interviewing for the job, even if I'm not one hundred percent sure I want the job.

The sun is setting by the time I pull into the driveway. I jump out of my truck and bound up the steps. I don't bother knocking and waiting for

Collins to answer. I barge in and shout her name.

“Up here,” she calls.

I quickly take my boots off, almost falling, and take the stairs two at a time.

The primary bedroom is the only room with a light on, so I head in that direction. When I reach the doorframe, Collins is pacing the room, a deep line between her brows, biting her lower lip. Her hands lay over her stomach as though she were nauseous.

“What happened?”

She looks up at me with unshed tears filling her eyes. “I found a phone.”

I don’t know what that means, but the pained look on her face does me in. I eat up the distance between us in a few strides and pull her into my arms. She clutches my coat for dear life while I rub her back in soothing strokes.

“I’m here. It’s okay, just tell me what happened.”

“I think Caleb was cheating on me.”

I freeze, my body tensing, and my brain rolls over what she said. I grip her gently by the upper arms and set her back from me to look into her eyes.

“Caleb would never do that.” What would make her think that?

She studies my face for a beat, then her body sinks, her shoulders slumping, and a breath rushes out of her mouth. “Thank God. I was hoping you didn’t know.”

“Collins, what are you talking about?” I hate the note of frustration in my tone, but I can’t believe she’d ever question Caleb’s commitment to her.

“After I texted you, I was afraid that when you came here and I told you, I’d realize that you already knew this whole time. I think that would have broken me.”

I shake my head. “Why would you ever think Caleb would cheat on you?”

She wraps her arms around her stomach. “I found some things. At first, I convinced myself I was paranoid, but then when I found the phone under the nightstand, I knew. I couldn’t keep lying to myself.”

She’s talking a mile a minute. I hold her upper arms, dipping my head to meet her gaze. “Slow down, start from the beginning.”

Collins draws in a deep breath and nods. Then she goes on to tell me about the receipt she found for a diner in Temple, the hotel receipt for

Galveston, and finally, the cell phone under the nightstand.

My stomach sours the more I listen to why she believes this. It doesn't look good. But I can't see Caleb stepping out on his marriage. I never saw anything that would make me think he was having an affair. He always seemed happy and in love with Collins. Never flirted with other women when he was out with Fowler and me. Even when we went to Vegas for a guys' trip.

It doesn't make any sense.

"Why haven't you said anything about this until now?" I can't believe she's been carrying this alone this long.

She shakes her head. "I don't know... lots of reasons, I guess. I didn't want to believe it. I debated whether I even really wanted to confirm it. I was afraid maybe you did know and were keeping it from me, even though the relationship between us had shifted. And a part of me knows how much you loved him, and I didn't want to taint your image of him. Whenever I thought about it, I just pushed it out."

I nod. It makes sense. She's been through a lot. I can understand the impulse to just keep moving forward and not examine the past too hard. It's pretty much how I've lived my life since I was a child.

"What do you want to do now?"

She bites her lip. "I want to turn the phone on and see what's on there."

"Are you sure? Once you see it, you can't unsee whatever's on there."

Collins nods slowly. "I'm sure. I need to know, Ansel. Either way."

"Okay. Where's the phone?"

She points toward the bed where an iPhone rests on the mattress. I take her hand and guide her over to the bed. We sit by the edge, side by side, and I pick up the phone and hold it out to her.

Collins looks between the phone and me for a beat, then takes it. "I'm afraid, but I can't keep lying to myself. I need to know the truth."

"Whatever it is, we'll get through it—together."

"Together." Her voice raises as though it's a question.

I squeeze her knee. "I'm here for you."

"Okay." She looks at the phone, draws in a deep breath, and holds the button on the side with a shaky finger.

I hold my breath, waiting for the screen to light up.

Nothing happens.

Her shoulders slump. "It's dead."

“You have a charger, right?”

She nods and stands, going to the nightstand over on the other side of the room, opening up the top drawer. She pulls out a white cord, plugs in the charger, and hooks up the phone.

She turns to face me. “Now we wait.”

“Shouldn’t take too long to charge enough to turn it on. What can I do for you while we wait? What do you need?”

She’s hurting, and I want to take it away, make it better for her however I can. I’m dreading what we might discover on that phone. I don’t want my memory of Caleb to be tainted, but I’m second to Collins. I need to support her in this moment.

“I want to ask you something.” She moves back across the room and sits beside me on the bed.

I’m not sure what she wants to ask me, but I can already tell from the tone of her voice that I won’t like it.

THIRTY

Collins

“Will you tell me about that night?”

Ansel loses the color in his face. “The night Caleb died?”

I nod. I don’t want him to have to relive it, but I’ve always been curious, and I’ve never been brave enough to ask. Not until this moment.

When Caleb died, it didn’t seem like it mattered. The result was the same. I was a widow. But now, I’ve discovered so much that I didn’t know about my husband... I want to know if he was in pain or not.

“You don’t want to hear about that.” He stands from the bed and pushes a hand through his hair.

“Yes, I do. I’m ready now.”

We lock gazes across the room, and neither of us says anything for a long while. It’s obvious to me that my request is causing him anguish, but I don’t want this to be yet another thing I don’t know about my husband.

I stuck my head in the sand and ran from the truth of so many things for so long, but now I’m ready to know all of it. I realize that the only way I’m ever truly going to be able to move on is to know it all—the good, the bad, the ugly.

“Please, Ansel...”

He sucks in a breath and gives me one quick nod, coming back over to sit beside me on the bed. He takes my hand and sighs. “I was paired with Caleb to go in and locate the homeowner. We didn’t even know if he was inside for sure. Once we got in there, things deteriorated quickly. It was impossible to see, and...”

Ansel squeezes his eyes shut before letting go of my hand and dropping forward, elbows on his knees and hands on the back of his head.

"I'm sorry to put you through this." I rub his back.

He shakes his head, not looking up or over at me. "And I knew we should get out of there. My gut was screaming at me to retreat, but Caleb wanted to keep pushing forward, and I went along with it, even though it felt wrong."

"You couldn't have known what would happen." I've never blamed Ansel. Even now, hearing these details, I know it's not his fault.

"You don't understand." His upper body jackknifes up, and he stares at me. "Sometimes as a firefighter, all you have are your instincts. And I've always listened to mine, until that day. Collins, it's my fault that he's dead. It's my fault you're a widow! And now I'm taking advantage and—"

My stomach twists. Here I thought I was carrying it all, but Ansel's been carrying a weight for almost two years too.

"Ansel, no, no." He looks away from me, so I fall to my knees in front of him, cupping his face in my hands and forcing his eyes to meet mine. "It's not your fault. You need to stop thinking it is. We both know that Caleb liked to push boundaries sometimes. I'm not saying that's what happened that day, but it would be just like him to want to keep going even if there was a risk."

It's true. It's one of the things I first found attractive about Caleb—how alive and engaged in life he was. He was always a bit of an adrenaline junkie. I remember we once took a trip to Colorado, and though he wasn't that great of a skier, he insisted on trying all the Double Black Diamond runs. I was new to skiing, so I was stuck to the green ones—or the spa. If we were to go waterskiing on the lake, he'd insist on trying it with one ski and then eventually barefoot. He said he'd done so much of it on two skis over the course of his life that it was boring.

"I should have told him no. None of this would have happened if I'd told him no. I failed him."

It absolutely guts me to see tears filling his eyes. "Listen to me—it is not your fault. I don't blame you. Even knowing what I know now. I don't blame you."

He slides down off the bed onto his knees in front of me and wraps his arms around me. I feel his heart beating a million miles a minute.

Ansel squeezes me tightly. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Collins."

“You have nothing to be sorry about. The floor caving in was not your fault. It’s one of the risks of the job. You are not to blame, you hear me?” When he doesn’t say anything, I pull back to meet his gaze. “You are not to blame, understand?”

He nods, but it’s clear to me that it’s a halfhearted effort.

“Do you want to know what would really upset me? If you went through the rest of your life bearing the weight of the responsibility for Caleb’s death unnecessarily.”

He stares off into the distance.

“Do you remember when you told me that Caleb wouldn’t want me to live that way?” I put my finger on his chin and turn his face to mine. “He would tell you the same thing. He wouldn’t want you feeling responsible for his death. He would *never* want that for you. I may be about to discover a side I didn’t know, but I know that for sure. He loved you and Fowler like brothers. He would hate to see you tormenting yourself this way.”

His shoulders sag, and there’s a flash of relief across his face. He knows I’m right.

Ansel pulls me in for another hug, and we stay in the embrace, just breathing each other in until our heartbeats sync and something like acceptance washes over us.

When my knees start to ache, I pull away. “Are you okay? Have you thought about talking to someone?”

“Yeah, we all went through the critical incident stress management. And I’d come to peace with it until you and I started this. I mean, I think I’ll always harbor guilt, but seeing you go through all this and having to dig yourself out... I can’t help feeling responsible for what’s happened to you.”

“Ansel, this isn’t on you. His death isn’t on you. He was a trained firefighter, and he had his own instincts that were guiding him. And as far as me, I’m good.” I hold out my arms even though I’m a little bit of a tattered mess right this minute. “So, no guilt, okay?”

He says nothing. I understand it will take time and that he harbors guilt for our relationship on top of not being able to save Caleb that night.

“Do you think the phone is charged enough to turn on now?” I figure distraction is the key right now, and I try to keep my voice from shaking, but I’m not sure I’m successful.

He grabs hold of my hand. “Whatever is on that phone, never forget that Caleb loved you. He did. That’s one thing I’m certain of.”

Pressing my lips together, I nod. “Kay, let’s do this.”

We shuffle over to the wall where the phone is plugged in and both sit cross-legged in front of it, facing the wall that’s wet with new paint.

My hands shake as I pick up the phone. Steeling myself, I press and hold the button on the side of the phone. The Apple logo pops up on the screen, and it goes through its start-up sequence. My stomach roils. I need to know what’s on this phone, but at the same time, whatever it is has the potential to blow up everything I thought I knew about my dead husband, everything I thought I knew about the life we made.

When it’s finally done, the screen opens to a lock screen.

My head falls forward. Of course there’s a lock screen. He had a hidden phone. He’s not going to just leave it without a password.

It dawns on me that however Caleb was paying for this phone, it’s likely not being paid for anymore, so there’s probably no plan associated with it. But I can see that it’s connected to the house Wi-Fi, so he’s clearly used the phone here before.

“Would you be able to guess the code?” Ansel asks.

“I knew the code for his other phone.” I punch it in, and to my surprise, it unlocks the phone.

The fact he didn’t even make up another code makes me feel like a fool, as if he thought I was too stupid to ever suspect he’d cheat on me. As though if I had found the phone, I would have just handed it to him and gone on my merry way. Anger builds inside me, my heart racing as though it’s knocking on my sternum, demanding to be let free.

I stare at the screen and the text message app that shows twelve unread messages. One press of my finger to that little green app, and everything I knew of my life could be blown up. Such a simple act with such potentially devastating consequences. Once you know something for certain, you can’t unknow it.

Ansel puts his hand on my leg and squeezes.

Drawing in a deep breath, I press the icon. Inside the app, there are only messages between Caleb and Madelyn. I look at Ansel, tears filling my eyes. He meets my gaze, jaw set, and nods. I nod back and press on the screen.

I knew.

And it’s confirmed, only it’s so much worse than I thought.

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THIRTY-ONE

Collins

The phone drops from my shaking hands onto the floor.

“What the fuck?” Ansel whispers from beside me.

My hand presses to my stomach. Nausea increases, bile rising. I’m gonna be sick.

I bolt up off the floor and rush into the bathroom, dropping to my knees in front of the toilet seconds before I vomit. I reach for the flush handle but then vomit again.

Steady hands pull my hair back from my face and rub my back.

I wanted to know everything, and now I do. Not only was my husband having an affair, but before all of the concerned messages she sent, asking why he wasn’t answering her, they were discussing the baby on the way.

Numbness washes over my body as I sit back. As though I can’t quite make sense of the information I’ve just been handed, even though it’s all right there in the form of text messages and ultrasound pictures she sent to Caleb.

Based on the dates of those pictures, that child must be about eighteen months or so now.

God, a piece of Caleb is running around out there, but he isn’t part of me. What a mindfuck. All the months that I got my period and mourned another month of no pregnancy. This woman, this stranger to me, has a part of him, and I don’t.

Jealousy snaps its leash inside me, desperate to escape my new reality.

Accompanying the jealousy is a profound sense of betrayal. And anger. So much anger.

“How could he do this to me?” I slump away from the toilet.

Ansel leans over me and presses the lever to flush the toilet.

“I can’t believe this,” I whisper.

“I don’t know what to say.”

I can’t stand the pitying expression Ansel’s giving me, so I walk over to the vanity and pull out my toothbrush. I put toothpaste on it and run it under the water and start brushing my teeth.

I stare at my reflection. All trace of the woman I was before I found the phone has vanished. I look exactly how I did after Caleb first died—filled with so much sorrow and desperation and confusion.

I’m pissed at him for taking away the small amount of peace I’d managed to claim for myself. Happiness feels like chasing smoke. It’s right there, I can see it, but when I reach out to grab it, it slides through my fingers.

Ansel climbs off the floor and stands behind me while I finish brushing my teeth. He’s watching me so intently, waiting for me to break. When I’m done and I’ve rinsed my mouth, I put my toothbrush back in the holder.

“I’m so sorry, Collins. I can’t imagine what you’re feeling right now.” He wraps me in his arms from behind and rests his chin on my shoulder.

I meet his gaze in the mirror. He doesn’t even know the half of it. But I’m not ready to talk about that just yet.

Ansel’s arms bring a comfort I needed, and I lean my weight to press against him. He’s warm and stable and safe. The more comfort I take from him, the more the raw emotions take hold. My throat aches from the lump forming there, and my eyes burn as more tears fill them. Tears Caleb doesn’t deserve from me. A single tear tracks down my face, then the floodgates unleash.

I’m mildly aware of Ansel turning me in his arms. My body is racked with sobs as I release it all. His shirt grows wet from my tears, and he just holds me, rubbing my back and telling me that it will be okay.

And I know it will, I do. I’ve already survived the death of my husband. I can survive this betrayal too. But right now, I’m all frayed edges.

At some point, the tears run out, as though the well has run dry on both my tears and my torment. I have nothing left to give in this moment.

I pull my head back a bit but remain in his arms, meeting his brown eyes. He's looking down at me as though he would do anything to make me feel better.

I pull his head down so that his lips meet mine. He's tentative at first, not returning the kiss, but when I lick the seam of his lips, he relents. When his tongue touches mine, I know why I kissed him. Because I'm tired of feeling bad, of being sad, and just for this moment, I want to feel something different. Something that feels *good*.

I'm the one still living, and Caleb did plenty of it while on this earth. It's my turn to feel alive.

I deepen the kiss and walk him backward until we reach the bedroom. Once we're beside the bed, I give him a little push, and he flops down onto it. I straddle his waist.

Our lips meet again, and this time the desperation in our kisses increases tenfold. He hardens beneath me, and I grind down on his length. Not wasting any time, I reach for the hem of my sweater and lift it over my head, leaving me in my bra. Ansel glances at me with heavy lids and drives his hand into my hair, dragging me forward to meet his lips again.

I quickly reach around and unclasp my bra, letting the straps fall down my arms, where I pull them off one by one. When I lean back to make some space, my bra falls down between us.

Ansel's dick twitches beneath me as his eyes soak me in. This is the first time he's seen me in any kind of naked state, and I feel empowered by the lust in his eyes. My nipples tighten under the intensity of his gaze.

He cups one breast, then the other, before trailing his tongue around my nipple. Then he bites down gently before sucking it into his mouth. A soft gasp leaves my lips as he suckles me. When my fingers dive into his hair, he sucks harder.

His hard cock presses between us, but I want to feel it in my hands, feel it inside me. After I shimmy back a bit, my hands go to his belt.

Ansel pulls away from my breast as if I've bitten him, looking up at me with wide eyes. "Wait." He watches me. "Fuck... wait, we can't do this."

"Yes, we can." My fingers continue to unbuckle his belt.

His hands cover mine. "Not like this, Collins. I don't want it to be because of what you just found out."

His words sober me as though I've had a glass of ice water splashed in my face. I hurry off of him, covering my breasts with an arm across my

chest, the sting of rejection burning.

“Collins.” Ansel rushes off the bed in a flash, cupping my face in his hands. “I want you. You know I do. But not like this. Not tonight.”

Big fat tears roll down my cheeks. I guess I have a second reserve somewhere.

Ansel wipes each one from my cheeks. “Why don’t you lie down?”

I shake my head.

“Please? I think it would do you some good.”

“Will you...” I swallow that lump in my throat that’s more painful than before. “Will you lie with me? I don’t want to be by myself right now.”

He glances behind him at the bed, probably thinking about how this used to be Caleb’s bed, but then he faces me and nods.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“What drawer are your T-shirts in?”

I point at a drawer on the floor, and he walks over, plucks one out, and puts it over my head. I wordlessly push my arms through the holes. Then he slips his hands underneath the hem and slides my leggings down my legs, helping me step out of them. Ansel takes my hand and leads me over to the bed, pulling back the covers for me to get in.

He walks around the end of the bed, pulling his own T-shirt up and over his head, revealing the chiseled perfection underneath.

“If you’re trying to get me to forget about wanting to have sex with you right now, you’re not doing a very good job.” My attempt at lightening the mood falls flat.

Ansel undoes his belt and his navy cargo pants next, sliding them down to leave him in only his black boxer briefs. Then he slides under the covers and shimmies over. Once he’s beside me, he wraps his arms around me and pulls me in so my head is on his chest. I wrap one leg over him and settle my hand on his firm pec. Then I sink into the warmth of his skin and the rhythm of his heartbeat. Soon, my eyes drift closed, leaving behind the hellish new reality.

THIRTY-TWO

Ansel

My eyes blink open, and it takes me a moment to remember where I am. The scent of fresh paint lingers in the air, and when I look around, everything from yesterday rushes back—Collins’s call for help, Caleb’s betrayal, and me being minutes from sinking into his widow.

Pushing her away felt nearly impossible, but I won’t take advantage of her like that, no matter how badly I want her.

As I look at her still-sleeping form wrapped around me, mouth slightly parted, I think that this is what it could always be like if we were together. Waking up together, making love or breakfast or both, sharing a bed. But we have a lot to deal with before we can ever make it there.

I can’t believe Caleb was cheating on Collins, let alone was irresponsible enough to get his mistress pregnant by accident. At least, I’m assuming it was an accident. I can’t imagine it was on purpose. Then again, I can’t imagine Caleb ever cheating on Collins to begin with.

Anger builds inside my chest. How could he? How dare he?

As though she can read the energy roiling off me in her sleep, Collins stirs. Eventually she blinks a few times and tilts her head up to meet my gaze.

“Morning.” I dip my face and kiss the top of her head.

“Morning. I have a headache from crying so much last night.” She brings a hand to her forehead and winces.

“Do you want me to grab you something for it?”

“No, just stay here with me a little longer.”

“All right.” I trail my hand through her hair, and we’re both content to lie there like that in silence, with only our thoughts. Eventually, I ask, “How are you?”

She takes a moment before answering. “Shocked, I guess. I mean, on some level I think I already knew that he was having an affair, so I was somewhat prepared for that, but a baby... I didn’t see that coming.” Her eyes glisten.

I take the hand that’s resting on my chest and bring it to my mouth, kissing her knuckles. “I’m sorry, Collins. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. I—”

She pulls her hand from mine and presses her finger over my lips. “I know, Ansel. I know you didn’t know.” Then she rolls away from me and shifts so that her back is to the headboard. “There’s something you should know.”

