

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The man, with a beard and short brown hair, wears a light purple long-sleeved shirt. The woman, with long, wavy brown hair, wears a patterned halter top. They are positioned in the upper half of the frame. The background is a scenic mountain landscape with a river winding through a dense forest of evergreen trees. The sky is filled with dramatic, golden-hued clouds, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is intimate and serene.

DEEP RIVER
series

BOOK 5 IN THE DEEP RIVER SERIES

SILENCE
BETWEEN
THE
Storms

NYSSA KATHRYN

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SILENCE BETWEEN THE STORMS
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He'll risk everything to protect her...even from fears she can't outrun.

Nora Slade came to Deep River to be close to her brother...not to fall for his tall, handsome and far-too-distracting best friend. *All* of her brother's friends are off limits. At least, that's what she's always told herself. And no, she isn't avoiding Zac, in particular, for any other reason. Certainly not because of a deep-rooted fear she's never shared with anyone. That she's destined to become her mother. That she's destined to destroy everyone close to her.

Zac Pierce has faced plenty of danger in his life. A former Navy SEAL turned search and rescue, he likes to think very little could scare him. But falling for his teammate's sister? That kind of terrifies him. Mostly because she's told him she can't date her brother's friends. So he just needs to back off. But in the small town of Deep River, avoiding someone isn't so easy. Especially when you're running into them at work every week...

When a dangerous new drug begins spreading through town, affecting Nora's students, it isn't too long before she's questioning her *own* sanity. Now, Zac can't stand back any longer. He'll do whatever it takes to protect Nora and prove that her demons aren't all in her head—they're only too real.

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And thank you to my family. Will, these books are yours as much as they are mine. I couldn't do it without you. And to my two girls, I love you and I hope that you grow up knowing that more than one world exists—the real one, and the worlds we create.

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PROLOGUE

T *wenty Years Ago*

NORA SLADE COUNTED the stars on the ceiling.

Thirty-eight. There were exactly thirty-eight stars that came alive in her bedroom when the lights turned out and night came. Sometimes she could almost convince herself they were real. Sometimes they almost looked brighter than the ones that peppered the sky outside.

Her bedroom in Ohio had held twenty-four. And in New Mexico, she'd had forty-nine.

Ryan always made sure she had stars on her ceiling. It didn't matter where they were or how hard money was to find, he managed to get them. Usually, that involved taking cash from Mom's purse. Not that there was ever much.

She turned her head and watched the rise and fall of her brother's chest. He was asleep. Good, he needed to sleep.

She studied the bruising around his left eye. It was dark and angry, a visual reminder of the mood their mother had been in today.

The morning flashed through her mind.

All she'd done was step into the kitchen. And her mother had looked at her like...like she didn't know who Nora was. Like her daughter was a stranger.

Nora had known the exact moment something bad was about to happen. Her mother's eyes did this thing where they got dark and slanted. Then that gaze sat on her for seconds that stretched into something longer. Something heavier.

Ryan had seen it too. He usually saw it before Nora did. Maybe because he was thirteen and she was only eleven. He'd moved faster than her. But then, she'd been too scared to move at all. He'd gotten in front of her just before the vase flew across the room.

Tears pressed at her eyes as she remembered the way the glass hit him in the eye. Then the shatter as it had smashed against the wooden floorboards.

Something squeezed in her chest. She was pretty sure it was guilt. It came every time Ryan got hurt protecting her.

The grumble of her tummy suddenly cut through the quiet. All she'd eaten today was a granola bar. Ryan had hidden it in a drawer in their bedroom. There'd only been one, and she'd tried to share but he'd refused.

If they'd gone to school today, they might have eaten more. Samantha Pollen often shared her food with Nora. But Ryan didn't like them going to school when he had bruises that people could see. He didn't want teachers doing anything that could have them separated.

Sometimes she wondered if that was true though. She wondered if he just didn't want to have to lie. Or to endure teachers looking at him with pity then turning away instead of helping them. That was what had happened when they were younger.

Her stomach growled again. But she wasn't just hungry. She was also thirsty. And she needed to pee.

She glanced at the door. The house had silenced a while ago. Could she risk it? Could she leave this room for water?

A couple hours ago, they'd thought their mother might have passed out. But then she'd knocked on the door and apologized. She'd told them she was better and they could come out.

But she lied. A lot.

Maybe she was asleep now. Plus, the bathroom was only eight steps from the bedroom. Nora had counted. She could be back in under two minutes. Maybe less.

Quietly, she climbed out of bed. At the light thump of her feet against floorboards, her gaze flew to Ryan. But he didn't move. His eyelids didn't

even flicker.

He was tired. He'd tried to stay up for her, because he knew she had trouble sleeping, but at some point he'd fallen asleep.

God, she loved him. Some days she was sure she'd die without him. He was so brave and strong. He was also the only family she felt safe with.

She crossed to the door and touched the lock, closing her eyes on a deep breath. Her heart raced. She'd learned that sometimes just getting really still and sucking lots of air into her belly helped her be brave.

Click.

She unclasped the lock.

The second the door opened, her hands went clammy. Fear. It came into her body a lot. Fear that she'd see her mother. Fear of the *version* of her mother she'd see.

Because there were so many versions.

The one who passed out on the couch and didn't get up for days. The distant mother who didn't seem to notice that she or Ryan were there. The third version was the worst. She was angry and violent, and Ryan almost always got hurt.

But every so often there was a glimpse, a tiny flicker, of this other mother. A mother who cared. A mother who braided her hair and read her stories.

Nora's heart hurt that she couldn't keep that version. That she got such short bursts of her.

She crossed the eight steps to the bathroom and peed in the dark, scared any light might move down the hall and wake her mother, wherever she was. It was okay. She'd memorized where everything was. She was also good at being quiet when she had to be. She'd learned to walk without making a sound. To avoid the loud floorboards and move in a way to avoid attention.

When she was done, she stepped back into the hall and glanced at her and Ryan's bedroom door. She should go back to bed.

Her stomach grumbled again. Ryan had to be hungry too. There wasn't much food in the kitchen, but maybe she could find something. Old bread. An apple that hadn't gone bad.

Six more steps took her to the kitchen doorway. Luckily, the house was small. Every house and apartment they'd ever lived in was small. And run-

down and dirty, sometimes with mice living in the walls. She wasn't sure her mother noticed those things though.

She passed a small container of pills on the kitchen counter. They were the good pills. The ones that made her mother less scary but more vacant. That's why her mother didn't like to take them. She said her head somehow felt both empty and muddy at the same time.

Ryan hated that. They fought about it. He'd yell that she needed to take her medicine because when she didn't, she couldn't take care of them. Her mother sometimes listened. But more often refused or lied.

There were also *other* pills. Ones that, even at eleven, Nora knew her mother shouldn't be taking. Ones that made her mother stay up all night. Play music too loud. Ones she got from bad-looking people.

Nora was about to open a cabinet door when she saw the dark silhouette in the living room. She gasped and spun. Her mother was facing the window. She was looking out over the street, her long brown hair knotted at her back, her robe over her shoulders.

Leave.

The voice of warning whispered in her head.

She took a step.

"They're watching us."

Nora froze at her mother's voice, gauged the distance back to the bedroom.

Then she looked at her mother. "I was just getting something to eat. I'll—"

"They think I don't know what they're doing."

Nora swallowed. She'd heard this before. When she was younger, she'd believed her mother. She used to think people were always watching them. That every time they moved, they needed to move again because new people were out to get them. "I'll go back—"

"Come here."

For a second, Nora's feet stuck to the floor. She didn't like to stand too close to her mother. She was too unpredictable.

Her mom turned her head, but darkness swallowed her features. "Come here, Nora. Please."

Nora's feet started to move. Maybe because she didn't want to wake Ryan. Maybe because she was too scared of her mother *not* to do as she was told.

“*Look.*” Her mother tilted her head toward the street.

She followed her mother’s gaze out the window. A few streetlights. Dark houses. Two parked cars. “I don’t see anything.”

“The blue car. It wasn’t there this morning.”

“Maybe someone just parked there.”

Her mother shook her head, but it was different from how she or Ryan or anyone at school shook their heads. It was jerky and fast, her eyes too wide as she moved. “No. I went to the store today. There was a man watching me. Then that car shows up. It’s *him.*”

Nora didn’t ask who the man was or how her mother knew it was his car. She’d learned long ago that asking questions made it worse. It made her mother’s stories more detailed and wild, pushing her deeper into this version that Nora didn’t like.

When her mother looked back at the car, Nora followed her gaze. For a second, she tried to see what her mom saw. She’d tried so many times over the years. Sat at so many windows and studied a world that looked normal, while being told it was dangerous.

“Do you see him?” her mother whispered. “Do you think he’s in the back, watching?”

Nora looked back at her mother’s profile. The way her mother held her robe closed with a grip so tight her knuckles were white. The way her eyes were red and bloodshot. “I think you need sleep, Mom.”

Wrong thing to say.

Her mother swung her attention back to Nora, anger reddening her cheeks. “You don’t believe me?”

Her throat tightened, the familiar pit in her belly growing wider. She didn’t want her mother to be angry. She didn’t like the angry version. So she lied. “I believe you.”

Her mother nodded. “Good. Ryan’s not like us. He doesn’t see the world for what it is, not like you and me. He pretends that it’s safe out there. But it’s not.” Her mother leaned closer. Nora flinched when she cupped her cheek, then her mom whispered, “Sometimes I look at you, Pea, and think I’m looking at myself. You look so much like me. You have my eyes. My hair. You and me...we’re the same.”

Nausea wrapped around Nora’s belly, making her want to be sick. It wasn’t the first time her mother had said that.

But Nora didn't want to be like her mother. She wanted to be as far from all the versions of this woman as possible.

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T^{oday}

NORA'S EYES SHOT OPEN, blood rushing so loud between her ears it almost drowned out the buzzing of her phone alarm.

A dream. It was just a dream.

She looked around the small studio apartment. The kitchen that was only five feet from the bed. The small round table that the door almost clipped every time it was opened.

Just a dream, she repeated in her head.

But it didn't feel like a dream. Every time any part of her childhood played over in her mind, it felt like she was living it all over again.

Damn her mother for still haunting her to this day.

She'd been doing so well. A month had passed since her last nightmare. Okay, a month might not sound long to most, but to her it was great. It might as well be a year or a decade.

She grabbed her phone from the bedside table, lips quirking at the screen.

Get your ass out of bed, woman.

The alarm label was absolutely mandatory. Because she knew her lazy, overtired ass would always stay in bed as long as possible.

Right on cue, she dropped the cell to the mattress and closed her eyes again. And this was why she was never early for work. But hell, she never missed a meeting with a student. That was what mattered, right?

The whoosh of the wind outside had her lips curving. She was in Deep River, Montana. Living in the same town as Ryan for the first time in their adult lives.

And God, it felt good. He was her family. Her only family. The one person who'd always been there. And now he was a car ride away.

Sleep was just pulling her under again when her alarm went off a second time.

Goddammit.

She grabbed her cell and read her screen again.

I mean it. Up. Now.

God, Nighttime Nora was a pain in her ass. She knew Morning Nora too well.

With a groan, she climbed out of bed and stretched. The studio apartment was so tiny that she could almost touch wall to wall. Okay, maybe not, but it was the closest she'd ever gotten. Ryan could probably stretch out *his* arms and touch both sides.

She kind of loved it. It was cute. Cozy even.

Maybe what she loved most was that the apartment was over Polly's garage, so she knew her new friend was close by if she needed help.

Inside the bathroom, she stripped and stepped inside the shower. When she reached for the bodywash, her gaze stalled on the small constellation of stars tattooed to the inside of her left wrist.

She swallowed as the dream came back to mind. But instead of panicking, instead of letting the memory pull her into some dark space, she let it pass through her, acknowledging it without *surrendering* to it. Then she anchored herself. Feeling the water on her skin, the tiles beneath her feet, the bodywash in her palm.

She'd done the therapy. A truckload of it. It had helped. Though, she still took medication for anxiety and magnesium for sleep. And there was nothing wrong with that, something her therapist had helped her to understand.

Over the years, she'd learned that trauma wasn't always something you healed from. But it *was* something you could learn to live with. She wasn't a victim—she was a survivor.

Once out of the shower, she pulled on a sage-green sweater, black trousers, and boots with a small heel.

Beige wasn't really her thing. She liked to show up to her job as a school counselor in pops of color and high-contrast nail polish, then just a bit of color on her lips.

On her way out, she grabbed a granola bar, banana, and small tub of yogurt. And there were Skittles in her car. Because that was what she called *balance*.

To be honest, she went very few places without Skittles. They lived in her office at work. There were bags in her kitchen cabinets. She usually had a packet in her purse...for emergencies, of course.

She climbed into her car and dropped her bag onto the passenger seat. She opened the middle console to grab her sunglasses, only...the Skittles were gone.

What the hell?

She pulled onto the road and tapped the call button on the dashboard touchscreen.

Ryan answered on the first ring. "Hey. You okay?"

"No."

"Why? What happened?" There was sudden urgency in Ryan's voice. "Are you hurt?"

"You stole my Skittles."

A short pause. "What?"

"There were Skittles in the middle console of my car yesterday. I would estimate three quarters of a bag. Then I asked *you* to change my tire, and now they're suddenly gone. Coincidence?"

"No."

She gasped. "You're admitting it?"

"It was Joel. I stayed late at work, so I asked him to change the tire. I assume he took them, since food doesn't stand a chance in his company."

"That's not fair. I can't be angry at him if he changed my tire." She took a right turn.

"But you can be angry at me?"

"Absolutely. That's what family is, unconditional love and highly conditional patience."

He chuckled. "I'll replace them."

He said it like he didn't know she had ten spare bags at home. "No, don't do that. Consider it payment for changing my tire. How's Emi today?"

Only a month ago, Emily, his girlfriend, had been through hell. Threatened, attacked, and targeted by the last person she thought would have wanted to hurt her. Thank God the asshole who'd terrorized her was now dead.

"She's good." A new softness crept into her brother's tone. It was almost strange to hear it from the tough former Navy SEAL. But she liked it. He deserved to be happy, and Emily *made* him happy. "I still catch myself wondering how I got so fucking lucky to have her here with me."

"That's a dollar in the curse jar, Ryan. And of course she's here. She loves you."

"Are you driving?"

"Just pulled up to work."

"Have you had any more trouble with those boys since Trap?" he asked, referring to some kids who'd hassled her at the local bar before discovering she was the new high school counselor.

"Nope. I've seen them around though."

A low growl rumbled over the line. And for good reason. The boys had caused a bit of trouble a couple months ago. They'd slipped into the bar and one of them had tried to hit on her. When she'd told them to leave, because she could tell they were underage—a *child* would've known they were underage—they hadn't been happy. One of the boys had even gone so far as to shove her.

She pulled into the school parking lot. "All right, I'm here. Got to go. Glad we sorted out that Skittle business."

"Be careful, Nora."

"I always am."

"And I'll replace those Skittles."

"Jumbo bag, please."

Another chuckle. She grinned with him.

She hung up but didn't get out of the car right away after parking. Instead, she took a moment to steady herself. Working as a school counselor could be a lot. Kids came to her every day with new problems. Some lighter, some heavier. Some issues reminding her eerily of her own problems growing up.

But that was why she did what she did. To be there for those who had no one else to talk to. And maybe even to save someone who needed saving.

Because no one had saved her and Ryan. Yes, they'd hidden what they were going through well. They'd stayed home when there were visible bruises. They'd found ways to eat and survive until they could get out.

But a little help would have gone a long way, especially in the early years.

She climbed out of the car. The loud buzz of voices and laughing and vehicle engines filtered through the air. Kids were scattered around the lot. Apparently, no one was ever in a hurry to get to class.

Her gaze caught one particular group. Mostly guys, but a couple of girls. And in that group were the boys who'd been at the bar.

She focused on the boy who'd shoved her. Toby. A lot of kids talked about him. But not for the right reasons. He had his arm slung over a girl's shoulders. She didn't look happy. She almost looked...zoned out. Or disassociated.

Nora wanted to go over and check on her. But she already knew the teenage girl wouldn't appreciate it.

That was the hardest part of this job...knowing she couldn't save everyone.

If a school counselor had tried to save *her*, she wasn't sure she would have let them either. They'd had no other family around to live with. She wouldn't have wanted to go to foster care, because she certainly wouldn't have wanted to be separated from Ryan.

"Nora."

She jumped at the deep, gravelly voice before shooting her gaze to the man beside her.

Zac. Beautiful, brother's-best-friend, totally off-limits Zac. She would never date a friend of her brother's. But she could admire his ridiculously sculpted body that was visible even through his tight T-shirt, right? She could get just a little lost in his ocean-blue eyes.

"Morning, Pierce. You just roll out of a forest?"

He frowned, a cute, confused expression knitting his brows.

She reached up and pulled a twig out of his hair. "I know you search and rescue guys like the woods, but wearing it is a bit much."

He chuckled, that low, deep, belly-flip-inducing chuckle. "I stopped at work on the way here and did a perimeter check."

"Is something wrong?"

"No. Just keeping an eye on everything."

A lot had been going on in this town lately. So much so that Ryan had actually told her *not* to move here. Yet here she was.

Zac shoved his hands into his pockets, his biceps doing that sexy bunch-then-un-bunch thing. “Have you spoken to Ryan this morning?”

“I have.” They stepped inside the hallway off the front entrance of the school. “I had to find out who took my Skittles.”

“Joel.”

“You knew?”

“I saw him eating them when he got back to the firehouse yesterday. I know you’re a Skittles addict, so I assumed he got them from you.”

She laughed. “Well, at least I’m not the only one with a sweet tooth.”

“That man would eat the emergency rations and *then* ask what the emergency was.”

“I like his priorities.”

Two girls passed, both staring at Zac, wide-eyed, while whispering and giggling.

Looked like she wasn’t the only one who couldn’t help but admire him.

She elbowed him in the side. “Bet you’re getting a lot of that.”

“No.”

She scoffed. “Okay, sure.”

“You think I’m lying?”

They stopped at the end of the hall, outside her office. “I *know* you’re lying, Pierce, which actually hurts, because you were my favorite.”

A strange look she couldn’t name crossed his face. But it disappeared as quickly as it came. “Were?”

“You’re about to lose your title, I’m afraid. Might give it to Joel.”

“After he ate your Skittles?”

“At least he never lied to me.”

The office door beside hers opened and Adam Sawyer, a gym teacher at the school, stepped out. “Good morning, guys.” His gaze lingered on Nora for a second longer than she would have liked.

Still, she smiled. “Good morning, Adam. You get your pancakes today?”

The first time Nora had tried the pancakes from The Pancake Bar, she’d decided she’d die a happy woman if she somehow drowned in that buttery syrup.

“It’s Tuesday. Where else would I get breakfast?” One side of his mouth lifted. “Maybe one Tuesday you could join me.”

And *that* was her cue to go.

Zac's lip curled in obvious distaste.

So she wasn't the only one opposed to creepy Tuesday-morning-pancake-date offers from the gym teacher whose gaze lingered too long.

"I barely get here on time as it is. I have to set two alarms every morning. Add in a stack of pancakes and I might *never* make it to work." She laughed awkwardly before stepping toward her office. "I'll see you guys later."

Her smile softened when she looked at Zac before closing her door.

Most of the time, Adam wasn't too bad. A bit forward, but she'd experienced worse.

She crossed to her desk. Making the space comfortable was always her first job at a new school. Potted plants were scattered around the room. Six to be exact. Two big, three small, and one a happy in-between. Her jar of Skittles sat front and center on her desk, along with a plate of granola bars and a bowl of fruit.

As a child, she'd often been hungry, so she always tried to have snacks available for kids who needed something to eat.

There were two couches, both so soft you almost had to peel yourself off to get up. And on the low-lying table between the couches sat a bowl of fidget toys and stress balls.

She *loved* fidget toys and stress balls. Possibly more than the kids did. Okay, so maybe they were more for her than them, but every so often, a student loved them as much as she did.

She'd just set her bag in a desk drawer when a knock sounded at the door. "Come in."

The door opened, and Nora straightened at the sight of the girl who'd been standing beneath Toby's arm.

"Hi." Nora went for an easy smile. "Can I help you?"

"I have a nine a.m. appointment." Her arms wrapped tightly around her waist, and she didn't make eye contact. "I'm early. I can come back—"

"No. Stay. All I was going to do was text my brother and find out when he was bringing me Skittles."

The girl eyed the large, completely full jar on Nora's desk, but instead of commenting on it, she just bumped the door shut with her hip.

Nora gestured to the couches. "Sit. Please. It's Taylor, right?"

The girl nodded and sat on the blue couch, leaving the pink one for Nora.

“Miss Posy told me to come.” Her arms were still wrapped around herself, and she looked like she was a second away from hightailing it back into the hall.

Nora sat opposite and lifted the bowl of fidget toys, offering one to Taylor. The teenager shook her head.

Nora grabbed her favorite purple cube stress ball and began to squeeze. “That happens a lot. Teachers asking kids to come in. I’m Miss Slade.”

Another glance at the door. “Do I have to stay for long?”

“That’s up to you. I’ve been told I’m not allowed to lock students in here, so if you decide to leave, the door will open.”

The girl didn’t crack a smile at her joke.

Nora squeezed the corner of her cube. “I’m glad you’re here. Even if it wasn’t your idea.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be taking notes or something?”

“Would you like me to take notes?”

“No.”

“Good. Because I really like this squishy cube.”

The tiniest hint of a smile appeared this time.

Progress.

Taylor glanced out the window. “Miss Posy thinks I’m...I don’t know. Distracted in class. Changing or something.”

“What do *you* think?”

“I think people change all the time. It doesn’t mean they need to be punished.”

“You think talking to me is a punishment?”

“I think she knows I won’t talk to *her*, so she sent me here to get you to report back.”

“The only time I loop adults into our conversations is if someone’s in danger. That could be you or someone else. Otherwise, it stays here.”

Taylor looked at her. “So you won’t tell her anything I say?”

“Nope.” Nora leaned back. “What would you rather be doing right now?”

“It’s not about what I’d rather be doing. I’d be in gym.”

“Who would you be sitting next to?”

There was a tiny flare of her eyes. It was so small that most would have missed it. But growing up with the mother Nora had, she'd gotten really good at reading people. At seeing micro expressions before a person could hide them.

"My boyfriend," Taylor finally said.

Huh. And Nora was assuming that boyfriend was Toby. "Have you been dating long?"

"A couple of months."

"Do you like him?"

"He's my boyfriend."

Not an answer. "What does your mother think?"

The girl's expression darkened. "My mother doesn't pay attention to what I do. She's always working or out with *her* boyfriend." Suddenly, the girl rose. "I should go."

Nora stood too, but slower. "Is that what you want? We still have another twenty minutes."

The girl shook her head and stumbled back. "No. I, um...this was a bad idea." Then she rushed out of the room.

Nora squeezed the cube harder, digging her fingers into the edges. Every so often, she saw a student with that look in their eyes. Like they were in trouble. Or possibly came from an unhealthy home environment.

It always reminded Nora of her own childhood. Sometimes Nora could help...but not always.

Zac Pierce stood behind the gym teacher's desk as he organized himself. Well, "organized" was a stretch. His office was a fucking mess. Paper and water bottles and gym equipment were everywhere. Sports bags piled in a corner. Balls scattered around the floor. And why the hell did the office smell like a locker room?

Not that this was the first time Zac had been in here. This was his first week running the outreach program, but they'd done some planning in this room. Actually, no, *Zac* had done some planning. Adam had messed with his phone or joked with students every time they stepped into his office.

Fine with Zac. He knew what to teach the kids.

"You know her well?"

The muscles in Zac's forearms twitched at Adam's question. "Who?" But he knew who.

"Nora." Adam grinned over his shoulder before going back to looking through the shit on his desk. "I keep catching you guys talking."

Twice. He'd caught them twice. "I served in the Navy with her brother."

"No shit? And now you're search and rescue with the guy?"

"Yeah."

"Got it." Adam straightened, key in hand. "I thought maybe you two were..."

Zac lifted a brow.

"Dating." Adam lifted a shoulder. "Or, you know, into each other?"

"We're friends."

The smile that spread across Adam's mouth made Zac want to change his answer. To something that would make Nora appear less...available.

But fuck, it was none of his damn business if this guy was interested in her. And if it *was* his business, it would only be due to the fact she was his best friend's little sister. That was it.

Zac checked his watch. "Didn't the lesson start three minutes ago?"

"Students won't care if we're late. They're probably hoping we don't show up."

Zac followed the gym teacher out of the office and turned right to move down the hall. At the end, kids were scattered around the area. Most on their phones. Some of the guys were shoving each other into lockers.

"Hey, no pushing, Toby," Adam yelled.

The boy turned, and Zac's eyes narrowed. It was the kid from the bar. The one who'd shoved Nora.

Toby.

The boy's lips twitched, like he was happy to see Zac.

Inside the gym, kids moved straight to the bleachers. Adam talked to the teenagers as they passed, laughing with some, hitting others on the back. Mostly the boys. Toby laughed at something Adam said before finding a spot at the back.

Adam came to stand beside Zac. "Nervous?"

"Not even a little bit."

Adam chuckled. "Don't get too confident. You may have fought terrorists in the military, but these kids are masters of psychological warfare."

"Thanks for the warning." He kind of hoped some of the kids *did* push back. It would be a good learning moment for them.

Once everyone was seated, Adam clapped his hands. "All right. Today, we have our first session with Zac from the local search and rescue team. Before he worked search and rescue, he was a Navy SEAL. So, he knows his stuff. Pay him the respect he deserves."

There were a few snickers from the back. Surprise, surprise, exactly where Toby sat.

Once Adam sat, Zac stepped forward. "Hi. I'm Zac Pierce. As Mr. Sawyer said, I work search and rescue. Anyone know what we do?"

"Rescue people?" a kid beside Toby called.

More snickers.

Zac nodded. "Sometimes. We also plan and train and wait."

A boy near the front shifted to the edge of the bleacher. "Train?"

"Yeah. We run search patterns. Practice rope systems. Learn the terrain and the trails and the weather patterns. A few of us are often in the forest even before we get a call, just so we're close." He pulled out his radio. "And we're always in communication with one another."

"So you're here to try to convince us to join search and rescue?" a girl asked from the second row.

"I'm here because I don't want you to need me." The girl's brows flickered as he continued. "My goal is to make sure you don't get lost. Or if you do, you know how to get out."

Toby scoffed from the back row.

"You got something to say?" Zac called.

A beat passed. A few gazes went to the teenager. He looked like he was weighing whether to challenge Zac.

Eventually, Toby straightened. "Yeah, I do. I think this is a waste of my time. Unlike you, we've all grown up in this town. We know these woods."

"Really? You ever been deep in the forest, near the west ridge, when the weather turns? It can happen fast. Visibility is the first to go. That trail you were following? Gone. Landmarks you didn't even realize you were using? The fog's too thick to see them." He kept his voice calm, feeling the eyes of the entire class on him. "Then the sounds change. Wind picks up. You can't hear anything."

Toby visibly swallowed.

"And that confidence?" Zac lifted a brow. "That's usually the next to go. Local doesn't mean immune to something happening in the woods of Deep River. It just means you're comfortable. And that's when people make mistakes. They leave late, go off trails, and take risks they shouldn't. We don't want to be coming out of the forest without a kid and having to deliver bad news to families."

Toby's jaw clenched and he looked away.

The door to the gym opened and a girl walked in. Her blond ringlets hid her face because her head was down. She went straight to the back and sat beside Toby.

Zac clapped his hands together, looking back at the group. "Okay. If there are no more questions we'll jump into today's session. Today, we'll be

staying in the gym. But we'll have many sessions out in the woods beside the school."

Over the next half hour, he showed the kids his gear and they talked through real-life scenarios. The group was actually pretty good. They listened and participated well in discussions. Hell, Zac was actually surprised by how much they knew. It was only the small group of Toby and his friends who seemed disinterested.

He was nearing the end of the hour when the door to the gym opened and, just for a second, his thoughts derailed.

Nora.

She walked in and stood to the side of the bleachers, a smile curving her mouth as she watched him. A smile so fucking wide, he almost stopped talking mid-sentence.

He cleared his throat, forcing his gaze from her to the class. "Okay. You've listened to my voice enough today. Before you go, if there's one thing I want you to take away from today, it's that getting lost doesn't happen from one mistake. It's a bunch of small ones piled on top of one another. Be smart out there."

The kids stood, but his focus was on Nora as she crossed the gym toward him.

"Hi, *Mr. Pierce.*"

"What are you doing here?"

"I had a break. Thought I'd watch you in action. I'm sad I missed it."

"You didn't miss much."

She lifted a brow. "You just got a bunch of teenagers with low attention spans and phone addictions to pay attention for an entire hour. That's not nothing. That's impressive."

No, what was impressive was that even in a gym full of teenagers, all he could smell was her damn vanilla scent. And even though it was toying with him, he wasn't leaning closer.

Jesus fucking Christ.

The girl with the blond ringlets passed. Toby's arm was around her, and he smirked when he looked at Zac, then Nora.

Instead of seeming annoyed by the kid, Nora's smile widened as she looked back at Zac. "Bet you can't wait to get back to the forest."

"I've got another session in an hour, so the forest will have to wait."

"An entire hour?"

“Yeah, think I’ll go get a coffee from Bloom.”

“Need the sustenance to keep up with these teenagers?”

No, he needed it if he was going to keep running into *her*. “Would you like a coffee?”

“Double-shot vanilla latte, please.”

He chuckled at how instant her response was. “Done.” He turned his head to see Adam talking to some of the boys. But the gym teacher was also watching him and Nora. Probably more Nora. And shit, he didn’t like it.

“I should go.” But before she did, she surprised the hell out of Zac by throwing her arms around him, then whispering in his ear. “Congratulations on surviving your first session with a bunch of teenagers. It’s tough work.”

Her warm breath hit his cheek. Slowly, he wrapped his arms around her...and fuck, every time he told himself he wasn’t affected, every *fucking* time, she did something to prove him wrong. “Thanks.”

“And thanks for my latte.” She stepped back.

By the time he got out of the school, he was tense. Hell, tense was a drop in the bucket of what he felt. Instead of driving, he walked to Bloom. He needed the fresh air on his skin. Or...he needed *something*.

Then, like the world was laughing at him, his phone rang, and of *course* it was Ryan. His best friend. Nora’s brother.

Zac put the cell to his ear. “Hey.”

Air blew over the line before Ryan spoke. “How’d the first session go?”

“One kid called me old. Another said he thought I’d be boring. Other than their brutal honesty, they were pretty good.”

Ryan chuckled. “You run into Nora?”

His fingers tightened around the cell. “I did.”

“She seem okay?”

“Yeah. She came to see the end of the session. Called me ‘Mr. Pierce’ and now I’m getting her a latte from Bloom.”

Ryan laughed harder this time. “Sounds like Nora.”

Zac paused in front of a new barbershop. “Did you know Gerome’s barbershop finally opened?”

“No. When?”

“Not sure. His friend, Pen, is in there right now. No customers. But lights are on.”

“Didn’t think he’d ever open that place.”

“Me neither.” The shop had been closed and the windows covered up since the day Zac arrived in Deep River.

Gerome was the sheriff’s son. He was also an asshole. They were almost certain he’d set fire to their SAR base just after the team had moved in, and he liked to run his fucking mouth about them whenever he could.

The sound of a car pulling up behind him made him turn.

He internally groaned.

“What is it?” Ryan asked.

Maybe it wasn’t so internal. “Gerome. He just pulled up. Got to go.”

He hung up as Gerome climbed out of his low-sitting Subaru. His shaggy brown hair looked like it hadn’t been washed in months, which didn’t really go with the look of a barber.

Gerome lifted a brow. “There a reason you’re standing outside my barbershop like a fucking lurker?”

“There a reason you wouldn’t *want* me outside your barbershop?”

“Did I say that?”

“Didn’t have to.”

Gerome’s lips twitched as he stopped in front of Zac. “You know, I kind of thought you guys would become less...annoying as fuck, as time went by. That hasn’t happened.”

“Am I supposed to be offended?”

“Don’t really care what you are. As long as you’re away from me.”

“You know you saying that just makes me want to get closer, right?”

Gerome scoffed, his gaze going to the sidewalk before closing a bit of space between them. “You stay the hell away from me. That goes for all of you rescue junkies.”

“And if we don’t?”

“Guess we’ll see.” Gerome lifted a brow before heading inside the barbershop.

And yeah, Zac *really* wanted to check the place out now.

Zac's chest heaved as he stepped inside the old firehouse. It was dark outside. So dark, he'd barely been able to see the woodland trail beneath his feet.

He hadn't cared. He'd traversed terrain with far less visibility.

He wasn't even supposed to be here. But after finishing his second week of sessions at the school, he'd needed to go for a run to clear his head.

Because damn if Nora wasn't messing with him. She wasn't doing it on purpose, probably didn't even *know* she was doing it. But every time she entered his line of sight, every time he got a hint of that vanilla scent of hers, it was like something took over his body. This need to get closer to her overrode every other instinct.

Today, she'd touched his arm. Just fucking touched him, and that was it. Fire raced up to his shoulders as if someone had scorched him with a damn match.

He moved through the firehouse, the building dark and quiet. His team had gone home hours ago. Because they weren't pining for someone they couldn't have.

Pining...was that what he was doing?

Shit.

He threw his clothes in a corner and turned on the shower.

He needed to get a hold of himself. She wasn't interested. She'd said that already. She'd told him, point blank, that she didn't date Ryan's friends.

So now it was Zac's job to respect that. To stop being a creep and leave her the hell alone.

He tipped his head back and let the hot water hit his chest. At least the sessions at the school were going well. They'd gone through the STOP principle—Stop, Think, Observe, Plan—and talked about survival priorities. They'd entered the forest beside the school and run through some scenarios.

It felt good helping kids. Not that they were really *kids*. The seniors were almost adults. Some of them were likely already eighteen.

He turned off the water and stepped out of the shower. He'd just pulled on a shirt and shorts when something sounded outside the bathroom.

It was well after office hours. His gaze shot to the door, his hand going straight to the weapon hidden beneath the basin. There was at least one weapon in every room. Too much shit had gone down in this town for them not to be careful.

Quickly, he turned off the lights and disengaged the lock, then stepped out of the bathroom. A beam of light sliced down the hall from the old apparatus bay. The same space where they kept all their SAR equipment.

Was someone robbing them? Or was this something else? And how the hell had the person gotten in?

He crept down the hall, steps silent, guided by nothing but that thin sliver of light.

When he reached the door to the apparatus bay, shuffling came from inside.

He swung the door open, weapon raised.

Joel straightened at an open cabinet, half-eaten granola bar falling from his mouth. "Hey."

Hey? That was it?

"Jesus Christ, Joel, I could have shot you!"

"You wouldn't have shot me." He rolled his eyes. "I'm too pretty."

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I told Polly I'd leave some maps at Bloom but forgot them." He pulled a handful of fliers from the cabinet. "Got them."

"I still could have shot you."

"If you do, make it a kill shot, because hospital food is worse than airplane food. Not sure I'd survive." He closed the cabinet door and picked up his granola bar. "What are *you* doing here?"

“I went for a run and just got out the shower.”

Joel studied him suspiciously.

Oh fuck.

Zac turned before his friend could say anything. Each of them could read the others better than they could read themselves.

Zac put the gun back in the bathroom, only to turn to see Joel right there in the hall, waiting.

“What’s going on?” Joel took a bite of the granola bar.

“You just dropped that on the floor.”

“I dusted off the dirt.”

Disgusting. He grabbed his shoes and moved into the main area before lowering to the couch.

“You’re not gonna tell me?” Joel asked, sitting opposite him.

He kept his eyes down, telling himself not to say it.

He did anyway. “It’s Nora.”

“What’s Nora?”

“I can’t... I’ve been trying to... Fuck, I don’t even know what I’m saying.” He pulled on his shoes and stood.

Joel stood too. “You have a thing for her.”

“Maybe.” Definitely.

Joel took another bite. “Have you told Ryan?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“What’s the point? Nothing’s going to happen.”

Joel’s lips twitched. “I remember when I said that about Polly. Poor, naïve Joel.”

“This is different.”

Joel nodded, but the look on his face told Zac he didn’t agree. “If you ask me—”

“I didn’t.”

“I think he’d be okay.”

Zac frowned. “Who?”

“Ryan.”

Zac shook his head. “This isn’t just about Ryan. She doesn’t want to date me.”

“Why not? You’re cute. Sweet. You know ten ways to kill a man. You’re the whole package.”

“Don’t think ten ways to kill a man is on her most-desirable list.”

“It should be.”

“I should go.”

“You’re welcome,” Joel called.

“For what?”

“Imparting my wisdom.”

Zac shook his head, but a smile crept over his mouth as he stepped out of the building.

Just as he climbed into the truck, a text came through.

Joel: If you want, I can be there when you tell Ryan. You know, moral support.

Zac scoffed. Trust Joel to make light of the situation.

Zac: Thanks, but I’ll handle this.

He switched his cell to silent and turned it over so he couldn’t see any more messages. Joel was the shit stirrer in the group. He was also a master at turning tense situations into ones that felt a bit more tolerable.

When he pulled into his driveway a short while later, he turned his phone over to see another text. A text that had been sent ten minutes ago.

But not from Joel.

Nora: HELP!!

Without hesitation, he hit her number. The call rang out.

Goddammit.

He hit it again. Nothing.

Zac: Are you okay?

He waited thirty seconds. Then another twenty.

Zac: I need you to call me, Nora.

When no response came through, he cursed and pulled back onto the road. Nora lived in a small studio apartment over Polly’s garage. It was less than three minutes from his place.

He pulled into her drive, grabbed his Glock from the glove box, and ran out of the vehicle. He sprinted around the garage and up the steps and knocked.

A few seconds passed. Then a few more.

When Nora didn’t answer, he tried the door.

Unlocked.

He stepped inside, Glock raised.

And at that exact moment, the bathroom door opened and Nora stepped out, wet hair splayed over her shoulders, drops of water scattered over her chest. And wearing only a towel.



NORA'S JAW dropped at the sight of Zac in her apartment. And he had a gun. A gun that dropped to his side the second she stepped out.

"Uh...hi." Interestingly, it was the size of her apartment, not the gun, that really had her pausing. It looked even tinier with him inside. Minuscule. Similar to what it looked like when Ryan was in there.

For a full five seconds, Zac just stared at her, mouth open, skin slightly paler than usual. Then he seemed to snap himself out of it and spun so that his back was toward her. "What the hell, Nora?"

"You're saying what the hell to *me*? The woman *standing in her own apartment*, wearing a towel?"

"Yes."

"Why are you facing the door? I'm not naked."

"I need you to put some clothes on."

"Zac—"

"Now, Nora."

So demanding. And tense.

She crossed to her dresser and pulled out her comfiest silk pajamas. They were pale pink, long pants and sleeves, and they felt like butter on her skin. Oh, and they had a cute little axolotl on the chest pocket.

She also grabbed panties and a bra, so, okay, she was glad Zac wasn't facing her for that part. Although, this was her pretty bra. It had ivory flowers and beading, so him seeing it wouldn't have been *all* bad.

In the bathroom, she quickly finished drying and dressed. When she stepped back out, it was to see Zac's broad shoulders still facing her.

Her lips twitched. "You can turn around now, tough guy. My scandalous shoulders are covered."

He turned slowly, but the absence of the towel didn't seem to ease the tension from his eyes.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked, scanning her own pajamas, looking for big holes where her nipples were.

“Like what?”

“Like I’m one strong breeze away from a public incident.”

He cleared his throat, eyes scanning the living room. “Nora, what am I doing here?”

She laughed and walked into her kitchen, grabbing the milk from the fridge. “Regretting your life choices?” At his silence, she glanced over her shoulder. “I have no idea, Zac. I was hoping you’d tell *me*.”

“You texted me.”

“I did?” Then it hit her. She spun. “I *did*. *That’s* why you’re here?”

“You said ‘help.’ In capital letters. With exclamation marks.”

Shit. She *had* written that. “I was being dramatic. I saw a wolf spider. But then I lost it, so I’m pretty sure it pays rent now.”

“You texted help because of a spider?”

“Yes.” She turned to the stove and poured milk into a saucepan before grabbing two mugs. “It was big and hairy, and I think I left my body for a moment there. But after you *and* Ryan didn’t come to my rescue, I calmed down and googled him. He’s harmless.”

At Zac’s loud exhale, she turned to see the air deflating from his body. “Jesus, Nora. You can’t do that.”

“You were really that worried about me?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.” She did that to Ryan so often, she didn’t really think about it anymore. “And thank you.”

“For what?”

“Coming to save me with Nigel.”

“Who’s Nigel?”

“Your Glock. I call Ryan’s Fred.”

This time, he laughed.

There it was.

She turned back to the stove. “Now, to apologize, I’m going to make you a big steaming cup of hot cocoa while we watch any show of your choosing. I might even give you one of the blueberry muffins I baked two nights ago.”

“Didn’t you tell me you’re a terrible baker?”

“The worst. But hell, *someone’s* got to eat them.”

Another deep chuckle.

Her smile widened as she spooned cocoa and sugar into the milk. “Are you game to try a muffin?”

“I’m game.”

“Famous last words.” She smirked as she popped one onto a plate for him.

Once the cocoa was ready, she handed one mug and one muffin to Zac and carried her own mug over to the bed.

“This is where you want to watch TV?” he asked, studying the bed like it was about to explode.

“Well, I don’t have a couch, and it’s more comfortable than a wooden seat, so…” When he didn’t so much as crack a smile, she said, “If you’re not comfortable—”

“I’m fine.”

But…*was* he? “We don’t have to watch—”

“No, I want to.”

“Okay, well, the sheets are clean and the bed is comfortable.” She grabbed her laptop and set it up on the end of the mattress, then she scooted over to the side against the wall and leaned back against the pillows, hot cocoa in hand.

Zac hesitated only for a second before lowering to the bed. Although, he did sit right on the edge, to the point another entire Zac-sized human could fit between them.

“So, what are we watching?” she asked.

“You choose.”

“Nope. Not falling for that.”

“Falling for what?”

“Usually a guy says you pick, then I pick, and he complains about my choice the entire show and I can’t enjoy it.”

“I’m not that guy.”

“What guy are you?”

He glanced at her, something almost…intense about his gaze. “When I say something, I mean it.”

Maybe it was because they were on the same bed, or the fact that his strong scent, both outdoorsy and so infinitely masculine, surrounded her, but his response made just a bit of heat spread over her skin.

No. That was stupid. She didn’t date Ryan’s friends, and catching feelings was not allowed.

“Okay. I’ll choose. But I don’t know how you’ll feel about this.” She leaned over and put on her favorite show, *The Great British Bake Off*.

“Really?”

“Just because I can’t bake doesn’t mean I don’t love watching others bake.” She leaned back. “This is my comfort show. I’ve watched every episode so many times I could probably recite them word for word.”

“And you still want to watch again?”

“Over and over. You’re also a virgin, which makes this even more fun for me. Beware, I may watch *you* more than the screen.” She grinned before looking at the muffin on his plate. “Brave enough to try it?”

Without a second of hesitation, he took a bite. And damn, but she couldn’t read him. Even after he swallowed.

“So?” she asked impatiently.

“Is that a ‘be kind’ question or a ‘be honest’ one?”

“Honest. Definitely honest.”

“It’s edible. But I wouldn’t sell these at a bake sale.”

She touched a hand to her chest. “Zac Pierce. That is possibly the nicest thing anyone has ever said about my baking.”

He shook his head, laughing again.

She looked back at the screen. “I’ll break out the Skittles in the next episode.”

“The next?”

“You can never watch just one.” She settled back, the heat of the mug slipping into her palms, Zac’s scent everywhere.

She liked this. More than she should.

“And Zac?” she said gently.

“Yeah, Nora?”

She looked up at him, smile soft. “Thanks for coming here tonight, armed and ready to shoot someone for me.”

“You say that like it’s not a completely normal thing to do for a friend.”

Yes. Friend. Just a friend. She needed to stick that in her head and remember it.

“**S**tay behind me.”
Nora tried to nod at Ryan’s words, but the movement felt jerky and stiff. She didn’t speak. Sometimes when she was scared, she couldn’t speak. It felt like someone stole her voice. Took it and refused to give it back.

Ryan took her hand and pulled her to the door.

It was a Thursday. They’d missed three days of school. Ryan said they had to go today. That the school didn’t like it when they missed too many days in a row.

Sometimes she wanted to ask what the school would do if they just never returned. But she was too scared of the answer. Scared that he’d say she’d be taken away somewhere. Somewhere she wouldn’t have Ryan.

They moved down the hall quietly. When they stepped into the living room, she stopped. Her bare feet just froze on the cold floorboards and her eyes stuck to her mother on the couch.

She looked like she was sleeping. And maybe she was. There was a bottle on the floor beside where her arm hung off the edge. And whenever there was a bottle, her mother usually didn’t wake up for a long time.

Good. Nora didn’t want her mother to wake up. The last time she’d been awake, she’d screamed. So loud and for so long that Nora was sure her ears would burst. She screamed about people watching her. About people wanting to take Nora and Ryan away from her.

Sick. That’s what Ryan said she was.

But Nora didn't understand. If she was sick, shouldn't they be able to take her to the doctor to make her better? Why did she stay sick?

Ryan said she was too young to understand. She was eight. That didn't feel young. Not after everything she'd already been through.

"Nora."

She traced the familiar lines beside her mother's closed eyes. Eyes that everyone said looked so much like hers.

That scared her. She didn't want to look like her mother.

Ryan touched her shoulder. "Nora."

She flinched and looked at him.

His face softened. "We have to go."

She nodded. Her feet unstuck and she moved again. At the front door, she sat on the floor and pulled on her white sneakers. Well, they used to be white. They were so old they were more of a brown color now. They were also tight and hurt her feet, but she didn't tell anyone. Ryan would worry, and her mother...well, Nora was waiting for a good day to ask about new ones.

When she took too long with her laces, Ryan finished them.

He pulled her to her feet and tried to open the door, only to stop and curse. "Shit."

She wanted to tell Ryan that shit was a naughty word. But then she looked at the door and realized why he'd said it.

It was locked. Locked with a key. A key her mother hid so that no one could take it from her. A key that could be anywhere.

"It's okay, we'll find it," he whispered.

Ryan did that a lot. Said things to make her feel better even though she knew things were bad. It could take them all day to find the key. It had in the past.

"Let's search the house." He put a finger to his lips. "But be really quiet."

She nodded and turned, watching Ryan walk into the kitchen. It was better he looked in that room. There were lots of loud things in there, and he was better at being quiet.

She turned to the living room and told herself not to look at her mother again. She didn't want to picture her eyes opening. She hated that first look. Because she never knew which mom she'd get. The one who braided her

hair and filled their fridge with food? Or the one who yelled and screamed and threw things?

She reached her small hand between the cushion and seat of the single couch across from her mother. Dirt. Old food. A small piece of Lego.

No keys.

She lowered to her belly, the cold floorboards seeping into her clothes then her skin as she looked beneath the couches.

Nothing.

She stood and looked at Ryan in the kitchen. He was searching drawers, a deep frown on his face.

She didn't like how much he frowned. She liked Ryan's smile. She liked it when his eyes squinted and his mouth curved and he was just...Ryan. Not the big brother who had to take care of everything.

Her gaze moved to her mother again. To her robe.

Could it be in her pocket?

She glanced at Ryan another time. He was halfway down the drawers.

She closed the small space to her mother. Lightly, she touched the pocket. Something hard tapped her fingertip.

The key?

She looked into the kitchen again, but Ryan was heading down the hall now. Probably to search their mother's bedroom.

With shaking fingers, she reached inside the pocket.

Her heart began to race. Those fast, hard hits that rattled her body.

Her fingers curled around cold metal.

The key.

She pulled her hand back slowly. It was almost out when her mother groaned and rolled.

Nora gasped, her feet moving before her brain could catch up, key firmly in her palm.

Away. Always away.

Her foot hit the bottle. She fell. So did the bottle. The louder crashes hit one after the other.

Her mother's eyes scrunched, her body twisting.

The beating of Nora's heart turned into thunder. Like those giant stomping elephants she saw on TV on those wildlife shows.

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Loud and fast.

Then Ryan was in front of her, his focus jumping from her face to their mother's.

Nora's heart was still beating too fast, air barely making it into her lungs. Sometimes when she got really scared, she stopped breathing for a few moments and black dots danced in her vision.

Right now, they almost blocked out Ryan.

He knelt in front of her, eyes worried. "Nora. Breathe."

Her chest moved too quickly.

"Nora—"

"Is she...is she awake?"

"No."

"I don't want her to wake up. I don't want—"

"I know, Nor. You're safe."

She tried to focus on Ryan. On his voice. The crease in his brow.

He was looking at her like he was trying to calm her down. It kind of reminded her of...

Her heart beat faster. It reminded her of the way he looked at their mother.

Carefully. Cautiously.

He was looking at Nora the way he looked at their mother when he was waiting to see which version of the woman he'd get.



ALL HIS MUSCLES WERE TIGHT. Every single one. In particular, his shoulder muscles. The same shoulder Nora slept on.

She'd fallen asleep halfway through the third episode, after finishing not only her hot cocoa, but half a bag of Skittles.

How someone could consume that much sugar and sleep so easily, he had no fucking clue. He also had no clue how to get out of here.

She smelled too fucking good. And the scent wasn't just on her anymore. That damn vanilla coated every inch of this apartment, in particular, her bed. The same bed he was sitting on.

How was he supposed to stay immune when she slept on him while he sat on her *bed*?

He couldn't.

His phone vibrated with a text.

Ryan: Anyone heard from Nora? She texted about a spider a few hours ago but hasn't answered my calls since.

Double shit.

Ethan: It's ten thirty. She's probably asleep.

Ryan: Maybe I'll go check on her. Just in case.

Jesus Christ, that was the only thing that could make this worse.

Zac: She texted me too. About the spider. She's okay.

Ryan: Really? She text the other guys as well?

Joel: Nope (sly face emoji)

Asshole.

Zac: We've been seeing each other a bit. At school. Probably why she messaged. She's okay. Although she said the wolf spider now lives in her apartment.

Joel: I fucking hate those things.

Connor: You can walk into a room of terrorists, but you hate a harmless wolf spider?

Joel: Fuck yeah, they're creepy and too fast to shoot.

Zac chuckled. Then Nora flinched.

He locked his cell and looked down. Her eyes were scrunched now, a bit less color in her cheeks.

Suddenly, she gasped and her entire body jolted.

Was she having a nightmare?

She turned her head into his shoulder and groaned, her breath speeding up, a tremble moving from her body to his.

"Nora?"

Nothing. She didn't hear him.

Gently, he gripped her arm. "Nora. Wake up."

She didn't. In fact, she grabbed his shirt, her fingers so tight her knuckles were white.

"I don't want her to wake up," she gasped. "I don't want—"

Gently, he shook her arm. "Nora—"

Her eyes flew open and she shoved off him. She moved so fast her head flew back.

He reacted on instinct, throwing a hand between her head and the wall, just saving her from the collision.

"Whoa, Nora."

She blinked once. Twice. It took four times before she actually seemed to see him. “Zac?”

“Yeah.” His brows twitched. “I think you had a nightmare.”

Her gaze darted around the room, taking it all in. She looked at the kitchen. The door. The small round table. Finally, she seemed to accept that she wasn’t wherever she’d gone to in her sleep.

“Oh God, I’m so sorry.” She dropped her face into her hands. “Jesus.”

“It’s fine. I have nightmares too.”

“You do?” She looked up, her beautiful brown eyes wide and vulnerable.

“Yeah. Went through a lot of shit in the military. I was even shot once.”

“You were *shot*?”

He pulled the neck of his shirt down to show her the small scar. He didn’t have the nightmare as much as he used to. But every so often, it interrupted his sleep.

Her brows flickered. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m okay.” His hand twitched to slip the piece of hair on her left cheek behind her ear. He fisted his hand. “Want to talk about it?”

“It was just a crappy memory from my childhood. About my mom.”

“You get nightmares about her a lot?”

“More than I’d like. It doesn’t seem to matter how much therapy I do, the nightmares stick.”

“I know what you mean. You can do all the therapy, but some moments just live inside you.”

“That’s exactly how it is.” For a second, her gaze didn’t leave his. Then she shook her head. “I really fell asleep?”

“Those Skittles knocked you out.”

“No, that would be my lack of sleep *last* night.” She scrubbed a hand over her face. “At least tell me I didn’t drool on you.”

“You really want me to lie?”

She laughed, and the sound affected him in a way that it had no fucking business doing.

He cleared his throat. “I’m joking. No drool.”

“Thank God. I’m sure you want to go. You know, avoid another nightmare drool fest.”

He lifted a shoulder. “Better than—”

Something hit the door hard.

Nora straightened. "What was that?"

Yeah, what the fuck *was* that?

He climbed off the bed and lifted the Glock from the small table.

Nora frowned. "It was probably Polly or Joel."

No, they would have made themselves known. He met her eyes. "Stay here."

She nodded sharply.

He reached the door just as another bang sounded.

A rock. Someone had thrown it at the door.

He opened the door slightly. Voices came from the bottom of the stairs. A few curses. When Zac adjusted to the darkness outside, he caught the backs of a few boys running toward the front of the house.

Zac raced down the steps but could already hear a car engine at the front of the house.

Those little fuckers.

Who were they? Boys from school?

Nora stepped outside as he made his way back up.

"Who was it?" she asked, arms wrapped around her waist.

He studied the pink in her cheeks. The way her eyes were wide. "Boys. I didn't see their faces."

"Probably local kids being stupid."

"Maybe. But I don't like it." Because they were at Nora's door. Why walk around the garage when Polly's front door was closer and so much easier to reach?

"Hey." Nora squeezed his arm, dragging his attention back to her. "I'm okay. You don't need to worry about me. Kids do dumb things sometimes."

He inched close. So close that vanilla scent teased him. "You need to keep your door locked. And if any kids come by again, you call me. Or you call Polly or Joel if they're in the house."

"You think they'll come back?"

"I hope they don't." But some teenagers had fewer brain cells than he liked.

An entire beat of silence passed before she nodded. "Okay. I'll call you."

"Good."

He was about to walk away. He *should* have walked away. But then his fucking eyes betrayed him. They dipped. Lowering to her lips. Lips that

parted at his glance. Lips that looked too kissable.

Shit.

He shot back like someone had pushed him.

“Zac—”

“I’ll see you later, Nora. Lock the door after me.”

He didn’t wait for her reply. Didn’t even look to see if she’d noticed where his gaze went. He just ran down the stairs toward his truck. But he didn’t drive off right away. Instead, he stared at Joel’s truck in Polly’s driveway.

He pulled out his phone to text his friend.

Zac: Some kids were throwing rocks at Nora’s door. I need you to keep an eye on that.

Joel: I’d ask how you know this, but I saw your truck on the street. Should I be worried about these kids?

Zac: Possibly. Not entirely sure what their intentions are yet. But keeping an eye out for them would be smart.

Joel: Done.

He lowered his phone, thoughts going back to Nora. To the pink in her cheeks and how she’d felt sleeping against him.

Shit, he needed to get out of here. He needed to put space between them. Lots of fucking space.

Nora grabbed the container of banana muffins and climbed out of her red Fiat. She was running late. Ten minutes late. Not egregious and it was just to meet her brother for a coffee. But whenever she was late to see Ryan, he assumed something was wrong.

And no, nothing was wrong per se, she'd just barely slept the last three nights. It had started the night before her nightmare against Zac's shoulder, and, well...the nightmares had just kept on rolling since.

Yes, she was taking her anxiety medication, and yes, she'd had an appointment with her therapist yesterday, which was why she'd expected to sleep better last night.

She hadn't.

She rushed into Bloom, almost running smack dab into a man with short silver hair and broad shoulders.

She gasped, just pulling back before she hit him. "Sorry."

He dipped his head and, without a word, stepped around her and left the café.

A man of few words. A very non-small-town trait.

She spotted Ryan in the corner. He sat with his back to the wall so he could see the entire café. Which was absolutely intentional. And right now, he was staring at *her* with far too much focus.

Crap.

She plastered on her best I'm-fine smile and crossed the café. "Good morning, big brother." She sat opposite him and pushed the container of

muffins across the table. “For you.”

He glanced suspiciously at the container. “You’ve been baking?”

“No. Knitting. That’s a container of mittens.”

He didn’t even crack a smile. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

He looked like he didn’t believe her. Like he was waiting for her to crack.

She almost rolled her eyes. “Ryan, I came here to talk to you. To catch up. Not to talk about the big bags under my eyes or the ten minutes I made you wait.”

“You always look beautiful, Nora. But I worry about you.”

“And I love you for that, but you don’t need to worry.” She leaned forward and placed her hand over his. “I’m great. I had an appointment with Cindy yesterday, and I’m feeling better than ever.”

Not technically true, but it had helped. Kind of. Why the heck these nightmares were suddenly coming back with so much frequency, she had no idea. And she didn’t like it.

She shot a glance over her shoulder to where she’d almost run into the man. “Who was the silver-haired guy?”

For a second, Ryan looked like he wasn’t going to drop it. Then he sighed and leaned back. “David Collins. People refer to him as the town recluse. Lives somewhere in the woods and doesn’t talk much since he lost his wife.”

“That’s sad.”

Polly set two mugs on the table. “One Americano, and one double shot vanilla latte.”

Nora sighed. “I could kiss both of you.”

“Buy me dinner first.” Polly eyed the container. “Or at least give me one of those muffins.”

Ryan shook his head. “You don’t want one of these muffins.”

“I don’t?”

Nora winced. “I’ve never been a good baker. Can’t follow a recipe to save my life, especially at one a.m., which is my chosen baking time. But I also can’t bear to just throw them out. So, I gift them to people. And those people never have to tell me if they eat them or if the muffins meet a sad demise.”

“I’m intrigued.” Polly continued to look at the container like they held something spectacular rather than muffins that never rose. “I wonder if Joel would eat them. He eats literally everything, so it could be a fun experiment.”

“Joel would eat a three-day-old baguette if he had butter on hand.” Ryan handed Polly the container. “Let us know how it goes.”

Polly grinned as she walked away with the container.

“I gift you food and you give it away?” Nora teased.

“Are you surprised?”

“Nope. Just clarifying.” She sipped her coffee and groaned. “Yes. I so needed this. How’s Emi doing?”

“She’s happy.” Her brother’s face softened in a way it only ever did when he talked about Emily. “She’s already booked people for acting classes and is knee-deep in organizing a theater show.”

“Of course she is. She’s amazing.”

“After everything I did to push her away, I had no business getting her back. But I’m glad I did.”

She whacked her brother’s arm. “Stop it. You got her back because she’s the Emi to your Vadym.”

“The what?”

“Emi and Vadym. Professional ice dancers. Epic love story.”

“I don’t follow ice dancing.”

“You’re missing out. They’re all the rage since the Winter Olympics.” She sipped the coffee again. “It just keeps getting better.”

“How’s school? Those little shits causing you any trouble?”

“No. Everything’s been pretty easy, actually.”

“Good. Is everything else okay?”

Nora lifted a shoulder.

“What is it?” Ryan asked.

“I just get the feeling there’s something going on, especially involving some of the seniors, but I can’t figure out what.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Sometimes kids are coming in too...hyped up. Other times, they’re vacant. Or they’re always tired, like they aren’t sleeping.”

“Drugs?”

“Maybe. Teachers have been talking about that possibility.” She rolled her eyes. “The principal, Franklin, or Frankie, as he likes to be called, could

not care less. His exact words were, ‘They’re teenagers, of course they’re tired and vacant.’”

“I fucking hate this guy.”

“Yeah.” She shook her head. “New topic. What are you doing today?”

“I let Emi pick.”

“Oh, that’s exciting. And?”

“And she chose thrift shops and the black-and-white theater.”

Nora laughed but it came out more as a scoff. “My big brother the softie.”

“I am not a softie.”

“You play the tough guy role really well, but we all know that’s just an act.”

“I’m *not* a softie.”

“Zac likes to put the tough guy act on too. One second, he’s holding a gun in my apartment, and the next he’s watching *The Great British Bake Off*.”

Ryan froze, coffee halfway to his mouth, his eyes doing that thing where they got really dark. “When the hell was he holding a gun in your apartment?”

“I...well... I assumed he would have told you?”

“No. When was he holding a gun in your apartment, Nora?”

Shit. What happened to “the guys and I don’t keep secrets”? Ryan had spewed that line a million times.

She cleared her throat. “It’s actually kind of funny. You know that night I saw Wolfie?”

“Who the fuck’s Wolfie?”

“That’s a dollar to the curse jar. And Wolfie is the wolf spider who now lives in my apartment. He’s actually kind of grown on me. This morning I saw him—”

“Get to the point, Nora.”

Jesus. And to think *she* was the one running on little sleep. “I texted him for help. Then took a shower. When I came out, he was in my apartment with a gun.”

“What the fuck?”

Okay, she was doing a terrible job of explaining this.

“Zac pointed a gun at you?” Ryan growled.

“No! I mean, kind of. He lowered it the second he saw me. Of course, he had to wait a second to get over the shock of seeing me in a towel.”

“What?”

“It was fine. I changed into my long, nun-approved pajamas with the cute axolotl. We laughed. We had hot cocoa and a bag of Skittles while watching *The Great British Bake Off*.”

Ryan blinked. Then he blinked again.

Wow. She’d actually silenced her brother.

His phone dinged with a text, and he didn’t so much as twitch. In fact, he sort of looked like a statue.

She glanced at the screen, a smile curving her lips. “Is that—”

“Are you dating?”

Her eyes widened. “What? No. Why would you ask that?”

“What do you mean, why would I ask that? You text him for help. He breaks into your apartment with a gun. Your apartment’s the size of a fucking shoe, so you spend the night, presumably on your bed, watching TV. That sounds like dating, Nora.”

“First, he didn’t break in. I forgot to lock the door.”

Ryan cursed again.

“Second,” she continued, “we’re friends. That’s all. It was a funny moment that turned into a ‘let’s watch something’ night of hanging out.”

“So you’re not into him?”

“No.”

She wasn’t into him. Absolutely not. No. No. God, why did she need to keep repeating that in her head?

She cleared her throat. “I don’t date your friends.”

“Nora—”

“I think Emi texted you. You should get back to her.”

He growled but lifted his phone. And yeah, she absolutely took the moment to find some composure. Because she had none. Squat. Zero.



“How’s THE research into Lotus going?” Zac asked.

Ethan winced as they walked down the street toward The Pancake Bar.
“You don’t want to know.”

“Still nothing?”

“Not *nothing*. I’ve found information on Lotus Cars. Lotus Software. The symbol. Even some closed businesses. I’ve found nothing on anything called Lotus here in Deep River. And nothing connected to missing or dead women.”

Great.

Five women had either gone missing or died in this town over the last twenty-five years. One of those women was Maggie, Ethan’s partner’s mother. And the team not only believed that there was foul play, but they also thought someone or something called Lotus was to blame, because one of the women had been a journalist who came to write about Lotus. They just couldn’t figure out where the hell to go from there.

“You’ve spoken to the mayor again?”

Ethan scanned the street. “Ferris says he knows nothing. Everyone in this town says that though. I don’t trust anyone anymore. I think people know more than they’re letting on. Makes me wonder...”

“If they’re involved,” Zac finished.

“Yeah.” Ethan slowed in front of the new barbershop. “Static?”

“Yeah. That’s what he named it.” Zac watched the two boys in the chairs. Pen, Gerome’s friend, stood behind one of them, scissors in hand. There were also two teenage girls waiting in seats, on their phones. One of the girls was the one who was always with Toby. What was her name? Taylor?

“Only took him years to open,” Ethan scoffed.

At that moment, Gerome walked out from a back room. He stopped, gaze narrowing on Zac and Ethan.

Ethan chuckled. “Come on. Before the idiot comes out and says something that makes us want to hit him.”

“He doesn’t need to say anything. The urge is always there.”

They moved down the street and were about to step into The Pancake Bar when Zac’s phone beeped with a text.

Nora: I’m sorry.

Zac: For what?

He’d barely hit send when the next text came through.

Ryan: We need to talk.

“What is it?” Ethan asked, palm on the door to the café.

“You go in. I just need to call Ryan.”

“Everything okay?”

“Should be.” Hopefully.

Ethan dipped his head.

As soon as Ethan was gone, Zac hit his friend’s number. “Ryan—”

“Why didn’t you tell me you entered Nora’s apartment with a gun?”

Shit. “I’m sorry. I should have said something.” To be fair, other than for an intense team training yesterday morning, he hadn’t had a moment alone with Ryan.

“Yeah, you should have. You really thought she was in trouble?”

“She texted ‘help’ in all-caps, then wasn’t answering my calls.”

“She does that.” There was a small pause. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Going over there and making sure she was okay.”

“Yeah. Of course.”

There was another pause from Ryan. “You two are getting close.”

It wasn’t a question. Zac ran his fingers through his hair. “We see each other at work and text sometimes.”

Sometimes? Try every day. This morning, she’d sent him a photo of Wolfie with a “good morning” caption.

“Are you interested in my sister?”

Zac’s fingers tightened around the cell. How the hell did he answer that? Did he tell his friend that he thought of her every damn day? That he was trying to push it down because she’d told him she wasn’t interested in a relationship?

The silence stretched.

Say something, you idiot.

“No. We’re friends.” A half lie. And he felt like shit for it. He didn’t lie to the guys. Any of them. They were brothers to him. Closer than brothers. Best friends.

“Okay.” Wind blew over the line. “Look, I have to go. We’ll talk more later.”

Zac nodded, even though Ryan couldn’t see him, and hung up.

He’d lied. He *was* fucking interested in her. Why the hell had he lied?

He stepped into The Pancake Bar.

Ethan lifted his brows from the counter. “All good?”

No. He’d lied to one of his best friends. And that lie sat inside him like a fucking rock.

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Usually, it didn't require effort to smile at the kids who came into Nora's office. Even the ones with more challenging behaviors. But watching *Toby* step into her office? It was hard to make the smile reach her eyes. "Hi. Toby, right?"

He smirked as he closed the door behind himself. "Don't pretend you don't know my name, Miss Slade. I mean, you'd have to know it to try and get the principal to suspend me, right?" He lifted a brow, almost in challenge.

"I wasn't trying to get you suspended, Toby. I just wanted to make sure it never happened again. You're seventeen. Trap is no place for you."

He shook his head as he stepped farther into the room. "So how does this work? We sit. You offer me candy as I tell you about my problems?"

She moved to the pink seat. "This works however you want it to work."

"What if I'm sick and twisted and have terrible plans for this session?"

He was trying to get a rise out of her. It happened. Usually, comments like that didn't bother her. For some reason, with Toby, it did. "*Do you* have terrible plans?"

"If I did, do you think I'd share them?"

"Why don't you sit, Toby?"

He flopped onto the blue sofa, lounging back, eyes half hooded as he took her in.

"Why are you here?" she asked gently.

"Taylor's been seeing you, so I wanted to see what the fuss was about."

“Taylor’s your girlfriend?”

He met her gaze, eyes narrowing slightly. “Yeah. But I’m sure she already told you that.”

Nora bit the inside of her cheek. She’d had a couple of sessions with Taylor, and the girl was just starting to open up. About her home life and school and her unhealthy relationship with Toby. “When did you start dating?”

He lifted a shoulder. “A few months ago. Hey, do you self-medicate?”

She almost flinched.

“You know,” he continued, “because you listen to so many sob stories that I’m sure traumatize you.”

“We’re here to talk about you, Toby.”

He lifted a bowl from the middle of the table and rifled through the squishy toys. “Hydroxyzine? Or is it buspirone?”

This time she *did* flinch. Only a small flinch. One he probably didn’t even notice.

Because he was right. She *did* take hydroxyzine.

“Not addictive, so you feel comfortable taking them.” He grabbed a blue cube and set the bowl back. “Which probably matters more than you’re willing to admit. A doctor likely suggested them after a ten-minute appointment, and they help. But on the bad days, you need something stronger. Propranolol or Xanax? Stops the racing heart and shaking hands.”

How did he—

“My mom,” he answered, as if he’d heard her question. “That was her in the early days, before it got bad.”

“How’s your mom now?”

“Hospitalized half the time and strung out the other half.”

So *that* was his story. “That must be hard for you.”

“Nah. What’s hard is having the school counselor tell my girlfriend I’m bad news.”

“I never said that, Toby.”

“No? Huh. Guess I read it wrong. Either that or you’re a liar.”

“I think we should end the session here.” She stood.

“Come on, Miss Slade, we’ve just started.”

She crossed to her door and opened it. “We’ll reschedule.”

He was slow to stand. And when he reached the door, even though he was seventeen, he towered over her. “We should definitely reschedule. This

was fun. I'd like to do it again."

She watched him walk away, barely stopping herself from placing a hand over her racing heart.

Why did he bother her so much? He was just a kid. A kid who was trying desperately to get under her skin.

And it was working.

Before Nora could close her door, Adam stepped out of his office. "Nora. You okay? Looks like you've seen a ghost."

Pull yourself together, Nora. "I'm fine."

He followed her gaze to Toby, as he rounded a corner at the end of the hall, before looking back to her. "Poor kid's had a tough upbringing. His mother struggles to keep herself clean and the dad's in jail. But I'm sure he told you all of that in the session."

Not really.

"Hey." Adam stepped toward her. "A few of us are having dinner tonight at the local Thai place. You should come."

"Oh, I would love to, but—"

"Nope. No buts. I haven't seen you at any Friday night drinks. I'm insisting you make an appearance tonight."

It was true. She hadn't been nearly social enough. And she wanted to be friends with people she worked with. She saw them every day. "Okay. Sounds good."

"Great. Eight o'clock. Don't be late."

Once Adam was gone, Nora headed down the hall to the staff room. Thankfully, no one was there. If Adam was commenting on how pale she was, it had to be bad.

She reached for a mug, only to stop midway and look at her fingers. They were shaking. What was going on with her? She never let students bother her like this.

But then, students didn't usually say things that hit so close to home.

She flexed her fingers before balling her hand into a fist.

"Are you okay?"

She gasped and spun around. "Zac! I didn't hear you come in."

"I move quietly." He studied her still-closed fist, then her face. "You're *not* okay."

"I just had a session with Toby. It was kind of a mess."

Zac's eyes darkened, something almost dangerous sharpening the line of his jaw. "What did he do? Did he touch you? Did he—"

"No. He was just trying to mess with my head and, unfortunately, he succeeded."