My forehead wrinkles. “Collins, I think your reaction was how most would react to the news.”

“Maybe, but there’s something I don’t think you’re aware of.” She pauses and swallows. “Caleb and I were trying to have a baby when he died.”

Bile races up my throat, and I have to swallow it back as I move into a seated position. “What?”

She nods. “That’s why it hit especially hard. To know that he was having a baby with someone else when we’d been unsuccessful ourselves.”

“He never told me.” I take her hand.

“It wasn’t going well, so we decided not to tell anyone until I got pregnant, which obviously never happened. We’d been trying for a couple of years with no luck. Right before he died, we were discussing the possibility of going to see a fertility doctor to look into what the issue might be. I assumed something was wrong with me.”

Fucking Caleb. I can’t believe he’d do this to her.

“You don’t know that, Collins.”

Tears fill her eyes again. “Then explain why I didn’t get pregnant, and she did.”

The worst part is that I can’t.

“It doesn’t mean you won’t ever be a mother, Collins. It could be something that’s easily solved.” I run my thumb over her knuckles.

She nods. “I know. I’m trying not to jump to conclusions. But it makes me feel physically ill to think of him fathering a child with another

woman.”

“I can’t imagine what you’re feeling right now.”

“Angry, hurt, confused, betrayed—you name it.” She lets out a chuckle that holds absolutely no humor.

“I’m pissed at him too.”

She nods.

“I can’t fucking believe he did this to you. That he would be so irresponsible with your feelings in the first place, then even more so to get his mistress pregnant. I know you said that you were feeling lonely in your marriage before Caleb died, but there’s no excuse for this.”

Collins visibly flinches, and I regret my outburst instantly.

I squeeze her hand. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said any of that.”

She shakes her head. “No, you’re right. I feel the same way.”

We’re quiet for a moment, and I consider whether I should bring up what’s on my mind, but I think it’s best to clear the air. After what she found out last night, I don’t want her confused about my feelings for her.

“About last night…”

Collins raises her hand. “You were right to stop me. If we had slept together, I would’ve been doing it to get back at Caleb, and that’s not how I want to be with you for the first time.”

I nod and cup her face. “It doesn’t mean I don’t want you. Trust me, you wouldn’t believe how much I think about it.”

Her eyes brighten. “Really?”

“Really?” I place a chaste kiss on her lips. “Now, I’ve got to get out of this bed before I have to rely on my willpower again. It’s running in short supply.” I groan and pull away, rolling out of bed and adjusting myself before heading to the bathroom.

Once I’m done, I return to the bedroom and find Collins where I left her.

“What do you normally do for breakfast? Are you a coffee-only kind of girl, or do you like a full spread?”

“Depends on the day, but I usually just have coffee and a bowl of cereal.”

“Coming right up. Any preference on the cereal?”

She smiles, and damn, do I like being able to put that smile on her face even when she’s dealing with so much bullshit. “Surprise me.”

“One coffee and one surprise cereal coming right up.”

I head downstairs and get the coffee going, then search through the cupboards until I find the cereal. The entire time I prepare Collins's breakfast, the feeling of *this is how it could always be* steals over me.

I still feel like a shitty human being for the fact that I'm falling for my best friend's widow, but at the same time, I'm angry as hell at him for what he was doing behind Collins's back. And if he'd told me about it while he was alive, I would've told him what a piece of shit he was being.

After last night, I'm more protective of her than ever. Which is why I can't tell her about the job interview in Portland. If anything comes of it, I'll tell her. She doesn't need my shit on top of her already overflowing plate.

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THIRTY-THREE

Collins

Two days later, and I'm still reeling. It's so strange to think that there's a piece of Caleb out there.

Now that I have confirmation that he was having an affair, I'm going back through my memories with a different lens. Yes, things weren't perfect between us, and I was feeling lonely in my marriage, but I didn't think he was so unhappy as to have an affair. Or maybe the affair was why I became so lonely—he was already pulling away?

I realize that I could go around in circles with all my theories. At some point, I'll have to stop and just try to move forward with my new reality.

I haven't looked at the phone again since that morning. Haven't been able to bring myself to see those ultrasound pictures again.

I did call Nina and fill her in, though. She was as shocked as I was and had more than a few choice words for Caleb. She doesn't seem to feel the same kind of guilt that I do speaking ill of a deceased person.

For my lunch break, I decide to visit the Birdhouse Bakery and grab myself a treat. I think I deserve to eat my feelings away. I've earned it. I'll be at yoga tonight, so it will all work out.

I walk over to the bakery from where I'm parked on Main Street. Even in the winter, the pink exterior and blue-and-white striped canopy exude springtime vibes. Birdhouse Bakery is written in gold lettering on either side of the robin's-egg-blue bakery door.

The bell above the door chimes, making me flinch. It's probably the sixth time I've flinched at something today. My central nervous system is in

overdrive, and I'm on edge.

The bakery case at the far end is painted the same color as the door, and I walk past the handful of small tables to have a look.

Deacon is behind the counter, wearing his usual white apron. He doesn't look like the kind of man you'd expect to own a bakery—six foot four with a barrel chest, a gray beard, and hands like catcher's mitts. He used to be a long-haul truck driver until he discovered his talent for baked goods and pastries after knee surgery.

"Morning, Collins." He crosses his arms and says nothing more, waiting for me to take in what he has available today.

"Hey." I give him as much of a smile as I can muster.

Deacon doesn't say anything else, which suits me fine.

I take in the glistening pastries and read the little chalkboard signs—Dottie's Secret, Roy's Reliable, The Ansel (proceed with caution), and more.

"Take your time," Deacon says and turns around to go back to icing something behind the counter.

I'm contemplating what to get when the door chimes behind me.

Dottie's voice rings throughout the space. "Well, well, look who's out in the wild."

I turn and smile at her, but it must not reach my eyes because she studies me for a beat and a line forms between her eyebrows. She turns to look at Deacon, who has abandoned whatever he was working on, and nods.

"What are we having, sweetheart?" She nods toward the case.

"I don't know."

"She's been standing here for four minutes," Deacon says, his voice a little gentler than usual.

"I'm trying to decide."

I catch her and Deacon sharing a look in my periphery while I stare unseeing at all the options. I look over at Dottie with her bright red lipstick that I could never in a million years wear and her winged eyeliner, and something in her expression makes those tears I thought were all dried up resurface.

I turn back to the case. "I'll just have—whatever. The scone, I guess."

Deacon arches an eyebrow. "Which scone?"

"Whichever. You pick."

Deacon grabs one and sets it on a plate, then slides it over top of the case toward me.

Dottie is still looking at me. "Sit down with me a minute."

"You don't have to—"

"I do have to. Sit down with me. C'mon." She takes the plate off the top of the case, leads me to one of the two-top tables by the window, and sets it down. Then she pulls out the other chair and looks at me.

I sit.

Deacon comes out from behind the counter. I'm not sure I've ever seen him out from behind the counter before.

He drags a third chair over to the small table with his boot and sits, then leans his forearm on the table, studying me. He looks somewhat ridiculous at this small table with how big he is, but I'd never tell him that.

I stare at my scone.

"What happened?" Dottie's words don't come out as a question.

"Nothing."

"Collins."

"Nothing new—just... nothing." I shake my head, still staring at my plate.

Neither of them says anything. There are only the three of us in the bakery, and it's quiet except for the humming sound coming from the pastry case.

"I found something out about Caleb." I don't know why I say it. Maybe because it feels like holding the words in feels as if they're burning a hole in my tongue.

Both Dottie and Deacon freeze in my periphery, and I finally look up.

"What kind of something?" Dottie asks.

"The kind of thing you don't come back from." My throat closes as I try to keep going, and I have to swallow to make space for the words. "He wasn't the man I thought he was."

Deacon exhales slowly through his nose, then leans back in the chair, crossing his arms.

"Does anyone know?" Dottie asks.

"Just Ansel. And Nina." I stare at the scone again, fingering it but unable to pick it up and eat it.

She nods.

"I keep feeling like I have to *do* something. But what is there to do? He's not here. I can't make sense of any of it." My chest tightens as though I have heartburn.

"That's the trap." Deacon's voice is grave but quiet.

I look at him.

He's looking at the table, not at me. "You want to yell at him. You want to demand an explanation. But there's no version of this where that happens. You're carrying this thing around and you have nowhere to go." Deacon meets my gaze.

I nod. Yes, that's it exactly. My chin wobbles while the lump in my throat grows and I have to gnash my teeth together.

He nods back. "That's the trap."

Dottie takes a long breath in through her nose and lets it out slowly through her mouth. "I ran from a bad man once." The corners of Dottie's red-coated lips tilt down. I know I'm going to get some version of the story that she tells everyone, but I can also tell that today, there's some level of truth in what she's saying. "I got in a car and I drove and I didn't stop until I reached a little town I'd never heard of. A place where I thought I could start my life over. For the first six months, I'd lie in bed going over every conversation, every moment we spent together, wondering how I didn't see it. How I missed all the red flags. How it was possible to be that blind."

She looks at me, and there's a heaviness in her gaze that I've never seen before. I realize for the first time that she's carrying around her own heartache.

"You'll do that for a while. Rewrite every conversation you ever had, every trip you took, every time he went out of town and called home to tell you what he was up to. You're gonna open every drawer in your mind to see what you can find. It will be like that for a while."

Tears build in my eyes, but they don't fall. "Then what?"

"Then one day you're gonna open a drawer and find nothing in it. And then a week will pass. Then a month. Then a year. And you'll realize you haven't opened any drawers in a while."

"That's it?"

She nods. "That's it."

"That doesn't feel like enough."

She nods again. "I know."

Deacon shifts in his chair, drawing my attention. “You can’t fix him. You can’t fix whatever it is he did. The one thing you *can* do is not hand him any more of your life. It’s a tragedy that he died, no way around that. But he already took something from you. Don’t let him take away your future.”

I stare at him.

Deacon pushes away from the table and stands, then looks at my scone. “I’ll get you something else.”

“No, this is fine.”

He reaches for the plate. “I’ll get you something different. You don’t want this one.”

He walks back over to the display, picks something from the plethora of pastries, and sets it on a plate.

Dottie leans across the table and puts her hand on mine. “You listen to me, sweetheart. You do not carry this alone. You talk to Nina, you talk to Ansel. Heck, come see me at the café or come in here to talk to Deacon.” She glances over at where he’s making his way back to us. “He’s a better listener than most people realize.” She squeezes my hand. “This town knew how to sit with you when Caleb died. They’ll know how to sit with you for this.”

“But they don’t even know what happened.”

“They don’t need to know the whole story to be able to sit with you through it.” She pats my hand and straightens out as Deacon slides a new plate in front of me.

“Eat that.” He nods at the pastry.

“What is it?”

“The Ansel.”

I arch an eyebrow.

“A chocolate habanero croissant that probably shouldn’t work, but does.” He shrugs. “Sometimes two things that shouldn’t work are actually magic when you put them together, even if most people don’t think they would complement each other.”

I swallow hard. “Thank you.” Then I pick up the pastry and take a big bite.

Deacon goes back to work, and Dottie sits with me for another ten minutes while I enjoy my pastry. We don’t talk about what’s bothering me.

Instead, I tell her about how I joined a weekly yoga class and about some of the decorative pieces I bought for my bedroom.

When it's time for me to get back to work, I say goodbye to her and Deacon, feeling lighter than when I first came in here. It's not like one conversation has made everything better, but I do see hope on the horizon that I won't always be dragging this feeling behind me like a ball and chain.

Ansel calls as I'm heading out of the Birdhouse Bakery to my car, so I stop and pull my thin glove off one hand and grab my phone from my purse, accepting the call.

It's still cold and snowy, but the bite of deep winter has given way to something milder. Something that promises spring in the not-too-distant future.

"Hello?"

"Hey, how are you doing?" Ansel's deep voice sounds in my ear, and I find it comforting. I instantly feel more at ease and settled.

"I'm not amazing but not like I was on the weekend." Or even a half hour ago, I don't add.

"It still feels surreal."

I nod, though he can't see me. "I agree. The whole thing is so messed up."

"To say the least. How's the bedroom going?"

Ansel insisted on sticking around to help me finish painting the morning after he stayed over.

"It's coming together. The bedding arrived yesterday, so I made the bed. Managed to find some new lamps at The Foglight online, so I ordered them and am going to pick them up after work." I'd planned to pop by there after I grabbed something at the bakery, but that didn't turn out as planned.

I don't mention it, but I also ordered a new mattress. I had debated doing it before, but with the recent revelation, it's the right thing to do.

"That's great. Listen, I have to go out of town for the day tomorrow, and then I work a few shifts, but I thought maybe on the weekend, we could get together and do something."

I grin like a schoolgirl who's just been asked out on her first date. "What did you have in mind?"

"Hear me out..."

"Why do I have the feeling I'm not going to like this?"

"I thought we could go snowmobiling."

I'm not a fan of winter sports, or the cold, really, but the more years I spend in Echo Lake, the more it's growing on me. To my surprise, the idea of spending the day outside in the snow doesn't sound awful. At least not when it involves me wrapping my arms around Ansel all day.

"I have a new sled, and there are some really gorgeous trails around. I think you'd like it."

"All right."

"Seriously?"

I chuckle at the surprise in his voice. "Yup." I pop the "p" on the end of the word.

"I thought I was going to have to do more convincing than that."

"Well, you thought wrong," I say with some sass.

"All right, I'll text you the details sometime this week, sound good?"

"Sounds good. So where are you headed tomorrow?"

There's silence for a beat. "Oh, uh, Portland again."

"Miss your friend already?" I check both sides of the road, then cross the street to walk over to my SUV.

"Yeah, something like that. I've gotta run, but I'll be in touch, all right?"

"Sounds good. Have a good one."

I know better than anyone how quickly things can change, but they don't always change for the worse. No, sometimes a conversation and the promise of seeing someone you care about is enough to lift your spirits.

THIRTY-FOUR

Ansel

Collins and I head out at first light to the head of the trail we're going to take. Though this isn't really her thing, she told me she visited The Main Outfitters store to get some gear. So she's decked out in a one-piece black, bright pink, and bright blue suit with a matching helmet.

I told her I was happy to ask one of the guys at the fire station if I could borrow some of their wife's gear, but she insisted that she wanted her own. Which makes me excited for future trips like this with her.

Once the sled is unloaded from the trailer and I've parked my truck, I walk back over to her. I pick her helmet up off the seat. "You ready for this?"

"All set."

I have to say, she actually seems like she might not be dreading today.

I slide the helmet onto her head and do it up for her. The whole time, her wide, expressive eyes take me in. When I'm done, I lightly tap the top, then grab my helmet and slide it on. After I double-check that I've got everything I need, I take a seat and turn the sled on, then motion for Collins to hop on behind me.

"If I'm going too fast for you, just let me know," I call over the engine noise.

"Do your worst, Mercer."

When we shoot forward, she yelps and clings to me like a koala bear.

We spend the next several hours working through various trails in the forest. It's late in the season and the conditions aren't exactly the best

they'll ever be. This will probably be the last ride I get this season, so I go a little longer and take it all in.

Collins hasn't said anything or asked me to stop, so I assume she must be enjoying herself too.

Eventually I find a spot to stop that doesn't leave us in the middle of the trail. I bring the sled over to the side of the trail in a small inlet in the forest and cut the engine. Collins climbs off the back, and I miss the feel of her arms wrapped around me.

I get up off the sled and stretch my legs for a second, then remove my helmet. "You hungry? I packed some food for us."

"Yes," she says through the helmet, struggling to get it undone, so I step forward to give her a hand.

"Don't worry, I'm used to undoing Baylor's helmet. I've got you." I undo the strap and gently slide the helmet off her head before setting it on the sled.

"Are you comparing me to a six-year-old?" she asks with mock exasperation. Before I can react, she bends down, grabs some snow, and tosses it at me.

It hits me in the face and leaves me sputtering and stunned. When I recover, I grin at her. "Oh, now you've done it."

I charge forward, and she yelps but can't get away from me fast enough. Bent at the waist, I pick her up over my shoulder with a battle cry and spin her around. She screams and laughs at the same time, trying to hold on to me for dear life.

When I finally set her down, I grip her waist in case she's dizzy. But she just grins up at me, then her hands are in my hair, and she pulls me down to her, kissing me.

I wasn't sure whether we'd get back here after she sat with everything she'd discovered, but I'm not an idiot, so I deepen the kiss. Both our noses are cold, and the air is crisp on our faces, but it doesn't dampen the heat of our kiss.

When we pull back from each other, we're both panting, clearly wanting more but unable to take it because of our surroundings. In the summer, that may not have stopped us, but I want to put on a good show our first time together, and the cold temperatures aren't known to do much for the male anatomy.

Besides, she still has her checklist to get through. More than that, I want to be sure her head isn't a mess over what's going on. The last thing I want to be is Collins's regret.

"Let me get the food out, and then we can sit on the sled and eat. I brought some sandwiches, soup, and some drinks."

Twenty-five minutes later, we're finishing up eating. Collins takes a sip from the Thermos and looks at me thoughtfully.

"What are you thinking?"

"What was it like growing up without your parents?"

Her question surprises me, and I blink a few times. No one has asked me that in some time.

"Sorry, there was probably a better way to ease into that topic. I was just thinking of Caleb's son or daughter and how they're not going to grow up with their father."

Ah, now I understand how it came up. "It was tough... at first. But we had Roy, so that made it a little easier. It didn't replace my parents, but it made the loss more bearable. We still had an adult in our lives who loved us. If it weren't for him, who knows where we would've ended up? We might have been split up."

Collins's head tilts. "Do you remember anything about your mom?"

"Not a lot. I was five when she died, so I have impressions of her more than actual memories. The memories I do have are more like snippets than anything, and I can never be sure if it's a true memory or just something I imagined after being told the story."

I struggled with that for a long time. Every year that passes, you forget more and more about that person. That's why when Caleb died, I dreaded every month that passed, knowing eventually I'd forget his voice, or his laughter, or stories that I only remember from my side or Fowler's when we were growing up. He wouldn't be there to argue that I had it all wrong.

"And your dad? I know he's in prison, but I don't really know the full story." She raises both hands. "If you don't want to talk about it, I understand."

"It's fine." It's not something I ever really discuss with anyone, but I find myself wanting to tell Collins. I want her to know that no matter how hard life knocks her down, she'll always have the strength to get back up. "After my mom died, my dad sort of went off the rails. He couldn't deal. Hollis was a newborn, and he already had three kids at home. Over time, he

got into drugs and alcohol, then he got caught drinking and driving. He probably did it hundreds of times after that, but it was years later before he got picked up again. He hit and killed someone, and because that someone was the son of someone important, the judge gave him the maximum sentence.”

“Wow. Jeez, I’m sorry, Ansel.”

I shrug. “It was a long time ago, and he made his decisions.”

I wish I actually felt as nonchalant about it as I pretend I do. The truth is that I’m constantly worried I’ll fail someone I love the way my dad failed all of us.

“Do any of you still talk to him?”

I shake my head. “I think my uncle might, but he doesn’t talk to us about it if he does. Knows we’re not interested in knowing. The funny thing is I don’t think the reason we don’t speak to him is because he went to prison. It’s the years before that, when he was totally checked out as a parent, that hurt the most. It wasn’t like he had any substance abuse issues before that, so it’s hard not to feel like he made the choice to deal with his pain that way. And if he didn’t have four kids at home who needed him, I guess... I don’t know... maybe it would feel different. But he did have four kids relying on him, and he let each of us down. If it weren’t for all that, we’d probably still have some kind of relationship with him even though we hate the fact he got in that car and took someone’s life.”

She cups my face. “That makes sense. I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

I twist my face and kiss her palm. “Thank you.” What else can I say?

We’re both quiet for a moment, and I shift to face her better.

“Can I ask you a question?”

She motions toward me. “Have at it. You pretty much know everything. All the terrible stuff anyway.”

“When Caleb first died, I thought for sure you’d move away. Figured there were too many memories here, and you didn’t have any family keeping you here. Why did you stay?”

I thought the moving truck would be at her house a month after Caleb died.

“You might’ve heard me talk about how I was an army brat growing up, right?”

I nod. Caleb mentioned it a few times.

“I never had the opportunity to make the kind of friends who stick because we were constantly moving. It felt like as soon as I started to get my bearings and get comfortable in a new place, we were up and leaving.”

“That must have been hard.” I bring the Thermos to my mouth and drink the hot apple cider.

“You get used to it, I guess. It was all I really knew. It wasn’t until Caleb brought me here that anywhere felt like home to me. I’d heard people talk about that feeling my whole life, but I never knew what they meant. Not until Echo Lake. That’s why I decided to stay. I like that people know you, care about you, check up on you. Like a big extended family.”

My gut twists when I think about my interview in Portland earlier this week. It went well. So well that I won’t be surprised if I’m offered the job. Not only have I not told Collins about it, but after hearing her answer, I know there’s no way I could ever ask her to leave Echo Lake. Even if we did long distance for a period of time, if things were going to be permanent between us, I couldn’t ask her to leave.

“Anyway, that’s why I’m still here.” She gives me a tight-lipped smile. “Now I can’t imagine leaving Echo Lake.” The look she gives me implies that I’m a part of the reason why she wants to stay, unknowingly shoving the knife a little deeper into my guilt.

I abruptly stand. “We should probably get going.”

She blinks a few times in surprise. “Oh, yeah, sure.”

We pack everything up and get on our way.

I vow to myself I’ll tell her as soon as we’re back at her place.

THIRTY-FIVE

Ansel

I pull into Collins's driveway and park my truck. The entire drive back to her place, all I could think about was how I'm going to tell her about the potential job in Portland. The last thing I want her to think is that I'm abandoning her. I don't even know for sure that I'll be offered the job yet, nor do I know if I'd even say yes.

Still, I'm antsy and nervous as I turn to face her in the cab of the truck.

"Do you want to come in for hot chocolate?"

Yes. Going inside will be better than doing this out here. Perfect.

"That'd be great." I shut off the truck and hop out.

Once we're inside and take off all our snow gear, Collins goes straight to the kitchen. I follow her. She pulls milk out of the fridge and pours it into a saucepan.

"When you said hot chocolate, you meant real hot chocolate."

She grins over her shoulder. Her nose and her cheeks are still tinged with pink from the cold. "Is there any other kind?"

I grip the back of my neck and cringe. "I usually boil water and then just dump some of the powder in there."

"Amateur." She winks. "Can you grab the marshmallows out of that cupboard for me?" She points at the cupboard.

Ten minutes later, she passes me a large mug filled with white hot chocolate covered with tiny marshmallows.

"Want to sit in the family room?" I think that's a better place for this conversation than the kitchen.

“Sure.”

She follows me, and we take a seat beside each other on the couch. I’m nervous as I work up the nerve to bring up the Portland job.

“See what you think.” She nods toward my drink and sips her own.

I bring the mug to my lips and take a small sip so I don’t burn my tongue. “Mmm. Oh my god, that’s so much better than what I make.”

Collins smiles again, then lets out a breath and straightens up in her seat, chin raised. “I need to ask you a favor.”

I frown, wondering why she seems like she’s readying for a fight. “What is it?”

“Will you read through the texts between Caleb and Madelyn?”

I blink several times. “You don’t want to do it yourself?”

She shakes her head. “I’ve thought about it, and I don’t want to see any more. Not the specifics of whatever they talked about, but I do have some questions I want answers to. I just don’t want the actual words in my head. I feel like the images of the texts I already saw are seared into my brain. I don’t want to make it worse.”

Of course I understand. It makes sense. But I’d be lying if I said I’m looking forward to it. “Yeah, sure then. If you think it will help you.”

“I do. I think until I know everything—at least everything I can know with him no longer here—I’ll just continue to wonder, to make up things in my head. It’s better if I know now. That way I can just deal with it and try to move on.”

I nod. “That makes sense.”

She sets her mug on the coffee table and stands. “I’ll go get it.”

She leaves the room, and I hear her going up the stairs.

Fuck. No chance I’m bringing up the job now. She’s not going to be in any shape for other shitty news after this.

Collins returns a minute or so later, handing me the phone.

“You’re sure about this?” I arch an eyebrow.

“The sooner I know, the sooner I can start to get over it. I’m tired of being in limbo. It’s been almost two years.”

The mention of the timeline brings up the fact that the two-year anniversary of Caleb’s death is approaching.

I clear my throat. “All right, what’s the code?”

She tells me, and I punch it in, then tap on the text message app. I scroll up to the beginning of the messages, noting the date, and start reading. I feel

Collins watching me for a bit, but then she gets up and walks over to the window beside the fireplace and looks outside.

My stomach grows sour as I keep reading and my face heats with anger. I can't believe that my best friend, the guy I knew like a brother, would do this behind his wife's back. Say these kinds of things to another woman. I'll never understand it.

It takes a long time to get through all the messages. When I finally finish, I exit the app and click the button on the side of the phone to close the screen. "All right, I'm done."

Collins releases a rough exhale, then she turns to face me. "I have some questions."

My heart rate picks up. I'm not sure what she's going to ask, but I don't look forward to having to be the one to deliver her hurtful news. She's already been through so much.

"What do you want to know?"

"How long was he seeing her?"

"The first message on this phone was about eight months before he died."

She seems to take that in stride, though there's very little emotion showing on her face. "So there's a good chance they were seeing each other a little longer than that."

I nod.

"Did you get any idea of how it started?"

I shake my head. "No, I didn't see any mention of anything like that in there."

She tucks a piece of hair that's fallen out of her French braid behind her ear. "I keep wondering if they met by a fluke or if someone introduced them. Maybe she was related to someone else at the academy... the possibilities are endless, but in the end, it doesn't really matter. The fact is they did meet, and whatever happened did."

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

Collins nods. "Yeah, I need this. Doesn't mean it's not painful, though."

"All right. What else do you want to know?"

She swallows. Hard. "Did he... did he love her? Or was he just hooking up with her?"

I look away from her. The minute I read those three words, my heart sank for her, and I knew she'd ask this. I had thought it might be her first

question.

“Ansel, tell me. Please.”

With a sigh, I look at her. “From what I saw, I would say that it probably started as physical and developed into something more.”

“But did he say he loves her? Did he send her a message that says that?” Tears are in her eyes as if she can read my body language.

I really don’t want to tell her.

“Collins...” My stomach roils. Why do I have to be the one?

“He did,” she whispers, phrasing it like a fact and not a question.

“I’m sorry, yes, they both wrote it to each other.”

I walk over to her, but she holds up a hand. “And the baby... was he happy about the baby?”

She’s killing me here. I rock my head back. I’m not sure I can even speak past the painful knot in my throat. My eyes and my chest burn with the truth.

Instead of confirming with words, I give her a single nod.

Her face crumples, and her head falls into her hands, crying. I break the distance between us, pulling her into my arms, knowing I can’t make this better for her, but wanting to anyway.

“Was it because of something I did? Because I couldn’t give him a child? Did he say why he was so unhappy with me?”

I rub her back as she cries into my chest, then kiss the top of her head. “I don’t think it’s anything you did or didn’t do. This is on him. If he was unhappy, he should have talked to you about it. Not started an affair.”

She pulls away from me, a fiery look on her face. “But did he say anything about me at all? Don’t lie to me, Ansel. I want to know it all. I lived in this delusional happy bubble that wasn’t real, and I want it popped and destroyed.”

I push a hand through my hair. I’m not sure whether it would be better or worse for Collins for him to have said something. “He didn’t say anything in those messages. They didn’t discuss you at all...”

Her face sinks. I’m sure that’s hurtful. She wasn’t even discussed as if she didn’t matter.

“Up until right before the end. He said he was going to talk to you about the baby soon.”

She throws her arms up at her sides. “What the hell?” Then she pushes her hands into her hair. “I feel like I’m being punked. I mean... what the

hell, Ansel?” She laughs maniacally and shakes her head.

I draw her into my arms again. “It doesn’t make any sense, I know.”

“Thank you for doing that for me. I know it probably wasn’t easy for you.”

I cup her face. “Collins, I’m here for you. I will do whatever it takes to help you get past this.” I say it with my whole chest because I fucking mean it. This woman has somehow become the most important thing to me.

She pulls my face down for a kiss, licking the seam of my lips. I can’t resist, and I open to her. She tastes of the sweet hot chocolate as I let my hands roam down to her leggings-clad ass, pulling her in so she can feel exactly what she does to me.

Collins pulls away and looks up at me with heavy-lidded eyes. “I just want to feel good. Please make me feel good, Ansel. I’m begging you.”

Well, fuck. When she’s begging like this, how could I not?

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THIRTY-SIX

Collins

This time, Ansel doesn't deny me. Instead, he picks me up, and my legs swing around his waist. He walks me over to the couch. I assume he's going to set me down on it, but he brings me to the back of it instead and sets me on my feet.

Before I can ask what he's doing, he reaches for my waist and spins me around so I'm facing the back of the couch. Then he applies pressure to the middle of my back, and I bend forward.

"Ass out, baby." His voice is deep and thick with lust, and I press my thighs together. Ansel wastes no time dragging my leggings to the floor and tossing them aside. "Nice surprise." His chest covers my back, and his mouth is at my ear. "Do you always go commando with leggings?"

"It's more comfortable."

"Does that mean you weren't wearing them when we did yoga?" He slips off me.

"Yeah."

He groans and drops his forehead to my ass cheek.

I resist the urge to arch my back and beg him to taste me. I'm completely bared to him, yet I feel no self-consciousness as he lifts his forehead and spreads my ass cheeks, taking his fill. I can practically feel his gaze move over my wet flesh.

"I'm gonna make you feel so good, baby."

That's all the warning I get before he licks me from one end to the other. I moan, and my head falls forward. When he reaches my puckered hole, he

laves it with attention. It's a foreign feeling to me, but oh so good, and I whimper. My clit pulses with the need for attention, and I want so badly for him to fill me as he continues to work that place where no one has been before.

I grip the couch cushion by the time he moves down and fucks my slit with his tongue. It's nothing I've had done to me before, but it's exactly what I want and yet not enough all at once.

It's a glorious, painful torture. He slides his tongue in and out of my entrance, his thumb pressing my clit in small circular motions.

I arch my back for more. Ansel concedes, bringing his mouth down to my swollen bud and sucking hard before laving it with his tongue. Just when I'm there, he pushes two fingers into me, and I grab hold of the couch cushions so hard my knuckles go white.

I'm practically panting as he drags his fingers in and out of me, curving them to hit the magic spot. It's impossible not to fuck myself against his fingers, but I refrain. The only thing that stops me is the knowledge that if I do, his mouth won't stay on my clit and the things he's doing to it—oh my god. I've never felt anything like it before.

He builds me up again and again until I think I might explode, then pulls back just enough to leave me wanting it again. He does it over and over, feasting between my thighs like a man possessed until I can't not come.

"Ansel, please... please..."

His deep chuckle sounds against my wet flesh. He's enjoying this pleasure-torture game, leaving me on the knife's edge of orgasm.

Pulling my hand from the cushion, I bring it around to the juncture of my thighs, but Ansel smacks it away, pulling back. "Don't you dare. This pussy is mine to control."

I clench around his fingers. He chuckles low and pulls himself completely from my body.

"No, don't you dare!"

His large hands wrap around my waist and spin me to face him. "Like that, do you? You wanna hear how much I'm enjoying my first taste of you? How I can't get enough and want to make it last?"

I am putty in his hands, and he knows it.

He grins and pushes me back by the sternum. At first, I'm not sure what he's doing until I realize that he wants me to fall over the back of the couch.

My shoulders are now pressing against the couch cushion, and my body is facing the ceiling. He steps forward, flush with the back of the couch, and I watch as he spreads my legs and hooks my knees over his shoulders.

"I'm gonna be thinking about this pussy all the time now that I know how it tastes." Ansel looks me in the eyes as he takes one long swipe of me from ass to clit.

"Ansel, I need you to—"

"This was about making you feel good. Haven't I done that?" There's a small smirk on his face as he presses his thumb to my clit, going round and round and round.

"Yes, so good."

"Seems only fair that I'm the one who gets to decide when you come, doesn't it?" He pushes two fingers into me, and I stretch around him.

"Y-yes."

I watch with fascination as he works his fingers in and out of me, my orgasm building again. He leans in and sucks on my clit with a steady pulse, and in this position, I can do nothing but take what he dishes out to me.

"Are you ready to come, Collins?" He flicks my clit with his tongue, watching me the whole time.

"Yes, yes, please let me come, Ansel."

He chuckles into me, still working me with his fingers. Then he curves them, and with every thrust, he hits my G-spot deep inside me, something that makes me abandon any pride I might have about keeping how much he's affecting me under wraps.

"I wanna hear my name from your lips when you come, baby, got it?"

I cry out and clench around him, so close.

"You like when I use a filthy mouth with you, don't you?" His throaty chuckle is almost my undoing. "Noted."

"Please..."

"Get ready for it, baby." Then he leans down and sucks on my clit—hard—curling his fingers just right, and I explode.

I shatter into a million pieces as I fall apart, screaming his name. My vision goes black, and my body convulses as pure bliss surges through me.

When I finally come back to myself, Ansel helps me up over the back of the couch and steadies me until I find my legs again. The expression on his face is pure awe, as though he can't believe what he's just seen. I understand how he feels. I've never come that hard in my life.

I struggle to get my heart rate back down and recover, but when I can feel my body again, I wrap my arms around his neck. “Thank you. That made me feel really good.”

He grins. “Anytime.”

His rock-hard erection presses between us, and I run a hand down his chest to between his legs, but he pulls my hand away.

“Ansel, let me—”

He shakes his head. “This was about making you feel good, not me.” He kisses me slowly.

I taste myself on his tongue, and it only stokes the fire of my libido again.

When he pulls away, he kisses the tip of my nose. “Should we throw those hot chocolates in the microwave to heat them back up?”

I chuckle and press my cheek to his chest. “Let’s just stay like this for a little longer.”

He rests his cheek on top of my head, and we stand with our arms wrapped around each other.

Ansel is the one to break the silence. “What are you going to do for the anniversary of Caleb’s death?”

Last year, there was a ceremony at the fire station, but I didn’t have it in me to join them. The chief reached out last week to let me know that there would be one again this year, and it’s been on my mind since.

“I’m going to go to the ceremony at the fire station, then I’m going to come home and write my letter to Caleb.”

Ansel stills beneath my hands as though he’s surprised by my answer. “Yeah?”

I nod into his chest. “Yeah. I’d already decided a while back that the anniversary would be the day I’d write the letter. That’s part of the reason I wanted to know everything that was in those text messages.”

The final step after the letter will be to remove my wedding rings.

“There’s something else I’ve been wondering...”

There’s hesitancy in his voice, so I pull back a bit to meet his gaze.

“Are you going to tell anyone about Caleb’s affair?”

It’s a fair question, one I’ve been asking myself. I’d never go broadcasting it around like a scorned woman, but will I purposely hide it from people?

“I don’t know. I’m angry as hell at him, but I don’t want to unnecessarily tarnish his good name after his death. I’m sure I’ll talk about it with the ones I’m closest to at some point. I already told Nina.”

He nods as though that’s how he expected me to answer.

“I’ve been debating whether I should tell Caleb’s parents.”

“Why would you do that?”

“They have a grandchild they know nothing about.”

Ansel pushes his hand through his hair. “Shit, I hadn’t thought about that.”

“I feel like they have a right to know, but that would be opening a whole can of worms for them. I’m outing that their son had an affair at the same time. I need to think about it for a while. I don’t want to make any rash decisions I can’t take back.”

He nods. “Sure, that makes sense.”

“Listen, Ansel, I know you must have your own feelings about this whole situation, independent of anything going on between us. If you want to tell Fowler so you can talk to him about it, that’s fine. He was as close to Caleb as you were.”

Relief crosses his face. “Thank you. I’ve been wanting to bring it up to you, but I wanted to give you time to deal with everything before I asked, but yeah, I really want to talk to Fowler about it.”

“I appreciate that, but I’m not the only one who has feelings to resolve around this whole thing.”

He tucks a piece of hair behind my ear, then kisses my temple. “If I haven’t said it before, I want to say it now—your strength amazes me.”

I let out a sad sort of chuckle. “I’m not that strong, believe me. Sometimes it feels like I take a step forward, then I’m forced a few steps back. It’s going to take me some time to digest everything you told me about those text messages. But at least now I feel like I know everything, and I can really start to move forward. No more surprises.” I give him a watery smile.

Ansel hugs me tightly. I hate that just when I was better, I got thrown this curveball, but Ansel’s right, I’m strong. I’ll get to the other side, hopefully with Ansel by my side.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Ansel

A week has passed since Collins gave me permission to talk to Fowler about Caleb cheating and having a kid. Our schedules haven't aligned, and he's been busy at the bar, working almost every day, so this morning is the first time I've gotten to see him more than just in passing.

I'm in the kitchen, putting away my breakfast dishes, when he walks in. His dirty-blond hair is a riot of waves, and he's only wearing his boxers.

"You're alive. I was starting to wonder." I lean back against the counter.

"Barely." He scratches his chest.

"There's still coffee." I motion toward the coffee pot I brewed a couple of hours ago.

"Thanks." He yawns, walking over to the cupboard and grabbing a mug. He pours himself a cup and takes a big gulp right away.

I've been considering the best way to get into the Caleb thing with him. I'm not sure how he'll react. He was as close to Caleb as I was, and I know he'll feel as conflicted and betrayed as I do.

"The bar still busy?"

He nods as he turns around. "Yeah. Business is up with the pub in Hillside closing, and Emelia's added all kinds of events geared at tourism to the calendar, so that has more people visiting Echo Lake. It's great, helps pay the bills, but it doesn't help when I have to keep firing my staff. How can it be this fucking hard to find someone who knows how to pour drinks and not be a dick to the customers?" He shakes his head and takes another sip of his coffee.

“Damn, you had to let someone else go?”

He sits at the kitchen table. “Yeah, a couple of days ago.”

“That sucks. If there’s anything I can do, let me know.” I walk over to the table and set down my coffee, leaning with both hands on the back of the chair across from him.

“Well, if you know anyone looking for a job in the service industry, send them my way. It’d be nice not to have to work fourteen-hour days, seven days a week.” He shakes his head in frustration.

“Will do.” I blow out a breath. “Listen, I have to talk to you about something.”

He frowns. “I can’t do serious, man. You look intense right now.”

“Sorry, but I have to, and you’re probably not going to like what I have to talk to you about.”

Fowler shifts in his seat, leaning back and groaning. “Give it.”

“It’s about Caleb.” I pull the chair out and sit.

His frown deepens. “Collins? What’s happening with the two of you?”

When I’ve seen him these past couple of months, he hasn’t really asked about her. I figure it’s because he’s uncomfortable with the idea of the two of us having feelings for each other. And I get it. If the roles were reversed, I would probably feel the same.