"What did he say?"

She swallowed, words lodging in her throat. She didn't want him to know about the medication she took. She didn't want *anyone* to know. Sometimes she felt ashamed that she needed something just to get through her days. Her therapist said the shame came from watching her mother abuse drugs.

Nora shook her head. "It doesn't matter."

Zac frowned. He took a step closer, the breadth of his shoulders making air catch in her throat. It wasn't just his shoulders—*all* of him was huge. Her head barely reached his shoulders.

"It matters." He touched her hip.

"You're right. It matters."

His fingers tightened. Only slightly. But enough to make a zip of awareness shoot from her hips to her toes.

"Come here." Two deep, gravelly words. That's all. Then he pulled her against his chest and hugged her. One hand pressed to the center of her back, the other touched the back of her head.

And she just...exhaled. She breathed out the frustration. The anxiety. The exhaustion. And she leaned into his strength, breathing in that rain scent of his.

She wanted to question why she couldn't step away. Why she wanted to sink into Zac and this moment.

She didn't. Instead, she just let him hold her. Until her heart started to beat at a normal pace. Until the shake in her fingers finally subsided.



ZAC HAD NEVER WANTED to hurt a kid before. He'd never had the slightest desire to harm one.

Until five minutes ago, in the staff break room with Nora.

The little fucker Toby had hurt her. Maybe not physically, and Zac still wasn't sure how. But *something* had been said.

He stormed down the hallway. He still had another session to run before he finished for the day. He needed to get his damn head in the right space first.

A group of teenagers to the side of the hall whispered as he passed, something in one of the girls' hands immediately disappearing behind her back.

There'd been a lot of that since starting here. Kids huddled in groups, whispering. At first, he'd thought it was because of him. But the more it happened, the more he started to think it was something else. Something the kids were hiding from adults.

At the end of the hall, he pushed through an exit, stepping outside.

Fresh fucking air. It went a little way toward helping his mood. Not enough though.

A teacher stepped into the quad.

Fucking hell. He wasn't in the mood for Adam right now. Not even a little bit. Half the time the guy was being a sexist prick, the other half he was talking about himself.

Adam grinned. "Zac. Buddy. Need something?"

"Just getting some air before the last session." He tried to walk past the guy.

Adam grabbed his arm. "Wait, I need to ask you something." He stepped closer. "Nora..."

Oh, yeah, this would make his mood worse.

"Do you know what her favorite Thai dish is?"

The fuck? "Her favorite Thai dish?"

"Yeah." Adam leaned in, his breath stinking of pickles. "We're going on a date tonight."

"What?"

"Thought I might surprise her by preordering some of her favorites."

"Nora's going on a date? With *you*?"

"She just said yes. She looks like a soup girl. I was thinking some tom yum goong. Bold. Fragrant. A bit of spice. Thoughts?"

His only thought was that he had to be having an out-of-body experience because there was no way—no *fucking* way—Nora was dating this self-absorbed prick.

"I'm not so delusional to think I'll get lucky." Adam laughed.

Zac flinched. The idea of this guy touching so much as a hair on Nora's head made him want to be physically sick.

She'd said *yes*? She couldn't date Zac because he was friends with Ryan, but she'd said *yes* to *Adam*?

"So..." Adam leaned closer. "Does Nora like some Thai soup?"

Zac's hands balled into fists. He opened his mouth, not sure what words were about to come out, when shouting sounded from the balcony of the building behind him.

He turned to see two boys puffing their chests like someone was about to throw a punch.

"What are you boys doing up there?" Adam shouted.

The taller kid punched the blond. The blond dropped.

"*Hey*," Zac yelled.

The tall kid grabbed the blond by the collar of his shirt, pulled him up just enough so he could hit him again.

"Let him go," Adam called.

The hits kept coming. The blond wasn't moving. And the kid doing the punching didn't look close to stopping.

Zac sprinted back into the building. He took the stairs to the second floor two at a time. When he reached the glass doors that led to the balcony, he tried the handle.

Jammed.

The fuck?

Through the glass, he saw the tall kid still hitting the blond. The boy on the ground was bleeding and unconscious.

Zac took three steps back before running forward. His shoulder hit the door. Wood splintered and the lock broke.

He raced across the balcony and grabbed the taller kid mid-swing, pulling him away.

"*Stop*," Zac shouted.

The boy didn't. He struggled in Zac's hold, eyes wild and solely on the unconscious boy on the ground. "He's trying to steal from me," the kid yelled. "I'm going to *kill* him!"

Kill? What the hell was going on?

The kid attempted to wrench left and got an arm free. The noise he made was something between a growl and a yell, like a fucking animal.

Zac adjusted his grip, shoving him into the wall and pressing a forearm over the boy's chest. *"Stop. Now."*

"No."

Zac studied the kid's eyes. The size of his pupils, the heaving of his chest and the sweat.

He was on something.

Adam burst onto the balcony, followed closely by two other male staff members.

One of the teachers dropped beside the blond, while Adam and the other teacher grabbed the kid in Zac's arms.

"He's taken something," Zac growled.

Adam pulled him out of Zac's hold. *"We've got him."*

Zac dropped to the blond kid's side.

"Ambulance is five minutes away," the other teacher gasped.

Zac checked the boy's mouth. There was blood along the gumline and lower lip. No vomit though. And no teeth knocked out. Nothing seemed to be blocking his airways.

He rolled the kid onto his side, laying his left arm out at a right angle and right arm across his chest. He also pulled the kid's right knee up. In this position, any blood wouldn't pool in the back of his throat.

Still, Zac didn't like the boy's breathing. It sounded wet. And his chest needed to be checked as soon as possible. He put two fingers to the side of the boy's pulse and counted against his watch for fifteen seconds.

Not terrible. But not good.

No blood or fluid in his ears.

He pulled the penlight from his key chain and lifted his eyelids. Pupils were equal size.

"What's his name?" Zac asked.

The older male teacher took a second to answer. *"Michael."*

"Michael." Zac touched the kid's sternum and pressed as he spoke. *"Can you hear me?"*

The boy's eyelids fluttered.

"Stay with me, Michael. Help is coming."

The teacher's phone rang, and he answered, listening to someone briefly before hanging up and looking at Zac. *"Paramedics are here."*

As they waited, Zac checked the boy's ribs and collarbone, wanting to give paramedics as much information as possible. All seemed fine. And the

kid's lips were pink, so enough oxygen was getting to his lungs.

Finally, two paramedics rushed onto the balcony, stretcher in hands. As they lowered beside the kid, Zac relayed everything he'd learned.

It wasn't until they left that Zac's mind went back to the boy who'd done the damage. And the question rolling through his mind was...what the hell had he been on?

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Nora was running late...again. And it had everything to do with not being able to shake the session with Toby.

It was silly. He was a kid. A kid who needed help. She'd had sessions with students like Toby before. She'd always been able to separate herself from what was said and done. Because it was never actually about her.

So why did today feel different?

She pulled into the parking lot behind the Thai restaurant.

She'd almost canceled. She'd been so freaking close to texting Adam, partly because of her mood, partly because it was cold and windy. But mostly, because her bed had been calling to her. Honestly, what was better on a cold night than lying in bed and watching baking shows with hot drinks and Skittles?

But no. She hadn't allowed herself to do that because it was Friday night. She was in her early thirties and she was not going to stay in and wallow about something she shouldn't even be affected by. No, she was going to eat Thai food and make friends with her colleagues.

She climbed out of the car and crossed to the restaurant, the cold seeping through her jacket. Inside, the warmth almost made her sigh. She scanned the tables, only to stop at the sight of Adam. *Only* Adam. Sitting at a two-person table.

No. No, no, no. This was not happening. It was not just the creepy gym teacher waiting for her in what suspiciously looked like a date.

She was about to spin back to the door and rush out of there, when Adam's gaze lifted to her.

"Nora!"

She internally winced. It was fine. She'd go over there, put her big girl pants on, and cancel in person. It wasn't even canceling really, because this was *not* what she'd agreed to.

Slowly, with a slight drag in her steps, she closed the distance between them.

He grinned at her. "You made it! Ten minutes late, but I forgive you."

"Adam, where is everyone?"

"They couldn't make it."

They couldn't make it? Just like that? Like this *wasn't* now a weird, forced date?

"Sit." Adam gestured to the seat opposite him.

"I think we should reschedule."

"But I've already ordered."

At that exact moment, a woman approached carrying three dishes. Soup. Some noodles. And something with red meat.

Once the dishes were on the table, the server disappeared and Adam cocked his head, a smile on his face. "Don't make me eat alone. Please."

She should say no. She should march her ass out of there and leave this asshole to eat alone. But dammit, then she'd have to face him every freaking day at work.

Five minutes. She'd stay for five short minutes. She lowered into the seat.

His smile widened. "You a fan of tom yum goong?"

"What?"

"Soup." He motioned toward the bowl of liquid.

"Um, yeah, I like soup."

"Thought you would. I might even let you take all the beef out of the noodles." He winked before lifting her bowl and grabbing a spoon.

She quickly pulled the bowl back. "It's okay. I can do that. And I don't eat red meat."

"Huh. Never met a person who doesn't eat red meat. I bet I could change your mind."

Her lips turned down. "Go ahead and serve yourself first."

"Oh, you're one of those feminists. Got it. Maybe I'll let you pay too."

Oh brother.

He served himself. And only when he'd put a big forkful of food into his mouth did he speak again. "So...tell me about you. What don't I know about Nora Slade?" Little bits of food shot from his mouth.

Oh, definitely not. She was not telling this man all the things he didn't know about her. Although, if she did, it might send him running, so that could be a positive. "There's not much to tell."

"I don't believe that. I'm guessing you have a sweet tooth, based on that jar of Skittles." He leaned over the table, his pickle breath somehow reaching her. "Want to know a secret?"

No. "Sure."

"I've stolen quite a few from that jar." He picked up some rice from his plate and popped it into his mouth before licking his fingers.

She pictured those same fingers inside her Skittles jar. And...now she was going to be sick.

Note to self, buy individual packets of Skittles for office and discard all current ones.

"You got a brother, right?" he asked, mouth filled with rice.

She nodded, spooning the tiniest bit of soup into her bowl. "I do. Ryan. He—"

"He's part of the local search and rescue gang?"

"Yes, he—"

"He close with Ward?"

Did this man intend to let her get any full sentences out? "No."

Adam snorted. "I actually heard they hate each other."

Then why was he asking, if he already knew that? "Does *anyone* like Ward?"

Adam didn't so much as laugh this time.

Were they friends? That actually wouldn't surprise her. They had a few similarities. Lazy. Obnoxious. Annoying. Neither of them had ever cleaned their work desks before in their lives.

She sipped some of the soup, but honestly, she had no appetite. Not after that Skittles confession.

"Good, right?" Adam grinned. "You know, you're lucky to be here."

She almost laughed. She actually had to grit her teeth to stop herself. "I am?"

“Oh yeah. Karly, who works at the front desk, has been trying to get a date with me for years.”

“Did she actually say that?”

His brows flickered, and okay, maybe she could have left the “actually” part out and lightened the sarcastic tone. But hell, she’d been tricked into a date with this man, and she didn’t appreciate it.

“She may as well have.” Adam lowered his spoon to the bowl. “Why? Does that surprise you?”

Yes. Big fat yes. “Not at all.”

“Yeah. Of course not. So, what do you want to know about *me*? Really, ask anything. I’m an open book.”

Nora stayed longer than five minutes. She suffered through the next *thirty* minutes of conversation because she was a sucker. And yes, it was every bit as painful as she’d thought it would be. Maybe worse. The low point was Adam’s tangent about why men should pee sitting down. *Then* he’d stopped mid-sentence to pull food out of his teeth. She’d almost lost the little soup she’d force-fed herself.

It was minute number thirty-eight—because yes, she was counting—while he was talking about why women always choose him over the bear, when she gave up, pulled out her cell beneath the table, and texted Zac.

Nora: SOS.

She looked back up at Adam. Still talking about why, if women had to choose between his company or that of a bear in the woods, they’d choose him.

She glanced back at her phone. No reply.

Come on, Zac.

Maybe she should text Ryan.

No, because then he’d want to know every tiny detail before saving her. She didn’t have time for that.

Zac: Is this like last time?

Nora: Last time?

Zac: I came to save you, and you ended up nicknaming the threat ‘Wolfie.’

Nora: This is worse. So much worse. I need help NOW.

Her phone rang.

Thank God.

She looked up at Adam, cutting him off mid-sentence. “Sorry I have to answer this.” She set the phone to her ear. “Ryan?”



NORA WAS on a date with Adam. Nora was on a fucking date with douchebag Adam.

No. It still sounded wrong.

He lifted the beer to his mouth and downed a good quarter of the bottle.

“Where’s your team?” Dusty asked, stopping in front of him.

“Home with their women. Didn’t want to pull them away from that just for this.”

“This?”

“Drinking alone at a bar.”

“Hey, good music. Good company.” The bar owner lifted a shoulder. “If I was alone, this is where I’d want to be.”

Zac chuckled. “You’re right. It’s not all bad.”

When a customer called Dusty away, Zac lifted his phone and texted Tate.

Zac: Hey. You make it home to your mom, okay?

There were three guys who’d been part of their SEAL team who weren’t in Deep River. Linc and Kolby, who’d put in for their discharge but weren’t out for another couple months. And Tate, who’d received special permission to leave early because his mother was sick.

Tate: Yeah. I’m here in Wallace.

Zac: How’s your mom?

Tate: Not good. I’ll be lucky if she lasts the month.

Shit.

Zac: You need one of us there for support?

Tate: No. I need this time with her. And when I’m not with her, don’t really feel like company.

Zac: I get it.

Tate: Thanks for checking in. How’s everything in Deep River?

Complicated? Frustrating?

Tate: Heard you’re crushing on Ryan’s sister.

Jesus Christ.

Zac: I'm gonna kill Joel.

Tate: If it helps, I don't think he told Ryan. He was trying to cheer me up with gossip.

Zac: I'm still going to kill him.

Tate: You really have a thing for her?

Zac: No. Yes. I don't know.

It wasn't a "thing." He was in a fucking spiral.

Tate: Still haven't told Ryan?

Zac: No. Because it's not a thing.

Tate: Sure.

Zac chuckled.

Tate: I've got to go. Mom just woke up. Let me know how this "thing" with you, Nora, and Ryan plays out.

Zac: There is no thing.

Tate: Just keep me in the loop.

Zac scrubbed a hand over his face and dropped the cell onto the bar. Tate had always been the more serious one in the team. The guy who didn't take shit from anyone. He was loyal. He looked after his family. Other than their team, his mother was the only family he had left. Well, except a half-brother he'd never been close to. And for good reason.

His phone vibrated, and he assumed it was Tate again.

Nora: SOS.

Was she texting him from her date?

For a second, he just sat there and stared at the screen, as if the words would somehow give him an answer.

They didn't.

Zac: Is this like last time?

Nora: Last time?

Zac: I came to save you, and you ended up nicknaming the threat 'Wolfie.'

Nora: This is worse. So much worse. I need help NOW.

He shouldn't do it. He knew he fucking shouldn't.

He hit her name.

She answered straight away. "Ryan?"

"No, it's—"

"Oh my gosh." Her voice grew panicked and high-pitched. "Of course! I'm coming right now. No, don't move." Her voice muffled, like she was

talking to someone else, but Zac couldn't make out the words.

Then voices in the background shifted to what sounded like wind over the line.

She exhaled loudly. "Thank the holy heavens above. Where are you?"

"I'm at Trap. Wait, did you just leave your date?"

"Do *not* call it that. I was *not* on a date. I was taken hostage." She huffed like she was walking quickly. "I thought I was going to die in there. I literally thought that terrible conversation and bad company were going to swallow me whole."

"Nora—"

"I'm going to kill him. Actually, you know what I'll do? I'll bake him a big batch of blueberry muffins. I won't even need to add anything. My baking alone could kill someone."

"Where are you?"

"Where do you *think* I am? I'm running for my life!"

He pushed away from the bar. "Stay where you are and—"

"Stay where I am? Are you nuts? He could come out here and...I don't know, trick me into *another* non-date. Do you know I literally picked up my fork and, just for a second, contemplated driving it through my own eyeball. My *eyeball*, Zac. Because at least then someone would call an ambulance and get me out of there. Doubt Adam would've called though. He didn't even notice me messaging you. He was too deep in his ego-inflating bear-to-man comparison."

The background noise over the line changed again. This time from wind to...

Wait... "Are you here at Trap?"

Nora dropped into the stool beside him. "I'm alive."

"What the hell, Nora?"

"What do you mean, what the hell? You should be checking my vitals."

"You walked from the Thai restaurant to here?"

"No, not walked. Ran like I was being chased by a creature worse than a bear." She shoved his shoulder.

"What was that for?"

"Not calling me the second you got my SOS text. You've got these big protector shoulders, and you couldn't even come and let me hide behind them?"

"You were on a d—"

“Do *not* say that word.” She closed her eyes and placed her palms on the bar. “It’s okay. I’m here. I’m out.” She said the words like she was reassuring herself.

“Why did you agree to go out with him if you didn’t want to?”

Her eyes flashed open and she glared at him. “You think I’d agree to a date with *Adam*? You think that little of me?”

“He told me you did.”

Now she gaped. “That weasel! No. He told me it was dinner with a bunch of staff members from school. Then I get there and it’s just *him*. And soup. And conversation I couldn’t get away from.”

Relief that he had no business feeling hit Zac like a freight train. But then, he should have known. How had he *not* fucking known?

“Interesting.”

His attention drew back to Nora. “What?”

“In Adam’s company, I had no appetite. But now...I could eat.”

He chuckled and stood. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“Obviously to get pancakes.”

Her eyes lit up. “Okay. But if we see Adam—”

“I’ll hide you behind my big protector shoulders.”

“You may have just redeemed yourself, Pierce.”

“He actually said that?” Zac looked at Nora with what could only be described as horror.

“In detail, for an entire fifteen minutes.” And yes, she was referring to Adam’s seeming obsession with why men should sit to pee.

Zac shook his head as they walked to The Pancake Bar. “So I guess a second date is off the table?”

“Zac Pierce, we’ve been through this. It was not a date.”

“At least you can check ‘worst date experience ever’ off your list.”

“You think that’s the worst I’ve had?”

“It *wasn’t*?”

“Oh, Zac. You clearly are very out of touch with today’s pool of available men. I once went on a date with a man who told me that he had intrusive thoughts about being a serial killer. *Then* he laughed, picked up his steak knife, and started to eat.”

“That didn’t happen.”

“It did. Another guy refused to tip the waiter, so I left fifty dollars on the table. When he thought I wasn’t watching, he pocketed the money. There was also a guy who disappeared into the bathroom and didn’t come back for forty-three minutes.”

“Forty-three minutes?”

“I know. I should have left. I was twenty-one, so I plead ignorance due to my age. And before you ask, no, I didn’t ask what he was doing in there, because honestly, I didn’t want to know.”

Zac wrinkled his nose.

"Oh." She grabbed his arm. "I forgot about Harry Potter man."

"Harry Potter man?"

"He walked out of our date mid-meal because I hadn't read a single Harry Potter book. Apparently, that made me undateable."

"Jesus, where do you find these men?"

"Online. Supermarkets. Bars. They're among us."

Zac laughed.

"What about you?" She kicked a rock. "Any crazy date stories?"

"No. Everyone I've dated has been freakishly normal."

"Must be a man-versus-woman thing."

"Or...and don't be offended...it's a you thing."

She gasped. "How am I supposed to not be offended by that?"

"I'm kidding. Guys are idiots. It's definitely a guy thing."

"Thank you." She glanced up at the stars, her heart giving a little squeeze. "I love the stars. Ryan used to stick them on the ceiling of my bedrooms growing up. He knew I had trouble sleeping, so I just used to lie there and look at them."

"I'm sorry."

She looked at Zac. At the downcast of his mouth. At his frown. "Don't be. The stars gave me hope that the universe is big and I'd find a good pocket to call my own one day."

His brows flickered as they stopped in front of The Pancake Bar. He cleared his throat before holding the door open for her.

She grinned. "What a gentleman."

"I was raised right."

"I don't know anything about *your* parents. Do they live close?"

"Cleveland." He followed her inside to the counter. "That's where I grew up. They're loyal sports fans who have strong opinions about the weather."

"We can't be friends."

"Because my parents have strong opinions about the weather?"

"Because your upbringing sounds far healthier than mine."

His smile dropped.

She touched his shoulder. "Hey. I'm joking." A table of three girls in the corner caught her attention, Taylor being one of them. "I'm just going to say hi."

“I’ll order for us.”

“Original stack and double shot vanilla latte, please.”

As she headed toward the girls, the one beside Taylor looked up at Nora before quickly slipping something off the table and onto her lap.

Nora’s smile faltered, but she recovered quickly. “Hi.”

Taylor looked up quickly, eyes widening. “Miss Slade. Hi.”

“It’s just Nora here. How are you?”

“Good.” Taylor nodded jerkily before looking down at the table.

The girl beside Taylor didn’t look up, and the one with her back to Nora didn’t even turn around.

Okay, that was her cue that these girls weren’t up for a chat.

“Well, I just thought I’d pop over and say hi.” Nora stepped back. “Have a good night.”

Zac looked up when she reached the counter again. “All good?”

She glanced over her shoulder at the girls, watching the one beside Taylor touching the hand of the girl on the opposite side of the booth. “I’ve been getting a bad feeling these last few weeks.”

“What kind of bad feeling?”

“Like something’s going on at the school, particularly among the seniors. Maybe alcohol. Maybe drugs.”

“Definitely drugs.”

Her gaze swung back to Zac. “Why do you say that?”

“Did you hear about the kid today?”

“I heard something about an ambulance after a fight broke out.”

“I broke up the fight. But the boy who was hitting the kid on the ground, he was...”

Nora inched closer and lowered her voice. “He was what?”

“On something. I don’t know what, but by the look in his eyes, he wouldn’t have stopped on his own.”

Fear lurched Nora’s heart. “You think he would have killed him?”

“If he had the chance.”

“Did they drug test him?”

“I assume so. I told Adam the kid had taken something, but they should have noticed anyway.”

Nora shot a glance behind her again. The girls were huddled over the table. They seemed to be comforting the friend who had her back to them.

She lowered her voice. “Maybe we should talk to the sheriff ourselves. Just to express our concerns.” Yes, the sheriff was a lazy idiot, but it seemed they should try *something*.

When Zac didn’t immediately respond, she looked up to see his eyes on her...but there was something about them. They were darker. More intense. More focused.

“Hey. Are you okay?” She touched his shoulder.

He shot back like she’d burned him, then ran his fingers through his hair. “Sorry, I...I forgot to order our drinks. I’ll go tell Basil now.”

She opened her mouth to tell Zac that they could just call him over, but Zac was already gone to the other end of the counter where Basil was.

What the hell was that?

Before she could read too deeply into it, her phone rang, Ryan’s name on the screen. She grinned as she answered the call. “No.”

“Huh?”

“Whatever it is, the answer is no.”

“How do you know I want something?”

“Sister intuition.”

“I’m just checking in, Nora.”

She frowned, suspicious. “Really?”

“Yeah. Where are you?”

“Out.”

He sighed. “Sometimes talking to you is exhausting.”

“But also the highlight of your week?”

He chuckled. “Yeah.”

“I’m at The Pancake Bar with Zac.”

“Zac?”

“Yeah.” She glanced back at the girls at the table.

“It’s Friday night, and you’re out to dinner with Zac.”

“It wasn’t a planned thing. He saved me from a surprise date that wasn’t really a date, and now we’re eating.”

“I’m confused.”

“It’s complicated. There’s too much to explain. Another time.”

“Nora—”

She missed whatever her brother said next, because the girl who’d had her back to Nora rose to her feet and yelled at her friends.

“You’re lying to me!” she screamed. “You’re both lying!”

“Ryan, I have to go.” She hung up and moved toward the group. “Are you okay?”

Nora was only a foot away when the girl reached toward the next table and lifted a knife. A *sharp* knife. One she held out in front of her like a weapon.

Nora stopped, lips parting on a gasp but no sound coming out.

Someone screamed. Chairs screeched as they moved.

Basil shouted from behind the counter. “*Hey.*”

The girl spun, the knife swinging with her.



ZAC SWUNG around at the sound of shouting. Then his world narrowed to the girl, the weapon, and how close she stood to Nora.

“Stay back,” the girl yelled, voice cracking. “All of you! Stay back!”

Even from across the café, Zac could see her pupils were too wide and her cheeks too pale. She was on something. She had a weapon. And there were five occupied tables in the café.

One of the girl’s friends gasped. “Verona! What are you doing?”

“You’re all in on this, aren’t you?” Verona yelled, knife swinging wide in front of her.

Nora lifted her hands. “Hey. It’s okay.”

The knife swerved in her direction.

Don’t. The word was a fucking shout in his head. *Don’t get her attention. Don’t let her focus on you.*

But Nora, of course, couldn’t hear his thoughts. “You’re safe,” Nora said gently, arms raised. “You don’t need the knife.”

“Are you in on it too?” Verona yelled, stepping toward Nora.

Zac started to move. He wanted to run. To sprint across the room and put his body between Nora and the knife. Instead, he had to be careful. Slowly, he started to close the distance one step at a time.

When a man near the window half rose, Verona’s gaze swung to him. “Don’t. Fucking. Move. Any of you.”

“Verona,” Zac said firmly. The girl looked at him, fear and anger and an almost wild rage on her face. “I can help you.”

She shook her head. “No. Everyone keeps *lying* to me!”

“About what?”

“You *know* about what.” Tears suddenly gathered in her eyes, her fingers visibly tightening around the knife.

He inched forward again, arms still raised, needing to make himself her ally. She was paranoid, and if he wasn’t an ally, he was a threat. “You’re right.”

She frowned.

“But *I’m* on your side,” he pushed. “Not theirs. I promise.”

The girl looked at the door.

“No one’s coming.” He took another step toward her. “It’s just us.”

A woman in a booth placed a hand on her chest, her breathing loud and anxious. Another person, an elderly man, had lost all color.

Zac clocked it all but didn’t take his eyes off the girl or the knife or Nora.

“I can help you,” he pushed.

She shook her head. “You’re lying. Everyone lies!”

“*I don’t.*” No hesitation. No shake in his voice. “But I need you to put the knife down.”

Verona looked at the knife, frown deepening, like she hadn’t even realized she was holding it.

“Please, Verona. Then I can help you.” Two steps closer. “I promise I’m on your side.”

When he reached Nora, he pulled her behind him, giving her arm a little squeeze, a silent comfort.

Good. He could think again. He could breathe.

“I don’t know who to trust,” Verona whispered.

“Me.” He raised his hands again. “Trust me.”

He could easily take the knife from her now. One move and the weapon would be gone. But that could hurt her. And she was close to giving it to him, he could feel it.

A car suddenly pulled up outside. Even without taking his attention off the girl, he knew it was a patrol car.

Ward. *Fuck.* The idiot would only make this worse.

“Give me the knife, Verona.” He held out his hand. “We’ll sort this out together.”

The knife started to shake, tears pooling in her eyes. She looked down at the weapon, then back at him. She started to hand it over when suddenly the

café door burst open.

“Put the fucking knife down, *now!*” Ward shouted.

The girl gasped, the knife hand swinging wildly.

Zac lunged forward and grabbed her wrist. With his thumb, he applied just enough pressure to her tendons so that she dropped it.

He caught the knife with his other hand and set it on the nearest table, out of her reach.

Ward was suddenly there, pulling the girl away. As the deputy cuffed her, Zac touched Ward’s arm.

“Hey.” Zac stepped closer to the sheriff. “She’s on some drug. And I’d bet my last dollar it’s the same shit the boy from the high school was on earlier today.”

“I’ve got it from here, son.”

“I want to know what the drug test comes up with.”

Ward frowned. “This is sheriff’s office business now. But I appreciate your help.”

Zac’s jaw ground as he watched Ward head over to where the other two girls were sitting. Nora was with them but, after a couple of words from Ward, she stepped away.

Her arms wrapped tightly around her waist, and she looked far too pale.

He closed the distance between them and touched her shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“They wouldn’t tell me anything. I can’t help them if they won’t tell me anything.”

He cupped her cheek. “They’re doing things they shouldn’t be doing. They’re going to keep their cards close to their chest for as long as they can.”

“I know. But I’m the school counselor. They should know they can talk to me. Maybe if I’d already gained their trust, this never would have happened.” Her gaze went to Verona, who was now being pulled from the café.

“If you’re implying that this was in any way your fault, it isn’t.”

She swallowed but didn’t nod. She didn’t give him any indication she agreed at all.

They waited around for a deputy to take their statements, then he walked her out of the diner. “Come on, I’ll take you home.”

She shook her head. “My car’s—”

“Nora, I’m taking you home. I’ll make sure your car gets back to your place.”

She nodded almost absently. She was quiet the entire walk to his truck.

Once they were driving, he shot her a glance. “Please talk to me.”

“I’m fine.” She glanced out the window, her fingers so tight around her phone that her knuckles were white.

It didn’t take long to reach her apartment. Once they stepped inside, she went straight to the kitchen counter. “Do you want coffee?”

“I’m sorry it scared you.”

She froze, then turned. “What?”

“The knife. It scared you. And that’s okay.”

“It’s not just that.” Her head lowered, fingers now wrapped around the edge of the counter. “I mean, tonight was awful. But...”

He inched closer, shoving his hands into his pockets to stop from touching her. “But what?”

She swallowed, her chest rising and falling with a sigh before she spoke. “When I was twelve, there was this one night. Mom was in one of her dark phases. She was off her meds, drinking, maybe even using. Ryan woke me up, told me to be quiet, and grabbed my hand. He was trying to get us out of the apartment, but when we stepped into the hall, she was there. She had a kitchen knife, and she was doing that thing where she looked at us like she didn’t know who we were. She told us to get out of her house.”

Zac’s heart beat wildly, the image of her as a scared kid sitting on his fucking chest, making it hard to breathe.

“Ryan pulled us into the bathroom and locked the door,” she continued. “We hid in the bathtub together and listened to her pound her fists against the wood. I was so sure she’d get through. That she’d break the door down and come in with that knife. She didn’t. But it’s one of those memories you never forget. And tonight brought it all back.”

In two strides, he crossed the minuscule space between them and pulled her against his chest. Then he lowered his mouth to her ear. “I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry, Nora.”

Without hesitation, she leaned into him, accepting his comfort. And he held her. Shit, he held her so tight and so close that he worried about hurting her.

“Can I ask you something really strange?” she asked quietly.

“Anything.” Right now, holding her, he’d do anything for this woman.

“Watch *The Great British Bake Off* with me?”

A laugh burst from his chest. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected, but it wasn’t that. “Done.”

She stepped back and tugged his arm toward the bed.

Ten minutes later, his shoes were off, and Nora was in her silk full-length pajamas with the axolotl on the pocket. And they were in her bed, watching the show from her laptop.

Only there was no space between them this time. She lay against his body, her cheek over his heart, trusting him to hold her.

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Nora gasped and shot up in bed, her heart racing, the nightmare so fresh in her mind that she could almost smell the old, musky apartment. She could see the glimmer of the knife in her mother's hand.

Oh, God.

She dropped her head into her hands and scrubbed her face.

It was just a dream. It wasn't real.

But the knife last night had been.

A bang on the door had her jolting.

"Nora?"

Her spine straightened at the sound of her brother's voice.

What was he doing here so early?

She tapped the screen of her phone beside the bed.

Eight thirty. Okay. Not early. At least she'd gotten a good chunk of sleep.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed and was halfway across the small studio when the piece of paper on the table caught her attention. It was folded, and her name was scrawled across the front in masculine handwriting.

Zac.

Her heart gave a little kick. She'd fallen asleep on his chest. Again. Only, she shouldn't have been able to sleep last night. Not after the incident at The Pancake Bar. She should have been awake for hours, if not all night.

Carefully, she lifted the piece of paper and read the short note.

Good morning, Nora,

You look too peaceful to wake, so I turned off your show and now I'm quietly sneaking out of your apartment like a very polite burglar. It's three in the morning, by the way. Why am I leaving so late? I'd love to say it's because the baking show became emotionally gripping, but unfortunately, it may have had something to do with you falling asleep on my shoulder, and me feeling incapable of moving.

I'll check in tomorrow.

Zac

The shudder that wove through her body touched every inch of her. She traced his masculine handwriting with her eyes, picturing him standing here, writing it in the dark.

"Nora?"

She jumped at her brother's voice, louder now, which was quickly followed by more fists against wood.

Crap.

She dropped the note and opened the door. "Ryan, I—"

Her brother pulled her into the biggest, tightest hug. One that only he was capable of giving.

She sank into him, letting his familiar strength hold her up for a second.

"Why didn't you call last night?" he growled.

"It was late—"

"It doesn't matter." He pulled back and studied her face, his dark gaze seeing far too much, as usual. "You need me, I'm here. You know that."

"Zac was here. I was okay."

"I know. He called at three a.m. He had to talk me down from coming then and there."

Thank you, Zac.

She turned, taking the four steps required to reach her kitchen counter. "Do you need coffee? *I* need coffee. An irresponsible, unfathomable amount."

She pulled two mugs from the cabinet. At Ryan's silence, she turned her head. He wasn't looking at her though, his gaze was on the note from Zac. The note she'd left unfolded for the world to see. The "world" obviously being her brother.

She winced. She wasn't even sure why. She had nothing to hide. And she didn't hide things from Ryan, anyway. And he already knew Zac had been here.

Ryan looked back up at her. "I'm glad he was here for you."

That was it? No questions about why he'd left at three a.m.? No pestering about him saving her from the date from hell?

"It was lucky he was at The Pancake Bar last night." She turned back to the counter and popped a pod into the machine. "Zac almost talked the girl into giving him the knife, but then the sheriff stormed in, gun blazing."

"Ward's an idiot."

"I just hope they figure out this drug stuff. That girl last night, Verona... she was in a world of her own. It was scary."

"I'm going to speak to Ward later today, but he's not always forthcoming with information."

Once the coffees were ready, Nora sat opposite Ryan at the small two-person table. She sipped her coffee before pulling her knees up.

At her brother's stare, which was far too intense, she lifted a brow. "Say it."

"You hate knives."

"I do."

"Did you sleep last night?"

"Surprisingly, yes." *Because of Zac.*

The last three words were only whispers in her head. But Ryan always had this way of reading her like a book, even when she didn't want to say things out loud.

She glanced down at her coffee. "I did have a nightmare about that night with Mom. I hate the nightmares so much. It feels like no matter what I do, how much therapy I get, or the healing I manage, the nightmares stay."

"I'm sorry, Nora."

She nodded. "When was the last time you spoke to her?"

"Mom?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know. Maybe four years ago. She blew up my phone when I was between ops, wanting money. I told her she wasn't getting any, and she stopped calling."

"Yeah, it was three years ago for me. She used to call like every six months. I haven't heard from her in a while though."

“Sounds like a good thing to me.”

She chewed the inside of her lip.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

“Ethan’s good at finding people, right? He’s like, the tech guy on your team.”

Ryan was shaking his head before she’d finished speaking. “No.”

“No what?”

“We’re not finding her.”

“Why not?”