I don’t want my relationship with Collins to come between our friendship, but I’d be lying if I said that I don’t feel some distance between us lately. I’ve told myself that it’s because he’s working so much that we haven’t seen each other, but maybe that’s the reason.

“She’s doing okay... as well as can be expected, I guess. Things with us are still on a bit of a pause until she works through what she needs to.”

He shakes his head. “It’s still a mindfuck to think of the two of you together, but I’m glad she has you to be there for her.”

I nod. “I know it’s weird. I get it. I just don’t want it to get in between the two of us.”

“It won’t. It’s just going to take some time to wrap my head around it, that’s all.” He brings his coffee to his lips.

“Anyway, that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about.”

He arches an eyebrow with an expression that suggests he’s worried I’m going to throw him another shit thing. And I am.

“Collins found something out. Found some stuff when she was going through some of Caleb’s things to pack away.”

Fowler tenses. "What'd she find?"

I sigh. "A few things, but the biggest thing was a cell phone that Caleb had hidden. One he used for texting..." Oh, fuck it, just rip the Band-Aid off. "His mistress."

His gaze darts to the floor. I've known him my entire life, and I can read him like a book. Fowler can't look at people when he's hiding something.

I bolt up out of my chair. "You knew? You fucking knew?"

He raises his hands. "He swore me to secrecy."

"What the fuck?" Hurt and betrayal lash at my chest. "Do you know about the baby too?" When his eyes fall to the floor again, I push both hands through my hair. "Un-fucking-believable."

I pace around the kitchen, gripping my hair. I feel like a fucking idiot, like the only one left out of the loop in our little trio of friendship. I'm so full of anger and... and something I can't name.

Fowler pushes away from the table and stands. "Ansel, let me explain."

I whirl on him, pointing at him. "No. Fuck you. You give me all this shit when I tell you about me and Collins, like we're doing something wrong, and you knew this? That he was fucking some other woman and giving her a baby? How dare you judge me."

Before he can say anything else, I walk out of the kitchen, grab my jacket off the hook in the front hall, and pull my keys from the bowl by the front door before slamming the door behind me. Then I'm in my truck and I'm driving, though I don't know where.

After driving around a bit, I end up at Elliott's. I'm not even sure why. Maybe my subconscious knows I need a pep talk from my big brother. Emelia's car isn't in the driveway because she's probably at work. And my niece should be at school.

I knock on the door, and Elliott answers right away. He gives me a quizzical look, but steps out of the way to allow me in.

"I'm just working in the kitchen. Had some issues with registration last year, so I had someone redo the website. I'm checking over everything before it goes live since registration is next week."

My brother owns a camp on the other side of the lake from his house. During the summer months, it's full of kids and counselors, and in the winter months, he rents it out for corporate retreats or to hunters or snowmobiler groups traveling to the area.

I follow him into the kitchen. "Sorry to just drop in like this."

“No worries. You want anything to drink?” He motions toward the fridge.

I shake my head.

“Okay.” He shrugs and sits at the table, closing his laptop and setting it off to the side. Elliott leans back in his chair and crosses his arms. “Why are you all riled up?”

“What makes you think I’m riled up?”

He arches an eyebrow. “Besides the fact that you’re here before lunch? Maybe because you’re standing there with your legs spread and your hands in fists. Pretty obvious. At least to me. We shared a bedroom for years, remember?”

I roll my eyes. “All right, sure. I’m pissed.”

“This have something to do with Collins?”

My jaw tenses. “Why would you ask that?”

He shrugs. “Word is that you two are spending a lot of time together lately.”

“I’m helping her with something, that’s all.” It’s not all, but he doesn’t need to know that. At least not yet.

“Okay then, what or who has pissed you off?”

I can’t tell him specifics, but I realize now why I’m here. “With Kate, how did you find it in yourself to forgive her?”

He blinks several times, clearly surprised by my line of questioning. He sits up straighter in his chair.

Baylor’s mom took off when Baylor was still an infant, leaving Elliott to raise her on his own. Kate came back into the picture, like, six months ago, wanting to establish a relationship with her daughter again.

“I don’t know that I ever really *forgave* her. It would be impossible for me to tell the woman who left our child without a thought as to what that might do to Baylor that it’s okay that she took off.” He leans forward, resting his forearms on the table and seeming to think for a moment. “I think that maybe by the time she came back, enough time had passed that I was able to *understand* why Kate did what she did. I don’t forgive her, but I can see it a little better from her perspective and understand why she thought it was the right choice—even if I know it wasn’t.”

I nod but don’t say anything, rolling over what he said in my mind.

Elliott picks up a pen beside his computer, taps it twice on the table, then sets it down. “Some of it is time, I think. Doesn’t fix it, but it does

something. And once I saw how happy Baylor was to have Kate in her life, holding on to my anger started to cost me more than it was worth. Then there's Emelia. When she came into my life, she showed me what life could be like if I wasn't carrying all that animosity around all the time. How sweet it could be if I set it down." He shrugs. "And it is. People are gonna do things you don't agree with, Ansel, there's no stopping that. They're gonna make choices that will piss you off. Sometimes life will hand you a shit sandwich for no other reason than that's life, but you owe it to yourself not to let it eat you alive—because it will. I watched it happen to Dad after Mom died. Hell, it tried to eat me alive for five years before I figured myself out."

He rubs a hand over his jaw and looks at me for longer than I want him to, if only because my older brother has a knack for seeing the things I don't want to tell him.

"But you've never been like me, Ansel. You've never been angry at the world because of what happened with Mom and Dad. In fact, you were the opposite. You always seemed to live life to the fullest. Whatever this is about, it's got you sitting in my kitchen at eleven in the morning looking like you want to put your fist through the wall. That's not you. So I know it must be something big. You're gonna have to figure out how to do something with it before it does something to you." He watches me for a beat. "You want to tell me what's going on?"

"It's not my business to tell."

Elliott holds my gaze, then gives me a slow nod. "Okay. Just answer me one thing." He picks up the pen again, tapping it on the table. "You in any trouble?"

I shake my head. "No, not the kind you're thinking."

He watches me for another beat, then gives me a single sharp nod, and I can tell that he's going to let the topic go. "Whenever you're ready to talk, I'm here. And if it's not me, make sure it's Hollis or Uncle Roy. Whatever it is, you don't have to face it alone."

All I can do is nod because suddenly there's a large lump in my throat preventing me from speaking.

Elliott opens his computer back up. "I gotta finish what I'm doing. You're welcome to hang around if you want, though."

I thumb over my shoulder. "I'll get out of your hair." I turn to leave the kitchen.

“Ansel.”

I spin around.

“Whatever it is you need to do, don’t do it mad. Never do it mad. Nothing good ever comes of that.”

I shove my hands into the pockets of my jeans and nod, then turn around and leave.

We may not be kids anymore, but one thing hasn’t changed—I still look up to my big brother.

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THIRTY-EIGHT

Collins

There's a soft knock on the door of the treatment room as I finish preparing the room for my next client. I glance at the clock on the wall and frown. They're early.

"Come in."

Carly pokes her head in. "There's someone here to see you. He says he just needs a minute of your time."

It's not my client because my next client is a woman.

"Who is it?"

"Ansel Mercer," she whispers, which says she probably already suspects something is going on. I hope she didn't hear us the last time he was here and his hand was down my pants.

I wonder what's going on. "Tell him to come back here. He knows where the room is."

She nods and disappears behind the half-open door.

A minute later, Ansel walks into the room and shuts the door. "Sorry to just pop up like this."

His back is straight, his hands tucked into his jacket pockets, and his hair has been pushed through by his fingers countless times.

I place my hand on his cheek. "What's going on? What happened?"

"Do you have time to talk?"

I glance at the clock again. "I have ten minutes until my next client is due."

He nods quickly. "I spoke to Fowler about Caleb, and he knew. He fucking knew this whole time."

My hand drops to my side. A million thoughts run through my head at once—how long has he known, did he think I was pitiful, walking around like an idiot not knowing my husband was cheating on me, and what exactly did Caleb tell him? But anger isn't there like it obviously is for Ansel. I guess it's a bigger betrayal to him and their friendship.

"Did he know about the baby?"

Ansel nods and squeezes my shoulders. "I'm sorry, Collins."

I shake my head. He has nothing to apologize about. "What did you say?"

"I got pissed off and stormed out, but I can't avoid him forever, obviously. We live together."

"We'll talk to him together."

He frowns. "Wait. What?"

I nod. "I want to talk to him together. I have questions of my own for him."

He steps back and pushes a hand through his hair. "I'm not even sure I want to talk to that asshole ever again."

"Ansel..." I take his hand. "You can't let what Caleb did come between you and Fowler. Caleb was the one who put Fowler in a bad spot. Don't forget that."

His jaw hardens. "Why aren't you mad?"

"Are you sure you're not just hurt that Caleb confided in Fowler and not you?" I try to use a soothing voice, but the three of them were a trio, and this means that at least for one big secret, it was only a duo. I'm sure he feels left out.

Ansel's forehead wrinkles. "You think I'm jealous of Fowler?"

"Not jealous exactly, but maybe him telling Fowler and not you left you with some questions of your own." I shrug. "Just a thought."

The last thing I want is to see Caleb's betrayal cause any more damage than it already has.

"I don't know about that," Ansel grumbles.

"Listen, I'm working late tonight, so I won't be done until seven. Why don't we meet outside the pub shortly after, and then we can get our answers?"

He draws in a deep breath and nods. "Yeah, okay."

“All right, I’ll see you then.” I give him a quick kiss on the lips.

He heads toward the door, but when I call his name, he looks over his shoulder.

“Try not to be so mad when we go talk to him. It’ll go better that way.”

“You’re the second person today to tell me that. I’m not an angry person, but damn, I’ll try to cool down.” Then he’s out the door.

TRUE TO HIS WORD, ANSEL IS WAITING OUTSIDE THE PUB FOR ME WHEN I walk up. He’s wearing jeans and a blue hoodie, hands shoved in his pockets. The snow is finally melting, and we had a few hours of rain earlier today that did a lot to wash away some of the remnants.

“You cooled down?” I ask as I approach.

He appears calmer now, less tense, though there’s still a simmer of anger in his eyes. “I’m ready.” He looks around before he pulls me into him, keeping his hands around my waist. “I want to apologize for barging into your work earlier today like that.”

“Ansel, you don’t have to apologize.”

“I just...” He looks at the darkening sky for a beat, then back at me. “You’re the person who makes me feel better.”

My heart leaps. “I’m happy to be that person for you. You’re that person for me too.”

Something passes between us, then the door to the pub opens, and we quickly step back from each other. Thankfully, it’s no one I recognize, so I assume they’re tourists who don’t know us either.

“All right, let’s do this.” Ansel holds the door open for me, and I step inside.

It’s busy. Almost all the tables are spoken for, though I don’t think that matters. We won’t be having this conversation where it’s up for public consumption.

Fowler is behind the bar, wiping it down, when he sees us. The cloth stalls on the wood surface, and his shoulders sag, lips turning down. “Rosalie, can you keep an eye on things for a few? I have something I need to take care of.”

The pretty brunette server at one of the nearby tables smiles at him. "Sure thing, boss."

"Let's talk upstairs." He nods toward the stairs at the back of the old house.

Before it was a pub, this place was a house on the water, though only the main floor and the outside are used for the pub. I've actually never been upstairs here before, so I can't help but look around as I follow Fowler.

The front bedrooms are used for storage, and the one on the back of the house is Fowler's office. Since it's a decent size, there's a desk and filing cabinets at one end and a couch set across from two chairs on the other side.

Ansel and I sit side by side on the couch, and Fowler sits across from me.

Before Ansel or I can say anything, Fowler looks at me. "Collins, I'm sorry."

I swallow at the regret in his eyes, and I nod. "When did he first tell you?"

Fowler shifts in the chair, appearing uncomfortable. "A few months after it started, so probably... four or five months before he died."

It dawns on me now that if he told Fowler, there's a chance Caleb told someone else too. The idea is mortifying. "Does anyone else know? Anyone at the station?"

He shakes his head. "No, I don't think so. He told me I was the only person he'd told."

"Why did he tell you and not me?" Ansel's voice is sharp as a whip.

Fowler leans forward and exhales, resting his forearms on his knees. "I don't know, man. I asked him once, and he said you wouldn't understand."

Ansel's lips thin. He doesn't understand it, and I get where his hurt is coming from. "What the hell does that mean?"

"You're a good guy, Ansel. Always have been."

He motions across the room at his friend. "You're not exactly evil incarnate."

"True. But I've never had a long-term relationship. Most of the women I've been with have just been hookups." He raises both hands. "I know what you're gonna say, and yes, you're not exactly Mr. Relationship either, but you have had them over the years. Maybe they didn't work out, but you weren't averse to them like I am." He shrugs. "Maybe Caleb thought you

would lay into him more. Honestly, I don't think he knew how to deal with the idea of disappointing you."

"And did you? Lay into him, I mean?" Ansel asks.

Fowler frowns. "Of course I did." Hurt flashes across his face. "You think I would what? Give him props, tell him it was no big deal?"

"I don't know what to think anymore," Ansel mumbles.

"Collins, I promise you, I told him to put a stop to it and to talk to you about it. Then when he said she was pregnant..." He pushes a hand through his mop of hair. "Then I didn't know what the hell to say." He shakes his head. "It was all so fucked up. I kept prodding him to see if he'd told you, but he just kept telling me the timing wasn't right."

"Was he planning to leave me?" My attempt to keep my voice steady fails spectacularly.

Ansel takes my hand, pulling it onto his lap and linking our fingers. Fowler stares at our joined hands.

"Deal with it." Ansel pins Fowler with a stare as though daring him to say something about it.

Fowler's gaze flicks back up to meet mine. "I don't know. He never said those words to me, but..."

When the silence prolongs, I finish his sentence for him. "But he was happy about the baby."

He cringes, squeezing his eyes shut. When he opens them again, all I see is pain and regret. "He was. I'm sorry."

I nod. This isn't new information to me. Sure, it's still painful to hear, but I must have already dealt with the worst of it because I don't cry. In fact, of the three of us, Fowler looks like the one closest to crying.

"After he died, I didn't see the point in telling you any of this, Collins. You were already so traumatized by losing him. You were in so much pain... what was the benefit of telling you besides relieving my own conscience? I couldn't do that to you. I thought I was protecting you. I decided that I'd rather live with knowing and have it eat me up inside rather than cause you any more pain. The idea of telling you everything seemed cruel when it wouldn't change anything. Caleb was dead."

I find myself pulling my hand away from Ansel and walking over to him. Fowler just stares at me until I pull at his hand to get him to stand. He does and wraps me in an embrace.

“I’m so sorry, Collins. Please forgive me. I thought I was doing right by you.” His head is tucked into my neck, and his tears wet my skin.

I consider what he must have been carrying around for the past two years. How he might have felt every time he saw me, whenever anyone mentioned Caleb. No part of me likes that he kept the information from me, but I can understand it. I can understand why. If roles were reversed, I might have done the same.

“I forgive you, Fowler.”

He sags a bit in my arms, then straightens out. “I’ve thought a lot about what I would’ve done if Caleb hadn’t died, and I swear to you both that I would have told you myself if he didn’t.”

I step back, nodding. “I believe you.”

Fowler looks at Ansel. “I can’t speak to why Caleb didn’t say anything to you, but I’m sorry I kept it from you. It was no different with you—I was trying to protect you and your memory of our best friend.”

Ansel is quiet for a moment before he nods. “I’ll get past it.” He glances at me. “I can understand keeping something to yourself that you think would be hurtful when it serves no purpose.”

I sigh. “There have been moments when I’ve wondered whether I’d be better off not knowing anything about Madelyn because really, what difference does it make? Caleb is dead. All me knowing has done is to cause me pain and leave me with a million questions I’ll never be able to answer.”

Both men look at me, seeming a little surprised.

I shrug. “It’s true. There’s nothing easy at all about this whole thing, but one thing I’m sure of is that I’m tired of being in this holding pattern in my life. I want to move forward. Caleb’s death, the reveal of his affair—it’s already stolen so much from me. I don’t want to let it take anything else from me.”

Ansel stands and looks at me with something like pride. Then he tugs me into him, kissing my temple, and says in a low voice, “I’m proud of you.”

“I’m proud of me too.”

When we pull away from each other, Fowler is looking at us strangely. “Sorry, it’s just kind of weird to see the two of you together like this.” Ansel opens his mouth to say something, but Fowler raises a hand. “I said weird, not bad. I’m happy you guys have found something in each other.”

I nod. "Thank you."

Fowler looks at Ansel. "You forgive me, or should I start looking for a new place?"

Ansel rolls his eyes and pulls him in for a man hug. "We're good. Sorry I flipped out."

"You were right to."

As I look at the two of them, a peaceful feeling settles over me. It finally feels like time to move on. Not because I'm running from the truth or my feelings, but because I'm just ready.

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THIRTY-NINE

Ansel

The ceremony for Caleb is over.

Unlike last year's anniversary when I was filled with grief and sadness, today I'm filled with a tossed salad of emotions. The grief is still there, but so is anger. At the choices he made. I'm hurt that he didn't feel that he could confide in me. And I'm concerned about Collins and fucking hate the fact that I can't pull her into my arms at the fire station and make sure she's okay.

In honor of Caleb, Russo has made Caleb's favorite meal from the firehouse—shepherd's pie—and he invited Collins to join us.

Russo is at the oven, pulling out two large casserole dishes he always insists have to go under the broiler for exactly two minutes and forty-seven seconds.

"You want something to drink, Collins?" Ramsey asks. "Pop, water, we even have some wine this elderly lady dropped off after we got her cat out of a tree. We can't drink it, so it's just sitting there behind Gonzalez's stupid protein shakes."

"I heard that," Gonzalez says without looking up from setting the table.

"I meant for you to," Ramsey says.

Collins laughs—a real one, not the pretend polite ones she was doing for so long after Caleb's death. "No wine for me, I'm driving. Water is fine."

"Water for the widow, coming right up." Ramsey stills, eyes going wide. "Shit, Collins, I'm sorry, I—"

“It’s fine, Ramsey.”

He shakes his head. “That was terrible, I’m sorry. I’m gonna go stand in the truck bay.”

Collins gives him a warm smile. “Just bring me my water, Ramsey.”

He does as she says.

Collins is still smiling, and she catches my eye from across the room for half a second. I have to look away because if I look any longer, everyone in this room will know how I feel about her.

Russo brings over one of the casserole dishes and sets it on a folded towel on the table. “All right, everyone, come sit.”

Collins is across from me, Fleming to her left, Ramsey to her right. Gonzalez sits to my left and Russo on my right. Everyone else takes seats farther down the table.

“To Caleb,” Russo says, lifting his drink.

“To Caleb,” we all echo.

Collins’s voice is even, and I don’t see the flinch of pain on her face I used to whenever Caleb’s name was mentioned.

We all pass our plates down, and Russo serves big spoonfuls.

“How’s the practice?” Gonzalez asks Collins, digging in.

“Busy—which is good.” She blows on the steaming food on her dish, then lifts a forkful to her lips. Her eyes close, and she nods like *yes, I can see why this was Caleb’s favorite*.

Russo points his fork at her and winks.

“So, how’s it going with Ansel’s back?” Ramsey asks, mouth half full. “You getting him fixed up, or is he a lost cause?”

I still for half a second.

Ramsey saw me coming out of the building when he drove by one day and asked about it, so I had to give him the same story I gave Collins about why I was there, but I never mentioned seeing him to Collins.

“He’s a project,” Collins says, not missing a beat.

“He’s *always* been a project,” Fleming says.

“Hey,” I say.

“He’s not wrong, Mercer.” Gonzalez laughs.

“I’m right here.”

“We know, you always make your presence known,” Russo says with a smirk.

Collins is trying not to laugh. I can see it in her eyes and the twitch of her mouth. She takes a drink of water to cover it and meets my gaze.

Fleming's eyes flick from me to her and back again.

Shit.

I concentrate on my plate.

The conversation moves on, and Russo tells us about the first time he ever made his shepherd's pie when Caleb was on shift and how he ate Gonzalez's portion right off his plate because he took too much time in the can. Everyone laughs.

"He talked about you, you know," Russo says. "All the time."

"It would drive us crazy," Gonzalez says.

"It did not drive us crazy," Ramsey clarifies.

"Ramsey liked it," Fleming says.

He nods. "I liked it."

Probably because Ramsey is married to his high school sweetheart. He is always on all of us single guys to settle down.

Collins's gaze studies her plate. "Thanks."

Russo breaks the tension by changing the subject. "Anyone want more?"

Plates are passed, and the conversation moves on. Gonzalez spills his drink at one point, and there's a scramble for napkins. I use mine, and when it's soaked, Collins pulls hers from beside her plate and passes it to me without thinking.

It's the sort of thing a person does with someone they're used to seeing every day, someone they're comfortable with. It doesn't land wrong for anyone but Fleming, whose eyes come to mine a second time.

He doesn't say anything, just looks back down at his plate.

By the time we're finished eating, Russo is telling a story about a call from three years ago, and Ramsey is arguing a detail with him. Gonzalez sides with Russo because he always does.

Collins stands and stacks plates.

"Sit down, you're a guest," Russo says.

"I'm helping." She turns and takes the plates over to the counter.

I collect more plates and bring them over to set them on the ones Collins has just set down. She opens the dishwasher, and I pass them to her one at a time. Our hands brush more than a few times, and I swear Fleming's gaze bores into my back.

When it's time to wrap up, I tell the guys I'm going to walk her out. I walk Collins out of the firehouse and into the parking lot, over to her SUV. I didn't bother with a coat before I came out and the cool spring air settles against my skin.

We're standing between her vehicle and another, so I take her hands. I study her for a beat. "How are you doing after all that?"

"Better than I thought, honestly."

This woman's strength amazes me.

"It felt different than last year," I say.

"I wasn't here, but I'll take your word for it. Even so, I feel different this year. I'm in a different place than I was then." She pauses before continuing. "I think I'm going to go home and call Caleb's parents. Feels like I should reach out today."

I slide my thumb over her knuckles. "Have you decided yet whether you're going to tell them about the baby?"

She shakes her head. "Not yet. I've been giving a lot of thought to our conversation with Fowler and how I've sometimes questioned whether it would be better had I never known. I realize it would be a little different for them, but I need more time to think it over."

"You'll know when you have your answer."

Collins glances away for a beat before she meets my gaze again. "Then I'm going to write my letter to Caleb."

I simply nod. An acknowledgment that it's another step forward for her. Another item off the checklist that puts us closer to the finish line. "I don't get off shift until tomorrow morning, but did you want to do something tomorrow night?"

"Sure. I'll text you when I'm off work."

"All right... well, safe drive home." I release her hands and take a couple of steps back. "I want to kiss you, but probably not a good idea."

"Probably not." She smiles at me, which is more than I thought I'd see her do today.

I smile back and walk backward, raising a hand. "See you later."

I wait and watch her get into her SUV before I turn around and make my way back into the station.

Fleming approaches me as I come through the door. "What's the deal with you two?"

I feign innocence. "What do you mean?"

Fleming gives me a look that tells me we did a shit job of hiding what's going on.

I'm not sure how to play this. I could deny that anything is going on between us, but eventually he'll know it's not true. But if I tell him the truth, I have to deal with the fallout. Am I prepared to do so? And does it put Collins in the line of fire as well?

For Collins, yes. Even though I despise the idea of any of my fellow firefighters thinking I'm being disloyal to a fallen firefighter and friend.

I tip up my chin. "I care about her."

He studies me for a beat, not saying anything. Fleming was over at Caleb and Collins's house many times with us all. He's seen the three of us interact and should know that nothing untoward was going on between Collins and me. But the question is, will he believe it?

"For how long?"

"It's a recent thing."

He nods, still eyeing me. "That's... inconvenient."

I cross my arms. "Yup."

Fleming blows out a breath and sets his hands on his hips. "Well, I'm sure you've considered all the consequences."

"I have." I nod.

He grips my shoulder. "Don't worry, I'll have your back with the guys if it comes down to it."

"I appreciate that. Obviously..."

Fleming removes the hand on my shoulder and raises it. "None of my business. I won't say a word. But it's not gonna stay a secret forever if it only took me an afternoon to figure it out."

I nod my appreciation and pass by him, knowing this is only the first of many conversations like this. I can only hope they all go as well, but surely they won't.

FORTY

Collins

I arrive home after the memorial at the firehouse, change into comfy clothes, and throw my hair into a messy bun on top of my head. After, I head down to the kitchen and grab the bag from Crow & Clover and bring it over to the kitchen table.

I pull out the pretty stationery with colorful flowers at the top and the matching pen I bought just for this letter.

I've been thinking about what I might want to say to Caleb for weeks. But as I pick up the pen and press it to the paper, the words pour out of me. As if I'm a vessel that's been holding them in all this time and only now has someone tipped me over.

Caleb,

I feel a little foolish writing to a man who can't read this. But this letter isn't really for you. Still, I want to believe that somehow, wherever you are, you'll feel the essence of what I put down here, even if the words never reach you.

Losing you was the hardest thing I've ever gone through.

Letting you go is the second.

That's what this letter is. I've been carrying you around like a stone clenched in my palm for two years, and my hand is sore and tired. Today, I need to set you down.

There are so many questions that I'd give almost anything to be able to ask you. I draft them in my head when I wake up in the middle of the night, like you might still come home from the station in the morning and sit on the edge of the bed so I can ask you. Did you still love me when you died? Did you love me for years and then fall out of love with me and were either too kind or too much of a coward to say so? Did you love me and love her too in some other part of your heart that I didn't even know existed? Were you going to tell me about her like Fowler said? Were you going to leave me? Was she a mistake you couldn't figure out how to unmake? If I had asked you when you started to pull away, if I had asked what was going on, Caleb, would you have told me the truth?

The hardest part is coming to terms with the fact that there's no version of my life where I'll ever know. None of those questions will ever be answered because you're no longer here to answer them. I have to close our book with the last chapters missing and try to make peace with the

blank pages. Some days I can. Some days I can't, but it's something I'll have to accept and live with. I know that, but it's hard.

We had a good life together. Not a perfect life, but a good one. I was happy for a long time. I don't want the last chapters to erase the first ones, and I have to keep reminding myself that they don't. Two things can be true—we were happy, and then presumably at some point, you weren't. But no one can take away those happy years from us. I won't let them.

You never had the chance to tell me some of the things you were going to. But I have something to tell you too.

I've fallen for Ansel.

It wasn't one moment. It was a hundred small ones that I didn't even notice as they were happening. He showed up. Then he kept showing up. In your absence, he's been a good friend—supportive, caring, protective, and loving. Somewhere along the way, I started to see him as more than your best friend.

I'm going to say it plainly—there was never anything between us when you were alive. Not one look. Not a shared moment. Not a single second that either of us crossed a line. Neither of us would have ever done that to you. This thing between us is new. He didn't take anything from you. You'd already given it up.

I think I have a real shot at happiness, and I hope that wherever you are, some part of you—the best part, the part I want to try to remember you by—can give us your blessing.

After you died, I didn't think I'd ever be happy again. And after I found out about Madelyn and the baby, it made me question it even more. But I've seen the future I might have, just glimpses here and there, and I'm going to take it. I'm not asking your permission. I don't need it. But I want you to know that I'm running toward that future full force now.

I'm not leaving you behind or forgetting what you were to me. But from this point forward, I'm going to turn my gaze on what lies ahead, instead of looking over my shoulder at what lies behind. There's a life waiting for me on the other side of this letter, and I'm grabbing it with both hands.

Thank you for the many years of happiness. Thank you for being the man you were before the man you became. I loved that man with everything in me. But this is where I put you down.

I'll always carry your memory with me, but you'll no longer be a shadow at my back.

Goodbye, Caleb.

Yours,

Collins

Tears wet the paper as I sign my name. But these tears are different. They're not born of grief or sadness. They're a cleansing. They mark a fresh start. A new beginning.

With the letter in hand, I walk into the family room, then set it on the coffee table and go to start a fire in the fireplace.

Originally I had planned to keep the letter so that I could revisit my words from time to time in case I felt myself sliding backward. But I know now that I don't need to revisit this letter because the words aren't just written here. The words *are* me. No written reminder is necessary when I can look inside myself for guidance.

Once the fire is going, I take the letter from the coffee table and toss it in the fireplace. The paper flutters down, where it catches fire and burns. Once it's reduced to ash, I close the glass front of the fireplace and go upstairs.

I open the lid of my jewelry box, slide off my wedding band and my engagement ring, and set them inside the slots of black velvet.

I flex my hands a few times, then close the lid. I thought that when I finally removed my rings, I would feel naked, or like something was missing.

But all I feel is freedom.

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FORTY-ONE

Ansel

I pull up to Collins's house, unsure what I'll find. Yesterday had to be difficult for her, but I couldn't get a sense of her mood when I texted her earlier to firm up our plans.

Whatever I expected, I did not expect *this*.

Collins stands in the doorway with a feline grin, wearing a lacy pale-blue bra and panty set.

I just about swallow my fucking tongue.

She looks fucking phenomenal, and I wish my mouth weren't so dry so that I could tell her so.

Instead, all that comes out is, "Wha... what..."

"I wanted to make it very clear where our night is headed. Now get in here, it's nippy outside."

The obvious joke escapes me right now, which is a shame because it's the perfect moment for it.

I step inside, and without missing a beat, I lift her so she's straddling my waist and kick the door closed.

We collide in a riot of kisses, and pretty soon, I'm trailing my tongue from the base of her neck to her jawline, then nipping on her earlobe. I'm already hard as a brick in my black cargo pants, and if Collins keeps rubbing herself against me, there's a good chance I might come in my pants.

Before we get too carried away, I want to be sure I understand what's happening here. Somehow, I find the strength to pull away from her lips.

I rest my forehead against hers, catching my breath, and giving my libido a chance to stall out. “What does this mean?”

She pulls her head back, looking at me with a *what-the-hell* expression. “Ansel, if a woman greets you in lingerie, what do you think it means?” She arches an eyebrow.

“In this case, I hope it means she wants to sleep with me, but are you ready?”

With a wide grin, she holds her left hand up between us.

Her wedding rings are gone.

My gaze snaps to meet hers. “Does this mean...”

She nods. “I wrote my letter, then afterward, I took my rings off. It was time. I’m only looking ahead to the future now, not behind anymore.”

I grin at her, unable to remember the last time I was this happy. “Fuck yeah.”

Our mouths meet again, and this time as I kiss her, I walk us up the stairs until I walk into her bedroom. I lay her down on the bed, then pivot to turn on the bedside lamp. I want to be able to see this woman in all her glory.

Collins shimmies up to the top of the bed, and I stand beside it, staring at her. “Do you know how beautiful you are?”

Her cheeks pinken and she turns her head away from me.

“Oh no, don’t you dare do that.” I use my index finger to turn her face back my way. “Own it. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.” I trail my index finger down beside the strap of her bra, then along the edge of the cup, over the fullness of her breast. “Right now, you’re like a present for me, almost too pretty to unwrap.”

She arches into my touch as I drag my finger back up the same way.

I straighten, and she watches as I pull my black hoodie over my head, then grip my T-shirt from behind my neck and yank it off, tossing it somewhere behind me. Next to go are my black cargos and socks until I’m standing there in my black boxer briefs, hard cock trying to burst through the cotton.

Collins licks her lips. “God, you’re hot.”

I can’t help but chuckle.

“Don’t stop there. The job’s only half done.” She motions toward my boxer briefs.

I grin as I crawl over the mattress until I'm over top of her. "Gotta leave you wanting more, baby."

I lower myself so that some of my weight presses against her and use my forearms beside her head to support the rest. Dipping my chin, I lick the seam of her lips the same way I plan to lick her other seam. She knows it too, because she moans from the simple act. Then our tongues are dueling for supremacy, and I come out on top.

She wraps her legs around my waist, and my hard length presses right where she needs it. I jerk my hips a couple of times, and she moans into my mouth. The urge to get her off like this is strong, but I want to be inside her so that I can feel her clenching around me.

I pepper her heated skin with open-mouthed kisses—across her jawline up to her ear, down her neck, and across her collarbone to the swell of her breasts. Her tight pink nipples press against the delicate lace of her lingerie, teasing. I can't resist running my tongue over the silk and lace.

Her hand pushes through the hair at the back of my head as I tongue her turgid peak and suck it. Collins pulls on my hair when I use my teeth to gently pull at it through the fabric before moving on to her other breast.

I slide one hand underneath her back, find the hook for her bra, and release it. Then I slide the straps down over her shoulders, and she pulls her arms out. I toss the bra somewhere behind me, take each of her breasts in hand, and push them together.

Remembering how much she loves my filthy mouth, I decide to tell her exactly what I'm thinking. "You have the best tits, baby. I can't wait to slip my dick between them and fuck them. Bring the massage oil home, baby."

She bites her bottom lip and moans as I continue to push them together and swipe my thumbs back and forth over her nipples. Her hips move against me when I pull each nipple with my thumb and forefinger, then release them over and over until she's panting underneath me.

Precum leaks from me, wetting the front of my boxer briefs. My engorged cock is desperate to be inside her, but I need to taste her first.

Sliding my body down hers, I kiss down her stomach until I reach the apex of her thighs. "Do you want me to eat this pussy for a bit before I fuck you?"

She arches her hips up, bringing my face closer to her core.

I let out a deep chuckle while I finger the lace edge of her panties. "Gotta use your words, baby."

Collins moans. “Yes, yes, I want you to eat me out.”

I grin, leaning in and inhaling deeply against the blue lace. “God, you don’t just taste like heaven, you smell like it too.”

I hook a finger through the crotch of her underwear and pull, coming up onto my knees so that I can get them completely off her. I toss the discarded lace aside, then run my hands up the insides of her thighs, spreading her wide open.

I study her, gazing at her perfect pink pussy that’s swollen and soaked already. My tongue waters, anticipating the taste of her.

“Ansel...” She wiggles her hips side to side.

“Time to get my fill.” With my hands still on her inner thighs, I swipe my tongue through her center, groaning when the flavor hits my tongue.

My legs slide out behind me, and I get to work. I want her on edge when I fuck her, so I’m not going to let her come, but I can still enjoy bringing her right to the brink.

Focusing my efforts on her clit, I swirl and suck and nip until her hands are in my hair and she’s pulling hard, desperate for release. Then I pull back on the intensity until her fingers relax. I do it over and over until she’s writhing and frustrated, trying to grind herself on my face. All the while, I fuck into the sheets as if I’m some goddamn teenager. Collins puts me on edge more than any woman before her.

“Ansel, please, please.”

I hear the desperation in her voice as I work her clit again, bringing her closer to orgasm, and decide it’s time to put us both out of our misery and pull back completely.

“No!” Collins grasps at my hair, but when she sees me sit up on my knees and start to pull my boxer briefs down, she relents. “Ah... finally.”

FORTY-TWO

Collins

As Ansel slips off his boxer briefs, I take in the sight of him. I've seen most of his body, but I've never seen *all* of his body. And yes, I had my hand wrapped around him at one point, but seeing him entirely is something else.

His dick is just as perfect as the rest of him. I've never thought of the male anatomy as particularly attractive, but that was clearly only because I hadn't seen what Ansel was packing. He's thick and long but not so much of either that it's scary and presumably painful. Everything is in perfect proportion. I want to run my tongue up the thick vein running up the underside to the blunt head.

"I'm not on birth control, but I have condoms in my nightstand." A little side quest that I went on earlier today at Feel Good Goods. I'm sure that news will get around.

I didn't have any need for birth control when Caleb died since we were trying to get pregnant, and I certainly didn't need it after he passed away.

Ansel nods when I point toward the right side of the bed, and he crawls over, opening the drawer and pulling out the box. He opens it, but when he pulls the package out, I snag it from him. I want to be the one to slide it over his perfect cock.

I rip open the package and pull the condom out while he positions himself in front of me. I can't resist sucking the head into my mouth. His hands instantly go to my hair, and he's pushing into my mouth with a groan. He pumps a few times before gently pulling me off him.

“Fuck, that was so good, but I want between these thighs.” He reaches down and taps my clit with his fingers, and I stifle a moan.

God, I love when he uses a dirty mouth with me.

I pinch the tip of the condom and stretch it around the head before rolling it down his concrete length.

Suddenly, I’m nervous. I’m about to have sex with another man. It’s been a very long time since I had sex, but even longer since I had sex with someone who wasn’t Caleb.

Ansel must sense the shift in my behavior because he cups my face and kisses me. Within seconds, I remember that I’m with Ansel, not some stranger. And when he pulls away and meets my gaze, I’m reminded of the connection we share.

I fall back onto the mattress and pull him over me. Ansel nestles his hips between my legs for a perfect fit, as though he belongs there. We hold each other’s gaze as I wrap my legs around his waist and he pushes against my entrance. I hold my breath as I stretch around him. He pushes farther and then pauses, giving me a moment to ease around his girth, all the while never breaking the connection between our eyes.

He slides out a bit, then pushes in again so that he’s more than halfway inside me now. His movement lights up all my nerve endings, and a small moan slips past my lips. Finally, he pulls out again and pushes in all the way until he’s fully seated inside me.

I’m not sure I’ve ever felt so full. He holds himself still, something that appears to take an enormous amount of willpower based on the determined set of his jaw. When I shift my hips to indicate that I’m ready for him to move, he doesn’t waste any time, pulling himself from between my legs and thrusting back in.

Our lips meet as he picks up his pace, and soon it’s as though these months of circling around this joining are coming to a head. His thrusts are almost animalistic, and he fucks my mouth with his tongue the same way he’s fucking me with his cock.

His eyes are glazed when he finally pulls away from our kiss and looks down at me. “I didn’t know it could ever feel this good. It’s like you’re made for me.”

I push a hand through his hair. He turns his head and nips at my fingers.

My climax builds quickly. He must be able to sense it because he unwraps my legs from around his waist and brings them up and over his

shoulders, leaning farther down into me. It causes each of his thrusts to hit that spot inside me that makes my eyes roll back into my head.

I'm panting and clawing at the sheets. "Oh god. Oh my god, yes, Ansel."

His hips become a jackhammer, and the punctuation of each thrust sends me into orbit. I've never come without clitoral stimulation before, but his next thrust breaks me apart, and I come, crying out his name.

"That's it, baby, that's what I wanna see."

The satisfaction in his voice prolongs my orgasm until I'm lying limp underneath him.

Ansel removes my legs from his shoulders and pulls out of me. I whimper at the loss. He moves up to the headboard, resting his back against it so he's in a seated position, his thick shaft pointing straight up. Just the sight of it has me wanting more of him.

He pats his lap with a cocky grin. "I want to watch you ride me so I can play with those gorgeous tits of yours."