Ryan leaned forward. “Nothing good comes from having her in our lives. We tried to get her help. Fuck, how many times did we beg her to take her medication? You stayed with her for months after you finished school, making it so fucking easy for her to get better if she wanted. She *didn’t*. She always chose the drugs and alcohol.”

“I know. I’m not saying we find her and bring her here. I just...I want to know where she is. What she’s doing. Whether she ever made any progress toward getting better. Call it closure, I don’t know.”

Ryan’s jaw clenched. “You know the chance of her turning her life around is—”

“Low. As close to zero as it can get. But these nightmares won’t leave me alone. I have to do *something*.”

He blew out a long breath, his focus sweeping around the room before landing on her again. “You know I’d do anything for you, Nora. I’ll find her.”



ZAC PACED the waiting area of the sheriff’s station. It was nine fucking thirty and Ward *still* wasn’t in. Where the hell was he?

The receptionist glanced up from behind the computer before quickly looking back at the screen. She’d told him to go home. She’d told him she’d call when Ward got in.

No. No fucking way. Ward would just tell her not to call. And he needed answers.

A kid had pulled a knife in The Pancake Bar last night. And *another* kid had almost beaten a boy to death. He needed some damn answers before

someone got killed.

His phone vibrated with a text. It was on the group thread.

Ethan: You speak to Ward yet, Zac?

Zac: Still waiting. The lazy idiot obviously likes to sleep in.

Connor: Could he be out on assignment?

Zac: No. The receptionist let it slip that when he works on Saturday, he comes in late because "he deserves to sleep in."

Joel: After the two incidents yesterday?

Zac: My thoughts too.

Ryan: I just left Nora's place and can be at the station in ten if you need me.

Zac: Nah, I've got this. How was she?

He wrinkled his nose at the question.

How was she? Why the fuck would he ask that?

Soon, Ryan would be demanding answers. About where exactly this relationship between him and Nora was heading. And Zac had no fucking clue how he'd answer, because he didn't know himself.

Ryan: Shaken up. But acting strong, like always.

Of course she was shaken up. While the guys were used to weapons being drawn from their time in the military, Nora wasn't. Add on all the stuff she'd been through with her mother, and he was surprised she'd slept at all.

"Are you sure you don't want me to call when he gets in?" the receptionist asked for the third time.

Zac shook his head, his gaze going to the parking lot. "No. I'll wait."

Instead of responding to the team, he texted Nora.

Zac: Morning. You sleep okay?

The three dots popped up, but it took a few seconds for her text to come through.

Nora: Good morning, my polite burglar friend. I slept really well, actually. For the most part. Thanks for closing the laptop. Did you get any sleep?

Zac: Enough. Has anyone from the school made contact with you?

Nora: Not yet, but I'm sure they will. A student pulling a knife is a pretty big deal. Any news on what she was on?

Zac: I'm just waiting to talk to Ward now.

Nora: K. I'll let you know if I learn anything from school. And Zac... thanks for last night. Not just for what you did at The Pancake Bar, but for staying and letting me fall asleep on you.

Zac: Wasn't exactly a hardship.

The door to the station opened at that moment and Ward stepped in. His eyes went straight to Zac before scrunching in annoyance. "It's Saturday. Can't I get a fucking break from you on a *Saturday*?"

"No." He followed Ward into his office.

The sheriff lowered a Bloom box and what looked like an iced coffee to his desk before turning to face Zac. "I can't tell you anything."

"The fuck you can't."

"Language, kid." The sheriff dropped into the seat behind his desk. "They're gonna call me this morning with her test results."

"They haven't called yet?"

Ward cleared his throat. "I may have missed it while at Bloom."

Jesus Christ. "Call them back."

"Look, I—"

"Call them back, Ward. *Now.*"

Ward leaned forward, eyes narrowing. "You watch yourself, boy. I'm the sheriff. This is *my* case."

"There's a drug problem at that school. We need to figure out what those kids are taking and where they're getting it from before someone dies."

"No one's going to—"

"They almost did. If I hadn't broken onto that balcony yesterday, that kid would be dead right now. And the girl at The Pancake Bar was out of her mind. She could've easily stabbed someone."

Something flickered in Ward's eyes. Maybe a hint of fear.

Good. The sheriff *should* be scared. Drugs and teenagers didn't mix well.

"Are you interviewing the students?" Zac asked.

"What students?"

"What the hell do you mean, what students? The two girls who were with her."

"We interviewed them last night."

"And?"

“And they had no idea what she’d taken or that she was even on anything.”

“Bullshit. They knew.”

The phone on the desk rang. They both looked at it.

“Answer it,” Zac said, when Ward hesitated.

The sheriff growled before picking it up. “Ward speaking.” A second passed before he nodded and thanked the guy. Once he’d hung up, he looked at Zac. “Tox screen came back this morning.”

“And?”

“Clean.”

Zac tensed. “It’s something new then.”

“Or these kids are just losing the fucking plot.”

“Are you kidding me? You saw her. She was on some sort of psychoactive drug. We both know it.”

“No. I know what I’m being told, that her tox screening came back clean.”

“There were two incidents yesterday. And I will bet every fucking dollar I have that more are coming.”

“They tested clean—”

“Because it isn’t on the standard panel, Ward! *Jesus*. Are you going to send the results out for further testing?”

“No.”

Zac fisted his hands to stop from hitting the guy. But fuck, he wanted to. He wanted to scream at the idiot. “You either send it off, or I’m calling in the state police.”

Ward’s eyes narrowed. “You wouldn’t.”

“You have twenty-four hours.” Then he stormed out of the office, so fucking mad he could barely see straight.

Nora glanced at the pale blue wall clock in her office.
Five past ten. Taylor was late.

It didn't mean she wasn't coming, but there was a strong chance. It was Wednesday. Five days had passed since the incident in The Pancake Bar. Taylor hadn't been at school Monday *or* yesterday. But, according to office staff, she was here today.

Would she come to her appointment?

Nora tapped her foot against the light green rug. She wanted to speak to the teenager. She wanted to see if she could get any answers regarding what had happened Friday night. What her friend had taken. *Why* she'd taken it. And maybe even where she'd gotten it from.

Nora wasn't naïve enough to think she'd get all those answers today. But even if she got one small tidbit of information, it would be better than nothing.

She glanced at the door again, the tapping of her foot growing faster.

Come on, Taylor. Come to your appointment. Talk to me.

Another five minutes passed, each ticking by slower than the last.

She'd almost lost hope when the door opened and Taylor stepped in.

Nora straightened. "Taylor. Hi."

"Sorry I'm late."

"That's okay. You're here."

Taylor closed the door and crossed the room to lower herself to the blue sofa. The girl didn't meet Nora's eyes. And her fingers wrapped so tightly

around the cell in her hand that her knuckles were white.

Nora offered a small smile. "I did something kind of crazy."

Taylor's eyes swung to her and widened. "What?"

"I made you your own jar of Skittles." She lifted the jar and pushed it across the table.

"There are no orange ones."

"I noticed you never eat the orange ones. Luckily, I *love* orange Skittles and had quite a lovely time eating them while watching my favorite baking show."

"You bake?"

"Very badly." Nora leaned back again. "I'm really glad you came today."

Taylor's gaze lowered again. "Well, I had the appointment."

She said it like having an appointment made attendance mandatory. It didn't. She chose to come. She wanted to talk to Nora. "What would you like to talk about?"

Taylor's brows flickered. "You're not going to ask me about it?"

"Do you *want* me to ask?"

She shook her head quickly.

"Then I won't. How's your mom?"

"My mom?"

"Have you talked to her about what happened?"

Taylor scoffed. "My mom was barely home all weekend. She doesn't care. My aunt though..."

"You have an aunt?"

"Yeah. We're close, and she called." Taylor fiddled with a strand of cotton that had come loose on her sweatshirt. "I told her about Verona."

"I'm glad you spoke to someone."

"My aunt said... Well, she said I could live with her...if I want." For the first time since meeting her, hope lit Taylor's eyes.

"What does your mom think?"

"I haven't asked her."

"You should."

"I'd have to move. She lives in Toronto."

Even better. "I think you should talk to your mom. She might surprise you."

Taylor nodded, gaze dipping again. When she looked up, her blue eyes were sad. The emotion went so deep that Nora almost felt it.

"I didn't know." Taylor's words were so quiet, they were almost a whisper.

"You didn't know what?"

"That she was going to do that. That she...that she wasn't okay. I knew she was upset, but I didn't know that she would..."

"Was she *just* upset?"

Taylor's eyes flared. Then her expression turned to something closer to suspicion. "Wh-what do you mean?"

Nora shuffled to the edge of her seat, choosing her next words carefully. "I think she took something, Taylor. Drugs. They're in the process of doing a more extensive tox screen, but...do you know what she took?"

Fear flared in Taylor's eyes so strongly, there was no mistaking it. "No."

Disappointment skittered through Nora's veins. But she didn't let it show. "How are *you* feeling?"

"Me? I wasn't—"

"You were in that café. You felt the same fear I did. How are you feeling today?"

"Guilty."

It took an effort to not react. Because she hadn't expected that. "Why guilty?"

Tears built in the girl's eyes. "Because I..."

Nora waited a few beats, but when Taylor didn't continue, Nora asked. "You what, Taylor?"

The girl's chest began to move faster, then she shook her head almost violently. "I can't. If I tell you..."

"What would happen if you told me?"

Taylor's phone lit up. She looked down, her cheeks losing a bit of color. "That's him."

"Who?" Nora's pulse picked up speed. Because the fear in Taylor's eyes intensified. Real fear. Whoever just texted her was not good news.

Was it Toby? Someone else?

Taylor locked her phone and stood. "I need to go. If he thinks I told you anything—" She shook her head. "I have to go."

"Wait—"

But she was already gone.

And now Nora had more questions than answers.



ZAC'S BOOTS sank into the damp earth as he moved quickly through the forest. The only sounds were the wind whistling through the trees and the soft tread of his footfalls.

While he searched the western grid, Ryan searched the east. The girl who'd called for help hadn't known where she was, but she knew she'd parked at the western trailhead off Cedar Road. That should be enough information to locate the sixteen-year-old.

Ethan had taken the call. He'd instructed the girl to stay on the line. She hadn't. Why, exactly, Zac wasn't sure. Ethan had called her back, but it had gone to voicemail. Had she lost signal?

He checked his cell. No. There was a signal out here.

His radio cracked. "Zac. Anything?"

Zac shook his head even though Ryan couldn't see him. "Negative. Moving toward the river."

"Copy. I'm moving in the same direction."

Zac shoved the radio into his back pocket and kept moving. It was a Wednesday. That meant no school sessions. No run-ins with Nora. He'd been at school yesterday though and hadn't seen her. He hadn't seen her since Friday night.

That shouldn't have him feeling so restless.

He maneuvered around a tree, the sound of the river growing louder. But that wasn't the only thing he heard.

He stopped.

Hushed voices reached his ears, coming from the left. He turned and headed toward the sound. Thirty more seconds and a girl came into view. But not just a girl. A boy too, who looked around the same age, sixteen maybe.

"Hi."

The girl jumped and spun at Zac's voice, while the boy's eyes narrowed before he barked, "Who are you?"

"Deep River Search and Rescue." He looked at the girl. "Are you Sienna?"

“How does he know your name?” the boy snapped at her.

“Obviously, I called for help.” She shuffled her feet almost uncomfortably. “We’re *lost*.”

“We’re not fucking lost!”

She rolled her eyes. “We’ve been trying to figure out how to get back for an hour.”

“I’m figuring it out, Sienna.”

“Luckily, you don’t have to.” Zac pulled out his radio. “Ryan, I’ve got them.”

“Them?”

“There’s a boy here too. They appear fine. I’ll walk them back.”

“Meet you in the parking lot.”

“Copy.” He shoved his radio back into his pocket. “Come on.”

He took a step toward the path, but only the girl followed.

He glanced at the boy over his shoulder. “You coming?”

When he hesitated, the girl huffed. “Come on, Rhett. I want to go home. I’m hungry and tired.”

“Fine.” He stomped toward them. Literally *stomped*.

“Let’s go.” Zac started moving toward the trail again. “Why’d you kids go off trail?”

“Ask Mr. Know-it-All here,” the girl scoffed. “He’s the one who wanted to skip school and come out here.”

“*Sienna*.”

“What? He’s not a teacher or anything. What would he care that we skipped?”

Zac shot a glance over his shoulder. “You kids go to the local high school?”

“We’re not kids,” the boy huffed.

Funny, he was acting like one.

“Yeah,” Sienna answered. “We’re in high school. Although, the less time we spend there, lately, the better. Did you hear about what happened to that boy? And then the girl in the café?”

A muscle ticked in Zac’s jaw. “I was there. Both times.”

She gasped. “Wait, are you the one who saved Michael and took the knife from Verona?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow! That must have been intense. It’s so sad what happened to them. The kids at our school are so stupid. I hate this new Blue Cherry craze.”

“Sienna,” the boy growled. “*Shut up.*”

Zac slowed, shooting a glance over his shoulder. “What’s Blue Cherry?”

“It’s nothing.” Rhett glared at the girl. “It’s *nothing*. Right, Sienna?”

Her lips snapped shut, her gaze nervous as it flicked to Zac, then back to Rhett. “Yeah. Nothing.”

“If there’s a new drug going around—”

“There isn’t,” the boy cut him off, looking more agitated by the second.

“Okay, but if there *was*,” Zac pushed, “one kid almost died. Two have been charged with very serious offenses. You’d be smart to tell someone what’s going on and to stay the hell away from the stuff.”

The girl fixed her gaze on her shoes, while the boy looked ready to murder someone.

Why the hell wouldn’t they talk? Was this a loyalty thing? Did they think they’d get in trouble with their peers? Or were they taking it too?

When he reached the parking lot, Ryan pushed off a tree before nodding at the kids. “Good to see you’re both okay.”

Rhett didn’t say anything, just stormed straight past them toward an old pickup truck. While Sienna offered a small smile. “Thank you.”

When the truck pulled away, Ryan glanced at Zac. “What happened?”

“The boy didn’t want his girlfriend to call for help. He also didn’t like what she told me.”

“What did she tell you?” Ryan asked, as they stepped back into the forest and started toward base.

“The street name of a new drug the kids are taking. Blue Cherry.”

“Not much to go on.”

“No. But it’s more than we had before.” His phone vibrated. He pulled it out of his pocket to see a text from Nora.

Nora: Wanna know the worst part of my day? Waking up to the realization that it’s a Wednesday. Wednesday means zero chance of accidental hallway encounters. Tragic. Guess I’ll have to bond with my emergency Skittles instead. Packaged Skittles, of course, because we no longer trust open Skittles jars or grubby gym teacher fingers.

His lips twitched.

“That Nora?”

Zac shot his gaze to Ryan. For a second, he'd forgotten he was even there. Shit, he was a bad friend. "Yeah. She's just talking about Skittles."

He nodded slowly. "You'd tell me, wouldn't you?"

"Tell you what?"

"If something happened between you two?"

He swallowed, but it still felt like there was a lump in his throat. "We've fallen asleep in her bed a couple times. That's it."

Ryan lifted a brow, like he didn't believe him.

"She told me she doesn't date your friends." And yeah, it did still kind of hurt to say out loud.

"Usually, that's true."

Usually? Zac wanted to ask Ryan what that meant.

He didn't. He didn't want his friend to say something that would give him hope. That would make him believe, even for a second, that Nora could be his...because he knew she couldn't.

Nora looked at the knife in Verona's hand. The blade caught the yellow light of the café, throwing it back in a thin bright line that moved with her hand.

The café was full of people. Some gasped. Others scooted back in their chairs so the legs scraped against the floors. There was an odd echo to each sound. One that merged with the roaring of blood between Nora's ears.

She looked into Verona's eyes. Eyes that were too wild. Too unfocused.

She was on drugs and holding a weapon.

A deadly combination.

Nora wanted to move. To hide behind the counter or run far away.

But she also didn't. Because she wanted to help the girl. Ask her to drop the weapon and make sure every other person in this café was okay.

"Hey." There was a shake in Nora's voice.

But it had the desired effect. The girl looked right at her. And the knife pointed in her direction.

"It's okay," Nora said gently, arms raised. "You're safe."

Even though her knees shook, she closed the distance slowly.

More words slipped to the tip of her tongue. But before she could get a single one of them out, a man close by started to stand.

Verona swung the knife around.

Nora's heart beat faster, panic making her breaths short and choppy.

She blinked once, twice. On the third, she kept her eyes closed for a few seconds. There was a squeeze of her hand. When she opened her eyes, the room was different. Darker. And the smell...it was that old musky scent of an apartment she'd once lived in as a child.

She looked down to see her small hand in Ryan's. The floor was cold beneath her bare feet, the boards dirty. Not the messy kind where stuff was everywhere. The grime of not having been scrubbed in months.

Panic in her chest swelled, her little body beginning to shake.

Then she looked up...

Mom.

The same wild, unfocused eyes. The knife in her hand. The gleam of light from the moon outside.

"I know who you are," her mother growled, voice so low it sent a shudder down Nora's spine. "Get out. Now."

Ryan tugged her to the right. The bathroom door snapped shut and he flicked the lock. Loud footsteps sounded from the hall. Her mother running.

Something banged against the wood. Maybe a fist. Maybe a shoulder.

Nora jumped back and screamed. The lock shook. It was cheap and old. It wouldn't hold.

Ryan grabbed a can of deodorant from the back of the cabinet.

At the first pull, she almost fell. Her feet didn't want to cooperate, her brain struggling to catch up with what was going on.

"Come on, Nora." Ryan tugged her again. This time her feet worked. She followed Ryan into the bathtub. A tub they'd slept in before. A bathtub they'd hidden in. This place had started to feel like their sanctuary.

She closed her eyes and gripped Ryan's arm, silently begging the banging from her mother against the wood to stop.

Yesterday had been such a good day. Her mother had made them breakfast. She'd offered to braid Nora's hair. For a single second, her life had felt normal.

But the moment Nora had gotten home from school today and seen the bottle, she'd known that the fleeting moment of calm was over.

Another bang against wood. Nora flinched. Scrunched her eyes shut.

They'd be okay. Her mother would pass out. The lock would hold and—

A bang cut through the room, this one louder than the others. Nora's eyes shot open just in time to see her mother racing toward them, knife raised, a crazy, out-of-control expression on her face.

She screamed—

Nora shot up in bed, fear making her heart race.

Another dream. It was just another dream.

She rubbed her eyes, the only sound in her apartment the rush of gasping breaths past her lips.

Her dreams did that sometimes. Changed memories. Rearranged them to breathe new life into her greatest fears. Her mother had never broken through the bathroom door. Not that night. Not ever. But the fear had always been there.

She tapped the screen of her phone beside the bed. Eleven thirty. Really? It was only eleven thirty?

After a dream, she always hoped it was almost morning, because getting back to sleep was usually impossible. The nightmares didn't leave her. They lingered. Playing over and over in her head like a movie she couldn't turn off.

Her gaze moved around her apartment, settling on her laptop. In one swift move, she kicked off the sheets, grabbed her laptop, and stepped into the kitchen. Once the lights were on, she chose her favorite episode of *The Great British Bake Off*. Series five, episode five, where Diana removes Iain's ice cream from the freezer and Iain trashes his entire bake in protest.

Then she got to work on a baked Alaska.



ZAC SLID behind the wheel of his truck while Joel got into the passenger seat. He'd already lain Polly across the back seat.

It was late. Almost midnight. But fuck, he'd had a good night.

Ethan had invited him, Joel, and Polly over for dinner. And if any couple could drag you out of a self-inflicted pit that he'd been in about Nora, it was Joel and Polly.

Not that *that* was evident now. His mood had significantly improved.

He glanced back at a sleeping Polly before pulling onto the road. "You might have to carry her in."

Joel chuckled. "Wouldn't be the first time."

"I don't know if I've said this, but you two are great together."

“Thanks. She’s the center of my world. Fuck, I love her so much. Even if she likes to push my buttons.” Joel shook his head. “What’s crazy is that I didn’t even know I wanted this. The relationship. Spending every night at her place or mine together. We’ve even talked about just selling my house and me moving to hers.”

For some reason, the image of Nora waking up in his bed flashed in Zac’s mind.

Jesus Christ.

He cleared his throat. “You should. Move in together, I mean. If it feels right.”

“How are things with Nora?” Joel asked, all but reading his mind.

“The same as last week. And the week before that. We’re friends.”

“Really? No sneaky kisses or cuddles to sleep?”

“Not lately.” But the thought of kissing her...

Stop, Zac.

“You want to know what I think?” Joel asked.

“I don’t know, do I?”

“You should let her know how you feel.”

He laughed. “What would that do? She’s not interested.”

Joel scoffed.

Zac looked at his friend. “What?”

“You honestly think that?”

“I texted her this morning and she still hasn’t gotten back to me. You think that’s a sign of love?”

“I think that’s a sign of avoidance.”

Zac pulled into Polly’s drive. “When did you become the giver of relationship advice?”

“I got Polly. It obviously unlocked some wisdom.”

Zac chuckled. “Need help getting her inside?”

Joel undid his seat belt. “Nope. I’m good. You might want to check on a certain someone before you go home though.”

Zac frowned before following Joel’s gaze to the apartment over the garage.

The lights were on. It was almost midnight, and Nora was up?

Joel disappeared into the house, but Zac didn’t move. He didn’t get out of the truck. He didn’t drive away.

His fingers tightened around the wheel.

He should go home. He had no business knocking on her door when it was almost midnight.

Goddammit.

He climbed out and jogged up the stairs at the back of the garage, taking them two at a time before lifting his fist to her door...only to hesitate.

What the hell was he *doing*? He shouldn't be knocking on her door so late.

He turned just as the door swung open.

"Zac?"

Shit. He turned back. Nora was in different pajamas tonight. These were pale blue with white stripes, and dammit if the shorts weren't so tiny that he could see every inch of her creamy thighs.

Nora's lips twitched, presumably at his silence. "Uh...are you okay?"

"Um, yeah...yes." Why the fuck was his voice so squeaky? "I just dropped Joel and Polly home and saw your light on. Thought I'd check in."

"I'm doing a terrible job at making baked Alaska. Want to help?"

Yes. "I shouldn't."

Her smile faltered a bit. "I *was* asleep but then...I woke up. Company would be really nice right now."

"Okay." The word came out before his brain had time to process it.

Her smile returned, wide and radiant. "Great. Come in."

She turned and moved back to the kitchen, and shit, he could almost see her ass in those shorts.

He closed and locked the door, his gaze hitting the unmade bed, then shifting to the open laptop on the table.

The Great British Bake Off. Of course.

"If you'd been Ryan," Nora started, "he would have chewed me out for opening the door before knowing it was you."

"I'm with Ryan on that one."

"I saw the lights. I thought it was Polly or Joel."

She pushed a bowl of raspberries into his chest. "Mash these for me."

"What exactly is baked Alaska?"

"Well, there's a sponge cake base. That's already in the oven. Then ice cream on top. Hence the raspberries that we'll mix into vanilla ice cream. Then we cover it all in meringue. That's what I'm working on." She cracked an egg and separated the white from the yolk. "You're supposed to torch the outside until it's brown, but I often skip that part."

“And you tell people you can’t bake?”

“Maybe this will be my exception. This is probably my most made recipe.”

He laughed.

She passed a tub of ice cream over to him. “It’s half melted. Mix in the raspberries and pop it back into the freezer.”

“So,” he started gently. “Why are you up?”

Her hand paused, broken eggshell between her fingers. “I had a nightmare.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

For a second, she was silent. The silence stretched, and he wasn’t sure she’d answer at all. Then she lifted a shoulder. “The nightmare started at The Pancake Bar with Verona. Then it changed to that night my mom had a knife.”

He stopped. “Shit, Nora. I’m sorry.”

“It’s just frustrating. As a trained counselor, I know why I still have nightmares. The experiences don’t just disappear. But as someone who’s spent so much time and money on healing, I wish my brain wasn’t so good at remembering trauma. You know?”

“Yeah. I know.”

She swallowed. “You said you have nightmares about the time you were shot?”

“I do.”

“Will you tell me about what happened?”

“It was a hostage rescue op for a group of aid workers who’d been kidnapped. My team headed the rescue mission. When we got there, it was hell on earth. A massacre.”

Nora gasped, hands gripping the counter. “Oh, God.”

“I found a woman in a back room. She looked scared and injured. She was wearing this red jacket, something I can never seem to forget. Halfway to the extraction point, she pulled a pistol and shot me in the chest. I would have died but Ryan was there. He shot the woman and got me to help. It’s the closest I’ve ever come to death though.”

Nora stepped closer and touched his chest. “I’m so sorry.”

“She wasn’t a survivor. She was one of the people responsible for the massacre. I should have known better.”

“How could you have known?”

“I was trained to know. It messed with my head for a while, but there are psychologists available to us in the military and mandatory mental health assessments. I went through all of it. It’s weird, but to this day, I hate red jackets.”

“It’s strange what sticks with us, isn’t it?” She met his eyes, her expression steady. “You’re amazing, Zac. You know that? To do what you’ve done in the military and still be dedicating your life to helping people.”

“I’m just doing what I love.”

She held his gaze captive, and fuck, but he couldn’t move.

“I want to do something really stupid right now,” she whispered.

His pulse picked up speed, not sure what she was about to say but knowing what he hoped it was. “Will you regret it in the morning?”

“Definitely.”

“Do it anyway.”

Her eyes flared. Slowly, she lifted to her toes and cupped the back of his neck. Only to hesitate. Her gaze shifted between his eyes, her breath merging with his.

Then she closed that tiny bit of distance and kissed him.

And *God*, her lips were so warm and soft.

A hum slipped from her throat, the sound sinking into him. He gripped her waist with one hand and her neck with the other. When he nudged her closer, she gasped, and when her lips parted, he deepened the kiss, slipping his tongue inside her mouth to caress hers.

She tasted like raspberry and ice cream, like she’d already tasted the ingredients on the counter.

Her hands ran over his chest like she was memorizing the feel of him.

He traced a thumb over the edge of her jaw, loving the small shiver that ran down her back.

He liked that. He liked that she reacted to him. Liked that she enjoyed his hands on her body. His mouth on hers.

He was already so deep he could barely think when she suddenly pressed her hands to his chest and pushed.

He forced himself to lift his head, but she wasn’t looking at him. Her head was down, palms still flat against him.

“Mistake,” she gasped. “Big, *huge* mistake.”

He tried not to flinch at her words. “Would you like me to go?”

Her eyes swung up then. “Go?”

“Yes, Nora. I can—”

“No.” Her mouth opened and closed. “I mean...we need to finish baking.”

His brows rose, gaze going to the melted ice cream and crushed raspberries. “You want me to help you finish?”

“You don’t?”

“I can stay.” How the fuck he was supposed to do that now, knowing how she tasted, he had no idea. But he also had no idea how to say no to this woman.

She stepped back, seeming to try to compose herself. “I’m so sorry. Let’s just forgot about what I just did, okay?”

Forget? She thought he was capable of that?

No. That kiss would live inside him now. There was no getting it out... even if he wanted to.

Nora snuggled deeper into the warm sheets, the morning sun just slipping over the backs of her eyes.

Mm. Bed was warm today. Almost too warm.

She breathed in a masculine scent, only to frown.

Small things began to register. The weight on her hip. The hardness against her back.

Hardness. Why was—

A nearly silent gasp cut from her throat.

Zac.

Her eyes snapped open, and the night before rolled over her.

The baking. Zac's surprise visit. The kiss. Oh God, the *kiss*. She'd kissed Zac Pierce. She'd kissed her brother's best friend.

And then she'd fallen asleep on him. So many bad decisions.

She squeezed her eyes shut, but that did not help. In fact, it made it worse. She could almost feel his soft lips against hers. Almost taste his mouth, a mixture of peppermint and wine. Even the pad of his rough thumb, grazing over the edge of her jaw—which had felt so good. Really good. *Too* good.

Not dating Ryan's friends was a long-standing rule. A smart rule. One she could not, *would not*, break.

Yet, here she was, in bed with a man she'd kissed, his morning erection pressed against her ass.

Carefully, she glanced over her shoulder, only to yelp at the sight of two dark eyes staring right at her.

“You’re awake?” she cried.

One side of that gorgeous mouth of his lifted. “Should I still be asleep?”

“Yes.” She rolled to her back, but his arm didn’t move. It was slung over her belly now, feeling heavy and hot and dangerous. “If you were asleep, I could sneak out and hide in the bathroom.”

He looked at the bathroom door, like he was picturing her inside, before glancing back down. “I mean, that plan sounds good. But this one’s better.”

His morning breath whispered over her cheek. And it wasn’t bad. Somehow, this man’s breath smelled good in the morning. *That*, in combination with his day-old stubble, made her want to run. Really far, really fast.

“I don’t date Ryan’s friends.”

“You’ve said.”

“He’s important to me. And every relationship either ends in a happily ever after or a breakup. I don’t know the exact stats, but I’d say they’re not in our favor. And if we *did* date or marry or pop out a few kids, and then things ended badly, that wouldn’t be fair to Ryan.”

“It wouldn’t.”

“So you agree. I shouldn’t date Ryan’s friends.”

“I didn’t say that.” His thumb brushed her hip. Her *bare* hip, because her top had risen to her ribs and his hand was flush against her skin.

Her attention lowered to his lips. Only for a second. A stretched-out, yearning kind of second. And when she looked up again, it was to see his eyes a shade darker. His fingers just a little tighter on her waist.

Her lower belly started doing that pulsing thing while her breathing shortened.

Kiss him.

The quiet whisper went against everything she’d just scolded herself for.

“We shouldn’t,” she whispered. “There are so many reasons not to.”

“You’ve only told me one.”

Like her hand had a mind of its own, she reached up and ran her palm over the stubble.

She wasn’t even sure who initiated what happened next. Maybe she pulled him down. Maybe he lowered his head himself, but one second, she was touching him, and the next, they were kissing.

And heaven almighty, but this kiss was just as good as the last. Maybe better, because his weight was half on top of her body.

She slipped her hand around his neck and curved a leg around his waist.

His tongue teased the seam of her lips. She opened for him. Then his tongue was inside her mouth, stroking hers with deliberate slowness.

Her heart started to beat to a new rhythm. A faster rhythm. One that seemed designed just for Zac.

She groaned as she tugged him closer with her leg, feeling his hardness press through jeans against her core.

He slid his hand higher, wrapping it around her bare side. His thumb traced the curve just beneath her breast.

Air caught in her throat.

His hand shifted up that last tiny bit, and he cupped her breast. And holy shit, every coherent thought left her head.

She whimpered at the feel of his callused palm slowly rubbing over her pebbled nipple. The tingles ran all the way down to her toes.

A phone beeped somewhere in the room. It took her a second to register that it was hers. Another second to register that it was probably her brother.

Her brother Ryan.

Zac's best friend.

Shit.

She tore her mouth from Zac's and rolled off the bed. In the process, she almost fell on her face.

"Whoa!" Zac reached for her.

She sidestepped and held up a hand. "No. That was bad, Zac. Really, really bad."

"I kind of liked it."

Even his teasing and that half grin were too much for her fragile morning sanity. "No. You didn't like it."

He climbed out of bed, and yep, that was a boner in his jeans. And somehow he just looked...bigger. In all aspects.

She shot back, her hip hitting the wall. "It never happened, okay?"

"Nora, I don't think Ryan cares—"

"I care. We can't date. We can't kiss. We can't..." She looked at the bed. "Do *that*." Then she was back to shaking her head like a mad woman. "I'm going to shower. You need to go."

"Can we just—"

“Have a really good day, Zac.” One tight smile, and she disappeared into the bathroom and locked the door with a decisive click. Then she lay her temple against the wood and breathed.

Of course, it only took a moment of clarity to remember that it was Thursday. And on Thursdays, Zac worked at the school.

She’d probably run into him.

Great.



HE WAS LOOKING FOR HER. Zac wasn’t even trying to hide it. Sometimes when he walked down this hall, he caught a glimpse of her talking to a student, or just stepping out of her office, or speaking with a teacher.

Was it sad that he kind of lived for those moments?

It was sad.

He hadn’t meant to fall asleep last night. He’d meant to get his ass out of bed after a couple of episodes of that damn baking show, a show he was actually starting to like, but he’d just fallen asleep, fully clothed and all.

And they’d kissed. Not once, *twice*. And both times, Nora had labeled them as mistakes.

But they didn’t feel like mistakes. And the more time he spent with her, the less fight he had in him to resist this thing between them.

He stopped outside Adam’s door and knocked, his gaze only hitting Nora’s closed office door for a second before Adam called him in.

Zac stepped into the office. It was an effort not to react to the stench of damp towels and gym socks in here. Jesus Christ, did the man ever wash *anything*? “Hey.”

Adam shot him a glance from where he sat at his desk. “Zac. Hey. Ready to roll? We’re going into the forest today, right?”

“Yeah. Today’s about disorientation. We’ll also rank how important different survival items are.” He grabbed the SAR bag he’d begun to store in Adam’s office from beneath the desk.

“Sounds good to me. Let me just file these papers.”

Zac almost laughed. This man filed things? Really?

He took in the coffee stains on what was clearly student work on the desk. Dirty mugs were scattered around, at least six of them.

But it wasn't just Adam's desk that was a mess.

"You heard any more on the drugs?" Zac asked, as he fixed his attention back on the gym teacher.

Adam stopped, mid-spin of his chair. "Uh, no. Nothing from the principal or Ward."

"What's the school doing about it?"

"Well, a few things." He scratched his head. "Parents have been notified. Teachers have been briefed on what to look for. The drug prevention counselor has talked to each grade and done some drug awareness sessions."

"Was Nora part of that?"

"Nah. She's a bit new, and given what happened at the café, the principal thought she was too close to it all. What's the woman's name? Maria? Yeah, she spoke to the kids."

"Spoke to them? That's it? Have you learned where the supply is coming from?"

"Not yet. But we will." He stood and patted Zac's shoulder as he passed. "Don't stress. We'll figure it out."

Don't stress? Was he serious? "Adam. This is a big problem."

Adam stopped before he could move through the door and turned. "We know that, Zac. But there's only so much we can do as teachers. And take it from me, someone who's been teaching for almost fifteen years...drug problems aren't anything new. We always get to the bottom of it eventually."

Why the hell was he acting like there was no urgency? "Someone could die next time."

"No one's ever died before."

"That kid on the balcony almost died."

"But he didn't."

"Because *I* stopped the other kid." Christ, what was he not understanding?

"If it hadn't been you, it would have been someone else. Look, I get it, working in a high school is new for you. It's not for the rest of us. We'll handle it." He walked out of the office like that was it.

Zac's fingers tightened around the handle of the bag.

He didn't want the conversation to be over. He wanted to hear Adam say they were doing surprise inspections of kids' lockers and school bags,

anything to figure this shit out.

With a clenched jaw, he followed the guy down the hall and into the gym where the kids were waiting.

“In the woods today,” Adam called. “Come on.”

A few kids groaned, others just grabbed their bags and followed.

Zac met Toby’s gaze, catching the cocky twitch of the teenager’s lips.

The kid was a pain in Zac’s ass. Liked to be the class clown and shout out unnecessary shit. Acted like he didn’t have a care in the world.

Zac had noticed the blond girl didn’t hang out with him anymore. She also didn’t look any happier though.

When they reached a small clearing just inside the trees, Zac stopped and turned. “What are we doing out here today?”