Without protest, I crawl over to him and straddle his hips. Ansel holds himself at the base, and I slowly lower myself onto him. His hands lift my breast to his mouth, and I move on him as he sucks on my nipple. His free hand tugs on my other nipple, and the sensation runs straight down to my clit.

With a moan, I push both hands into his hair, holding him to my chest.

I move on and off his length, increasing my pace as I go on. The space between my legs hums, every nerve ending firing in pleasure. When his free hand snakes between us and finds my swollen clit, I cry out, grinding onto his hand. His teeth tug at my nipple.

"I want to feel you come around my cock, baby," he says against my wet flesh, grinning against my breast when he feels me clench around him.

I'm close. So close. Every muscle in my body tenses as I grind against his fingers while they move against me. I tug on his hair, and when he bites my nipple, I'm done for.

"Ansel! Oh my god, I'm coming." Bliss catapults through my body, filling me.

"I know, baby, I know. I can feel you." His voice is laced with lust and male satisfaction while I clench harder and harder around him.

Then he's pounding up from under me and crying out, holding himself inside me where I can feel him twitching his release.

His hand comes up to the side of my face, and he directs me down for a kiss. It's lazy, slow, and indulgent. I wrap my arms around his neck and play with the sweat-soaked hair at the back of his head.

That was... wow. That was something I've never experienced before.

"Does this mean you're officially my boyfriend now?"

He twitches inside me. "It does if you want it to."

I nod. "That's exactly what I want."

Ansel kisses me again, throwing all of his feelings into it before he pulls away. "This means we're not going to keep this a secret anymore."

I nod. "I'm ready to move forward with my life."

His eyebrows draw down. "Some people won't be happy about this."

"I know. I'm prepared to deal with them. But honestly, I don't care. I'm not living my life for anyone but myself. Life's too short. That's what all this has taught me. I know who I am, and you know who I am, and that's good enough for me."

He kisses me again, and within minutes, he's reaching into the nightstand for another condom, proving, once again, that this was totally worth the long road getting here.

FORTY-THREE

Ansel

Today is Uncle Roy's birthday, and my sister has decided to host a birthday get-together at his house since she's living there, despite the fact that our uncle has always preferred to let his birthday pass by without much fuss. But this is Sutton, and usually, what she wants, she gets. She's bullheaded and will push and push, so a lot of times it's easiest to go along with whatever it is.

I park my truck in the driveway and look at Collins. She looks hot as fuck today, dressed in a thin pale-yellow sweater with jeans that mold perfectly to her ass. Her blue eyes sparkle and her cheeks are pink. She looks alive in a way that she didn't six months ago, and all I feel is pride because of how far she's come.

"Ready for this?"

"Yup." She gets out of the truck, wasting no time.

I get out too and grab the present from the back seat. We walk up the driveway, and I take her hand and pull her to a stop when we're standing in front of the door.

"Last chance. If you want to keep this just between us for a while longer, we can."

She smiles softly, appearing at ease. "It's not lost on me that I'll be the one painted with a scarlet letter when our relationship comes out, even though Caleb was the unfaithful one." She squeezes my hand. "Like I said, I know who I am, and you do too. That's enough for me."

I kiss her as the door swings open in front of us. I turn my head to find Elliott with less of a shocked look on his face than I expected.

“Okay, so this is a thing now. Cool.” He points behind us at the driveway. “Forgot our present in the truck, so I’m just gonna go get it. Be right back.”

He makes his way around us, and when I look at Collins, she’s smiling at the ground.

I appreciate Elliott keeping it casual even if he is surprised.

“All right, let’s do this.” I hold the door open with my free hand and lead us inside.

Based on the sounds of things, everyone is in the living room, so I close the door and lead Collins in that direction with my hand in hers.

We enter the room, and we’re the last to arrive. It takes a beat for anyone to notice us, and when they do, it takes a beat for their eyes to notice our adjoined hands. Everyone stops talking.

I hold my breath, waiting for their reaction. An arm is slung around my shoulder, and when I look to my right, Elliott has returned and positioned himself between us, an arm slung over each of our shoulders.

“Did you guys hear the good news?” He nods down at our hands.

Everyone breaks into cheers—even the Thermos Crew.

Emelia even gets up off the couch and walks over to us with a grin. She gives me a quick kiss on the cheek, then gives Collins a hug. The two of them share a look.

Baylor rushes over and wraps her arms around my legs, looking over at Collins. “Is Uncle Ansel your boyfriend?”

She chuckles. “He is.”

“Yay!” Baylor lets go of my legs and wraps her arms around Collins’s legs, pinning her to the spot.

Collins gently touches Baylor’s hair since it’s pulled back in an intricate braid I know is all Emelia’s doing. Then Collins looks at me. Even though she didn’t seem nervous, I can see the relief in her face that my family is so accepting.

No one is asking questions about if anything was going on with us prior to Caleb’s death because they know us well enough to know that would never be the case. I’m not naive enough to think that this will be the reception we receive everywhere we go, but it’s good to know that my inner circle has our backs.

There's a couple sitting on the couch that I don't recognize. Well, the man looks vaguely familiar, but I can't place him.

Emelia must notice my gaze snag in that direction, and she waves them over. They get up off the couch, and the first thing I notice is the sheer size of this man. He's probably around Roy's age, maybe a little younger, but he's fit. I can tell that in his younger days, he would've been built like a brick house.

"Ansel, Collins, this is my Uncle Xavier and my Aunt Clara. They were down in the lower forty-eight, so they came to visit for a few days. They're staying in the bunkie."

"Nice to meet you," her aunt says and gives us both a hug.

"Xavier Greene, good to meet you." He shakes our hands, and that's when it dawns on me where I recognize this man from.

"Holy shit. You used to play quarterback for the San Francisco Kingsmen."

He chuckles. "I did. Feels like a million lifetimes ago, though. I leave football to my sons now."

My attention goes to Emelia. "You didn't tell me that your uncle played for the Kingsmen."

She laughs. "Yeah, and my Uncle Rylan is a professional soccer player. Should I have mentioned that he's married to Easton Bailey's cousin?"

"Easton Bailey, the shortstop for the Chicago Colts?" My mind is blown right now.

Collins laughs and rubs my back. "Breathe, Ansel."

After I'm finished interrogating Emelia about what else she might have forgotten to mention—newsflash, it's that her uncle's wife is also the niece of the Phoenix Bailey, whom I'm not afraid to say I lusted after during my teenage years. She was the biggest pop star at the time. We head over to wish my uncle a happy birthday where he sits, wearing a Bad Bunny shirt in the same La-Z-Boy chair he's had since I was a teenager.

"Don't get up." I wave him off when he starts to put down the leg extension. I set his present to the side of his chair with all the other ones. "Happy birthday, old man." I lean in to give him a hug.

"Happy birthday, Roy." Collins hugs him.

He whispers something in her ear I can't hear, but when she pulls back, they share a look. He takes her hand and squeezes before letting it go.

Sutton joins us in the living room, and until now, I didn't realize she was absent. Probably because I'm not used to having her home. "All right, the cake is iced and ready to go."

When she extended the invite, she made it clear that the gathering didn't involve a meal—merely cake, drinks, and presents.

"Your sister made a flourless banana cake to celebrate." Roy feigns excitement.

Sutton sets her hands on her hips. "I saw your lab work. None of you have been watching him. He's prediabetic and needs to watch his sugar intake. Diabetes is no joke."

"Never said it was. But what's the point in living if you take all the fun out of it?"

She shakes her head. "You act like I'm running a boot camp."

He looks from her to me. "She's forcing me to go on hikes now that the weather is warmer. Hikes, Ansel."

"Thought you were looking a little trimmer around the middle." I wink at him.

"You two sound like an old married couple," Jimmy says, laughing.

Sutton tells everyone to head into the dining room so we can have cake and asks me to bring the presents over to the table so Uncle Roy can open them there. My sister runs a tight ship. Always has. I wasn't surprised when she went into event planning.

Everyone else goes into the dining room while I'm bent at the waist, collecting the gifts. When I straighten up, Sutton is still there.

"Happy for you, brother."

I know she's referring to Collins and me. "Thanks. I'm happy too."

"Oh, boy. You and Elliott are a match with those hearts in your eyes. Now we just have to get Hollis a woman, and it'll be a trifecta."

"What about getting you a man?" I arch an eyebrow.

She waves me off. "Not worth the time or the trouble."

Sutton helps me with the last few gifts, and we join everyone in the living room.

The night passes in a blur of the usual chaos you'd expect when we're all together, and before I know it, I'm backing out of the driveway to leave.

"That was fun." Collins runs her fingers through the hair on the side of my head.

It feels so good, I'm tempted to close my eyes and let my head rest against the back of the seat. "I'm glad you had a good time."

No one inquired about our relationship. I'm not naive enough to think it's not coming at some point, but everyone accepted us with open arms. It was as though Collins had been my plus-one for years.

Collins watches me from her seat, so I turn my head and find a thoughtful look on her face.

"What's up?" I look back at the road.

She shakes her head. "Nothing."

"Tell me." I take her hand, and she intertwines our fingers.

"It's too soon. It would be weird."

I chuckle. "Now you have to tell me."

She sighs. "Do you remember how I told you that I've felt like Echo Lake was home since I arrived here with Caleb?"

"Yeah."

"Tonight, I feel like I found a deeper meaning of home. I feel like I belong somewhere that's not just a place anymore, somewhere that's here." She places her hand over her heart.

I swear my heart damn near beats out of my chest. I bring our joined hands to my lips and kiss her knuckles. "I know what you mean."

I've fallen hard and fast for this woman, and it's scary as fuck. Not so scary that I want to run away, though. Just scary enough that I don't want to fuck this up because I'd never be able to live with myself if I failed her.

FORTY-FOUR

Collins

Today is the first time we're grocery shopping together, and it has me giddy for some reason. Probably because it's a real couple thing to do together. But Ansel spends a lot of time at my place, so I want to make sure I have things he likes to eat. I also have to pick up some ingredients because I'm making him a recipe I love—Southern-style gumbo.

We walk into Halloran's Market hand-in-hand until he grabs a cart. I can already feel people looking our way, but I pay it no mind. Soon enough, everyone will move on to something else worth gossiping about.

He flips his hat backward and pushes the cart toward the fruits and veggies. I pause for a moment to take him in because Ansel Mercer wearing a backward Red Sox hat is apparently my catnip. He always looks hot, there's no denying that. But right now, in his jeans and his hoodie with a backward baseball cap, he looks *delectable*.

And suddenly I'm a woman starved.

He looks over his shoulder at me. "You coming?"

I blink out of my stupor and walk toward him, imagining all the things I want to do to him when we get back to my place. Every single one of them is NC-17.

Ansel reaches into the back pocket of his jeans for the grocery list. It's something that shouldn't be sexy, but it is when he does it.

"All right, looks like we need some celery, onion, and green peppers," he says, looking at the list. "I wouldn't mind grabbing some fruit while we're here. What kind of apples do you like?"

“I’m not fussy. Whichever kind you want.”

He cocks his head to the side, a grin tilting one corner of his lips. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Honestly?”

He nods.

I step into him, bringing my mouth to his ear. “I’m thinking about how hot you look right now with that hat on backward and how horny it’s making me.”

When I back away, he snakes his tongue out and licks his lips with heavy eyelids. He looks around quickly. “You sure we need to shop right now? Maybe we come back.”

I laugh and move to take the cart from him, but he stops me.

“No, I need to push it.” When I give him a questioning look, he explains, “I need it to hide my hard-on, thanks to you.”

I laugh again and move forward to pick out some peppers for my gumbo recipe. Ansel grabs the onions. When I return to the cart with the peppers, I set them inside, and Ansel shakes his head at me.

“What?” I give him an innocent look.

“You know exactly what. Your words are running in a loop in my head now, and it’s making it very uncomfortable to walk around.” He discreetly adjusts himself. “Carrie.” Ansel looks over my shoulder with a surprised expression. “Good to see you.”

I turn to see who he’s looking at and find Russo’s wife standing in front of the potatoes. Her dark eyes take us in.

“Hey, you two. Just doing some grocery shopping?” Her head tilts.

I can tell she’s trying to figure out what this is, if it’s really what she thinks it is. Rather than play coy, I decide to be upfront. “I’m going to make Ansel some gumbo tonight.”

She smiles at us, but it’s forced. That I can see. I’ve been around Carrie enough over the years through the firehouse to see that. “Oh, sounds yummy.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” Ansel rubs his six-pack.

Carrie and I let out a bit of an awkward laugh.

“Well, I’ll let you guys get to it.” She smiles again and pushes her cart away.

“Awkward,” I whisper under my breath.

Ansel wraps his arm around my shoulder and pushes the cart forward. "First of many interactions like that, I'm sure."

"I know. I just wish we could get them all over and done with at once."

He hip-checks me. "Want me to put an ad out in the local paper? One and done. Everyone will be talking about it."

I chuckle and shake my head. "I think we're good to let the old-fashioned way do the work." He tilts his head, so I say, "The gossip mill."

He laughs, and when I look over my shoulder, I spot Carrie watching us with her phone out. I hook my arm through Ansel's and turn back around. Whatever.

"So tell me how horny you are again," Ansel says as we pull into my driveway. "I want to hear more about that."

"I'll bet you do." I'm playing coy, but the truth is that I was lusting after this man the entire time at the grocery store and the drive home, and I have plans for as soon as we walk through my door.

I get out of the car and walk up the steps to the front door while Ansel grabs the three grocery bags in his back seat. The door is unlocked by the time he joins me, and I push it open. He motions with his head for me to go first and follows behind, setting the grocery bags on the floor so he can remove his shoes.

Before he can, I shut the door and back Ansel up against the wall, my hands going to his belt. He doesn't fight me. No, his hands are pressed to the wall behind him, and he looks down at me with that damn hat still on backward.

Shaking my head, I look straight ahead to where I have his belt open and start working the button on his jeans.

"What're you shaking your head for?"

"You and that damn backward hat. It's like catnip or something."

He lets out a deep chuckle as I get the button undone and slide his zipper down, then he sets the hat backward on my head. "Don't want to drive you too crazy."

He winks, and I slide the elastic of his boxer briefs over his already engorged cock, then shimmy down his underwear and jeans until they reach his calves. I lean in, gripping his thick base, and run my tongue up the vein on the underside of his shaft.

The back of Ansel's head thuds against the wall.

My tongue traces a path around his crown, and I taste the saltiness of his precum. I suck a few times on the tip while I stroke his hard length. When I look up, Ansel is watching me intently, so I lean forward and push him into my mouth until the tip of him hits the back of my throat.

“You look so perfect with your lips wrapped around my cock like this.” He strokes the side of my face the way you might stroke a cat, and I eat it up, moaning around his girth. “On your knees, stuffed full of my cock.”

The space between my thighs buzzes, demanding attention, but I ignore it.

With my hands on his thighs, I pull out then suck him back in. I can’t fit him all in my mouth, but I’m determined to blow his mind nonetheless. I work him like that until he starts thrusting just a bit into my mouth. I can tell he wants to be rougher and take control when his hand goes to the top of the hat on my head, but he refrains, letting me remain in charge.

Removing my hands from his strong thighs, I bring one to the base and squeeze to make up for the portion I can’t fit in my mouth, and with the other, I stroke the underside of his balls.

“Fuck, baby.” He pants, the hand on my head squeezing.

I think he’s going to fuck my face in earnest, but without warning, he pulls me off him and yanks me up under the arms. It all happens so fast that I don’t have time to stop him before he spins me around and turns me to face the wall, holding me there with the press of his hips.

“I’ll never be able to wear that hat again without sporting a hard-on,” he says into my ear. “Every time I wear it, all I’m going to see in my head is you sucking my cock like a fucking pro.” He punctuates his words by thrusting his hips.

I can’t stop myself from moaning.

“You like that? Like knowing what you do to me?”

I’m wearing a miniskirt and sweater today, and as he talks, Ansel pulls up the fabric between us, revealing my panties.

He bends down, hooks my right leg under the knee, and holds it up. “I am so fucking gone for you, baby.”

Then he slides my underwear to the side and pushes into me. The air leaves my lungs, and I clutch at the wall to try to gain purchase as he fucks me with purpose.

A few minutes go by, and he slips out. “Shit, condom,” he groans.

“Just don’t come in me.” I’m not that worried about getting pregnant. It’s the wrong time of my cycle, and Caleb and I were trying for two years and nothing.

“You sure?”

“Ansel, get your dick back inside me and fuck me.”

He chuckles, but the minute he thrusts back inside me, our laughter stops.

He fucks me as though he just can’t get enough, and my nipples tighten from moving up and down on the wall. There’s something so satisfying about him taking me this way—in my foyer, both of us fully dressed. As if I were so desirable he can’t help himself.

And that’s how I’ve felt since I’ve been with Ansel—desired and loved. We haven’t said the words to each other yet, but I’m pretty sure I’m not the only one who’s fallen.

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FORTY-FIVE

Ansel

I know it's coming before anyone says a word. I've been expecting it.

It's my first shift at the firehouse since Collins and I have gone public with our relationship. Carrie Russo saw us, as did many other people around town.

Thus far, we've gotten a couple of double-takes, but no one has said anything outright. Hell, Dottie told us it was about time we stopped circling each other, so she was right on board.

The reason I know is because no one has busted my balls today, and I'm six hours into my shift. Firefighters live to razz one another. So when the four men I work with stay quiet, I know we're about to have a conversation.

I'm rinsing my plate in the sink after lunch when Russo comes in, then Ramsey, then Gonzalez. I'm sure it's meant to look random, but it doesn't. Fleming is the last to come in the room, and he looks like an unwilling co-conspirator, sitting at the long dining table.

I turn off the tap and put the plate in the dishwasher. "All right, just come out with it, guys." I turn around and lean against the counter with my arms crossed.

Gonzalez nervously laughs. "What?"

"Whatever this is." I motion between them all.

Russo blows out a breath and plops down on the seat across from Fleming. "All right."

Gonzalez takes the chair at the end, and Ramsey leans beside me at the counter, as though his newfound position in the firehouse might cause him

to have to intervene if this goes south.

"You and Collins," Russo says.

I nod. "Yeah."

"That's a thing?" He arches an eyebrow.

"It is." I let my hands fall to my sides and grip the counter.

Russo nods, taking in the information. He's older than the rest of us by almost a decade, and it's fair to say that we all sort of look up to him.

"Someone saw you guys shopping downtown together," Gonzalez says.

I nod again. "They did."

"And Carrie saw you guys at the grocery store," Gonzalez says.

"She did."

"Shopping for groceries together," he says.

"Usually how it works."

Ramsey snickers beside me, then catches himself, looking at the floor.

Russo taps his knuckles on the table, still seemingly deep in thought. Then he looks up and meets my gaze. "How long?"

"Not long."

His eyebrows draw down. "More specifically."

"The past couple of months."

He nods slowly a few times.

"It started as a friendship. I was trying to help her move on and figure out what her life looked like without Caleb in it, and it turned into more."

I can see Russo running back over the meal we all shared here with Collins, recalculating things in his mind. "You sure there was nothing happening before that?"

I'm trying not to be offended. It's the question anyone would ask. But he knows me. Does he actually think there's a possibility I'm lying?

"There's nothing to tell." My hands grip the counter harder.

"You sure about that?"

I push off the counter. "Yeah, I'm sure. She was Caleb's wife, for fuck's sake. Then she was his widow. Then she was just Collins, my friend, until she wasn't." I glance around the room and make eye contact with each and every guy so that they see I'm telling the truth.

Russo studies me some more. Whatever verdict he lands on will matter to the rest of the guys in the firehouse. He crosses his arms and leans back in his chair. "I'm gonna be honest with you... I'm not asking these questions because I'm accusing you of something. But if I'm gonna vouch

for you when other guys are asking about it, I need to know I'm vouching for the truth."

I nod. "You are."

"You didn't touch her before he died?"

"No." I hold his gaze, trying to keep my anger out of my voice.

"Didn't want to?"

"No."

"And after?" He arches his eyebrow again.

"After she had nobody. Caleb's family moved away, she's not close with her own, and she wasn't moving on. After a year and a half, she was in the same spot she was a month after Caleb died. He wouldn't have wanted that. So I took it upon myself to try to help her. I checked up on her, told her I'd accompany her to things so she'd get out of the house. That kind of thing."

"And then..."

"Then I fell for her. I didn't plan it. Didn't want it to happen for obvious reasons. But it did. And here we are."

The room goes quiet. Gonzalez shifts in his chair, and Fleming glances at me.

"I just needed to hear it from you," Ramsey says. "That's all."

I nod. "You heard it."

Russo runs a hand over his jaw. "Ansel, Caleb was our brother."

"Mine too. For years before we were firefighter brothers."

"He's not here to have an opinion about it, so we have to have one for him."

"Fair enough."

"Some of the guys aren't gonna be okay with this, you gotta know that." He crosses his arms again.

"I do."

"Some of them are gonna say stuff. Already are."

I step all the way over to the table now and lean my weight on the back of a chair. "What are they saying?"

"Doesn't matter. Just know it's out there. But also know that when it's said around us, we'll be shutting it down. All four of us."

I look at Fleming, who hasn't said anything at all, and he nods and says, "All four of us."

Something in my chest loosens. Even if everyone thought I was a douchebag who was messing around with Collins when Caleb was alive, I

wouldn't have backed away from her, but it feels good to know that the guys I'm closest with at the station have my back and believe in me.

"Thank you." My voice comes out hoarse.

"Don't thank us." Russo stands from the table. "Just don't break that poor girl's heart. She's been through enough. If you do, you're gonna have four guys on your ass."

Gonzalez gets up and clamps me on the shoulder before he leaves the room.

Ramsey comes over. "For what it's worth, Russo's wife said she looked really happy at Halloran's. Said she had a smile she hadn't seen in a long time."

My chest swells with an unnamed emotion. "Yeah, she laughs now."

He smiles and continues out of the room.

Fleming remains at the table, looking at his phone again. "Told you they'd notice."

I shake my head at him. "You want an award?"

He rolls his eyes. "You're welcome, by the way."

I arch an eyebrow. "For what?"

"Why do you think Russo came in here all calm? I ran interference for you beforehand."

I give him a small smile. I want to tell him thanks, but he'd hate that. So I just nod. He nods back and picks his phone back up.

A half hour later, I'm outside, sweeping a bunch of the shit the snow left behind off the drive, when my phone buzzes in my pocket.

I don't know the number, but it's a Portland area code. Panic rushes through me. "Hello?"

"Can I speak with Ansel Mercer, please?"

"This is he."

"Ansel, this is Wendy Grafton from Portland Fire and Rescue. I apologize for the delay in getting back to you with an answer about the job. One of the key people on the hiring committee had a family emergency and had to go off rather abruptly before a decision could be made. We're just getting back to the process now."

"No apology necessary." I look around to make sure no one is nearby.

"I'm calling to extend an offer of employment to you. Congratulations." Her voice is chipper and excited and the exact opposite of how I presently feel.

“Thank you.” My voice comes out more choked.

“I’ll be emailing the offer to you this afternoon. You can have a look at it and let me know if you have any questions. Congratulations again. We look forward to having you become a part of the Portland Fire Department.”

I give her a weak thanks and hang up.

With everything going on these past few weeks, I completely forgot about the job. It fell off my radar entirely, mostly because the most important thing to me these days is Collins, not my career.

The question is now—what the hell am I going to do?

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FORTY-SIX

Collins

Ansel got off shift early this morning, and he texted me to see if I'd like to have lunch with him, so I'm meeting him at Slice of Life to grab a quick bite. The plan is to get a slice of pizza and take a walk up Main Street since it's an abnormally mild spring day.

When I arrive, he's already holding a box out for me. He's wearing jeans and a flannel shirt with a white T-shirt underneath, looking every bit the outdoorsman he is.

"How was your morning?" He gives me a chaste kiss and hands me the pizza.

"Busy. I'm surprised you're up. Figured you'd sleep a little longer." I bite the pizza and moan.

Ansel waves for us to start up the street. "I couldn't sleep."

His voice is off, and that familiar gut pull tells me he couldn't sleep because he has to tell me something. Maybe something I might not like. I take a better look at him and notice the bags below his eyes. "What's going on?"

"The guys at the firehouse confronted me about what's going on with us."

I cringe, but my body releases the anxiety. Okay, that explains his behavior. "That bad? Maybe I should go talk to them—"

"No, that went all right, surprisingly."

"Oh, what did they say?" I take another bite of my pizza, my stomach calming. Ansel is just still processing his firehouse family knowing about

us.

“Mostly just asked me a bunch of questions. Wanted to be sure nothing was going on before Caleb passed. But in the end, they believed me. Said they’d have my back with the other guys.”

I run my free hand down his arm. “Well... that’s good, right?”

“Yeah, it is.”

His voice still holds that tone. If anything, it’s grown worse. So the firehouse situation isn’t why he’s not sleeping. I clock that he still hasn’t taken a single bite of his pizza.

“Then why do you seem stressed out?”

He sighs and stops walking, his eyes downturned and his shoulders sunken in. “I need to tell you something.”

I glance around to see if anyone is nearby, because I sense that whatever he’s about to tell me is serious and I’d really not like to have a nervous breakdown in the middle of town. I take his free hand and lead him toward the bench. “C’mon.”

He waits for me to sit before folding himself next to me. But he doesn’t put his arm around me or his hand on my thigh.

“What’s going on, Ansel? Whatever it is, we’ll figure it out.” I place the cardboard container on my lap and take his hand.

He swallows hard. How bad could this be?

“I was offered a job at Portland Fire and Rescue.”

He’s leaving?

“I don’t understand. Why would they just offer you a job?”

He looks down at our joined hands. “Because I applied for a job with them... months ago.”

I tilt my head and say nothing.

“Before we were anything... before we were... this.” He squeezes my hand.

My head spins out of control. He applied to the Portland Fire Department? I had no idea he wanted out of Echo Lake. I thought he was a lifer. “Help me understand why this is the first I’m hearing of this.”

He nods a few times as if he knows he has explaining to do. “Ramsey got the promotion over me at the station. I’m not bitter about it. He’s a good guy, and he deserved it. Okay, I was a little bitter. But I want to move up in the ranks too, and now I’ll be waiting for Ramsey to get promoted before I can be next in line. The day I heard, I thought if I went somewhere with

more stations, there'd be more opportunity for me to grow there. Honestly, when I applied, I just did it on a whim."

I shake my head. "So, they offered you a job from an application?" I understand what he's saying, although I don't understand why he never told me about it. I feel like I just got slapped across the face.

I remember how many interviews Caleb went on to get accepted into TEEX, but I guess that's a more elite program.

"I interviewed," he admits, and a sprout of anger erupts in my gut.

"You did?"

"Twice, actually." He cringes, and his eyes downturn again.

I huff. He's interviewed twice. One of them had to be during the times we've been kind of together because I remember when Ramsey got the promotion and Carrie invited me to his celebration party.

I jolt up off my seat, my pizza tipping off my lap and splattering onto the sidewalk. "Is there even a friend in Portland, Ansel, or were you just up there for interviews?"

He pushes a hand through his hair. "No, there's a friend. But... yeah, I went up there for the interviews."

My hands tighten into fists. "You lied."

He hangs his head and nods. "I omitted the truth. I didn't know what was going to happen, and you had so much to deal with, I didn't want to add that into any equation. Or stress you out anymore."

"Ansel, omission is lying. You purposely kept this information from me." My voice grows louder.

A few people glance in our direction. Great, we just came out, and now people are seeing us arguing on Main Street.

Shame coats his eyes. "At first it didn't matter, we weren't involved."

"And once we were? You never thought, *I should tell Collins because I might be leaving Echo Lake?*"

His shoulders sag. "Then I did keep it from you. I thought I was doing the right thing. I wasn't even sure I was going to take the job."

"That's not the point!" My hands fist at my sides. "Ansel, you allowed me to get attached to you knowing there was a possibility you'd leave me. You were the first man I trusted again after Caleb."

"I didn't want to hurt you or stress you out. You already had so much going on. I didn't want to add to it."

“And had you wanted to take the job in Portland? Had they offered you something you couldn’t pass up? You would have hurt me... much worse... you would have left me.”

“Collins,” he says with desperation.

“This is unbelievable.” My fury feels like a hot lava rock in the dead center of my chest.

“It doesn’t matter because I’m not taking the job, but I wanted you to know...”

My hands fly up at my sides. “Oh, you’re not going to take it, so now you want a clear conscience? You don’t get it, Ansel. You *lied* to me. Lied. Caleb lied to me on numerous occasions, it appears. He had an entire life I didn’t know about. Lies upon lies. I’m not interested in being in another relationship with a man I can’t trust, a man who plays with my heart.”

Ansel stands, abandoning his pizza on the bench. He takes my shoulders, but I step back. A flash of panic crosses his face. “Collins, I did it to protect you. I didn’t want you worrying that I would be leaving when I wasn’t even sure I would be.”

“If that’s true, then why are you telling me now?” I cross my arms and jut out my hip.

He hangs his head.

My arms fly out at my sides again. “I can’t deal with this right now.” I bend at the waist and pick up the pizza that fell onto the ground, then walk the few steps to a garbage can and toss it in. I whirl on Ansel, my anger not going away. “I can’t be treated with kid gloves, Ansel. This relationship doesn’t work if you try to ‘protect’ me. And did you ever think that I should have known before we got involved that you might be moving to Portland? Give me the opportunity to make that decision with all the information?”

“Collins—” He steps forward to break the distance.

I put my hand in the air. “No.” He stops and draws back, giving me the space I’m asking for. “I need to think. Don’t call me tonight. I’m not interested in hearing your excuses.”

I storm down the sidewalk.

“Collins—”

“Don’t!” I shout, putting my hand in the air.

I have no idea how I get there, but once I’m in my SUV, I put the key in the ignition and purposely don’t look at the sidewalk. If he’s still there, I don’t care.

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FORTY-SEVEN

Ansel

Well, I fucked that up royally.

My hands tighten around the steering wheel as I make another aimless turn on a country road. I don't even know where I'm going, I've just been driving around. Frustration has miles after miles ticking up my odometer, but I have no one to blame but myself.

Finally, I decide I need reinforcements to help me figure out how to unfuck myself. Fowler will be busy at the bar, and Elliott will be grabbing Baylor from school soon, so I ring up Hollis on my Bluetooth and tell him I'm coming over. He tells me he's in his shop, so I do a U-turn and head back to Echo Lake.

Unlike Elliott, who lives on the lake, and me, who lives in town, Hollis lives in a cabin in the woods and has a large shop on his property that he runs his business out of.

The sound of tires on gravel comes through my open window as I drive up his driveway. I veer to the left around the cabin and continue toward the shop at the back of his property. The minute I park my truck, Sheriff bounds out of the shop. When I get out of my truck, I give him some of the loving he's looking for, rubbing behind his chocolate-colored ears. He might be the cutest lab, especially with a red bandana tied around his neck.

"Hey, buddy. How's it going?"

He sits, mouth open, tongue hanging out, tail wagging.

A whistle sounds from inside of the shop, and Sheriff bolts back inside.

When I step inside the shop, I'm greeted by the scent of sawdust. My brother's shop has big windows on two sides and is filled with raw wood, half-finished products, and about a million tools that I have no idea what they do.

Hollis is filing a piece of wood, but he sets his tool down and turns toward me, brushing the sawdust off the front of his shirt. "Drink?"

"A beer if you got it."

He nods and opens his old beer fridge covered in stickers.

Sheriff wanders back over to me as I climb up on one of the worktables.

"What's with the fashion accessory?" I point at the red bandana.

Hollis grabs two beers from the fridge and hands one to me before sitting on another worktable. "The groomer." He shrugs as though that's explanation enough.

"You take him to the groomer?" Who takes an outdoor dog like Sheriff to a groomer?

"Yes, he likes it." He pets Sheriff behind his ear. "Don't you?"

I ignore that new fact because I don't think I'll get more from Hollis on the topic.

We both twist the caps off the bottles and knock the necks of our beers together.

The sound of tires on gravel sounds again, and Sheriff takes off out of the shop once again like a bat out of hell. I arch a brow in Hollis's direction, and he shrugs.

"Sheriff! Baylor is going to be upset she's not here to see you," Elliott says, walking through the shop door, Sheriff by his side.

"You called Elliott?" I ask Hollis.

"What's with the red bandana?" Elliott asks.

Hollis slides off the table and goes back to the fridge.

"Apparently, Sheriff likes to be pampered." I shrug and take a pull from my beer. "What're you doing here?"

"Hollis called me. Said you didn't sound good on the phone."

I pin my younger brother with a stare.

"What?" Hollis's eyes scan up and down me. "You look like shit, so I was right to call reinforcements." He goes to hand Elliott a beer.

Elliott raises his hand and shakes his head, then hikes himself up on the worktable across from me.

"I figured you'd be picking up Baylor from school." I set my beer on the table beside me.

He shrugs. "I would be, but Em's gonna do it for me today."

"Because you had to come here?" I ask.

"Because we're a team."

Then both of my brothers stare at me and say nothing else.

I blow out a breath. "I fucked up."

"Well, that much is obvious, or you wouldn't be sitting here with that sad sack look on your face," Elliott says.

I narrow my eyes at him.

"How exactly did you fuck up?" Hollis intervenes, always the good moderator.

I hang my head and swing my feet. "I kept something from Collins."

"Which was..." Elliott asks.

I kept something from them too.

"I applied for and got a job with Portland Fire and Rescue." I raise my head, seeing surprise on both their faces.

"You applied for a job in Portland?" There's an edge of hurt in Hollis's voice.

Elliott doesn't say anything, just watches me and waits.

"Ramsey got the promotion over me..." I explain my reasons and how I hoped to wind up back in Echo Lake someday. "I'm sorry. I should've told you guys too." I pick up my beer and take another pull.

"Ansel, we want you here, obviously, but you need to do what you think is best for your life. Not what everyone else thinks is best," Elliott says.

I nod. I know that. I do. "I felt like I'd be disappointing you if I left."

"You would be."

My gaze snaps to Hollis.

"But not how you think. We'd just be disappointed because we couldn't see you all the time, not because we think there's some contract that says you have to stay in Echo Lake your whole life."

The three of us are quiet for a minute. If they're like me, they're thinking about how if I moved, I won't have these moments with my brothers anymore. Look how much Sutton has missed in the last five years.

"So you didn't tell Collins about the job?" Elliott breaks the silence.

I shake my head, pressing my lips together. "No. At first there was nothing between us, so it didn't matter. But when I got the second

interview... I should've said something."

"Why didn't you?" Hollis pets Sheriff when he nudges Hollis's hand with his nose.

"I wasn't sure I was going to take the job. Once things started developing with Collins, I don't know... it changed my perspective. That and... she had some things she was dealing with. It didn't feel like the right time to mention it when we didn't really know what we were yet, and she had so much going on."

My brothers are smart enough not to ask exactly what she had going on. They know that if I wanted to discuss it, I would tell them the specifics.

"And then you got offered the job," Elliott says.

I nod. "Honestly, I'd kind of forgotten about it. Things were going so well with Collins that it just kind of faded into the background."

Elliott lets out a sharp laugh. "Love will do that to you."

My forehead wrinkles. "Who said I love her?"

"Oh, come on." He laughs. "We were all at Uncle Roy's birthday dinner. We know what we saw."

My gaze veers over to Hollis, and he shrugs.

I set my beer back down. "Fine. I'm in love with her."

"How'd she find out about the job?" Hollis ignores my declaration.

"I told her. They called and offered me the job yesterday when I was on shift. We had lunch together today, and I told her. Needless to say, it didn't go as planned."

"She's upset that you kept it from her," Elliott says with that arrogant smirk.

I nod. "There were some issues in her relationship with Caleb. Him not being honest. She told me she has no interest in being in a relationship with someone who's going to lie to her. And she said I put her heart at risk by allowing things to develop but keeping the fact I might leave Echo Lake from her."

"She has a point."

I scowl at Hollis, but he doesn't flinch.

"So now you have to fix it." Elliott crosses his arms.

"Now I have to fix it." I palm the back of my neck. "But I have no idea how?"

"First, be honest with her. Lay it all out," Elliott says.

“I’m telling you I’m never going to keep anything from her again, but how do I get her to believe that?” I shake my head, disappointed in myself.

Hollis takes a long pull from his beer and sets it down beside him. On his other side, Sheriff sighs and sets his head on his paws as though he feels the weight of this conversation too.

I’m right there with you, buddy.

“Words will get you halfway there, but you’re just going to have to show her. She’s gonna have to see that you mean what you say. You’re gonna have to back up the words, week after week, day after day.”

I nod. “Yeah, I know.”

“He’s right, but I’ll add one thing.” Elliott shifts on the worktable. “You’re a good man, Ansel. I’m sure she sees that, otherwise, she wouldn’t be with you in the first place. Especially not with who you were to Caleb.”

I turn that over in my head. Caleb wasn’t honest with her. And I kept something from her. Small in comparison to what Caleb was keeping from her, but something all the same. She’s spent the past however many months figuring out how all the things he kept from her fit together to make a whole marriage that she felt was a lie.

“So what do I do?” I look between my brothers.

“You tell her the truth,” Elliott says. “All of it. What you were thinking with the job. When it changed for you. How you feel about her. What you want your future with her to be. You don’t ask her for anything, not even forgiveness. You lay yourself bare, then you leave it with her, and this is where it gets hard... you wait for her to come to you.”

I palm the back of my neck. “That sounds terrifying.”

He grins. “That’s how you know it’s the right thing to do.”

Hollis pulls from his beer. “And then you show up and do the thing you said you’d do. Week after week, day after day.”

I release a long breath.

For a minute, no one says anything. Sheriff snores softly on the floor.

My eyes scan the shop. The talent my brother possesses amazes me every time I see one of his pieces.

My gaze lands on a piece, and I point at it. “Is that piece for a customer?”

Hollis’s eyes follow my finger. “No, that’s not a commissioned piece. I made that one to sell. Just finished it last week, but I haven’t had a chance to get it listed yet.”

An idea forms. “I’ll take it.”

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FORTY-EIGHT

Collins

That evening, I'm lying on the couch, mindlessly staring at the TV, not really knowing what I'm watching. My mind keeps going over my fight with Ansel earlier today. I did not see that coming.

The doorbell rings, and I bolt up into a sitting position. Is it wrong that a part of me hopes that Ansel didn't listen to me about leaving me alone and he's here to grovel? *Yes, it is*, I tell myself.

I open the door to find Nina, Sutton, and Emelia on the porch.

For a moment, I realize the doorbell didn't trigger that memory. I wanted Ansel to be on the other side of the door. I smile at the small bit of closure I didn't even know had happened.

Sutton is at the head of the pack, holding a bottle of wine in each hand. She steps over the threshold. "Your girls are here."

"What are you guys doing here?" I close the door behind them.

"Heard my brother is being an idiot. We came to lend our support." Sutton makes her way into the kitchen, and Emelia follows.