“Looking for Verona’s drugs?” a kid scoffed beside Toby.

Some kids gasped, while others muffled laughs.

“That’s actually why I get some of my callouts,” Zac said, not cracking so much as a smile. “Have to carry some of those kids out on stretchers. Then it’s into the hands of the police.”

The smile on the boy’s face dropped, and Toby gave a short shake of his head.

Zac laid out a tarp and spread equipment out over it. “We have an emergency blanket, water, a radio, climbing rope, med kit, and a GPS beacon. Who can tell me the most important survival tool here?”

“You’re missing the knife,” Toby called.

The girl with the ringlets rolled her eyes. “Shut up, Toby.”

Toby’s attention swung to her, looking surprised.

“How will a knife help you if you’re lost, it’s midnight, and you have no idea how to get yourself out of the forest?” Zac asked.

The kid just lifted a shoulder, no longer seeming interested in the conversation.

“It won’t,” Zac finished.

Over the next ten minutes, the teenagers ordered the survival tools from most to least important. Zac explained hypothermia, while the students passed around the emergency blanket. They talked about the importance of food and water and communication.

The class actually did really well. With the exception of Toby and his friends, the rest of the group seemed genuinely interested in the information Zac was sharing.

Once the equipment was back in the bag, they started navigation exercises. The class split into small teams, each using the compass function on their phones to locate colored markers he'd set up earlier in the week.

He walked around, helping the students, but when he reached Toby's group, he noticed the teenager was missing.

"Where is he?"

One of his friends looked up and shrugged. "I don't know. Making out with Taylor?"

His boys laughed. Zac didn't.

He scanned the forest, moving from group to group. It wasn't until he reached Taylor's group that he spotted a hint of her blond curls behind a tree.

He walked over to find Toby crowding the girl. "What's going on?"

Toby hung his head before turning. The teenager was tall, over six feet, but shorter than Zac, and he didn't have the same breadth.

The boy lifted a brow. "You fucking love me, don't you?"

"I asked you a question. What's going on?" He looked at the girl. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, seeming more angry than anything else. "I'm fine. Thank you." She walked away.

Toby tried to follow her, but Zac sidestepped, cutting him off. "What are you doing back here?"

"Building a canoe."

"You think you're funny?"

"I think you should mind your own fucking business."

"While I'm running these sessions, what you do *is* my business."

Footsteps sounded to the right, then Adam's voice. "Toby, what's happening?"

"I'm trying to rejoin the group, sir. But Mr. *Pierce* seems to have a real obsession with me."

Zac's jaw ground. "He had a student cornered."

"Is that true?" Adam asked.

"No." Then Toby laughed and shook his head. "Well, this has been fun, but I actually have to go."

"Where?" Adam asked.

"I have an appointment." There was a small twitch of the kid's lips. "With our delightful school counselor."

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Nora's gaze ran over the next name on her schedule.
Toby Johnson.

His appointment wasn't for another twenty minutes, but her chest already felt tight. She could have refused to see him. She could have asked the other school counselor to take his appointment.

She didn't, because Nora had questions. Questions he probably wouldn't answer, but that she needed to ask anyway because the school was getting nowhere with this mystery drug stuff. And something told her Toby knew something. He seemed like the kind of kid who knew exactly what went on in this school.

Her phone dinged with a text.

Zac: You have an appointment with Toby?

How had he known? Unless the class Toby was currently in was with Zac?

Nora: He made it. It'll be okay.

Zac: Last time it wasn't okay.

He was right. She'd let the boy get to her. Hell, she'd basically fallen into a heap in the staff room.

Nora: That won't happen again.

The three dots popped up, then disappeared before his response finally came through.

Zac: Be careful.

Ha. Like being careful always helped when a hormonal teenager was involved.

She dropped her phone into her bag and pulled out the small bottle of hydroxyzine. Sometimes they took the edge off her anxiety, and yeah, she kind of needed that right now. And twenty minutes was the perfect amount of time for them to work.

She popped two small white pills into the center of her palm before recapping the container and dropping it into her bag. She was just reaching for her water when the door to her office opened.

Shit. Why was he here already? Had Zac let him out early?

She turned, setting the tablets on her desk and pushing them under the corner of her bag. "Toby."

"Whoops. Was I supposed to knock?" He shoved his hands into his pockets, that familiar cocky expression firmly on his face. "I'm early."

"That's okay." The sooner she started, the sooner she'd be finished. She indicated the blue couch. "Have a seat."

"I might stand."

She almost laughed, because she'd seen this before. Kids trying to keep the upper hand and asserting their dominance by defying requests.

"Sure." She lowered to the pink couch, grabbing a cube from the bowl and squishing it in her hands. "Do you want to tell me why you're here?"

"Taylor broke up with me."

"She mentioned." And Nora was so proud of the girl. She'd started opening up about how she felt stuck in the relationship. How she wanted out but wasn't quite sure how to *get* out. This breakup was a long time coming. "How did that make you feel?"

"Doesn't really matter how I feel."

"I think it matters."

He picked up her Christmas snow globe and shook it.

A small smile curved her lips. "I have that because Christmas makes me happy, and I thought maybe it makes other people happy too, so why not have it out all year round."

"Christmas is really shitty for some kids."

"Is it shitty for you?"

"It's the same as every other day." He set it down and moved to the window. For a few seconds, he just watched outside. "Your boyfriend just caught me trying to talk to Taylor."

“I’m guessing you’re referring to Zac. He’s not my boyfriend. He caught you with Taylor?”

“That’s what I said.”

Concern immediately went to Taylor. Was she okay? From the little she’d gotten out of the girl, the relationship hadn’t been healthy, so the breakup had been necessary.

“A bit quiet over there, Slade.” Toby swung her a glance. “Worried about her?”

“Toby, I need to ask you something.”

“About Blue Cherry?”

She frowned. “What’s Blue Cherry?”

“Taylor didn’t tell you?” He scoffed. “Guess you two aren’t as close as you think.”

“What’s Blue Cherry, Toby?”

He lifted a shoulder. “I don’t know.”

He was lying.

She shuffled to the edge of her seat. “Kids are getting hurt at this school.”

“Michael was an idiot. He deserved to have his ass beat. And Verona didn’t actually hurt anyone, did she?”

“Where are students getting it?”

He lifted a framed photo of her and Ryan. “Who’s this?”

“It’s my brother.”

“He looks a bit like your boyfriend. That’s kinda sick, huh?” He shot a glance over his shoulder. “You got a mother?”

“We’re not talking about me, Toby.”

“I am.”

“Then you’re going to have to leave.”



TOBY JOHNSON LAUGHED. Okay, maybe it was more of a scoff. This bitch was really pissing him off. And somehow, she thought she was in control.

His gaze raked over the desk. Sticky notes. Fluffy pens and a jar of Skittles. Stupid shit that was so fucking irrelevant.

“You want to talk about me? Okay.” He turned and looked at her. “My dad’s in prison because he shot my mom. She didn’t die. But she did find comfort in a bottle. Been sucking on that for the last ten years. We lost our home and have to live with my grandpa. Mean old man. Thought he could put his hands on me, until I started putting my hands on him right back.”

Nothing. No widening of her eyes. No dropping of her jaw.

Huh. She was going to act unaffected.

“I’m sorry, Toby. That must be really hard.”

Oh, now she was doing the sympathetic shit. “I told *you* something, now you tell *me* something.” Like why the fuck she’d told his girlfriend to break up with him.

He didn’t really care that Taylor had left him. That whore had become a whiny pain in his ass. What he cared about was that she knew too much. And it was always best to keep those kinds of people close.

“I told you, Toby. We’re not here to talk about me.”

Even her fucking voice grated on him. It was too smooth, too soft. She pretended to help people, when all she really did was listen to kids complain, then deposit her paycheck. Did she ever actually help anyone? Fuck no.

He ran his gaze over the brown leather bag on the desk. Interesting that everything else in this office looked like a fucking rainbow had thrown up, but her bag was a shitty brown color.

“You know what I think?” He picked up a pen and ran a finger over the fluffy end. “I think you had a fucked-up upbringing. Maybe your mama didn’t love you. Maybe no one saved you. So you decided to become a school counselor to try to save everyone else.”

She stood. “Okay, we’re done.”

He was right.

He slipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out two small white pills, hiding them in a fist.

He’d clocked the white tablets half hidden under her bag the second he’d looked at the desk. Probably anxiety meds. His mother took them for a while. Until she’d realized the bottle was a lot more effective when it came to blacking out.

He shifted in front of the desk, blocking her view of the tablets. Tablets that looked conveniently similar to Blue Cherry. Then he reached behind him. “I like you, Miss Slade. So I’m going to give you some advice.” He

swiped her tablets with his right hand while releasing *his* from the left. “Leave this drug shit to the professionals. You don’t want to get hurt in games that aren’t yours to play.”

She opened the door. “This isn’t a game, Toby. And we *will* get to the bottom of this, with or without your help.”

He pushed off the desk and moved to the door, but before stepping out, stopped right in front of her. She kind of smelled like vanilla. He fucking *hated* vanilla. “You have a good day, Miss Slade. A really good fucking day.”



NORA CLOSED the door even though she wanted to slam the thing.

She did it again. She let him get under her skin. Yes, he’d had a hard upbringing. She’d known his story before he’d shared it. But that was no excuse for trying to toy with people’s emotions. And he was seventeen, almost an adult. If he didn’t get help, if he didn’t turn his life around right now, what kind of man would he become?

She returned to her desk and lifted her phone. And dammit, her fingers were shaking. She hated that they were shaking.

There was already a text waiting for her.

Zac: Let me know when you’re done. That kid has serious issues. I don’t like you being alone in a room with him.

Nora: Did you let him skip class?

Zac: He told me he had to leave for the appointment. Was he lying?

Nora: He was early.

Zac had been right. She never should have met with him. She should have known she’d get nothing useful out of Toby Johnson.

Nora: It doesn’t matter. I’m done. I didn’t get through to him. He was just here to mess with my head.

Zac: Bell’s in five minutes. I’ll come to you.

Nora: No. I’m okay. I’m going to rush home now and shower and change before the town meeting. It’s early tonight. I’ll see you there?

Zac: You sure?

Nora: Yeah. I’m okay.

She dropped the phone into her bag and lifted it. The two white pills sat on the desk.

She'd completely forgotten about them.

With barely a glance, she lifted the meds, popped them into her mouth, and swallowed them with water.

Hopefully, they'd take the edge off the anxiety running through her body and she'd be fine by the town meeting.

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Nora pulled into a parking spot outside the community center, but instead of getting out of her car, she pressed a shaky hand to her chest.

Her heart was racing. The beats hit her palm in fast, sharp thuds.

Why? Because of Toby? Because of his appointment? Almost two hours had passed since their confrontation in her office. And she'd taken hydroxyzine. That should have kicked in way before now.

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. It wasn't just the racing of her heart that felt wrong. She was...anxious? No, it was more than that. This was different.

She shouldn't have come to the town meeting. She shouldn't—

A knock on the window made her jump. Her eyes flew to the man outside her car. The man wearing white hospital scrubs.

She blinked.

The scrubs disappeared. Ryan frowned at her, concern etched into his features.

She shook her head, grabbed her keys, and climbed from the car. "Hey." She tried for a smile but, given Ryan's intense gaze, she was guessing she didn't pull it off.

"What's wrong?"

"I just had a hard last appointment at work." She shoved her keys into her bag, Ryan's eyes still on her.

"Nora—"

“Gang’s all here,” Joel shouted, as he came to a stop beside Ryan.

Not just Joel. Emily and Polly, Connor and Raven, Ethan and Maggie... and Zac.

One side of Zac’s mouth lifted. “Hey.”

This time, she tried for a half smile. Obviously, it was just as bad as the full one she’d offered Ryan, because Zac’s smile faltered too.

“Come on, let’s get in there before we miss out on all the fun,” Polly said, slipping her hand into Joel’s.

Zac slipped to her side as she walked toward the hall, his deep voice rumbling as he whispered, “Are you all right?”

“Just feeling a bit off since my session with Toby.” She kept her eyes down, frowning when the ground looked slightly blurry.

“What did he do?”

She shook her head. “Nothing, he was just—”

“Nora.”

She flinched, feet grinding to a halt, gaze shooting around the front of the community center. That voice. A whispered female voice. A *familiar* voice. One she heard too often in her nightmares.

Mom?

“Nora?” Zac touched her arm. “What’s going on?”

She looked at him. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” He stepped closer, hand gripping her hip.

“You didn’t hear her call my name?”

“Who?”

He hadn’t heard. It was in her head. Was she losing her mind?

“Don’t worry about it.” She rushed up the steps, spotting the women in the middle row on the left side, while Ryan and the guys stood at the front with the mayor. Ryan was watching her. She dipped her head, taking a step toward the women, but Zac gently gripped her wrist, stopping her.

“Nora, something’s wrong.”

Something was definitely wrong. But she had no idea what. And she didn’t want to share how scared she was. Not with Zac. Not with Ryan. Because something inside her, a fear that ran too deep, simply wouldn’t let her.

She pulled her arm free. “I’m okay. I’ll see you after the meeting.” Another small, tight smile and she rushed to the open seat beside Polly.

“Want one?” Polly held something out in her hand.

Nora glanced down at the small pills in a Styrofoam cup. The lights buzzed and the voices in the room seemed muffled. She gasped. “Why would you give me that?”

Polly frowned. “Why would I give you mints?”

She blinked. And when she looked down again, there were no pills in a cup, just pastel mints in a container.

They were *only* mints. “No, thank you.”

“Are you okay?”

Nora’s eyes flew back up to Polly. “I—”

“Good evening, everyone.”

Nora’s attention went to Ferris at the front of the room. As the mayor started to speak, Maggie said something to Polly, pulling her attention away. Nora looked down at her hands, noticing the shake in her fingers was worse now.

She fisted her hands hard, knuckles turning white.

“*Nora.*”

Air stuttered in her lungs at the sound of her mother’s voice. It was real. She’d definitely heard it that time. She swung her head around, scanning every person near her.

Locals stared back at her. Basil from The Pancake Bar. Maureen, the local psychic. Even David Collins, the town recluse, sat two rows behind.

Not her mother. Because her mother wasn’t here.

She scrunched her eyes shut and rubbed a hand along her jeans. Her skin felt tight and clammy and...wrong.

This is just anxiety. You’re not going insane.

She looked up to the front of the hall to see Zac standing beside Ryan. Ryan’s gaze flicked to hers. He didn’t smile. In fact, he looked like he was studying her.

The way he used to study their mother.

Zac wasn’t looking her way. His cell was in his hand, and he was staring at the screen.

Her phone vibrated with a text.

Zac: She’s here.

Nora: Who’s here?

Zac: Your mom.

A buzzing sounded in her ears, growing louder by the second.

“Nora—”

Her gaze swung up to Polly. But it wasn't Polly... It was her mother. For a second, she couldn't move or breathe. Fear rooted her to the spot. "Wh-what are you doing here?"

Her mother frowned. "I've always been here, Nora."

The lights in the hall suddenly seemed brighter, almost fluorescent. Then they flickered. She blinked. Her mom was still there but the room... It wasn't a hall anymore. The walls were white, the chairs plastic.

Her chest started to move faster, the smell of antiseptic slamming into her nose so vividly, she almost gagged.

She squeezed her eyes closed.

It's not real. It's not real. It's not real.

She opened them. She was back in the hall, the wooden chairs filled with townspeople again.

"Nora, what's going on?"

Nora's gaze flew back to Polly. She was looking at her like she was...

Like she was crazy.

"I need air."

Polly touched her thigh. "Hey. You're shaking."

"I'm fine. I'll be back in a second." She remained hunched over slightly as she rose from her seat and rushed out of the hall.

Cold air slapped her in the face as she stumbled down the steps.

"Nora."

"Stop it." She closed her eyes again, trying to block out her mother's voice.

It's not real.

She touched her pockets as she rushed toward her car.

Empty. She'd left her keys in her bag and her bag by her seat in the community center.

"Nora." Fingers wrapped around her arm.

Strong fingers.

Restraining.

She jerked away. "Don't touch me!"

Zac held up his hands, confusion knitting his brows. "Okay. I won't touch you."

Air stuck in her lungs as she looked at his clothes. Not clothes...scrubs. The same white scrubs she'd seen earlier.

Her stomach rolled, panic bubbling over inside her. “Stay away from me.”

“Nora, talk to me.” He took a step toward her. “You’re making me worried.”

She looked around, not sure what she was searching for. Her gaze caught on the couple across the street. They also wore scrubs. One held a clipboard, the other a clear cup of pills. There was a random person walking the other way holding a syringe. And an elderly couple sat in the gazebo, also wearing scrubs, but they stared at her like they were one moment from jumping to their feet and grabbing her.

They were everywhere.

“*Nora.*”

Tears gathered in her eyes at her mother’s voice. She wouldn’t leave her alone!

The sudden need to get away, to run, to claw off her own skin, had her taking a step back. “You think I’m crazy, don’t you?”

Zac’s frown deepened. “No one thinks you’re crazy.”

The words tangled in her head. Moving around. Morphing into new sentences.

No one thinks you’re crazy...yet.

No one thinks you’re your mother...yet.

No one can lock you up...yet.

She shook her head. “I have to go.”

Zac’s eyes flared. “Go where?”

“I don’t want you to follow me. I don’t want *anyone* to follow me!” She turned and started to walk quickly.

But footsteps sounded behind her. Footsteps that competed with the buzzing in her head.

She shot a glance over her shoulder to see Zac close. “Go away!”

“I can’t do that, Nora.”

She walked faster, somewhere between a jog and a run.

“Nora. *Stop.*” There was more urgency in Zac’s voice now.

“I’m not her. I’m not!” Her arms pumped now, shoes slamming onto the pavement.

The streetlights flickered, making her blink.

“*Nora!*” Her mother’s voice again.

She closed her eyes, her feet flying over the pavement. “Stop it! Please, stop it!”

Zac’s footsteps grew closer. Louder.

She jerked to the left and raced across the road.

“No!”

Zac’s shout was drowned out by the squeal of tires.

The bright lights of the truck came from nowhere. She screamed. A body suddenly hit her hard, sending her flying through the air.



ZAC CURSED under his breath as he jogged after Nora. He wanted to grab her. And he could. But she was already scared. The last thing he wanted to do was make her feel cornered or restrained.

But he had to break through whatever was going on in her head. Get her to remember who he was. That she was safe.

She sped up.

“Nora. *Stop*,” he called.

She said something back but it was too breathy to catch.

He barely felt the cold air slapping him in the face as he lengthened his strides. All his focus was on Nora. He moved faster, closing the distance between them.

Suddenly, she veered onto the road at the exact time truck headlights burst around the corner.

“No!” Zac shot forward, old SEAL training taking over. Three fast strides and he grabbed her around the waist, the collision of body against body hard enough that he heard the breath expel from her lungs.

He threw them to the side, twisting midair, making sure his body took the brunt of the impact as they hit the ground.

Asphalt slammed into his shoulder, then his back. Pain burst along his spine.

Truck brakes screamed a few feet away. A woman ran out of a store beside them.

Zac ignored it all, putting his entire focus on Nora as she trembled in his arms. She shook so violently it rattled his body.

Alive. Nora was alive. The truck hadn't hit her. It hadn't hit either of them.

But fuck, it had been close.

He sat up slowly, keeping her close against his chest. "Easy."

She looked at him, eyes wide with terror, pupils huge. Quickly, he scanned her body for signs of blood or injury. There weren't any.

"Zac?"

His eyes returned to hers again. "Yeah, honey, it's me."

"I...I don't know what's happening to me. I'm scared." Her voice cracked.

Footsteps from the right sounded. He looked up to see Ryan and the guys racing toward them, as well as Polly and Maggie.

Zac gave a small shake of his head to Ryan. A silent signal not to close the space between them. If more people crowded her, Nora might lose her sense of reality again.

His arms tightened slightly, not enough to hurt, just firm enough in case she tried to run again. "I've got you, Nora. You're safe with me."

The truck driver started to walk toward them. "Hey!"

Nora flinched at the voice.

Ryan was suddenly in front of the guy, cutting him off.

"Look at me, Nora," Zac urged gently.

She shut her eyes and shook her head. "I can't. When I look, you're wearing scrubs. And I keep hearing her voice. I can't...I can't get her out of my head."

"Listen to *my* voice."

"I *can't*."

"You can."

There were so many people and voices around them. That, combined with the flood of adrenaline...none of it was helping.

She was on drugs. He'd clocked the signs outside the community center. How the fuck that had happened, he had no idea. That was a later problem. Right now, he needed to keep her safe from herself.

"There are too many people," she whispered. "The lights are flickering and—"

He cupped the back of her head and guided her forehead beneath his chin, blocking the lights and the people.

Immediately, her breathing hitched.

“Breathe with me for a second,” he urged gently.

She fisted his shirt, her back moving up and down in stuttering breaths.

Zac rested his jaw on top of her head as sirens filled the air from a distance. He looked at Ryan, now standing across the street, and even in the evening light, the fury blackening his features was hard to miss.

And yeah, Zac felt that too.

Someone had done this to her. And Zac wanted, he *needed*, to know who.

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“What the hell happened out there?”
Zac paced Nora’s hospital room, taking a moment to respond to Ryan’s question. “I don’t know.” He glanced at Nora in the bed. She was pale, her eyes closed.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” Ryan growled. “You were both at school today. You were texting her during the meeting. And when she left that meeting, you said you’d go after her and keep her safe.”

Guilt dropped on his chest. He *had* said that. And he hadn’t kept her safe. She’d almost been hit by a damn truck.

“Hey.” Ethan placed a hand on Ryan’s chest. “Enough.”

Ryan ran his fingers through his hair. “I’m sorry. I’m just trying to understand.”

“Someone drugged her,” Zac said.

The room became quiet, but Zac felt the gaze of his two friends on him.

They had to have already known. But maybe hearing it out loud hit different. It sure as hell sounded wrong to his ears.

“Her eyes.” Zac looked at her. At her closed eyelids. The small graze on her forehead. “They looked the same as the last two kids on that drug. Pupils blown and like she didn’t know what was reality and what wasn’t.”

“It fits the MO of this drug being some kind of psychoactive substance that heightens emotional intensity.” Ethan looked at Ryan. “What was Ward’s last word on this shit?”

A muscle twitched in Ryan's jaw. "He's interviewed the kids and their friends. Everyone's denying knowing anything about it. Ward sent samples from the two kids off to a state forensic lab. They came back clean again. It doesn't match anything in their current regional database. No meth, no opioids, no benzos."

"It's synthetic," Zac said, almost to himself.

Ethan cursed. "And someone's distributing it in Deep River."

"But how'd it reach Nora?" Ryan's hands fisted. "There's no way in hell she would have taken it voluntarily. Thanks to our mother, she wouldn't touch anything like that."

A pulse throbbed at Zac's temple at the memory of who her last session was with. But before he could voice his thoughts, the door opened and Ward stepped in, a deputy behind him.

"Hi, boys. I heard we had some trouble this evening."

"Get out," Ryan growled.

The sheriff's eyes narrowed. "You do *not* speak to me like that."

"This is my sister's room, and she's not even awake yet."

Ward grunted. "Looks pretty awake to me."

Zac's gaze flew to the bed to see Nora blinking.

Shit. They hadn't even noticed.

He lowered to the chair beside the bed and took her hand. "Hey."

She blinked a few times. "Zac?"

"Yeah, honey. I'm here."

"I'm in the hospital."

He nodded. "Yeah. They gave you a mild sedative until the drug could wear off."

"Drug?" Ward asked. "Wait, you took that shit that's going around town?"

This time, Zac was the one to growl. "What the hell are you still doing in here?"

"I need to interview her."

"You can wait in the fucking hall!" Ryan yelled.

"It's okay." Nora pushed herself up to sit.

Zac helped her. "You should rest before you talk to anyone."

"I want to know what happened to me." There was fear in her eyes. Real, unfiltered fear. "I want to know if someone drugged me."

If? There was no *if* about it.

“How would someone do that?” Ward asked, tone filled with skepticism.

Okay, Zac was going to murder the asshole, and he was going to murder him right here, in this room. Unless Ryan got to him first.

Ethan stepped between the sheriff and Ryan and Zac, as if knowing what might happen. “We’ll figure it out.”

Nora frowned, like she didn’t know the answer either.

Zac squeezed her hand. “Your last session was with Toby. Could this have been him?”

“I don’t see how—” She paused, frown deepening. Then she gasped. “Oh my God.”

“What?” Ryan inched forward.

“I was about to take hydroxyzine, my anxiety medication, when Toby stepped into the office. I pushed the pills under my bag on the desk. Then after he left, I took them. But he was walking around my office the entire time he was in there. He could have...”

“He could have swapped them for something else,” Zac finished, having to really fucking tense his muscles to stop himself from getting up and hitting something.

Okay. He didn’t want to murder Ward. Toby needed to go first.

Nora shook her head. “No. He wouldn’t do that. He’s a severely troubled kid, but he wouldn’t do *that*.”

Ward crossed his arms. “I agree.”

Fucking hell.

Zac rose and faced the sheriff. “You agree?”

“Yeah.” Ward lifted a shoulder. “Why would he?”

“Because he’s had a shitty upbringing that makes him do shitty things. Because he’s a kid whose brain isn’t fully developed. Because he hates any form of authority. Because he wants others to hurt like he does. There’s a whole lot of reasons why he could have done it.”

“Or...” Ward lifted a shoulder. “Nora’s lying.”

Ryan lunged toward the sheriff, but Ethan pressed both palms to his chest and growled, “*Stop*.”

Zac had a different tack. He took a slow step forward, towering over the stubby man, letting the guy feel their size difference for a moment. “She’s not.”

The idiot didn’t appear scared. “How do you know?”

“I’m right here,” Nora said. “And I’m *not* lying.”

The sheriff lifted a brow like he didn’t believe it. “Fine. We’ll interview the kid.”

“He’ll just lie,” Zac scoffed. “You need to get a search warrant. Search his room. His locker. His school bag. Hell, search his phone and find out where the fuck he’s getting the stuff.”

“I need probable cause for—”

“We *have* probable cause,” Ryan growled. “He was the only one with access to switch out the drugs.”

“There’s no evidence. It’s her word against his,” Ward said calmly, then he looked at Nora. “We’ll interview him, okay? I’ll see if I can get a warrant, but don’t hold your breath. Now, tell me about what happened after you left the town meeting.”

At Nora’s sharp intake of breath, Zac sat back down beside her and touched her hand.

“There isn’t much to tell. I was hallucinating. I heard voices.” Her eyes flicked nervously to Ryan. “I just felt like people were against me and that I had to get away, so I ran.”

“And you followed?” Ward asked Zac.

“Yes. She ran in front of a truck. I pushed her out of the way.”

“Sounds like you’re lucky to be alive.” Ward’s attention went back to Nora. “Is that it?”

Nora nodded.

“Good. I’ll keep everyone updated on the kid, but like I said, don’t get your hopes up.”

The second Ward and the deputy stepped out of the room, Ryan stormed out after him, Ethan not far behind.

Zac wanted to follow too and give the asshole a piece of his mind. But more than that, he wanted to be close to Nora.

He slipped a piece of hair off her face. “How are you feeling?”

“Confused. Upset. Guilty.”

“Why guilty?”

“I could have gotten you killed with that truck.”

“That was *not* your fault. If we’re going to blame anyone, it’s the little jerk who swapped out your medicine.”

She looked down at her lap, a deep frown settling between her brows. “For a moment there tonight, I thought...”

“You thought what?”

She paused before shaking her head. “Nothing. It doesn’t matter.” She looked up, her gaze shifting between his eyes. “I don’t want to be alone tonight.”

His heart fucking kicked against his ribs. He didn’t want her out of his sight. But she had a brother. A brother she was close to, who would likely be her first choice. “I’m sure Ryan will let you—”

“No. I want to stay with you. If that’s okay.” She pulled at a thread that had come loose on the bedspread, like she was nervous he’d actually say no.

“Of course you can. If you want me, you have me.”



NORA STEPPED onto dark wooden floorboards in Zac’s home. There were boots beside the door and a dark-toned living room to the right, which led to a kitchen.

The house was clean and warm and smelled like coffee and woodsmoke.

“You know, I kind of pictured you living in a log cabin in the middle of the woods.” She tried for a smile.

The corners of Zac’s mouth lifted, but only slightly. “Nah, better Wi-Fi here.” He locked the door after her. “What do you need? Food? A shower? Or bed?”

“Shower. Definitely shower.”

It was two a.m. and she stunk of hospital. She hated the smell of hospitals. That too-clean, sterile, disinfectant scent.

Without a word, he took her hand and led her to a room at the end of the hall. A bed centered the space, with dark wooden bedside tables on either side. There were also two doors. She could see a bathroom through one, and the other was likely to a walk-in closet.

Zac’s bedroom.

He led her into the attached bathroom. “There are towels in the cabinet.”

“Do you have anything I can borrow before Ryan drops off clothes?”

He left the bathroom and grabbed a shirt from his dresser. When he returned, he set it on the counter before closing the small space between them and touching her hips. "Will you be okay?"

No. What happened tonight had scared her on levels that she couldn't even verbalize right now. It had fed into every fear she'd lived with since she was a child. "I will be."

His jaw tightened, the muscles in his arms flexing. Then he lowered and touched his lips to her forehead. The kiss was so gentle, she closed her eyes, letting herself sink into the feeling.

It was over far too quickly.

"Shout out if you need anything." He left the bathroom, closing the door with a quiet thud.

She glanced at herself in the mirror, hating how pale her cheeks were. She hated that paramedics had needed to sedate her. That Zac had seen her like that.

Her phone vibrated from her back pocket. She pulled it out to see a text from her brother.

Ryan: Leaving your apartment now with a bag of your things. How are you doing?

Nora: I'm about to take a shower.

Ryan: Not what I asked.

Nora: I'll be better after some rest.

Ryan: I hope you get some sleep tonight, Nora. Call if you need anything. I'll leave the bag by the front door for Zac so I don't wake you.

She was so lucky to have him. And Zac and everyone else looking out for her.

She set down her phone and jumped into the shower. It was the quickest wash of her life because she found her mind was far too active when she was by herself.

Every time she closed her eyes, she heard her mother whispering her name. She saw Ryan and Zac in scrubs. She felt the suffocating fear that her mind was broken and everyone she loved was trying to have her committed.

Was that how her mother had felt when she wasn't medicated? How could *that* have been better than the drugs that kept her mind healthy?

She'd never understand.

Once dry, she pulled on her panties and Zac's shirt. And it was exactly what she needed. Baggy and warm and infused with Zac's scent.

She stepped out of the bathroom, only to stop in her tracks. “Zac...”

He looked up from where he lay on the bed, remote in hand. There was a TV on the opposite wall. *The Great British Bake Off* was paused at the beginning of an episode. There was a bowl of Skittles in the center of the bed, and a mug of hot cocoa on each of the side tables.

“Or say the word and we bake,” he said gently.

He knew all her emergency activities. Not just knew them, had arranged them with the kind of care that made her chest ache.

For some reason though, she hesitated. Why? Because he was friends with Ryan?

No, the deeper her feelings grew for the man, the flimsier that excuse got.

It was something else. Something she wasn’t quite ready to acknowledge yet.

She moved one foot forward. Then another. The hesitation lasted right until she climbed into the bed, moved the bowl of Skittles, and curled against Zac’s side.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“This show’s actually growing on me.”

“No.” She looked up. “Thank you for earlier. You noticed something was wrong. You followed me and risked your life to push me out of the way of that truck.”

At the mention of the truck, his expression tightened. But it cleared just as quickly. “I’m going to make sure Toby faces the consequences of his actions.”

She nodded, not entirely sure she believed him. Because how would they ever prove what she knew in her heart he’d done?

She nuzzled into his chest. “So...are we sharing this bed?”

“Do you *want* to share this bed?”

“I don’t want to be alone.”

“Then we’re sharing.” He turned on the episode and, for the first time that night, she allowed herself to relax.

The soft patter of rain pulled Nora from sleep. Slowly, she opened her eyes and looked at Zac asleep beside her. His eyes were closed, his chest moving up and down in even succession.

She scanned the dark room. The TV was off and not a thread of light slipped through the curtains.

Still nighttime.

She closed her eyes.

“Nora.”

Her eyes shot back open and she sat up.

No. Not again.

She shook her head and lay back down, scrunching her eyes tight.

“Nora. Wake up.”

Her eyes flashed open, and she pushed up slowly this time, scanning the empty room. There was no third person. The whisper wasn’t real.

You’re okay. You’re not losing your mind. You’re safe.

“Nora.”

Her gaze shot to the walk-in closet, where the voice was coming from.

Her chest started to heave, a tremble forming in her fingers. Carefully, she pushed off the sheet and blanket and climbed out of bed. Zac didn’t stir. And she didn’t even consider waking him. Not for a voice that couldn’t be real. Not to confirm that no one else was in this room.

Her bare feet touched the soft rug beneath the bed. Slowly, she crept across the room toward the closet. Her fingers wrapped around the cold knob, but she didn't open it. Not right away.

Fear made her hesitate. She hated the fear. She wanted to be strong and brave and sure.

It's not her, Nora.

She turned the handle and looked inside.

Clothes. Some boxes. Shoes on the floor.

But not her mother.

She closed her eyes and let the frantic beats of her heart slow.

"Nora. Look at me."

Her eyes flicked open and she looked to her right. To her reflection in a mirror. Only it wasn't *her* she was looking at...it was her mother.

She *was* her mother.



NORA SHOT up to a sitting position, lungs tight, breathing ragged.

The sheets rustled beside her.

"Nora?"

She flinched at the hand on her shoulder, and her gaze whipped around to Zac. At first, he was a blur of shadows and lines. She blinked twice, forcing herself to focus. On him. On what was real. "Zac."

His frown was so deep it looked carved into place. "What happened?"

"I was...she..." Her chest moved too quickly, not enough air getting into her lungs.

She couldn't breathe.

Panic started to squeeze her throat, a wild need for air blurring her vision again.

Suddenly, Zac set two large palms on her cheeks and lowered his forehead to hers. "I've got you, Nora. Breathe."

She closed her eyes, letting the warmth of his palms, the heat of his breaths as they brushed over her mouth, pull her away from the nightmare.

"Sometimes, I know it's a nightmare," she stuttered. "I'm not sure how. It's just a feeling. Like I'm watching something unfold instead of being in my body. But just now, it felt so real."

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

Her mother’s face in the mirror flashed in her mind. That suffocating terror of thinking *she* was her mother.

She shook her head, unable to make words work for a moment.

“Okay.”

That was it? He wasn’t going to push?

She frowned, staring into his dark eyes. Eyes that almost looked black in the moonlight.

Instead of trying to pull information out of her, he remained still, seeming perfectly content to sit in the silence with her. “I’m sorry I woke you.”

“I’m not. If you need me, I want to be here.” A small, crooked smile took over his mouth. “Saves you from having to get out of bed and bake.”

“You don’t like my baking?”

“The ice cream was good.”

She laughed softly. “That wasn’t baking. That was mixing fruit with premade, store-bought vanilla ice cream. And you did all the work.”

“It was delicious.”

Her gaze caught on the small bullet scar on his chest. The smile slipped, and gently, she slid her finger over the old wound. Then her fingertips ran over his bare chest. A chest that was otherwise thick and sculptured and perfect. So incredibly strong. “Can I ask you something completely inappropriate?”

“I love inappropriate questions.”

That small smile returned. “If I kissed you right now, what would you do?”

There was no change in him. Or maybe there was, she just couldn’t see it in the near darkness. “Depends. Are you kissing me to forget the dream? Or because you *want* to kiss me?”

“Maybe a bit of the first. But mostly because I want to.”

“I’d kiss you back. I’ll always kiss you back, Nora.”

Her belly quivered, and she traced the outline of his lips with her gaze.

Slowly, her hand curved around his neck. He was so still that she wasn’t even sure he was breathing. Then she pulled his head down and kissed him.

Soft lips melted against hers, a softness she remembered well. And a gentleness that seemed so at odds with the strength of him.

She slipped her fingers into his hair, and when he nibbled on her bottom lip, she opened. His tongue swept inside her mouth, tasting her. Letting her taste him. Peppermint and warmth and something so uniquely Zac.

She swung a leg over him and settled on his lap. Then she was cupping the back of his head and kissing him so thoroughly he consumed her senses. Touch. Smell. Taste. He owned every one of them.

His hands slipped beneath her shirt. Or his shirt really. Before sliding up her back.

Even that felt like heaven. She wanted more of that, and him, and them.

She reached for the bottom of the shirt and pulled it over her head.

His eyes turned onyx as they ran over her breasts. Down to the thin material of her panties. His fingers tightened on her waist.

“You’re so beautiful, Nora.” His voice was rough around the edges.

“When you look at me, I feel beautiful.” She kissed him again, deeper this time, sinking a bit closer, running her hands over his broad shoulders.

His cock hardened against her core, and in response, she rocked forward and back, swallowing his deep growl.

One of his hands splayed over her lower back, drawing her closer still, while the other slipped over her belly, then up to her rib cage.

And all of it, his hands on her, his tongue against *her* tongue, their cores connected, made her forget. The nightmare. The drugs. Everything outside of Zac.

When he cupped her breast, she gasped, her head flying back, her fingers gripping his shoulders so tightly, her nails bit into his skin.

His mouth didn’t leave her though, just slipped down her neck, running soft kisses over her skin as the callused pad of his thumb found the peak of her nipple, and the rough drag of his stubble, her collarbone.

And oh God, it was sensory overload. All of it.

His mouth lowered, lips running over her chest before he paused at her breast.

For a second, he just froze, his warm breath brushing her nipple, making her shudder. Then he took her bud between his lips.

She gasped. A loud, cry-like gasp that cracked through the quiet night.

His tongue moved in a slow circle, and when she whispered his name, she felt him smile.

He liked what he was doing to her. The gentle torment. The heat he no doubt knew was pooling between her thighs.

He switched to her other breast, and if possible, he moved even slower this time. Like he was memorizing the feel of her nipple inside his mouth. Learning what she liked.

All of it, she wanted to scream. She liked all of it.

She grabbed his hair, not gently or carefully, and pulled him up. Then her tongue was inside his mouth again. And she was devouring him.

His hands slipped down to the waistband of her panties. At first, he just teased, almost playing with the thin band of material. Then he inched it down a little at a time. She lifted to her knees to help, pulling one leg out, then the other.

When she was completely free, his hands moved to her thighs. Thighs that hugged his waist. Thighs that gripped him so tightly, trying to hold him in place.

His finger ran over her clit.

She jolted, then her body automatically rolled toward his hand.

“Yes.” The word came out a bit strangled.

His other hand wrapped around her waist, holding her against him.

He circled her slowly, deliberately, the hard length of him pushing up beneath her.

“Please.” She wasn’t even sure what she was saying *please* for. More strokes? More pressure?

He slipped a finger inside, and she gasped, gripping his wrist, not to stop him, but to hold herself together.

He thrust in and out, his thumb rubbing over her clit. She exhaled long and loudly, losing herself in the feeling of his onslaught. Then he added a second finger, curling them, moving them in and out and back and forward.

Too much. It was too much.

She reached for him, slipped her hand inside his briefs and pulled him out.

The fingers around her hip tightened, his breath stuttering.

She stroked him as she found his mouth, tasting him once again.

When she ran her thumb over his tip, he growled, low and deep. She did it again before moving up and down, speeding up her pace, then slowing down.

“Nora.” There was a warning in his voice. He pulled out of her and gripped both of her hips, some of his careful control visibly slipping.

She lifted her hips and settled him at her entrance. Her pulse started to race, and she'd just started to slip down when his fingers tightened, halting her.

"I'm not wearing anything."

Shit. She hadn't even considered protection. It hadn't been a fleeting thought. *That* was how out of her mind she was.

Without moving her, he leaned over and opened his bedside table. He tore a rubber package open with his teeth and slipped it over his cock in two quick moves.

She grinned as she repositioned herself. "Now?"

"Now," he whispered.

Slowly, she sank down, her walls stretching, only stopping when he filled her completely.



EVERY PERFECTLY PUT-TOGETHER part of him unraveled at the seams at the feel of Nora around him. Her soft walls clenching his cock.

He made a sound. Something between a growl and a groan.

She didn't move right away. Instead, her fingers tightened on his neck, her forehead touching his as they both just breathed together.

"Zac."

Fuck, he loved the way she said his name. Like she owned it. Like she owned *him*. Which she did. He gripped her hips so tightly that he had to force himself to ease his hold so he didn't bruise her.

She made a sexy fucking moan before kissing him. Her tongue slid straight into his mouth, her hands cupping his cheeks.

Then she moved, lifting so that just his tip was inside, before sinking back down onto him.

Oh *fuck*, she was going to kill him. It was going to be a slow, torturous death.

She did it again, moving in a rhythmic rise and fall, her lips never leaving his, her hands tilting his head back so that she could have all of him.

He wrapped an arm around her, tugging her flush against him, her breasts crushed against his chest.

She gasped, but she didn't slow.

When her head finally fell back, he latched onto her flesh, sucking her throat just beneath her jaw. Tasting her salty skin.

He started to lift his hips, meeting her thrust for thrust. Then he switched to her breast, taking her hard nipple between his lips and sucking.

She cried out, the sound breathless, her movements faster, becoming wild and uneven.

He released her nipple and in one swift move, swung them around, rolling her beneath him on the mattress.

The stutter of air leaving her lungs was loud.

He barely paused before starting a new rhythm, lifting and falling. Thrusting deep and fast.

Her nails dragged across his shoulders, down his triceps.

Zac dropped to his forearms, bringing himself closer, then lifted her thigh, hitting a new spot inside her.

Her cries grew louder, her eyes squeezing closed.

He continued to drive deep as he lowered his head to her neck, feeling the hard thumps of her pulse against his lips.

She felt so fucking good around him. And he was close. Too damn close.

He sped up, shifting all his weight to one forearm and bringing his other hand between them. He found her clit and pressed down with his thumb.

She jolted.

He kept thrusting, keeping the pressure on his thumb as he moved it up and down, stroking her clit. He felt the tension start to coil her body. The way her thighs locked a little tighter around him. The short gasps of her breathing, like she couldn't get enough air.

He ran his thumb in a circle, thrusting faster.

Suddenly, her back arched, her head flew back, and she screamed. Not his name. Not anything he could understand at all. Broken sounds as her walls pulsed around his cock.

He kept thrusting, his thumb still moving, until he couldn't stop himself.

He buried his face in her neck, sinking into her again and again as he came.

Fuck, he lost himself in her.

When he finally stilled, he held her tight against him as he rode the waves down from his high. Long seconds passed where neither of them spoke or shifted or tried to get up. Maybe neither of them *could*.

When he eventually lifted to look at her, her eyes were still closed.

He slipped a piece of hair from her cheek. "Hey."

Slowly, her eyes opened.

"Are you okay?"

A slow smile curved her lips. "I don't think 'okay' quite describes how I feel."

He chuckled before kissing her. A slower, sweet graze of lips against lips, before pulling out of her and dropping to the side. Immediately, she rolled over and nuzzled against him.

Eventually, he'd have to get up and clean himself, but not just yet. First, he wanted to hold her. To feel her fall asleep in his arms.

He stroked her back. Everything about what they'd just done felt good and right...and so long overdue. He just hoped that when morning came, and the adrenaline wore off, that Nora felt the same.

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Zac shot awake at the first flicker of movement. Hell, it wasn't even movement. It was the mere tensing of Nora's muscles against his.

She was awake.

He was about to ask how long she'd been up, when she lifted her foot so that it no longer sat between his calves. She did it slowly. Like she was trying not to wake him.

Was she sneaking out?

Next, she lifted her hand from his stomach. Another really slow lift, only to freeze. She was waiting to see if her movements woke him.

Obviously, she was satisfied that she hadn't, because her head was next. She moved it from his chest and turned away from the bed.

"Running from me, Nora?"

She jumped, gaze whipping toward him. Not the half-hooded gaze of someone who'd just woken. She'd been awake for a while. "I...I thought you were asleep."

"Hence the great escape?"

She rolled her eyes, fingers tightening on the sheet that covered her chest. "I wasn't trying to pull a great escape. I was trying to be quiet and... thoughtful. So I didn't wake you."

"Huh." He shoved a hand beneath his head. "They kind of sound like the same thing."

"No. Different. Very different. But..." She reached for her phone and tapped the screen. "I do need to get ready for work."

His eyes narrowed, and he sat up slowly. "You're not working today."

"Of course I am. Kids have appointments with me."

"And you think you're fit to see them?"

She flinched.

Shit. "I didn't mean it like that."

"I'm able to separate myself from what happened last night and help them. Yes." She turned and moved to stand.

He grabbed her arm. "Nora, wait. I'm sorry. But I think you should have a few days off. At least today. You've barely gotten any sleep. Let yourself recover a bit. At least wait for Ward to arrest the kid."

"*If* he arrests him."

This time, Zac tensed. "He swapped out your drugs."

"It's going to be his word against mine."

Zac knew that. He fucking knew. And he hated it. "I don't want you around him. I don't want you anywhere *near* him."

"I have to work."

"If it's money—"

"It's my job. It's the fact that these kids need me."

He grazed her arm with his thumb. "I worry about you."

"You don't need to. I don't have any appointments with Toby, and I'm very good at holing up in my office. I'll be fine."

Yeah, but the little shit had friends, and Zac didn't trust Toby not to set them on her. "I'm going to talk to Ward today. I'm going to do everything I can to get to the bottom of this drug problem."

"Blue Cherry. That's what they're calling it."

"I know. A kid mentioned it to me."

"It's bad timing, considering the senior dance."

"There's a dance?" No. *Fuck no.* "They obviously need to cancel it. Kids take drugs and alcohol into those things all the time. It's too dangerous."

"I agree. But the leadership at the school leaves a lot to be desired."

He studied her. "Wanna talk about last night?"

Her eyes flared, and he felt her pulling away. Not physically. But in every other sense. "I would. I absolutely would. But time...you know. I need to get ready for work, and you probably need to meet your team."

Disappointment hit him hard. Had last night changed *anything* for her? For *them*? If it had, would she be acting so distant? Would she still use her

brother as an excuse? “Can we talk tonight?”

“Sure.” The answer came too fast. “We can talk tonight.”

He didn’t believe her.

He was about to release her, but at the last second changed his mind, and instead of letting her go, he tugged her down to the bed. She gasped as her back hit the mattress, but he cut off the sound with his mouth.

At first, she was rigid beneath him. He ran his tongue over the seam of her lips and his hand down her side, pausing on her waist and tightening his fingers.

Finally, she relaxed. Parted her lips and let his tongue in. Curved a leg around his waist and welcomed him.

And fuck, but his cock turned straight to stone.

He ran his tongue over hers, tilting her head and loving her deep moan.

When he lifted his head, she was a different woman than the one he’d been speaking with moments ago. There was no guard up. No barrier between them. It was just him and her.

“I need you to stay safe at work,” he pushed gently. “Okay? They may just be kids, but kids can be dangerous.”

She swallowed and nodded. “I will.”

“Good.” He kissed her once more, tempted to take this further. Wanting to sink into her.

Instead, he rolled to the side and let her go.

She wanted him as much as he wanted her. He could see it. Feel it. But she was fighting. He just needed to work out why.



NORA STEPPED INTO HER OFFICE. The second the door closed behind her, she set her forehead against the wood and just breathed. It wasn’t even nine and she was already exhausted. No, she didn’t get much sleep last night. But this felt like more of an emotional exhaustion. From this internal war that raged over Zac. Over wanting him so badly but also needing to push him away without really understanding why.

She’d never felt this before. Guys had always been easy. Easy to enter into a relationship with. Easy to walk away from when the relationship had run its course.

But Zac felt different. The stakes felt higher. And that scared her. Her body had gone into fight-or-flight mode the second she'd woken and remembered what they'd done last night.

She turned and glanced around her office. And that brought her to the second reason why today already sucked...she was at work.

Zac was right. He was so damn right. She shouldn't be here. But there were some vulnerable kids at this school, and she wanted to be there for them. She wanted to do her job.

She'd just dropped her bag onto the desk when a knock sounded.

Her first appointment wasn't for another fifteen minutes. Could it be Adam? Or one of the other teachers?

She opened it and frowned. "What are you doing here?"

"What am *I* doing here?" Ryan stormed into the room. "Nora, what are *you* doing here? A kid drugged you yesterday. You were at the hospital until the early hours of the morning. How much sleep did you even get?"

Very, very little.

"Technically, he just switched out my drugs. *I* took them." And she was still kicking herself for that. She should have trashed them. She should have gotten new pills from the bottle.

She pushed the door closed.

"I was hoping when I rocked up at Zac's house and he said you were at work, he'd gotten it wrong," Ryan growled.

"Well, he didn't." She wrapped her arms around her waist. "I'm where I'm needed."

"But are you okay?"

The previous night slipped into her mind. Her mother's voice. The hospital scrubs.

She blinked. "I can do my job."

"That's not what I asked." He stepped closer. "Are *you* okay?"

She opened her mouth to insist that everything was fine and last night hadn't affected her. But that would be a lie, and she tried not to do that with her brother. "I kept hearing Mom's voice."

Ryan flinched. "What?"

"Last night, after I took the drugs. She kept saying my name. And I was so scared that..."

"That what?"

“That I was going crazy. That I was getting sick like her. Mom didn’t start showing signs of schizophrenia until her twenties, and...I don’t know. I thought for a second—”

“No.”

“Ryan—”

“You are *nothing* like her. You hear me?”

Unexpected tears filled her eyes. “I look like her. And what if one day, I start sitting in a chair by the window with a hot drink, watching my neighbors for hours and hours, suspecting them of watching *me*? What if I start believing everyone’s against me?”

“First, you don’t look like her. Having the same hair color does not make you look like someone. She’s never had your glow or strength.”

“Glow?” She smiled slightly.

“Yeah, I said glow. Second, you’ll never sit by a fucking window suspecting your neighbors of watching you, because you’re not sick.”

“Not right now.”

“Not ever. You hear me?”

“I—”

The door to her office suddenly opened. She frowned. “Toby?”

The teenager stopped, half inside the room.

Ryan spun. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Ryan—” She started, but her brother was already storming toward the kid. She raced around him, putting a hand to his chest, just before he reached Toby. “*Stop.*”

“You shouldn’t be at school,” Ryan growled to the teenager. “You should be in jail.”

Toby frowned, but it was the most condescending frown she’d ever seen. “Jail? I’m just a kid.”

“A kid my ass,” Ryan spat. “You’re almost eighteen.”

Toby’s brows shot up. “Been looking into me? That’s funny. It was also funny getting a visit from Sheriff Ward this morning. Hope you weren’t expecting much from that guy. He asked a few questions. I denied any wrongdoing. He left.”

Ryan’s muscle twitched beneath her fingers. And yeah, she felt angry too. Really angry. But showing any of it to this kid wouldn’t help. “You need to leave my office, Toby.”

“Nah, I want to see this guy kick me out.”

“Toby?” Adam’s voice sounded from the hall, then he appeared next to Toby. The gym teacher glanced from the boy to her to Ryan. “What’s going on?”

“He shouldn’t be at school,” Ryan barked.

A cocky smile curved the boy’s mouth.

“I heard about what happened.” Adam scratched his head before looking at her. “I hope you’re okay. But Toby hasn’t been charged with anything, so he has every right to be at school.” Adam looked at the boy. “However, he should know better than to be in this office. Go back to class. *Now.*”

It was the firmest Nora had ever heard Adam speak to a student. Not that Toby looked affected. The boy smirked at them one last time, attention lingering on Nora, before turning and walking away.

Ryan scowled at Adam. “He shouldn’t be in this building.”

“I’m not saying I disagree with you. But without evidence—”

“Evidence? The pills were on her desk during *his* session. He *stood* at that desk, and they were switched out.”

“Allegedly.”

This time, Ryan took a step toward the gym teacher.

“Ryan, stop it,” Nora said. “He’s right. It sucks, but there’s no evidence and the school can’t just kick him out.”

A muscle ticked in Ryan’s jaw. “Has the school found the drug source?”

“Not yet.” Adam winced. “We’re working with Ward on it.”

If a man could explode from one statement, Ryan would have.

“It’s okay.” It wasn’t, but the energy in the room was tense and she had an appointment in a few minutes. “We’ll get there.” Maybe. Hopefully. God, she hoped so.

Nora laughed at Polly's rendition of Gerome. Apparently, the sheriff's son had stormed into Bloom earlier that morning and blown up at Polly for telling customers that the only clients he could get were kids. He told her to keep his business out of her mouth, then proceeded to spill his caramel macchiato all over himself. Because yes, he had ordered a drink from her before going on this rant.

"When he tripped," Polly continued, "he was mid calling me names that I won't repeat and got cream all over his shirt. I laughed until I cried. I was such a bitch."

"You're right, that's not nice," Maggie agreed, but with a hint of a smile on her face. "*But* he's an ass, so he deserved it. I'm assuming you didn't offer to make him a new one."

"No, I did," Polly replied. "But I could barely get the words out through snort-laughter, so he, in very colorful words, told me where I could go, then stormed out."

Nora's gaze lifted to the men in the kitchen. Most of them were outside, but Zac currently drank a beer with Ethan in the other room. Like he felt her eyes on him, he looked over and winked.

She offered a half smile.

Yes, only a half smile. She liked him. She wanted him. But there was still a block there.

She and Zac had texted and joked and had coffee together over the last three days since sleeping together. But there'd been no more sex. Hell,

neither of them had even mentioned it.

She rose from the couch and moved into the kitchen just as Ethan stepped into the living room to chat with Maggie. “Hey.”

Zac’s mouth curved into a smile. “Hey, yourself. Did I see you laughing at a Gerome story?”

“Yes. But Polly openly admitted she’s a terrible person, and I’ll also admit to that for laughing at his public humiliation.”

“I like to think good things happen to good people and—”

“Bad things happen to bad people?”

“No. Bad things happen to people who don’t treat our women right.”

Their women? Was she *his* woman?

He stepped closer. “How are you doing today?”

“Good. Really good, actually.” She fiddled with the edge of the counter. “I’m sorry if I’ve been distant these last few days.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“You know, it would be okay to blow up at me. To tell me I run hot and cold too often. That I’m the most infuriating, frustrating woman you’ve ever met.”

“You definitely drive me insane.” His hand went to her side, fingers wrapping around her hip. “But I’m up to it.”

Holy Jesus, but she could feel his breath on her lips. “When you get this close, all I can think about is kissing you.” And there she went again... going hot all of a sudden.

It was his proximity. It had to be his proximity.

There was a small lift of his lips. “It’s generally hard for me to think of anything else when you’re around.” His gaze dipped to her mouth.

Her lips parted. Her body started moving of its own volition, leaning forward, lifting to her toes. She was almost kissing him when the back door opened.

She shot back as Ryan stepped in, closely followed by the guys, Zac’s warmth disappearing from her hip.

Ryan stopped a few steps inside and lifted a brow. “Am I interrupting something?”

“Nope.” She shook her head and opened a cabinet to grab a glass.

“Food’s ready,” Joel called. “Grab some before I take it all.”

Everyone laughed and got up and filled their plates. Nora found a spot at the table beside Ryan. A second later, Zac lowered to her other side.

Over the next hour, they ate and joked and laughed. She completely forgot about the drugs and this block she had with Zac. And she was reminded of how much she loved it here in Deep River. Being with her brother and his friends, people who'd already become *her* friends. Both the people and the place felt like home so quickly.

Everyone was finishing when she pushed her chair back. "I'll go get the ice cream I made from my apartment."

Ryan paused mid-stand, plate in his hand. "You made ice cream?"

"I flavored it."

"You what?"

"You'll see."

Zac stood. "I'll come with you."

"No. I'll be fine." Plus, him and her inside her little apartment? Absolutely not. After three days of abstinence, she'd obviously go crazy and jump the guy. "I'll be right back."

She stepped out of the house and rounded the garage. At the top of the stairs, she unlocked her apartment door and stepped inside, only to freeze.

A chair sat at the window. A chair she absolutely hadn't left there.

Nora stepped into the dark living room to see her mother on a wooden chair by the window, watching the street.

She blinked, forcing the memory back.

Why was it there? Who *put* it there?

Her gaze shifted to the table. To her small bottle of hydroxyzine. The lid was off and a couple of pills were scattered around the container.

Her heart started to race, a chill sweeping over her skin.

Who did this?

Could it have been you?

The whispered question in her head had her flinching.

But other than Polly, she was the only one with a key. And her door had been locked.

The sudden need to get away had her turning and racing down the steps. She'd just rounded the garage when she almost ran right into Zac.

He gripped her arms. "Whoa. Are you okay?"

"I...there was..." Her lungs seized, fear stealing her voice.

Joel, who stood behind Zac, looked around her, like he was about to go up and check her apartment.

The apartment with the chair by the window. The chair she didn't recall placing there.

"Hey." Zac scanned her eyes. "Breathe. Tell me what happened."

She opened her mouth to tell him about the chair. The pills. But instead of any of those words coming out, she shook her head. "Nothing. I...I thought I saw another spider. I'm okay."

He frowned like he didn't believe her. And yeah, it was a lie. A big one. But the truth didn't make sense. The truth made her sound crazy. It made her *feel* crazy.



"IT WASN'T JUST ME, RIGHT?" Zac looked at Joel from behind the wheel. "She wasn't good."

"She wasn't good."

Exactly. She'd been too pale. Her eyes too wide. "I know this thing between us is new. But there's something going on with her that I wish she'd trust me with."

"Have you talked to Ryan?"

"No. I don't want to go behind her back and ask her brother. I want *her* to want to tell me. We have a connection that's so fucking strong. But then the morning after we slept together—"

"Hold the fuck up! You slept with your best friend's sister?"

His fingers tightened around the wheel. "Yeah."

"You sly dog! Didn't think you had it in you."

He punched Joel's shoulder.

"Ouch." Joel grabbed his shoulder. "What was that for?"

"Like I don't already feel like shit for not telling Ryan."

"Ryan loves Nora. And he loves *you*. You have nothing to worry about."

Nora had something to worry about though. What? What put that fear on her face just now? "I was waiting for her to tell me where this thing between us is going."

He knew where he *wanted* it to go.

They parked in front of Bloom. Polly had forgotten the box of pastries she'd set aside for after dinner, and though she had said to leave them, Joel refused to skip dessert.

They were about to climb out when Zac's phone rang, Tate's name on the screen.

"Look who it is." Zac hit answer and put the call on speaker. "Hey, Tate. You're on speaker. Joel's here too."

"Warning me so I don't talk shit about him?" Tate asked, humor in his voice.

Joel scoffed. "Please. There's no shit you could bring up. I'm perfect."

"How's your mom?" Zac asked.

"That's why I'm calling...she, uh, she passed last night."

Joel cursed, while Zac blew out a long breath before saying, "Jesus. I'm sorry, man."

"She's not in pain anymore. And I got to say goodbye. For such a shitty situation, I was glad I got those things, at least."

"How are you doing?" Zac asked.

"As well as expected."

"When's the funeral?" Joel asked.

"Hopefully next week."

Joel nodded. "Good. I'm coming."

"You don't have to—"

"I'm coming," Joel said, cutting him off.

A loud exhale sounded from over the line. "It will be good to see you."

"I'm sure some of the other guys will go too." Zac cringed. "I would, but there's some stuff going on at the local school that I need to be here for."

"The school?" Tate asked.

"It's a long story."

"Looking forward to hearing about it." Air whistled over the line. "I've got to go, just wanted to call to let you know. I'll keep you all updated with details when I have them."

"Thanks. And Tate..." Zac paused. "You're in our thoughts, man. Call if you need anything."

"You know I will."

"Shit." Joel ran his fingers through his hair as Zac hung up. "That's really fucking crappy for him."

"Yeah. He'll be glad to have your company next week."

"I'm sure he—" Joel stopped, gaze on Bloom. "What the fuck's Gerome doing in there?"

Zac's eyes narrowed on the jerk as he stood by the counter. "You think he's causing trouble?"

"Don't know. But according to Polly, he wasn't happy with the whole drink spill mess this morning. I doubt he'd go in a second time on the same day just for shits and giggles."

They climbed out and stepped into the café.

"I said it was bad, so it was fucking bad. Got it?" Gerome's voice was raised, his friend Pen standing beside him with crossed arms.

"I offered you a new one *and* a refund," the girl behind the register replied as she shuffled her feet. "You said no to both. What do you want?"

"I *want* you to make a good fucking coffee the first time."

"*Hey.*" Joel's voice was hard and loud as he stepped behind Gerome. "There a problem here?"

Gerome turned, a cocky smirk on his face that Zac wanted to wipe clean off. "Wow. It's the town heroes. Think you forgot your capes. But guess what? No one needs saving right now, so back the fuck off."

"Actually, we'll decide if we need to back the fuck off." Zac looked at the girl behind the counter. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "He said no to everything. I don't know what he wants."

To cause trouble, that's what.

Zac looked back at Gerome. "If you don't want a new coffee or a refund, they can't help you. Leave."

Gerome lifted a brow. Then his elbow shot back, hitting the coffee that sat on the counter.

It flew back, splashing the girl, coffee spilling over her and the floor.

Zac moved before Joel could, his left hand shooting forward and grabbing Gerome by the back of the neck.

"*Hey!*" Pen tried to jump in to help his friend, but Joel grabbed him and, together, he and Zac towed the two guys outside.

"Get the fuck off me!" Gerome growled, trying to twist out of the hold.

Zac didn't loosen his grip until he stepped outside. Then he shoved the guy.

Gerome stumbled on the sidewalk, falling onto his ass. He was only down for a second before he pushed to his feet and charged at Zac.

Zac dodged him with a quick right step, then grabbed Gerome from behind and shoved him against the wall of the café. "You listen really

carefully, Gerome. You don't pull shit like that in this town again. You hear me?"

"Let me go. Now. Or I'll—"

"Call your daddy?" Joel asked, no longer holding Pen. No, Gerome's friend stood to the side, obviously not wanting any part of Gerome's stupidity.

"You do that, and I bet that server would love to file a report about what you did," Zac said, twisting his arm a little higher. "And we'll be witnesses to how intentional it was."

"Your dad does something about one incident, he'll have to do something about the other," Joel finished.

"So the next time you storm into Bloom, trying to show everyone how big your dick is because you're embarrassed...don't." Zac let go of him.

Gerome stumbled again before quickly turning to face them. He rubbed his wrist. "You should've walked away. You just made a very big mistake."

Then the two men stormed off, reminding Zac of the kids at the high school. Same maturity level, at least.

Nora held the black dress up against her body.
Nice. Formal. Maybe a bit too...office-y for a school dance?
She held up the red dress.

Florals. Flowy. A bit more casual.

Red. Definitely red.

She dropped the black dress to the bed and stepped into the red dress.

The zipper was halfway up when a shuffling noise sounded from outside. She froze.

Usually, that wouldn't unsettle her. But strange things had been happening over the last week. Items in her office moved around. A feeling like someone was watching her. And yesterday, she'd been called in to see the principal because three separate students had reported that she was repeating herself in sessions and not making sense.

The principal wouldn't tell her who though, citing confidentiality. But together, all those events were really messing with her.

She shook her head and pulled the zipper up that last bit. She looked back at her reflection to see dark circles shadowing her eyes.

Not a surprise. Everything happening lately was stealing her sleep.

Had she been repeating herself? She couldn't recall doing so, but how could three students be wrong?

A knock at the door made her jump.

It was probably Polly. She was leaving with Joel and the guys to go to Wallace, Idaho, and support Tate for his mother's funeral. The entire team

was going. All except Zac.

She and Zac hadn't seen much of each other over the last week. Every day, something new freaked her out, so she'd pulled away from him more and more.

Was it healthy? No. Did she want to tell him she felt like she was losing her mind? Also no.

She'd just wrapped her fingers around the knob when her brother shouted, "Nora, it's me."

She tugged it open. "Ryan? What are you doing here? You're supposed to be leaving for the airport."

"I know. I need to talk to you first." He slipped past her.

She closed the door and turned. "What's wrong?"

"How do you know something's wrong?"

"Because you have that I'm-going-to-kill-someone look on your face." She crossed her arms. "Spill."

On cue, his jaw clenched and he looked at the bed, then the table, then the bed again. "Can we sit?"

"That bad?" Okay, now she was nervous. She crossed the room and perched on the edge of the bed, mattress dipping beneath her.

He sat beside her and studied her dress. "Are you going out?"

"It's the school dance."

He cursed. "I forgot. This can wait until I get back."

He braced to stand, but she grabbed his arm and pulled him back down. "Absolutely not. I'm not waiting an entire week for you to come home and tell me. I'll lose my mind. You need to tell me now."

His frown deepened, and he glanced over her shoulder like he was searching for the words.

"Jesus, Ryan. You're scaring me." She touched his hand. "What? I can handle it."

He looked at her, his eyes so familiar...and right now, so haunted. "You know how you asked me to find Mom?"

The beats of her heart sped up, the fine hairs on her arms standing on end. "You found her?"

"Yeah."

Oh no. "Is she close? No, she's still sick and off the rails, isn't she? I knew it. I don't know why I expected—"

"Nora." Ryan paused. "She's dead."

Air caught in her lungs and for a second, she couldn't speak. "What?"

"She overdosed two years ago. Ethan found her death certificate. She was buried in Tacoma, Washington."

Nora shook her head. "No. We would have been notified, we—"

"She had no current address. No emergency contacts. No job. No insurance. Half the records had her name spelled wrong."

Something deep in her chest suddenly ached. She pressed a hand there, trying to soothe it. "I feel...sad. Why? She wasn't good to us. She chose to stay sick, and by making that choice, she was choosing to be a terrible mother. Why does this hurt?"

"Because you were hoping that one day she'd get it together and be what we needed." He squeezed her hand. "I was hoping for the same thing."

She nodded. He was right. This thing inside her was loss. Deep, painful loss of a mother she hadn't known she was still hoping for. Loss of the version of her mother she'd been yearning to see one more time. The good version.

"I feel like I should be crying. People usually cry when they find out a parent's dead."

"There are no rules, Nora. Come here." He pulled her against his chest, and she just sat in the familiar circle of her brother's arms. Arms that had been her protection since the day she was born. Arms that were the only healthy love she'd known as a child. "Fuck it, I'm not going."

She pulled back. "To Tate's mother's funeral?"

"Ethan, Joel, and Connor will be there."

"No."

"Yes."

"Ryan, one of your best friends just lost his mother and you told him you're coming. You need to go. I'll be fine. Besides, Zac will be here."

"Have you even seen him this last week?"

"Bits and pieces." And she'd missed him. Probably more than she was willing to admit to herself.

"I should have waited until I was back to tell you."

"No." She shook her head. "I deserved to know, and you deserved to not be the only one carrying this information. How do *you* feel?"

"Shocked. Angry. A bit guilty."

"Why guilty?"

"Because I gave up on her."

“No, Ryan. Oh my God, definitely no. We tried to help her. As kids, we asked her, *begged* her to take her meds and get help. Even as adults. We paid for her medication. We booked her into centers. You can’t help someone who doesn’t want to help themselves.”

“Yeah.” He studied her. “Are you going to be okay?”

“I’ll be fine. The school dance will be a good distraction.”

“And you’re still feeling all right after that drug shit?”

“Better every day.”

He watched her another moment, like he was trying to figure out whether to believe her, before finally nodding.

Even after he hugged her again and left, she didn’t know how to feel.

Her mother had died alone. She’d died alone and no one even knew she had a next of kin.

Dead.

The word settled like ice over her skin.



MUSIC PUMPED through the school gymnasium, competing with the sounds of the teenagers. The voices, the laughter, the clicking of heels against wooden flooring.

Zac was lucky the principal let him come tonight. He’d used the excuse of being an extra adult to monitor for any transfer of drugs. And yeah, that was part of the reason he wanted to be here.

But the other part was Nora. No way in hell did he want her here, at a school dance, alone, where kids would likely be taking this Blue Cherry shit.

And where Toby would probably be.

Zac moved around the gym slowly, scanning every face.

Where was she?

“Looking for someone?” Adam stepped in front of him, wearing a blue suit with a football tie. Yeah, the tie actually had footballs on it.

“Have you seen Nora?”

“No. Don’t think she’s here yet.” Adam sipped from a red cup. “You two dating now?”

Were they dating? A week ago, he might have said yes. But she'd been doing a really good job of avoiding him. Something he'd tried not to push her for answers about. But soon, he might have to push.

"It's okay." Adam lifted a shoulder. "She and I didn't mesh well." He bumped Zac's shoulder. "I'm not as charming as you."

"Anything new on these drugs?"

Adam cringed. "We did bag searches yesterday. Found nothing."

"Did you check Toby's locker and school bag?"

"Sure did. He didn't even fight the search. Happily let us look."

Zac frowned. "Could he have known the raid was coming?"

"Don't think so. It was random. Hell, *I* didn't even know. Ward just showed up."

As if he'd heard his name, Toby moved toward them, two of his friends sticking close. "Hey, Sawyer." Toby looked at Zac. "Mr. Pierce. Wasn't expecting to see you here."

"I'm here to help."

"With what?" The kid lifted a brow as he sipped his drink.

Cocky little shit. "Keeping an eye on things."

"Don't worry. Nothing bad's gonna happen tonight. It's all good vibes here. Ain't that right, Sawyer?"

Adam cleared his throat. "Yeah, Toby, that's right."

"See?" Toby smirked before walking away, his followers trailing behind.

Adam scrubbed his jaw. "He comes off worse than he is."

Zac barely bit back the laugh. Or maybe it was a scoff. "He drugged Nora."

"Well, I mean, he said he didn't—"

"You believe him?"

"It's not my job to believe one thing or another. It's my job to teach these kids." Adam clapped him on the shoulder. "I'm going to do a lap."

Zac watched the gym teacher walk over to a group of boys. They all laughed at something he said. The guy certainly liked to befriend his students.

Zac blew out a frustrated breath, and when he turned his head, it was to see Nora standing by the drinks table, talking to an older woman with blond curls in jeans and a casual shirt. A mother?

For a second, he just watched her, because damn if she didn't freeze him to the spot. The smile on her face. The way her eyes crinkled at the edges. And that dress. It wasn't even revealing, it just fit her in a way that accentuated every curve.

God, but he'd been having withdrawals these last few days.