Nina stops and squeezes my shoulder. "How are you doing?"

I shrug.

"C'mon. It's wine time. Then you can unload." She hooks her arm through mine and leads me to the kitchen.

I grab wineglasses from the cupboard while Sutton opens a bottle and pours. Once we all have a glass of wine in hand, we head into the family room.

“All right, what did my shithead brother do to piss you off?” Sutton brings her wineglass to her lips.

I hate complaining about Sutton’s brother and Emelia’s brother-in-law. It feels wrong to tell them our fight and have them only hear my side.

Sutton puts her hand on my thigh. “We’re yours too, not just his. You can say whatever you want, and I won’t go into protective sister mode. I promise.”

I smile and look at Emelia, nodding in agreement.

“He applied for a job in Portland without telling me,” I say.

Sutton frowns. “Ansel wants to leave Echo Lake?”

I shake my head. “I’m not sure it’s about wanting to leave. More about wanting to move ahead in his career after another guy at the station got promoted.”

“So you’re upset that he’s going to move hours away when you’ve just started a relationship? That’s understandable,” Nina says, sympathy in her eyes.

My free hand flies up. “No, it’s not that. Sure, it’s not ideal, but we could’ve talked about it... had he told me. But that’s the point—he didn’t.”

“So how did you find out?” Nina asks.

“Well, he told me today.”

Nina nods, getting it now.

“How long has this been in the works?” Emelia asks.

“A few months, from what I gather. I just... I can’t be in another relationship where my partner keeps things from me.”

Emelia tilts her head because she doesn’t understand what I’m talking about. I glance at Nina and she nods, suggesting that I tell them.

I slug back half my glass of wine and tell the girls all of it—the original receipt I found, the hotel invoice from Galveston, and finally the hidden cell phone. Then I tell them how Ansel read through all the messages for me and relayed what they said.

Nina gives me a sympathetic smile, tears in her eyes, when I mention the baby. She knows better than anyone else here how much it wore on me when I didn’t get pregnant right away.

Emelia and Sutton’s mouths are practically hanging open.

“I can’t believe Caleb did that. It just seems so unlike the guy I grew up with,” Sutton says.

Then I detail how Fowler knew about Caleb's affair and my conversation with him.

Sutton's jaw actually hangs open now. "Fowler knew?"

I blow out a breath. "Yeah. I can understand why he didn't say anything after Caleb died. He was his best friend and thought he was saving me a lot of pain. But we're good now."

Sutton downs her glass of wine and seems almost angrier than I was. I guess, like Ansel, since they all grew up together, she's wondering how Fowler could keep that secret.

"Given all that, I can understand why you were upset with Ansel." Emelia frowns.

"I just don't understand why Ansel wouldn't tell me. He says it's because I had so much going on already, but he had a front-row seat to me discovering my real marriage. Didn't he think I deserved to make the decision about our involvement knowing all the facts?" I shake my head.

"I can tell you exactly why he didn't tell you," Sutton says, pushing up from where she sits cross-legged on the floor. "As soon as I refill my wine. Anyone else?"

Nina holds out her empty glass.

Sutton goes into the kitchen and returns a minute later, passing Nina her refilled glass. She sips her wine, then looks at me. "He didn't tell you because Ansel is terrified of ever letting down someone that he loves."

"Why would—" But as I'm asking the question, it dawns on me. "Your father."

She nods. "I don't think he ever really got over what our dad did. He knows the pain you cause someone when you fail them, and I don't think he ever wants to be the one to inflict that kind of pain on someone else."

The room quiets for a minute.

That jives with the Ansel I know.

"He has to know that keeping things from me isn't the right course of action, though. It's not something I'll be able to deal with, even if he thinks it's for my own good. He disappointed me by keeping it from me."

"Yeah, he doesn't see that," Sutton says.

"He did tell you, though." Nina's voice is quiet, tentative.

I look at her. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, he could've turned the job down and never told you. You'd probably be none the wiser." She shrugs.

She's right. Ansel didn't have to tell me about the job. If he'd kept it to himself, I wouldn't even have known about it. Probably never would have known he'd applied. Instead, he chose to tell me, knowing I might be upset with him.

"Maybe he figured out he did the wrong thing initially and was trying to make up for it by coming clean," Emelia says.

I nod slowly. "I think you might be right. He deserves some credit for that, I guess."

"Men are like dogs. You have to train them early, otherwise you're stuck with their bad habits forever," Sutton says.

The three of us laugh.

"I'm just joking, but you just have to tell Ansel where it's at. Set the expectation and make it clear that you need him to live up to it." She raises her wineglass and nods.

"Sounds like as good a plan as any," Nina says.

"I think you're right," I say.

One thing I know about Ansel is that he's a good man. Yes, I thought I had a good man in Caleb too, once upon a time. And I've allowed that past to dictate how I behaved with Ansel. But they're different men, and I refuse to let what Caleb did sour me on the idea of love for the rest of my life. Ansel's not perfect, but neither am I. He deserves another chance.

"Still, men do suck. No matter how well you train them," Sutton says before knocking back more wine.

"Amen to that." Nina holds out her wineglass to Sutton, and they clink them.

Emelia raises a tentative hand. "My man doesn't suck."

"All right, Elliott doesn't suck—any more," Sutton concedes. "But that's only because he met you and you trained him."

Emelia chuckles and shakes her head at her future sister-in-law.

"So, what are you going to do?" Nina asks.

And that's the question now...

FORTY-NINE

Collins

When I arrive home from work the following day, Ansel's truck is parked in my driveway.

He texted me earlier, asking if we could talk after work, and I agreed, but I didn't think he was coming by until later. He has the door code, and I see that he must have used it when I get out of my SUV and find his truck empty.

I look at the house and pray this conversation goes well. I just want to make my needs known and move past this. Fighting with Ansel feels unnatural.

When I enter the house, he's not anywhere that I can see, but he calls, "In the kitchen."

I walk in and see Ansel sitting in a chair at a table that wasn't here when I left this morning. It's a gorgeous walnut harvest table with matching wood chairs. I haven't had a chance to look for a new kitchen table, but if I had, this is exactly what I would have chosen.

"What the—" I point at the table.

"Please... sit." Ansel motions to the chair to the left of where he's at the head of the table.

I sit and run my hand over the wood. "Did Hollis make this?"

"He did. And when I saw it, I knew it had to be ours." Ansel takes my hand, and I allow him. "This is the table I want to share meals at with you for decades to come. This is where I want our children—in whatever form they might come—to spill their juice and accidentally get marker on wood.

This is the table I want to have our serious conversations around when we're trying to figure out how to make ends meet, or disagree on how to discipline our teenager when they're acting up. This is the table around which I want to share a life with you, Collins. I want to look back at this table in fifty years and remember where every scratch and ding came from. See every happy and sad memory we've shared around it." He squeezes my hand. "I'm sorry, Collins, so much. I understand why you're mad, and I promise to show you every day that I'm not that man you think I am."

"Ansel..." I sigh. "I know you didn't mean to hurt me, but I need complete transparency, even if you think it might upset me."

He nods. "I should have found a way to tell you I applied for the job, regardless of what was going on. I see how trying to keep you from hurting actually caused you more pain, and I swear to you, Collins, if you let me remain in your life, it will never happen again. I'll never keep something from you ever again. I saw how much it hurt you, and I never, ever want to be the one to cause you pain."

I think back to what Sutton said about her brother. The guilt that he disappointed me is written all over his face. "I need to know that you'll always tell me the truth. No matter what."

He runs his thumb over my knuckles. "The truth, Collins, is that I love you. Have for a while now."

Tears well in my eyes. I press my lips together to keep from crying.

"You are the biggest and best surprise of my life. When I set out to help you move on, I never would've thought we'd end up here, but I couldn't be happier that we did."

I can't remain in my seat anymore, I need to be close to him, so I rise from my chair. He scoots back with a smile tipping his lips. I straddle his lap. One of Ansel's hands rests on my thigh, the other on my lower back while I slide one hand around his neck and cup his face with the other.

"I love you too, Ansel. After Caleb died, I wasn't sure I would ever find love again. And especially after everything about his affair came out. But you made me see that the life I thought I could have didn't die with Caleb, just that version of it."

He guides my head down to his, and our lips meet in a slow, sensual kiss bursting with love. When he finally pulls away, the way he's looking at me lets me know that he's really heard everything I said and understands what I need from him.

“There’s just one thing.” I give him a quick kiss.

“What is it?”

“I want to talk about this job you’ve been offered in Portland.”

Ansel shakes his head. “I’m not taking it.”

“I don’t want you to sacrifice your career aspirations for me.”

He tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. “It’s not a sacrifice, Collins. Not even close. None of it would mean anything without you beside me.”

“Ansel…”

“We’ll figure something out down the line for my career. I’m not worried about it right now.”

His use of *we’ll* spurs giddiness inside me.

“If this is important to you, then it’s important for me. We can figure it out.”

He shakes his head. “*You’re* important to me. The rest will fall into place.”

“Ansel—”

He covers my lips with his finger. “You told me Echo Lake felt like home to you. That it was the first place you ever felt that. Well, it’s my home too. I love Echo Lake, and what I’d love more than anything is to live my life here with you.”

Tears well in my eyes again, and this time, one escapes and trails down my cheek.

Ansel wipes it away with his thumb. “I hope these are happy tears.”

“Only the happiest.” I smile.

He kisses me again. “So… do you think we should christen our new table?”

I toss my head back and laugh. “Obviously.”

He lifts me by the waist and sets me on the edge of the table, his chair skidding along the floor.

“The first of a lifetime.”

EPILOGUE

TWO WEEKS LATER

The Thermos Crew

Jimmy Dalton arrives outside the Bait & Tackle at 6:47 a.m., the same as he has every day for decades. His camping chair is in the bed of his truck because it's always in the bed of his truck. With a Thermos in one hand and his chair in the other, he shuffles over to his spot through the mucky gravel lot, barely lifting his feet.

Clyde pulls into the lot at 7:03 a.m. in his sedan that looks as if it's held together with duct tape and prayer these days. He pulls his chair out of the trunk and limps over to where Jimmy is already set up. He sets his chair up beside Jimmy and flops down into it with a groan, rubbing his knee. "Morning."

"Mornin'."

Sam arrives at 7:13 a.m. He doesn't say good morning, just sets himself up on the other side of Jimmy, and stretches his legs out in front of him as always.

All three men wear lighter jackets than they have in the previous months, and Jimmy has traded his winter cap for a Red Sox baseball hat. Although they've had a good run of warmer weather lately, spring in Maine isn't what other people think of when they think of spring. It's more *it's not winter anymore* than anything.

They aren't there for more than thirty seconds before Dottie comes out of the Hollow Pine Café across the road with a steaming coffeepot in hand.

"Morning, boys." She starts with Sam's Thermos, then Jimmy's, then Clyde's.

They all murmur their good mornings, then Dottie returns to the café, as she does every morning.

Clyde only lasts seventeen seconds before he breaks. “So...”

“Here we go.” Sam closes his eyes and tilts his chin up toward the sun.

“I wasn’t going to say anything—” Clyde sounds offended.

“You absolutely were going to say something,” Jimmy says.

“—but I saw Ansel Mercer carrying a couch through the front door of Collins Ward’s place yesterday.”

Jimmy sips his coffee.

“A couch,” Clyde says again in case they missed it the first time.

“We heard you the first time,” Sam says.

“He’s moving in.”

Sam nods. “He was moving in.”

“You already knew.” Clyde’s voice is filled with disappointment.

“Marlene was at the salon yesterday, and Greta said that she heard from Manuel that Ansel had told Fowler earlier this week that he was gonna be moving in with Collins.”

Clyde ignores him. “Anyway, Ansel moving into Collins’s house, that’s a thing that happened in this town yesterday.”

“It’s good for them,” Jimmy says, then sips from his Thermos.

Sam nods.

“I want the record to reflect”—Clyde raises his finger—“that I was the first person to say something was going on there last year after Baylor’s birthday party.”

“You said something after I said something.” Jimmy readjusts his hat.

Clyde shakes his head. “Nope. You said it meant something, but I’m the one who pointed it out first. Those two are headed for the altar, mark my words.”

“They’re headed for a common-law marriage at least,” Jimmy says.

“I want it on the record that I’m saying they’re headed to the altar.”

“You’re always on the record,” Sam says.

Clyde shrugs then rubs his shoulder. “Only when I’m right about something.”

Jimmy takes a slow sip. Greta Goldstein drives by with a honk, and they all raise their hands in unison, like a well-choreographed routine.

“They looked good together yesterday. I drove by twice. She was laughing at him. He was carrying something too wide for the door, and she

was showing him how to angle it, and he was ignoring her, doing it his own way. That's a marriage right there." Clyde brings his Thermos to his mouth.

"That's what a good marriage looks like," Sam says.

The three of them are quiet for a while because they all remembered the other kind. All had the sense that something was going on with Caleb in the last year of his life. Remembered the funeral, Collins in a black dress with Ansel's hand on her elbow as though it was the only thing keeping her up that day. They remembered the year that came after and the way that Collins barely left her house except to work. The way Ansel had so much pent-up emotion he'd bounce his leg through every poker game until you wanted to strap it with duct tape to the chair.

They remembered a lot. But none of them said anything.

"Good on 'em," Jimmy finally says.

"Good on 'em," Sam echoes.

Clyde nods and lifts his Thermos. "To Ansel and Collins."

The other two men follow suit. "To Ansel and Collins."

"Now, can we talk about Sutton?" Clyde asks.

"Jesus," Sam says with exasperation.

Clyde shakes his head. "You know something's going on with her."

"I know something's going on with her because I have eyes, yeah," Sam says. "I don't know what because it's not my business."

Clyde's head rocks back with a guffaw. "Not your business because Marleen hasn't told you yet." He takes a sip from his Thermos. "Roy kicked her out. That's what I heard."

Jimmy's eyes flicker toward Clyde. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Had to stop by Crow & Clover, and Manuel told me."

"Roy wouldn't kick her out," Sam says.

"All right." Clyde raises a hand. "Manuel said that Roy told her it was time she made herself a proper place to sleep, which in Roy speak is basically kicking her out."

"That's Roy's way of saying *I love you, but figure your life out*," Jimmy says.

"Exactly," Clyde says. "So Sutton is moving into Ansel's old room."

"At Fowler's place," Jimmy says.

Clyde nods. "Fowler's place."

The three of them sit with that.

“Now,” Clyde says carefully, “I’m not saying anything, but I’m just noting the arrangement.”

“You’re always noting something,” Sam says.

“Just saying—Ansel moves out, Sutton moves in.”

“They’re grown adults,” Jimmy says.

“Grown adults who now share a bathroom.” Clyde sips from his Thermos.

“Clyde...” Sam shakes his head.

“I’m just noting it is all.” They’re quiet for another few minutes, until Clyde breaks the silence again. “There’s something up with that girl.”

“Roy knows,” Jimmy says.

The other two men nod and say in unison, “Roy knows.”

Jimmy sets his Thermos in the cupholder of his chair and folds his hands over his stomach. “Well, whatever it is, I’m sure she’ll figure it out.”

“She’ll figure it out at Fowler’s apparently,” Sam says.

“You gotta admit,” Clyde says, “it’s an *interesting* arrangement.”

Sam sighs. “You’ve said.”

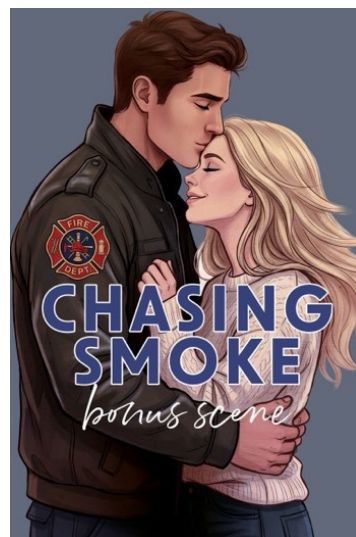
“I’m just—”

“Noting it, we know.” Jimmy nods. “Guess we’ll see how it all pans out.” The corner of his lips turns up in a knowing smirk.

The End

You watched Ansel and Collins do the impossible—find love after loss.

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COCKAMAMIE UNICORN RAMBLINGS

With almost one hundred full-length books to our name, it's hard to find a trope we haven't tackled yet! But we found one! We've never taken on the trope of the best friends' widow.

There are a lot of emotions to mine when you're dealing with the loss of a spouse, and it felt important to try and strike a delicate balance between Collins's and Ansel's developing feelings. Too fast, and it risks feeling like a betrayal. Too slow, and readers might want to fall asleep. LOL

It was a hard task to explore how Collins would deal with Caleb's betrayal *after* he had passed, knowing she'll never get the answers she wants. We suppose we could have had Collins find some letter Caleb had written or texts he sent someone about the affair, but that felt too easy. And let's be honest, that wouldn't really satisfy her desire to know *why* he did what he did and how he felt about her. It felt more interesting to dig into how she was going to live with the knowledge of what happened, without understanding it, than to have her somehow discover the answer to every question she had.

You might be wondering if Collins decided to tell Caleb's parents about the baby he had with Madelyn... you'll have to wait for that answer in the next book. ;)

Part of the fun of this book was getting to explore the town a little more than we did in the previous book. It's always fun to figure out the names for our small town businesses, and if you haven't already seen it, there's a town map of Main Street over on our website, Piperrayne.com.

We have a bunch of people to thank for helping to put this story in your hands...

You, the reader, who has an abundance of amazing books to choose from—thank you for picking up one of ours. Word of mouth is always the best form of advertising, and we appreciate you sharing your love for our work with the romance community! We couldn't do what we do without you, and we are sincerely grateful for the support!

Nina and the entire Valentine PR team. We appreciate you SO much!

Cassie from Joy Editing for the line edits and for always graciously working with our chaotic schedules.

Ellie from My Brother's Editor for line edits and proofreading. You always come through for us!

Olivia Winston for giving our manuscript one final look over before we hit publish. Unlike us, you never miss a deadline!

Simone and Angela at Buerosued for our illustrated cover. Your work is fantastic as always!

Hang Le for our indie exclusive cover. You never disappoint. Ever!

All the ARC readers who choose our book to read when you have so many options. We're always grateful for your reviews, edits, and enthusiasm. It all makes a difference, and thank you never feels like enough!

All the Piper Rayne Unicorns who support us all day, every day. Old or new, you're our safe space on the internet, and we'd be lost without you!

Sutton and Fowler's book, *Treading Water*, is up next! If you've read a lot of our books, it will come as no surprise that we love a brother's best friend story, so you know we had to have one in the Mercer series. These two have a secret of their own they've been keeping, and it's not what you think...

xo,

Piper & Rayne

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ABOUT PIPER & RAYNE

Piper Rayne is an Amazon Top 12 and USA Today Bestselling Author duo who believes in soft places to land, big laughs, and happily-ever-afters.

Piper runs on tea. Rayne runs on Diet Coke. But they both have one boy and one girl and are married to men who patiently listen to book talk they'll never quite understand.

Piper's the one who turns up the heat and humor—spinning tension, spark, and steam into moments that make you blush into your pillow and grin through the next chapter.

Rayne's the one who tugs on your heartstrings—mixing locker-room laughs, brotherhood banter, and the kind of heart-punch moments that hit when you least expect them.

Together, they create stories that feel like family—sometimes found, sometimes blood—but always the kind that stays with you long after the final word.

At the end of the day, Piper and Rayne write love stories that they hope feel real, funny, with just the right amount of steam... ones that make your heart race and your world a little warmer.



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