Nora's smile lasted right until the woman turned away, and then it dropped. It dropped so fast that Zac found his feet moving before his brain had time to catch up. It wasn't just that her smile dropped. Everything about her suddenly looked...sad.

"Hey."

Her gaze shot up at his voice. She hadn't seen him coming. "Zac! Hi. What are you doing here?"

"Extra supervision."

She nodded almost absently.

"Are you okay?"

Her brow creased. "Ryan stopped by before he left tonight. He told me something kind of big."

"What is it?"

There was a brief pause before she spoke. "My mom died."

He flinched. "*What?*"

"Yeah." Her arms wrapped around her waist. "I, um, asked Ryan to find her. He got Ethan to help. And Ethan found that she died two years ago. She OD'd."

"Shit, Nora." He pulled her straight into his chest, one hand going to the middle of her back, the other to the back of her head. Then he whispered, "I'm sorry. I'm really fucking sorry."

She wrapped her arms around him, and they just sat in the hug for a few moments. "Thank you. I haven't cried. Ryan said that's okay, but I'm not sure it is."

"Of course it's okay." He pulled back, but his hands remained on her waist. "You shouldn't have come."

"No. I need to be here. A lot can happen at school dances. Plus, it will also be a good distraction. I want to find the source of these drugs, Zac. Hopefully find it *tonight*."

He nodded, still not convinced she should be here. But thank fuck *he* was.

When her attention caught on something across the room, he followed her gaze to Toby and his friends. The boy looked at Nora, visibly scoffing before looking back to his friends.

“And I want to know *his* part in this,” she said quietly.

“You need to stay away from him, Nora. I don’t like him. And I’m not convinced he’s not dangerous.”

She didn’t respond.

“Hey.” He waited for her to look at him. “You sure you’re okay to be here?”

She lifted to her toes and kissed him on the cheek. “You don’t need to worry about me.”

“I do.” Worrying about her was as easy as breathing right now. And he didn’t like that.

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If there was one good thing to come from tonight, just one, it was that she'd spoken to Taylor's mother. The woman clearly hadn't wanted to talk to Nora. Every two seconds, she'd looked at the door. But Nora had persevered.

She'd mentioned Taylor's aunt. How excited Taylor was about the prospect of staying with her for a while. She'd mentioned how hard Taylor's breakup had been. Her mother hadn't even known she'd broken up with anyone.

She'd tried, as gently as she could, to plant a seed about Taylor staying with her aunt. Not forever, just for a while.

Of course, the second Taylor's mother had walked away, her own reality had set back in. Saying the words out loud to Zac had made it feel all the more real.

Her mother was dead. The words kept repeating in her head.

She sucked in a deep breath before looking across the gym at Toby. For the last five minutes, he'd been glancing at his phone like he was waiting for someone.

Was he planning something? Something to do with the drugs? If she watched him long enough, would he reveal some key information?

One of his friends looked at her, and she quickly glanced away, only to see Zac moving toward her.

Man, he looked good tonight. The white shirt fit snugly over his broad shoulders, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. And those black pants did

nothing to hide the power in his legs. But it was the look on his face that had her pausing. The familiar concerned frown he'd been wearing since she'd told him about her mother.

"Zac." She touched his arm as he stopped beside her. "You don't need to watch me all night."

"Your mom—"

"Died. Two years ago. I know."

"And you just found out."

"Yes. But I have a job to do right now. So I'm compartmentalizing. Besides, my mother and I were no-contact. This doesn't hit me as hard as it would for the average person." She leaned in a bit closer. "I'm fine."

His jaw clenched, like he didn't believe her. Which was understandable. If situations were reversed, she wouldn't believe it either.

She scanned the gym, the students. Everyone looked so beautiful. The girls wore everything from silk gowns with slits up the sides to more casual knee-length party dresses. And the boys were mostly in slacks and button-down shirts, making each of them look ten years older than they were.

"Everyone looks so grown up," she said quietly.

"A lot more grown up than at the dances I went to as a kid."

"I didn't go to any school dances."

He looked at her. "None?"

"I never had anything to wear and life was too unpredictable. We moved a lot, and there was never any money to buy pretty dresses." She tilted her head, one memory coming back to her. "There was one dance I *almost* went to."

"Tell me about it."

"It was a Saturday morning. Mom was having a good day. She woke me up and was holding the dance information slip. I'd stuck it to the fridge, just in case. She looked so excited, told me we were going shopping to buy a dress."

"And did you?"

"Yeah." A real smile curved her lips. "It was the best day. Ryan came too. And my mom bought me this beautiful pale blue dress that went to my knees. It had these gems around the bust, and I just remember thinking I'd never worn *anything* so pretty."

"But you never went to the dance?"

“No.” Her smile fell. “Mom’s good patches were fleeting. By the time the following Friday came, she wasn’t in a good headspace. Ryan still insisted I go. I got dressed, but Mom didn’t want us to leave the house. So as we were leaving, she poured a jar of pasta sauce all over me.”

“Jesus.”

“Ryan tried to save me, so he got most of it, but I remember just standing there, wondering how long it would take to get the sauce out, and whether I could make it for the last hour. That’s how badly I wanted to go.”

He squeezed her arm. “I’m sorry, Nora.”

“I’m okay now. Some kids have it worse. Some kids didn’t have a Ryan. Besides”—she smiled at Zac—“without going through that, I wouldn’t be doing what I do now. I want to help kids who need the help I didn’t get.”

“You *should* have gotten help.”

“You’re right. But if I can make a difference in just one kid’s life, then I’ve done my job.”

Her gaze went back to Toby, but he wasn’t with his friends anymore.

She scanned the room. Where was he?

She straightened when she realized Taylor wasn’t with *her* friends anymore either.

“I’m going to walk around.” She looked back to Zac. “You should do the same.”

“Nora—”

“I’ll be fine.” She squeezed his arm before heading into the crowd.

As she moved through the gym, a few kids stopped her to talk. The majority of the students at this school were wonderful. Open and happy to chat.

But she worried about Taylor. The teenager’s relationship with Toby hadn’t been healthy or easy to get out of. And even though they’d broken up, Nora worried that they wouldn’t *stay* broken up. Taylor had a desire to be loved and seen, because she’d never felt that from her mother. And unfortunately, it was easy to get that validation from the wrong person.

Nora spotted Taylor and Toby standing close together in a back corner of the gym.

If they’d looked fine, then she would have left them. But Toby was crowding her, and there was visible discomfort on Taylor’s face.

Nora crossed the space between them quickly. “Taylor.”

Taylor’s gaze shot to her, while Toby shook his head.

“Is everything okay here?” Nora looked between them.

“Jesus.” Without so much as a glance, Toby turned and walked away.

Nora ignored him, focusing only on Taylor. “Did he do something?”

There was the slightest glint of tears in her eyes before she blinked them away. “It’s fine.”

It wasn’t fine.

“Hey.” Nora waited for the girl to look at her. “You can talk to me. Did he say something to upset you?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

“He threatened me.”

“About what?”

“He...” She looked behind Nora, across the gym, then shook her head. “I’ve got to go.”

“Wait, Taylor—”

It was too late. She was already gone.

Dammit.

Nora spun, eyes narrowing on Toby’s back as he walked with his friends.

She didn’t stop to think, just stormed toward him, wanting to know what he’d said to Taylor. Had he threatened her to keep her mouth shut about something? About the drugs?

Of *course* he had. Because that was the kind of thing someone like him did.

When he slipped out the side door with his friends, she frowned. Was he leaving? The dance wasn’t even half over.

She sped up, half walking, half jogging.

When she reached the door, she opened it to see the group of boys heading toward the tree line—where someone waited for them. It looked to be a man wearing a black hoodie. The hood was up though, and that, in combination with the darkness, made it impossible to see the person’s face.

No...they wouldn’t be dumb enough to buy drugs at the school dance?

The guy in the hoodie passed something to Toby.

They *were* dumb enough.

Without thinking about her own safety, she stepped outside.

She was halfway across the side lawn when Toby’s friend spotted her. The kid quickly turned back to the group and shoved sweatshirt guy. He

turned to run.

“Stop!” Nora sped up, but gaining speed in heels was freaking hard. When she reached the boys, one of them sidestepped in front of her. She hit his chest and rebounded off, falling back and hitting the ground.

A new voice suddenly sounded from the gym. “Hey!”

Zac’s voice. And he wasn’t happy.



“SHIT, I HATE THESE THINGS.” Adam stopped beside Zac, yanking at his tie as if it was choking him.

“I would have thought you’d be used to them by now.”

“Nope. The older I get, the worse they get. And they’re the same at every school. You know, I’ve been here for almost three years. Shit, that’s a long time.”

Didn’t sound like a long time to Zac.

His eyes narrowed on Toby as the boy walked away from Nora and the girl. “You’re watching the kids closely tonight, right?”

“Shit, Zac, you’ve gotta stop focusing on the drug thing, man.”

Zac looked at the gym teacher. “You remember what happened to those two kids, right?”

“Yeah, and I also know nothing’s happened since.”

“You mean since Toby drugged Nora?”

“Again, that wasn’t confirmed.”

What the fuck was *wrong* with this guy? “We’ve been through this. He swapped out her damn medication.”

“Allegedly.”

Okay, Zac needed to get the hell away Adam before he did something crazy, like punch him. “He drugged her, and she almost got killed. Other kids almost died from this drug too. So no, I will *not* stop focusing on it, not until we find out what the hell this Blue Cherry shit is and where it’s coming from. And as a teacher, maybe you should give a shit about the welfare of your students and actually care.”

He moved away from the gym teacher toward where Nora had been... only she wasn’t there anymore.

He scanned the gym, muscles in his forearms twitching when he spotted her going outside.

What the hell was she doing?

He started moving, sidestepping a few kids, giving short nods to a couple of boys who said hey.

When he reached the door, he stepped outside to see Nora running toward a group of boys. One of the kids suddenly stepped in front of her and she bounced off his chest, stumbling to the ground.

The fuck? "Hey!"

He stormed across the space between them, focusing on Nora first. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, taking his outstretched hand and letting him pull her to her feet. "There was a guy here."

"A guy?"

Adam and the deputy principal stepped outside the gym, but Zac's attention remained on Nora. "What guy?"

"He was wearing a black hoodie, so I couldn't see his face, but I think he was dealing drugs."

Toby scoffed. "Fuck off."

Adam reached them. "What's going on?"

"They need to be searched for drugs. Nora saw someone dealing to them." Zac pointed to the kid who'd stepped in front of Nora. "And he needs to be suspended or expelled, or whatever the hell the consequence is for assaulting a staff member."

"Assault?" The boy laughed. "*She* ran into *me*. If anyone should be accused of assault, it's her."

The little shit.

The principal held up his hands. "Everyone, calm down." He looked at Nora. "You think the person selling drugs to the students was here?"

"Yes." She nodded, clearly ignoring the glares coming from the boys.

The principal nodded. "Okay. We'll call in the sheriff and parents, and everyone will be searched."

"*What?*" The third boy scowled.

"No one moves," the principal pushed.

"I'll get my jacket." Zac was about to move.

Nora grabbed his arm. "I'm okay."

"Nora—"

“I’m fine. I’d prefer you to wait with me.”

He slipped an arm around her waist to keep her warm. Then they waited.

It took too fucking long for everyone to get there. The parents were first. All except Toby’s. Ward took over half an hour. During that time, Adam talked to the boys. Even joked and laughed with them.

And it made Zac so fucking angry, he had to fist his hands to stop from going over to the guy and doing something that would get *him* arrested.

As Ward searched the kids, Zac checked in with Nora. “You sure you’re okay after that fall?”

“Other than a bruised butt and frustration that I lost the guy? Yeah, I’m okay.” She looked into the tree line. “I wish they’d just tell us who it was. He looked like a man, but I can’t be sure.”

“Let’s hope Ward does his job for once and finds the drugs and all involved.” Shit, even hearing those words come out of his mouth felt fucking ridiculous.

Nora nodded, but she didn’t look hopeful.

“He turned eighteen last week,” Nora said quietly. “Toby. So he doesn’t need an adult here. He could also deny consent for a search.”

Zac’s muscles tightened. The only good part of that though, was that if the kid got caught, he’d be tried as an adult.

Another half hour passed before Ward came over to Zac and Nora. “Parents and kids all consented to a search. Even Toby. We didn’t find anything.”

Zac stiffened. “Nothing?”

“No.” Nora shook her head. “I *saw* something passed between them.”

“They said they came out for air, and a guy was already out here. They just talked with him. Said they didn’t know him and nothing was passed between them.” Ward checked his watch. “I’m gonna go home. I should have clocked off an hour ago.”

Zac grabbed the sheriff’s shoulder before he could leave. “You’re sure you checked them thoroughly? All pockets, up their sleeves...”

“Kid, I know how to do my job.” Ward yanked his shoulder free. “They’re clean. Now I’m going home.”

Zac looked up to see Toby smirking at them before the kid moved toward the parking lot.

“I saw it, Zac.” Nora stepped closer. “I saw the guy pass something to Toby.”

“I believe you. Something happened. He hid it or passed it to a friend. Whatever it was though, we won’t be getting our answer tonight.”

Her lips turned down. And he felt it too. It was so fucking frustrating, he wanted to call everyone back and do the sheriff’s job for him.

They stepped back into the gym just as the dance was finishing. He and Nora spent the next hour helping with cleanup and saying goodbye to the kids.

When they finally stepped out to the parking lot, Zac started to lead Nora to his truck, but she hesitated before saying, “I’ve got my car here. I’ll drive myself home.”

“Nora—”

“I know what you’re going to say. It’s been a big day. I shouldn’t be alone...but I think I just need a bit of time to process. Plus, I’m frustrated about Ward and the drugs and won’t be good company.”

“You think I care about what kind of company you are? Nora, *any* version of you is better than none.”

Her eyes flared. But then she blinked. “I’ll message when I get home.”

Fuck. He didn’t like it. But what choice did he have? “The second you get home. Then before you go to bed.”

There was a small lift of her lips. “Deal.”

It still wasn’t enough. But he couldn’t force her to lean on him.

He walked her to her car, but before she could climb behind the wheel, he gently gripped her arm and turned her to face him. Then he lowered his head and kissed her. He didn’t even think about what he was doing or where they were, he just needed one taste.

Surprisingly, she didn’t pull away. The opposite. She made a sexy moaning sound before melting against him, her fingers splaying over his chest.

When they separated, he touched his forehead to hers. “Remember to text.”

“Twice.” She was slightly breathless. “When I get home. And before bed.”

“And if you need me—”

“You’ll be there. I know.”

Her breath whispered against his lips. Then she slipped into her car, and he watched as she drove away, feeling so fucking helpless that it was all he could do not to jump into his truck and follow.

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Nora pulled up in front of Polly's garage and closed her eyes. What a long, terrible day. Well, no, that wasn't true. It had started fine. But then finding out about her mother, followed by the incident at the dance, it had kind of gone to shit.

Basically, it had sucked from about five p.m. onward. Big bucketloads of suck.

How had Ward not found anything? There had been a transfer of *some* sort of package, but the boys must have hidden it. Either that or given it back. God, it was infuriating.

And even worse, finding out about her mother just made her want to pull away from Zac more.

What was *wrong* with her? She wasn't this person. She'd dealt with her trauma. She was confident and sure and she took chances.

Maybe what she needed was a twelve-hour slot of sleep and she'd feel better.

Huh. Twelve hours of sleep was very unlikely.

She climbed from her car. Polly's home was dark as she passed it. Hopefully they all got to Idaho okay. She rounded the garage to the stairs. At the top, she unlocked her door, stepped inside—and stopped.

The chair was at the window again. Not just a chair though.

Slow steps took her across the room. To a mug that sat on the windowsill. A mug with liquid inside and steam coming off the top.

Her pulse picked up speed, gaze shooting to the small kitchen. To the open packet of coffee pods on the counter. The spoon beside it, and grains of what looked like sugar.

She squeezed her eyes closed.

It's not real. She's dead. She's not here.

She opened her eyes again. The mug was still there. The chair. The hot coffee.

Nora padded quietly down the wooden floorboards, her feet bare and cold as she made her way toward the kitchen. Her tummy grumbled, but there'd been barely any food in the house this week.

Ryan had taken money from Mom's purse this morning and bought milk. Milk that should still be in the fridge. Please still be in the fridge. He'd gotten her favorite. The one with the red logo and the picture of the mountains.

She stepped into the living room, only to stop.

"Mom." She sat on her usual wooden chair by the window. The mug in her hands had steam drifting off the top.

Her mother turned her head. "Hi, darling. Why are you up?"

"I, um, wanted some milk."

"Oh. I bought a carton earlier this afternoon."

A lie. Something Nora had come to recognize her mother did a lot. Ryan disagreed. He said it wasn't a lie, that their mother actually believed what she said.

Nora didn't understand. How could their mother believe something that was so clearly untrue?

"You know what I think, baby?" Her mother set her mug on the windowsill. "I think Ryan will leave us one day. He keeps looking up that military stuff. But you...you'll be my baby forever. Right?"

Nora blinked, pulling herself out of the memory and stepping back, her hip hitting the doorframe.

Away. She had to get away. From the seat by the window, the mug on the sill, and the memories that haunted her.

She spun and ran down the steps. She almost missed the last one, her heel striking the edge. She grabbed onto the railing, barely catching herself.

Quickly, she rounded the garage and sprinted to her car.

But again, she was such a mess that when she scanned the trees surrounding the house, she took her eyes off the ground in front of her. All

it took was one wrong step and she fell, face first into the dirt.

She groaned as pain laced across her cheek. Quickly, she pushed up, and the second she did, she heard something. A moan coming from the tree line. It was low-pitched and creepy and made her skin crawl.

Her heart punched hard at her ribs, a chill skittering over her skin. She raced the last few steps to her car and slipped behind the wheel. She wasn't even sure where she was going until she'd pulled up outside a familiar house.

Her heart was still beating too fast when she climbed out of her car. A small voice in her head whispered that she should take a second to calm down. To breathe and rationalize what had just happened.

But then the chair and the coffee steam flashed through her mind again. The moan from the forest.

She raced up the walk to Zac's door and banged on the wood.



ZAC UNDOED the buttons of his shirt. He wasn't tired. He was wired, his mind filled with Nora. She should have come home with him. They didn't even have to talk, but she shouldn't be alone.

She'd learned her mother had died, for Christ's sake. Then that shit at the dance.

He pulled off his slacks and grabbed shorts from a drawer. Maybe he'd hit the bag in the basement for a while. Hell, even a run in the cool evening air would be better than nothing. He didn't care that it was pitch black outside.

He tapped the screen of his phone.

No message from Nora yet. Five more minutes, and if she didn't text, he was calling her.

He'd just pulled a shirt over his head when banging sounded on the front door.

His head shot up, hand instinctively reaching for the Glock in his bedside drawer.

He moved quickly to the front of the house, shock tightening the muscles in his neck when he looked through the peephole and saw who it was.

He pulled it open. "Nora?"

"Zac! I...there was...I think..."

"Hey. Breathe." He pulled her in and closed the door behind him. Then set the Glock on the side table before narrowing his eyes on her cheek. "You're hurt."

A graze tinged with dirt.

"Is there someone out there?" He moved to reach for his Glock again.

She shook her head. "The chair..."

"What chair?"

"I'm going crazy, Zac. I'm losing my mind and I don't know how to make it stop!"

"Come here." He pulled her to his couch. Once she was seated, he crouched in front of her, eyes on hers. "Tell me exactly what happened between leaving the dance and now."

She swallowed, mouth opening and closing a few times before she spoke. "I went home. But when I stepped inside there was..." Beats of silence passed.

"What?" An intruder? Had there been someone in her fucking apartment?

"There was a chair beside the window. And a cup of coffee."

"A chair and coffee?"

"Yes. The coffee was hot. There was steam coming off the top and sugar on the counter and...it reminded me of my mother."

The fuck?

"She used to sit by the window with her coffee and scan the street. She'd do it for hours. She used to say people were watching us. Oh, God!" Nora dropped her head into her hands. "I'm losing my mind."

"You're not losing your mind."

"I am! The apartment was locked, so no one broke in. And this isn't the first time it's happened."

"The chair's been put by the window before?"

"Yes."

Someone had been inside her fucking home. More than once. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I was scared! I *still* am." She looked up at him, tears in her eyes.

He had so many questions. Afraid of the person who moved the chair? Or something else? And why had fear kept her from telling him? Had she told Ryan?

Instead of asking any of them, he pulled her into his arms. She nuzzled into his chest, and he just held her. Stroked her back. Let her fingers hold his arms so tight that she might leave bruises.

He didn't let go until her breathing returned to normal. Then he said quietly, "Let me know when you're ready."

She lifted her head. "Ready for what?"

"I'm going to go with you to check the apartment."

Some of the color drained from her face. She recovered quickly though, straightening before nodding. "Okay. I'm ready."

He grabbed his phone, keys, and the Glock before setting a hand to the middle of Nora's back and leading her to his truck. The drive to Polly's was quiet, but at least it was quick.

He parked in front of the garage and scanned the surrounding area. If someone had been in her space, he wanted to know who. Was it those kids who'd thrown rocks at her door all those weeks ago?

Glock in hand, he climbed out and took Nora's hand before circling the garage. At the top of the stairs, he tried the handle. It opened easily.

"That was me," Nora said quietly. "I ran out of here like I was being chased and didn't lock it."

They stepped inside.

"No!" Nora gasped before moving around him, gaze on the window at the end of the tiny room, then shifting to the clean kitchen counter. "It was here! There was a chair by the window. My yellow cat mug was on the windowsill. And there was sugar on the counter."

She took two steps to reach the kitchen counter, where she opened the upper cabinet. A yellow cat mug was the first thing he saw.

"It was here." Nora spun, new tears in her eyes. "I swear, it was *here*."

"Hey." One step and he was cupping her cheeks again. "I believe you."

"I feel like I'm going insane, Zac!"

"Has anything else happened?"

"A couple of times I've walked into my office and things are moved around, even though I always lock it when I leave. I've been feeling like someone's watching me. And when I was running to my car tonight, I heard a moaning sound coming from the trees."

Someone was absolutely fucking with her. “Does anyone else have a key to this apartment?”

“As far as I know, only Polly.”

He pulled out his cell and hit her number, putting the call on speaker.

Polly answered on the second ring. “Zac. Hey. Everything okay?”

“I’m with Nora, and we need to know if anyone else has a key to the studio over the garage.”

“A key?”

“Yeah.”

“Uh, no, it’s just me. I mean, there’s a key in a fake rock in front of the house but—”

“Where?” He took Nora’s hand and led her out of the studio and down the stairs.

“It’s a gray rock to the right of the front porch.”

When they reached the front of the house, Zac crouched and lifted a few rocks. It was the third rock that was hollow. He cracked it open. “It’s empty.”

“What do you mean *empty*?” Polly gasped. “I checked it not long ago.”

“There are no keys, Polly.”

“Someone took them? Wait, did something happen?”

“It’s a long story. We’ll fill you in later. But Nora and the apartment are fine.” He looked at Nora to see her frowning at the rock.

“Someone had access to the apartment?” she whispered.

“I can hazard a guess who.”

She shot her gaze back to him. “Toby?”

“I bet every fucking dollar I have he’s also the kid who threw a rock at your door all those weeks ago.” He took Nora’s hand, trying to keep the rage in check, even though it threatened to drown him. “Come on. Let’s pack a bag. You’re staying with me.”

Nora's eyes opened slowly, and she spotted a line of light cracking through the curtains.

It was morning. Meaning she'd officially survived the evening from hell. Thank God. And thank God Zac had been there.

She closed her eyes again and reached for him on the other side of the bed. Only, the sheets were cold.

Her eyes flicked back open. The bed was empty. Well, his side was at least.

She pushed up to a seated position and scanned the room. He wasn't here.

She pushed the sheets off her legs and climbed out of bed. Even though she'd grabbed a bag of her own things, she'd still slept in Zac's shirt. She wasn't even sure how it happened. She'd been getting changed alone in the room, had looked at her bag, then Zac's drawer, and she'd instinctively reached for his clothes.

Zac hadn't minded. In fact, she was pretty sure she'd seen heat in his gaze when he'd looked at her.

She stepped out of the bedroom, and the distant echo of Zac's voice sounded from somewhere in the house. Along with...a woman's voice?

Slow steps took her to the end of the hall. When she rounded the corner into the living room, she paused to see Zac making coffee, a phone propped up on the counter and a woman's face on the screen.

“Zachary, I’m trying to be patient, but how long does a mother need to wait?”

His mother. And *Zachary*? That was new. A smile curved Nora’s lips.

“We’re not even technically dating, Mom,” Zac said softly.

His mother scoffed. “What a load of bolly squodge.”

“What the hell is bolly squodge?”

“It’s nonsense is what it is. Just like this dating someone without a label. In my day—”

“Mom, people dated without putting labels on it in your day too.”

“So you *are* dating?”

Nora stepped back, but her hip hit the hall table and keys dropped to the floor.

Crap.

Zac’s gaze flew to her.

“Is that her?” his mother asked loudly. “I want to speak to her. Nora, darling, is that you?”

Nora shook her head. She hadn’t even looked in the mirror. Her hair probably looked like a bird’s nest and the lack of sleep had no doubt created big black hollows under her eyes. Plus, she wore Zac’s shirt. *Only* Zac’s shirt.

Zac gestured with his head, a silent “come here.” She shook her head a second time.

His lips twitched, and he turned back to his mother. “It wasn’t her.”

“Don’t you lie to your mother, Zachary.”

Oh man, she had to do it. Offending his mother would be worse than a first meeting where she’d just rolled out of bed.

She tugged at the bottom of the shirt, which already hit her knees, before crossing the room. Then she smiled at the gray-haired woman. “Hi, Mrs. Pierce.”

“Nora, finally!” His mother’s brows shot up. “My God, you are *stunning*, my darling.”

Nora almost laughed, because she was pretty sure she still had yesterday’s makeup on. “Thank you.”

“And you can call me Beth.” His mom sighed. “Look at you two together. My son has said so many wonderful things about you. I feel like I know you already.”

He had? “You speak often?”

“As often as I can get him to answer my calls.”

Zac blew out a breath. “Okay, Mom, I need to go now.”

“But I’ve only just met Nora. I—”

“We’ll have plenty time to talk on another occasion. I love you.”

“Fine,” she huffed. “I love you too. Have a good day, my darlings.”

Nora looked at Zac once the call ended. “She’s nice.”

“Yeah, she is. Sorry to spring that on you. I hope I didn’t wake you with the call. We usually talk at least once a week.”

Nora shook her head. “You didn’t wake me.”

“Good.” He curved an arm around her waist. “How’d you sleep?”

“Better than I should have...considering.”

His brows drew together. “Yesterday was a lot.”

“I still haven’t cried about Mom.”

“That’s not wrong, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

She frowned at the phone. “So...you told your mom about me?”

“She saw how happy I was during a recent call. Assumed it was a woman and wrangled it out of me.”

“Hmm.” She slipped her hands down his bare chest. His *sweaty* bare chest. “Did you work out this morning?”

“Yeah. I’ve got a bag in the basement that I hit for a while.”

“What’s a while?”

“An hour...or two.”

Her brows flickered. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Last night...I was a mess.” She was *still* a mess.

“Nora.” He placed a finger under her chin and tilted her face up. “You never need to apologize for any version of you. Okay?”

A familiar fear settled in her chest. Fear that he was falling for her. Fear that she’d *already* fallen for *him*. And fear of what their future held.

She stepped out of his arms and cleared her throat. “I, um, might go grab us some coffee from Bloom.”

“I’m making coffee.”

“No, this is Bloom coffee.” Did she really need it? No. Did she suddenly feel this unexplainable need to put space between them? Yes, dammit.

She turned and moved to the door before cursing. “My car isn’t here.”

“You’re also wearing my shirt. Now, I like looking at you in my shirt, but I don’t like the idea of others doing it.”

He tried to curve an arm around her again, but she slipped to the side.

His frown deepened. “Nora...what’s going on?”

Yeah, what *was* going on? And when was she going to set that next therapy appointment, because God knew she needed it. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m scared about the future. Hell, maybe I need a session with the town psychic to tell me what that future looks like.”

“As good as Maureen is, I think you and I talking this out will work better.”

He was right. But how could she talk about it when she still wasn’t completely sure what this block was about?

“I just need coffee. You don’t mind if I use your truck, right?” She turned and hightailed it down the hall, but his footsteps followed.

With her back to him, she pulled off the shirt and grabbed her bra.

“Nora—”

“I swear I’ll take good care of it.” She grabbed leggings and a sweater from her bag.

“You know you can tell me anything, right?”

Her heart gave a huge hit-her-ribs thump. “I know.”

When her hair was in a ponytail, she turned and tried to slip around him. But he was faster, stretching out an arm, hooking her waist, and pulling her against his chest.

“You talk a big game, Slade, but I’m not buying it.”

Her mouth dried at the feel of his bare chest against her. At the heat of his breath as it mingled with hers. “Buy what?”

“You’re falling for me.”

“I’m not—”

“And I’ve *already* fallen.”

Her eyes flared.

“But for some reason,” he continued, “that makes you want to pull away from me. I wish you’d tell me why. I’m hoping you will soon.”

She had no words. None. Squat. Because he was right. Dammit, he was so right.

“I’ll grab coffees from Bloom. You stay here. Relax. I’ll be back soon.” Then, before she could anticipate what he was doing, his head lowered and he kissed her.

She was so shocked she gasped, and he slipped right in, the taste of peppermint settling on her tongue.

"I'll be back." Three words, then he pulled on some clothes and was gone.

And she was left feeling like her skin was on fire and wondering if a visit with the psychic to have the woman assure her that her future held more than misery wasn't such a terrible idea.



ZAC PARKED OUTSIDE OF BLOOM. He was about to climb from the truck when his phone rang, Ryan's name on the screen.

Shit. He hadn't told Ryan about what happened last night. "Hey."

"Hey, Zac. I tried calling Nora, but she didn't answer. Polly said her spare keys were gone."

Zac winced. "Yeah, a few things happened last night. There was a slight hiccup at the dance. Followed by another hiccup."

"Tell me."

Zac told Ryan about the altercation outside the dance. About the man in the hoodie, and Ward, and the drug search.

"And they didn't find anything on them?" Ryan growled.

"Not according to Ward."

"Jesus Christ. The idiot probably didn't even do a proper check."

"My thoughts too." Zac's gaze ran over the street.

"What was the second thing that happened?"

Zac scrubbed his face. "I think Nora should tell you."

"Is it about our mom? Did she tell you what Ethan found?"

"Yeah, but I don't think what happened is connected."

"Okay. I'll check in with Nora. Did she stay with you last night?"

"She did."

"Good. Thank you for looking after her."

A tightness he hadn't realized was there eased from his chest. He and Ryan hadn't had the official "I'm dating your sister" conversation, but it almost felt like they may as well have. "Of course. I hope Tate's doing okay."

He was just climbing from his truck when he noticed Toby and a friend walking into The Pancake Bar.

Zac should leave it. He should stay the hell away from the teenager in case he did something that would get him into trouble.

He didn't. He stormed toward The Pancake Bar, feeling no desire to be smart.

Inside, the friend was at the counter, and it was just Toby sitting in the back booth.

Zac crossed the café and lowered into the seat opposite.

Toby looked up, then scoffed. "You following me now?"

"Nah. Right time, right place."

"Right for who?"

"Me." Zac let a small beat of silence pass between them. "I know what you did last night."

"I was clean. Ward didn't find anything."

"We both know I'm not talking about that."

Toby lifted a brow. "Gonna have to be more specific, Grandpa."

Zac laughed, no humor in the sound, before leaning across the table. "You should be careful with the choices you're making."

"Is that right?" Toby leaned forward too. "What if I'm not? Will bad stuff happen to me?"

"You think you've seen the ugliest this world has to show you? You think having a bad upbringing is a good excuse to be a jerk? It's not. And you haven't. You're eighteen, which means the second you're caught committing a crime, you'll be tried as an adult. You'll see a hell of a lot worse behind bars."

"You threatening me?"

"I'm giving you a chance to stop acting like an idiot before your life gets a whole lot more confined."

"Thanks for the advice."

"Drug dealing isn't a small offense. Breaking and entering? Also not a small offense. Make better choices, or life as you know it will be over before it's begun."

A muscle ticked in the kid's jaw. "As fun as this has been, I think it's time for you to leave."

His friend stopped by the table.

“Listen to my advice. Or don’t and we’ll see what happens.” Zac pushed out of the booth and walked out of the café.

He wasn’t expecting the little chat to work miracles. But if he’d scared the kid even slightly, then maybe the little shit would think twice about harassing Nora again.

He was walking back to Bloom when he passed a narrow alley.

He stopped at the sight of Ward. The sheriff had his back to Zac and a phone to his ear.

“I’m not fucking around,” Ward growled, just loud enough for Zac to hear. “People are gonna start asking questions.”

Zac’s brows flickered. He wanted to move closer, but he didn’t want to be seen.

“No, that will just make it worse,” Ward barked. “Just lie low and let me handle the rest.” Ward cursed and hung up.

Zac moved away, making sure the sheriff didn’t see him.

He opened the text thread with his team.

Zac: I know you guys are busy, but I have a lead. Kind of.

Ryan: Tell us.

Zac: I think Ward’s covering for someone.

Joel: Gerome?

Zac: Don’t know. But it’s worth looking into.

Nora lifted her fist to knock on the wooden door, only to quickly tug her hand away.

This was a bad idea. She had to be going through some sort of quarter-life crisis, because *what* was she doing here?

She turned to leave, to race her butt to her car and pretend this never happened, when the door opened and Maureen smiled at her from the other side.

“Nora. Right on time.”

Nora smiled back at Maureen. “I’m sorry. I...I just remembered I have somewhere I’m supposed to be.”

Good work, Nora. Lying to a psychic. What could possibly go wrong?

“Where?” Maureen asked gently.

“What?”

“Where are you supposed to be?”

“I...um.” *Lie, dammit.* But there were no lies in her head. Zero. Her shoulders sagged. “Here.”

Maureen smiled and stepped back. “Wonderful. Come in. I’m all ready for you.”

Nora stepped inside, wooden floorboards creaking beneath her feet. The hallway was long and the lights dim. It felt warm and cozy, but also kind of creepy.

Or maybe that was just in her head. She’d never done this before. She’d never even considered doing something like this.

At the end of the hall, they stepped into a room with more low, warm lighting. Candles and salt lamps were scattered around the space. There was a small round table in the center of the room with comfy-looking chairs on either side.

Yep, this was exactly what she pictured a psychic's room to look like.

"Sit." Maureen ushered her to a seat. "Would you like tea?"

"No thank you." She was too nervous to put anything in her stomach. She wasn't even sure why she was nervous. There was nothing Maureen could say that would affect her on a large scale, because she didn't believe in this stuff.

So why are you here?

"Tell me why you're here, Nora."

Her gaze flew up at Maureen's words, eerily similar to the ones she'd just voiced in her head. "I don't know." A lie. Of course she knew. But the truth sounded insane, even in her own head.

She'd had two therapy sessions over the last week. *Two*. And for some reason, they weren't helping her break through this wall she'd put up between her and Zac. And she *needed* them to help. She wanted Zac.

Maureen cocked her head and smiled, like she was reading Nora's every thought. "You're worried."

"I am."

"This involves Zac Pierce."

"Yeah." Although, neither statement required psychic abilities. Everyone in town had seen her with Zac, and the strain around her eyes had basically become just another part of her ensemble.

Maureen reached for a deck of cards that sat beside a candle and began to shuffle.

Oh, Jesus. It was really happening. This bad idea was playing out right in front of her. This mammoth-scale, losing-her-marbles-level bad idea. Because how would a woman reading cards help Nora feel safe enough in her future to let Zac in completely?

She wouldn't.

Maureen spread the cards over the table as rain began to gently tap the windows. "Touch them."

Nora hesitated. "Touch the cards?"

Maureen nodded.

She ran her fingers over the frayed edges of the cards.

“Now, pick three,” Maureen said.

“Any three?”

“Any three.”

Nora grabbed the three her fingers were already lying on and handed them to Maureen.

Maureen turned the first one over to show a tall stone tower perched on a mountaintop. There was a lightning bolt striking the top of the tower and flames coming out of the windows. There were also two people plummeting headfirst from the tower.

Holy shit. That did *not* make her feel better. Maybe she should have booked a third therapy session. There were no people plummeting to their deaths there.

Maureen frowned. “This is the tower. It shows the destruction of something that can no longer stand.”

Well, Nora could have figured that out.

Maureen looked at her. “Have you built something upon unstable assumptions?”

Yes. Absolutely yes. “I don’t know.”

“I think a major shift is either coming or already underway. It may feel big and hard to adjust to, but the change will reveal a truth that needs to be seen. And I think you’ll be freed of whatever you’re hanging on to.”

Nora’s heart raced. There was only one thing she’d been holding on to for as long as she could remember. One thing that had stayed with her since she was a young child.

Maureen flipped over the second card. A woman bound loosely in ropes, blindfolded, and surrounded by swords.

Good God. It just kept getting worse.

“You feel trapped in your own mind,” Maureen said gently. “You believe disaster is inevitable.”

Nora’s throat tightened.

Maureen was right. How was she so *right*? It was like the words had been plucked right out of Nora’s head.

The rain grew heavier outside.

Maureen looked at her. “Who are you frightened of becoming?”

Nora flinched. That wasn’t on the card, was it?

When Maureen just looked at her, Nora shuffled uncomfortably on the seat. “My mom. She was sick for a long time. And...and she used to say we

were similar.”

“And you believe it.”

It wasn’t a question. And Nora didn’t miss the fact she’d said believe... present tense. “I don’t *want* to believe it.”

Maureen stared at Nora. “You were hyperaware of your mother. It became a matter of survival for you. But now it’s turned inward. And you’re watching for danger inside yourself.”

The words felt like a bucket of ice water over her head. So true. And so hard to swallow.

Maureen tilted her head. “I think your mother gave you your wounds and her grief, but I don’t think she gave you her sickness.”

“How do you know?”

Maureen just smiled before turning over the last card. She didn’t look at it as she said, “Because of this.”

Nora glanced down at a woman kneeling beside a pool of water beneath a sky full of stars.

Her childhood bedrooms came back to her. The stars on her ceilings. The stars that gave her such hope.

“Is that good?” Nora asked.

“The stars come after destruction. They’re a sign of survival. Of living through what could have destroyed you.”

“Hope,” Nora whispered, emotion clogging her throat.

“Yes. But the hard-earned kind of hope.” Maureen tilted her head again, gaze unwavering on Nora’s face. “You are *not* your mother, Nora. No one is ever a copy of another person, no matter how much we look like them or how closely we’re related. You will have demons to tackle, but they won’t be the same as hers.”

“Demons?”

“Oh yeah, something’s coming.” Maureen shuddered, like whatever was coming, it was bad. Then she looked up and her features were clear. “But it’s not your mother’s demons.”

Nora’s mouth opened and closed. Because what was she supposed to do with that? “What’s coming?”

“It’s not written in stone yet.”

“*What* isn’t written in stone yet?”

“Time will tell.” Maureen shuffled her cards back into a pile. “It was so nice having you here for this session.”

“Wait, that’s it?”

Maureen stood. “I’ll walk you out.”

Oh, *hell* no, she couldn’t put the fear of God into her, then just send her on her way.

Nora hurried behind the woman, toward the door. “Maureen, please, you just said something’s coming. I need to know what.”

She stopped by the door and frowned. “Okay, let me see if I can get anything.” She lifted Nora’s hand and remained silent as she looked into her eyes. Then said, “It’s external.”

“Okay.”

“You’re getting too close to something, and someone doesn’t like it.”

Her pulse picked up speed. The drug stuff?

“That’s all I can get. But...” Maureen paused before letting go of her hand. “You’ll probably survive it.”

“Probably?”

“Have a good evening, Nora. And come back anytime.”

“But—”

Maureen shuffled her out and closed the door.

Nora watched the door close with a thud, mouth open.

Great, so she *wasn’t* turning into her mother, but something else was gunning for her. Maybe Toby. Maybe the unidentified drug dealer.

She jogged to the car through the rain. She’d just dropped behind the wheel when her phone vibrated with a text.

Zac: Hey. I just got home but you’re not here. Are you okay?

Nora: On my way home now.

She pulled onto the road and headed toward Zac’s house.

Maureen didn’t think she’d turn into her mother. Of course, she was just a psychic who didn’t know Nora at all on a personal level. But Nora wanted to believe her. Ryan had told her the same thing, but she hadn’t believed *him*. Maybe because he’d spent his entire life protecting her. So of course he wouldn’t tell her something that would hurt her.

She pulled into Zac’s garage and pressed the button on the remote he’d given her to close the doors. Parking in the garage was new. But according to Zac, it was necessary.

Instead of getting out, she texted her brother.

Nora: Do you remember Mom when she was having a good day? She’d get up early and make us pancakes. Sometimes, she’d make a face on them

with whipped cream and bacon and do a gigantic nose just to make us laugh.

Her brother's response came right away.

Ryan: Yeah, I remember.

Nora: I thought they were our good days. But now I realize they almost felt worse than her bad days. Because we were just waiting for her to turn. And the kinder she was, the harder the change was to take.

Ryan: There were no good days...even when we thought there were.

Nora: I think I've always seen myself as Mom on her good days. But I've also spent most of my life waiting for the other version of her, the one I was afraid I'd become, to show up in me.

There was a small pause in her brother's response.

Ryan: The difference is, the version of you that we all know and love isn't temporary, Nora. And there isn't a single thing about you that reminds me of Mom, not even her on her good days. You're you. That's it.

The passenger door opened.

She jumped, phone almost slipping from her fingers. "Zac!"

He climbed into the passenger seat and closed the door after him. Then his kind eyes pierced her. "Hey."

She popped her phone into the middle console and looked at him. "I didn't hear you step into the garage."

"Are you okay?"

"Apart from finding out something really bad is coming my way, yeah."

"What?"

She chuckled. "I did something kind of crazy tonight. I had a reading with Maureen."

"You did? I thought you were joking about that."

"Me too." She nibbled her bottom lip. "But I had two therapy sessions this week. They didn't help. So I decided I had nothing to lose and booked in with Maureen. Interestingly enough, I think I'm finally getting it."

"Getting what?"

She wet her lips and looked out the windshield at the garage wall. "It was never Ryan. He was never the reason I didn't want to date you."

"I know."

She laughed. Of course he knew. She glanced down to her lap. "I was scared I was going to turn into *her*."

"Your mom?"

“Yeah.” She pulled at a thread of cotton on her dress. “My mom only started showing signs of schizophrenia later in life. And after an entire childhood of having her tell me how much I look like her, that Ryan was different, but she and I were the same, I’ve just been carrying around this fear that I’m going to go down the same hole and everyone around me will suffer, the same way Ryan and I suffered.”

“Come here, Nora.”

Her brows flickered. But she only hesitated for a second before unclicking her seat belt and climbing over the middle console. Her dress bunched at her waist as she set one thigh on either side of him.

He gripped her hips. “I never knew your mother. But I know *you*. You are a million things. Stubborn. Funny. Weirdly obsessed with Skittles and baking shows.”

She laughed. “One baking show.”

“You’re Nora. One hundred percent, original version only, Nora.”

She closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against his, something between a sob and a chuckle slipping out. “I love you.”

He tensed slightly beneath her.

The tension made her pull back. Was he not there? Was she rushing things?

But his fingers immediately tightened, and his eyes... God, they were blazing as he uttered those same beautiful words. “I love you too, Nora Slade.”

Air rushed from her chest and her heart raced. It pounded so hard and fast that for a moment, she felt light-headed. Or maybe that was because of the weight of his words.

He loved her too. And for some reason that felt healing. She was loveable. She wasn’t her mother. She wasn’t turning into the woman. She wasn’t anything like her.

She only held his gaze for another second before kissing him.

Zac drank in Nora. She tasted like coffee and cinnamon. And her body was so soft as she melted into him.

She loved him. This beautiful woman *loved him*. And shit that felt good.

He slipped his tongue in and out of her mouth, their kiss so unhurried it felt like they had all the time in the world to just love each other.

She leaned her head back to breathe, but he chased her. Capturing her lips once more. Moving his tongue against hers, holding her tight against his body.

He pushed her denim jacket off her shoulders before dropping the material to the floor of the car. Then he pulled the straps of her dress down. The material fell loosely over her shoulders.

Her breathing grew ragged as he slipped his hands behind her and unclipped her bra. The soft thud of it hitting the floor seemed loud in the quiet space. But not as loud as the roaring of blood between his ears when he smoothed his hands over her beautiful bare breasts. Lightly at first, her pebbled nipples barely glancing his palms.

She felt it though. She moaned into his mouth, pushing her chest into his hands while grinding her hips against him.

She wanted more. And fuck, he did too.

He ran his fingertips over her nipples this time. Immediately, her lips parted and she exhaled against his mouth.

He kissed down her jawline, then her neck. When he reached her chest, he gripped her waist and took one nipple between his lips.

She latched onto his hair, tugging as she cried out.

He traced the bud with his tongue, closing his lips to suck, then loosening them to flick his tongue over the peak. When he sucked again, he felt her head tip back.

He shifted to her other breast, closing his lips around her quickly this time and sucking like she was candy.

The rocking of her hips grew faster, and his cock got so fucking hard it was almost painful.

He reached between them and ran a finger around her clit, through her panties.

She hummed, a shudder rippling through her body. He did it again, applying a bit more pressure this time before rolling that sweet bud.

“Zac...” She moaned. “Please.”

“What do you want, Nora?”

“You.” One word. In one breath.

She cupped his face and pulled him back to her, her tongue pushing into his mouth, curling with his.

He slipped the material of her panties aside and ran his thumb down her clit. She groaned into his mouth.

One more caress before he slipped a finger inside.

Warm. Slick. Ready.

But he wanted more from her.

He moved his finger in and out, stroking her clit with his thumb as he thrust. Her breathing grew ragged, the rotation of her hips fiercer.

And he loved it. Her reaction to his touch. Her need that matched his own.

When he found that bud with his thumb again, he rolled it. She gripped his cheeks and set her forehead against his.

Fuck, she was so perfect. He wanted to feel her fall apart in his arms. He wanted to feel her shatter on his lap.

She kissed him again, this time reaching to undo the top button of his jeans, then sliding down the zipper. Just like her breathing, her fingers were unsteady and rushed, all the unhurriedness gone.

When she pulled him out, he barely bit back the groan. Gently, he slid his finger out of her and gripped her hips, trying to allow her to take the

lead.

But fuck, she made him lose his damn mind.

She stroked him, moving her palm up and down and over his tip. She was killing him. He was going to die, and he was going to die a happy fucking death.

She lifted, setting his tip at her entrance.

He stilled so completely, not a single hair on his body moved. He was frozen, Nora's slave to do with whatever she wished.

Slowly, she sank down on him in one slow motion.

Black dots hedged his vision and he closed his eyes, trying to grasp on to some fucking clarity.

"Hey." She ran her thumbs over his eyelids.

He opened and looked at her. Stared into those gorgeous brown eyes that haunted his dreams. "You're so beautiful, Nora."

Her smile softened.

He reached behind her neck and pulled her to him. The second his lips touched hers, she lifted her hips and sank back down.

It damn near drove him over the edge there and then.

She did it again, her nails biting into his shoulders, her breasts rising and falling against his chest as her thighs quivered.

She was a work of fucking art. All of her.

He reached between them and found her clit, running his thumb up and down.

She whimpered, her breaths coming in short, hot shudders before she dropped her mouth to his shoulder and bit down.

He started to lift, meeting her thrusts, deepening them.

Another groan from her.

Her breaths shortened further, her movements losing their rhythm and becoming staggered and wild.

He continued to thrust up, holding her hips now, doing the work.

Suddenly, she gave a low, lush cry, her head tipping back as she came. He continued to rotate his thumb over her clit as she broke. To thrust up, hitting her deep.

He brought his mouth to her shoulder and kissed her. Once. Twice. On the third, he paused at a spot just behind her ear and nibbled, making her tremble.

He thrust up a few more times before he broke along with her, growling and digging his face into her neck.

Then she collapsed on him—and fuck, all he could do was hold her tight.

“I think...car sex...is my new favorite thing,” she gasped through ragged breaths.

He chuckled. “I think *anything* with you is my favorite thing.” When she lifted her head, he swiped a thumb over her cheek. Then he tensed. “Shit. I didn’t wear anything.”

“It’s okay. It’s not the right time.”

Strangely, he wouldn’t care if it was. He wanted her. All of her. And this thing he felt wasn’t temporary. “We’re done running from this, right? It’s you and me. We’re in this together.”

There was no fear in her eyes. And not a bit of hesitation. “You and me. Together.”

Thank fuck.

He kissed her once more, before gently sliding out of her. Quickly, they straightened their clothes before climbing out of the car. But as soon as he was on his feet, he threw her over his shoulder.

She screeched. “What are you doing?”

“Shower.”

She laughed.

They spent the rest of the night washing each other’s bodies, then eating takeout and Skittles, before Nora fell asleep to *The Great British Bake Off*.

He was pretty sure he’d watched half the episodes already. Maybe more.

He was easing out of the bed, trying not to wake Nora, when his phone lit with a text.

Ryan: You home?

Zac: Yeah. Are you back?

Ryan: I’m outside your place.

Zac’s brows flickered.

He pulled the covers over Nora before stepping out of the bedroom and easing the door closed. At the front door, he found Ryan already waiting.

“Is everything okay?”

“Just came to check on Nora.”

“She’s asleep.”

Ryan nodded like it wasn’t a surprise.

“Beer or coffee?” Zac asked, having a feeling he knew what this conversation was going to be about. It was long overdue.

“Definitely beer.”

Good. Zac could use a beer too. He headed into the kitchen.

“How’s she been?” Ryan asked.

“I think she turned a corner tonight. You’ll never guess who helped her get there.”

“Who?”

Zac handed Ryan a beer. “Maureen.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah. She had a session with her.”

“And *that* helped her?”

“I think we underestimate our town psychic.” He uncapped his beer and sipped the cool liquid. “How have you been?”

“Worried about Nora after the news.”

“She was your mother, too.”

“She could have been. But she made choices that stopped her from ever really being that. I’m more angry that she never got her shit together.”

Zac nodded, not feeling qualified to agree or disagree. Ryan and Nora came from a completely different upbringing than his. “How’s Tate?”

“He’s Tate. He tells us he’s fine, but we can see right through it. Funeral went well though.”

“Glad to hear. Is he still moving here?”

“He’s here now.”

Zac’s brows shot up. “No shit?”

“We helped him pack up his mother’s house and he came back with us.”

A small smile curved Zac’s mouth. He fucking loved that. Every guy on the team was family, so to have another member here felt right. Now they just needed Linc and Kolby to get their discharge papers.

Ryan set his beer on the table before looking at Zac. “This thing between you and Nora...what is it?”

“I love her.” No pause. No hesitation.

For a second, Ryan’s expression was unreadable. “You know that Nora and I don’t have a normal brother-sister relationship. I’ve felt responsible for her for most of my life. She’s an adult and can look after herself now, but that thing inside me that needs to make sure she’s okay, that will always be there.”

“I know.”

“I *want* her to be with someone who loves her.” Ryan’s fingers visibly tightened on the bottle. “Who’s willing to put his life on the line to protect her.”

“Ryan—”

“I’m not finished. She tells people she’s fine when she’s not. So she needs someone who can see through that.” Ryan frowned. “She needs *you*. And I’m glad you have each other.”

“You’re really okay with this?”

“My sister loves my best friend. There is no better scenario, because I know that no one will love and protect her the way you do.”

Zac set down his beer and hugged his friend. Fuck, he loved the guy. Ryan and Nora might have come from a tough upbringing, but they were two of the best people he knew.

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Nora parked around the block from Bloom. A walk, no matter how small, always helped when she needed to clear her head. And after the workday she'd had, she needed to clear her head.

It was Friday afternoon and work had felt slow. Appointments had run overtime, meaning she'd missed lunch. She'd spilled coffee all over her desk. Even her Skittles had run out. That never happened.

And the worst part? Toby.

Of *course* it was Toby. She wasn't sure if the kid had made it to a single class today because every time Nora stepped outside her door, he'd been standing by his locker. A locker that was uncomfortably close to her office.

And to make matters worse, she'd had an interview with the principal after school that had been the most infuriating twenty minutes of her life. She'd voiced her concerns about Toby. About him knowing where she lived. About him possibly entering her office *and* home and trying to mess with her head.

The principal had looked at her like *she* was the problem. Or at least like she was delusional.

With a deep sigh, she climbed from her car and started down the street. Everyone was meeting at Bloom. Apparently, even Tate would be there.

She'd met him a couple of times over the years. He was intense, but so were all of them. He was also a million feet tall, with muscles piled upon muscles. Again...so were the rest of them.

She was just passing The Pancake Bar when the door opened and Toby and his friends stepped out.

Argh, just what her day needed.

She offered a small nod before moving around them, but even with her head down, she felt their stares on her.

Footsteps sounded before Toby popped up beside her, matching her step for step. "Miss Slade. No hello?"

"I'm running late." It wasn't a lie. But it also wasn't why she was rushing.

"I smiled at you in the hall a couple times today. Felt like you were ignoring me."

"No, Toby, I'm just busy."

"Huh. Felt kind of like you were ignoring me. I should really be avoiding *you* after what you did at the dance."

She paused and turned. "Toby. You need to stop."

"Stop what?"

"I know what you're doing." A voice in Nora's head told her this wasn't the time or place and she should walk away from this kid. But dammit, she was so frustrated with him.

He lifted a brow. "Intriguing. What am I doing?"

"You overheard my conversation with Ryan about my mother and decided to take it upon yourself to make me think I'm losing my mind. I don't know how you knew about the fake rock with the keys, but there is nothing 'cool' about breaking and entering. Or harassing someone."

"You think I'm trying to be *cool*?" He laughed, before taking a small step closer. "You don't know me at all, do you? If you did, you'd know I just don't like it when people insert themselves into my shit."

"You think that's what I'm doing?"

"I think you told my girlfriend to break up with me. I think you've spoken to the principal about me on multiple occasions. I think you're the one who's made sure my shit has been searched three times."

"I'm only doing my job." She swallowed, hating how close he was, but also not wanting to step back and show him she was uncomfortable. "You don't have to have the same life as your dad. You could have more."

His eyes narrowed, that cocky grin finally dropping. "Don't try to psychoanalyze me."

"I'm trying to *help* you. This path you're on isn't going to lead anywhere good. But you can change that. You can make your own future, separate from that of your parents."

"Like you did?"

"Yes." She straightened. "Like I did. Don't you want more?"

"What I *want* is for you to leave me the hell alone. Leave my girlfriend alone. And keep my name out of your fucking mouth."

"Everything okay here?"

Nora glanced up to see a man with short dark hair and even darker eyes. Tate.

But Tate wasn't looking at her. His eyes were narrowed on Toby.

"Who the fuck are you?" the boy asked, almost sounding amused.

"I'm the guy making sure Nora's okay."

Toby scoffed. "Okay, I see. You're another one of those meatheads like her brother, huh? Like Mr. Pierce."

"Toby," Nora said firmly. "Walk away."

"Whatever." The teenager gave Tate a once-over before heading back toward his friends.

"Who the hell was *that* little shit?" Tate asked.

"A troubled kid."

"Didn't look like a kid to me."

He was right. Toby was an adult. Old enough to make better decisions.

She gave Tate her full attention. "You're here."

"I'm here."

She pulled him into a big hug. "I'm so sorry about your mom."

"Thanks. It's been a tough few weeks, but I'm glad to be with the guys."

She pulled back and studied him. "Is there anything you need?"

"Coffee. Really strong coffee."

"Well, Bloom is the place for you then."

"I've heard lots of good things about this Bloom," he said, as they started walking.

"They are all correct. Polly's coffee will knock your socks off."

"So she's told me." He looked down at Nora. "I heard you're dating Zac."

"Who'd you hear that from?"

"Ryan. Joel. Connor. Ethan didn't say it directly, but he didn't disagree with anyone."

“I didn’t know the guys had such loose lips.”

“Oh yeah, they gossip like schoolgirls.”

She laughed. “It’s true. Zac and I are dating.” And that was probably the first time she’d said those words out loud. They felt good.

“And the rest of them are all paired off too. It was nice meeting everyone over the last week.”

“I think it’s something in the Deep River water.”

“Am I at risk?”

“Only time will tell.”

He shook his head, a hint of a smile on his face as they stopped in front of Bloom. He held the door open.

She stepped inside and saw Zac, his team, and their women all inside.

Everyone was drinking coffee and laughing, and all that crappy energy from her long day, as well as all the nervous tension from her conversation with Toby, faded. It didn’t completely disappear, but seeing her friends definitely took the edge off.

Zac rose from his seat and crossed the space between them. Then he curved an arm around her waist. “Hey. Are you okay? You look tired.”

“Then I look how I feel.” She set her palms on his chest. “But I’m better now. The day is over, I can smell coffee, and you’re here.”

“You sure you’re all right?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.” He lowered his head and kissed her.

“Hey. What am I, chopped liver?”

Nora bit back a laugh at Tate’s words, while Zac’s mouth curved against hers before he lifted his head. “You’re back.”

“Not that *you’d* notice.”

“I noticed.” Zac stepped up to his friend and pulled him into a hug. “It’s good to see you, man. Shitty circumstances, but good to have you here.”



“HOW ARE YOU DOING?” Zac asked, as the rest of the table talked and drank coffee.

“Okay. Considering.” Tate lifted a shoulder. “I’m glad Mom’s not in pain anymore. Cancer fucking sucks, I can tell you that.”

Zac nodded. Tate's mother had died of breast cancer. She'd been diagnosed years ago and beat it, but it had come back, only this time, she'd lost the battle.

"Glad I got a bit of time with her." Tate scanned the café. "You guys look like you're doing well here."

"Deep River's been good to us."

Nora laughed beside him as she spoke to Polly.

"Have you always had a thing for Ryan's sister?" Tate asked quietly, with a grin.

"Yeah. I think I have." He looked back at his friend. "Didn't always intend to act on it though."

"Ryan must be relieved."

"Relieved?"

"He fucking loves her, and now he knows she'll be taken care of." Tate sipped his coffee. "Shit, this is good."

"Best in town. Just ask Polly."

Tate set the mug back on the table. "What's this stuff I've heard about some drug problem in town?"

"It's bad." Hell, bad was a fucking understatement. "Nora works at the school, and I've been doing outreach sessions there. They call it Blue Cherry, and it's some sort of synthetic psychoactive drug that heightens emotional intensity."

"Sounds dangerous."

"It's more than dangerous. I've seen kids go into uncontrollable rages. Just yesterday, another kid lost his shit at school, and me and a teacher had to physically force him away from the other kids until police arrived. They lose their inhibitions. It distorts reality. Basically makes a person spiral into psychotic breakdowns."

"What's the sheriff doing about it?"

"Nothing."

Tate's jaw clenched. His father had been a sheriff before he'd passed. And a damn good one, from what Zac had heard. So anyone wearing the badge and not doing their job was a slap in the face for Tate.

"I fucking hate a sheriff who doesn't do his job," Tate muttered. "I'm assuming you guys are looking into it?"

"I overheard a conversation Sheriff Ward was having on the phone. Sounded like he was covering for someone. Maybe his son. I plan to pay

Gerome a visit.”

“Let me know if you need company for that conversation.”

“Will do. There’s also this kid...Toby.”

“The kid Nora just had a run-in with?”

Zac tensed. “What?”

“Some kid was getting in her face outside. The two of them seemed to be in a heated conversation when I approached.”

The *fuck*?

As if she’d heard them talking about her, Nora turned and frowned at him. “What’s wrong?”

“What did Toby say to you?”

Nora’s gaze flicked to Tate.

He winced. “Sorry.”

“Nothing important.” She looked back at Zac. “I told him I know what he’s been doing. He lied and said he didn’t know what I was talking about. Then he told me he didn’t like the way I was meddling in his life.”

“How the hell are *you* meddling in *his* life?”

“He thinks I’m the reason Taylor broke up with him. And he blames me for the drug checks.”

“And he approached you in the street to tell you all this?”

She nodded.

What the fuck? The kid drugged her. Broke into her fucking apartment. Now he was cornering her on the street?

It had to stop. All of it.

He shot up.

“Zac.” Nora stood with him. “What are you doing?”

“I’m making a call.”

“To who?”

“I’ll be right back.” He kissed her before stepping outside with his phone to his ear.

As the call rang, Zac moved down the street, needing to get some of the pent-up rage out of his fucking body. Needing to move. To breathe.

When Ward didn’t answer, Zac cursed and hung up. Then he spotted the barbershop across the street. Or, more specifically, Toby and his friends *inside* the barbershop, laughing with Gerome.

Zac stormed across the road and into the shop.

Toby immediately locked his phone and shoved it into his pocket.

Gerome stepped forward, the smile dropping from his face. “Zac, you here for a cut? We’re actually about to close.”

“Why are teenagers always in here?”

Gerome frowned. “What?”

“The only clients I ever see in this shop are kids from the school. Why?”

“Because they need haircuts?” Gerome laughed. “Shit, I don’t know what you want me to say.”

Zac looked at the Rolex on Gerome’s wrist. To the gold ring on his finger. “Opening a new shop must be expensive. I’m surprised you have the funds to buy watches and rings like that.”

“They’re old.”

“They look new.”

“They’re not.” Gerome’s eyes narrowed. “You can leave now.”

“And if I don’t?”

Gerome laughed again, head dropping to his chest, before looking up again. “Well, I can call my father. Have you arrested. What do you think of that?”

“He won’t arrest me. That would require him to get off his lazy ass and do some fucking work.”

Gerome shot forward, already swinging. Zac sidestepped the strike easily.

Gerome stumbled, falling to the floor, rage tearing across his face.

Zac glanced around the shop, noting the closed door that led to the back room, before looking back at Gerome. “I’ll see you around, Gerome.”

“You stay away from me!” he shouted. “You’re not welcome in here ever again. You hear me?”

Zac opened the door, but before walking out, zeroed in on Toby. “And if I ever hear of you talking to Nora again, it won’t just be your bag and locker that are checked. Every inch of your fucking life will be searched until they find the drugs I know you’re carrying, and you’ll be locked up for good.”

Zac climbed out of his truck. He didn't want to be at the school today. Hell, he didn't want Nora here either, but she was already in an appointment with a student.

They both had jobs to do. And what the fuck else was he going to spend his day doing? Sitting at home, twiddling his thumbs, waiting for the state police to get back to his team?

Their conversation with the state police had been enlightening to say the least. Apparently, the drugs had made their way out of Deep River and federal drug agents had already been looking into Gerome Ward for weeks. Gathering evidence and building a case. They'd been planning to execute a raid before the call, and the raid might even take place that evening.

They'd mentioned their suspicions of Ward covering for his son as well, but there was no proof of that...yet.

But Zac couldn't sit still and just wait to see what eventuated. He'd drive himself crazy within the hour.

He stepped inside the school and moved down the hall.

He hadn't told Nora any of his suspicions about Gerome. Because if he was right, if the son of the sheriff was the person distributing these drugs, then anyone they knew could be in danger. Plus, she had enough to deal with.

If his team got what they wanted, the feds would raid Gerome's barbershop tonight. They'd find the evidence they needed, the asshole would be arrested, and this drug shit would be over.

The question after that would be...did Sheriff Ward know what his son was doing? And more than that, was he protecting him?

Zac was looking at Nora's closed door when Adam stepped out of his office, Zac's bag of equipment on his shoulder. "Zac, ready for our last session?"

"Yeah, let's do it." He took the bag from the teacher.

"I know this hasn't been the easiest, what with this drug problem we're facing," Adam said as they walked. "But we really appreciate you running these sessions. I think the kids have gotten a lot out of it."

Apart from the drugs and Toby, Zac had enjoyed it too. "It's been a good program. And it's important for these kids to know this stuff. If you want to run it again next year, I'd be happy to help."

"Thanks. I'll probably take you up on that offer."

They met the students in the gym and headed into the forest.

Zac dropped his pack and water by a tree before turning toward the class. "All right, eyes up."

Most students looked up. Toby and his friends took a few more seconds.

Zac waited before starting. "This is our last session, which means I've done the work to this point. Now it's your turn."

A girl at the front straightened. "Do we get to be search and rescue today?"

"Actually, you do. And hopefully, this will help you understand why we do what we do." He looked into the thick, wooded trees. "There's a person missing somewhere in this section of the forest."

Not a real person. It was a dummy. A few dummies, actually. But the teenagers would work that out soon enough.

"You're going to be split into groups, and every group will have an area to search," Zac continued, looking back at the students. "In real life, the search area would be based on last-known location, phone data, witness reports, whatever we can get. But here's the problem—we don't know which direction they went. We don't know if they're injured, disoriented, or walking in circles."

"So how do we find them?" a kid asked.

"You sweep your grid without getting lost. You know where your teammates are at all times and you leave no stone unturned."

Zac got them all into groups, then gave them their search grids. Last week, they'd gone through how to read and use maps, so every teenager

should have a sufficient level of knowledge.

Then the teams got moving. Zac lifted his water and sipped it as the teenagers got to work.

One group worked fast, finding their guy within twenty minutes. Another took twenty-five. When the last few took longer, Zac hiked into the trees to see if they needed help.

He frowned when he saw a group of kids standing in a small circle around a phone.

What the hell were they looking at?

None of the students heard him coming. None of them even noticed when he stood over one of their shoulders and looked at the phone.

His body turned to stone.

Nora. She was sprinting down the steps to her studio and racing around the garage. Halfway to her car, she fell to the ground, and quiet laughter sounded from whoever had filmed it, then loud moans like they were trying to scare her.

Zac yanked the cell from the kid's fingers. "Who took this?"

All the kids spun, their jaws dropping, then closing.

When another beat of silence passed, Zac asked again, louder this time. "I said, who shot this?"

"We don't know," one of the boys finally replied. "It's been circulating all morning. I don't know where it started."

Zac stormed back to the group, phone still in hand, and Toby was the first kid he saw.

Toby lifted a brow as Zac stopped in front of him. "Everything okay, Mr. Slade? You look like you wanna kill someone."

Oh yeah, he definitely wanted to kill someone. "This was you." He spun the phone around.

Toby's friends snickered behind him.

Toby's features didn't change at all. "Don't know what you're talking about."

"The fuck you don't." He stepped into the boy's space, done with the playing-it-nice shit.

"Whoa, now, what's going on?" Adam yelled, racing toward them.

"Toby has been breaking and entering."

"Again, don't know what you're talking about." The teenager crossed his arms and rocked back on his heels.

And all Zac wanted to do, all he could *think* about doing, was wiping that smug fucking expression from Toby's face.

Adam set a hand on Zac's shoulder. "Did something happen?"

Zac handed Adam the phone.

Adam cursed beneath his breath before turning to Toby. "Was this you?"

"No, sir."

"Check his phone," Zac pushed.

"Can't do that," Toby said, with far too much arrogance. "You need my permission, and that's a no can do."

"He's right," Adam said under his breath, sounding frustrated.

"It's okay." Zac stepped back. "I know someone who can discover where the original came from."

The smug expression dropped from Toby's face.

Zac wasn't actually sure if Ethan was capable of that. But he'd sure as hell try.

And if he couldn't? Well, Zac had a feeling the search of the barbershop would give them everything they were looking for, including evidence of Toby's involvement.



NORA WATCHED as Taylor lowered to the opposite couch. There was something different about the teenager today. The shadows beneath her eyes were gone and she was smiling. A real smile, not that small, tight expression that looked like it took far too much energy to force.

"Hi, Taylor," Nora started gently. "How are you today?"

"Good, actually. Really good."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." She fiddled with a folded piece of paper in her hand.

"Is there something that makes this day better than others?"

"You know how I told you about my aunt?"

Nora's heart beat a little faster. "Yes?"

"Mom agreed to let me go and live with her for a while."

Everything inside Nora, all the tension she'd been holding all day, the uncertainty about whether she should even be here, released. Taylor's news made everything Nora had been through the last several weeks worthwhile.

“You must be excited.”

“More relieved than anything. For the first time in a long time, I have hope.”

There were no words Nora could use to adequately describe how relieved she was too. She’d been so worried about how detached Taylor had become. “When do you leave?”

“Tonight. Mom said I could choose when, and I wanted to do it as soon as possible so she doesn’t have time to change her mind. We booked the ticket and called my aunt. It’s all going ahead.”

Nora leaned forward. “I am so happy for you, Taylor. You deserve this.”

A film of tears filled the girl’s eyes. “It’s thanks to you. You told me to talk to her, and I did. I told her how unhappy I was. I told her about Toby and the drugs and the loneliness. And I know you spoke to her as well.”

Nora shook her head. “No. Any good that comes to you is your doing. You spoke to your mother. You came to these appointments. *You* put in the work.”

Taylor’s smile widened, but then it dimmed. “I haven’t told Toby I’m going.”

“And you don’t have to. He’s not your boyfriend. He’s not your friend. You are allowed to just leave and save yourself the fallout.”

Taylor nodded sharply...but her gaze drifted to the door like she was already wondering where he might be.

Nora leaned back in her seat. “Tell me about your aunt.”

The smile returned. And Taylor spent the rest of the session talking about her aunt’s home. The smells of baked bread and hot honey that greeted her when she stepped into the house. The pale blue walls of the room she slept in. And all the ways her aunt made her feel seen.

Something squeezed tight in Nora’s chest. It was almost healing to hear about the life Taylor was heading toward. It was everything Nora had craved during her own childhood. To escape a home that didn’t feel like hers and go to one where she felt safe and loved.

Taylor was still talking about her aunt and Florida, when a knock sounded at the door.

“Oh my gosh, sorry.” Taylor stood. “I’ve gone into your next appointment time.”

Nora stood too, but slower. “There’s nothing to be sorry about. I loved listening.”

Taylor hesitated, but only for a second before stepping forward and wrapping her arms around Nora. “Goodbye, Miss Slade.”

“Goodbye, Taylor.”

“Oh, and I wrote you this letter.” She pulled back and handed Nora a folded piece of paper. “It’s just a thank you...and some information I know you wanted.”

Nora frowned, but before she could ask about it, Taylor was leaving and her next student was stepping inside the room.

Quickly, she dropped the note into her purse before starting the next session.

The last hour of the day went quickly. So quickly that she lost track of time and the final session ran fifteen minutes past the end of the school day. She didn’t even hear the bell.

She’d just said goodbye to the student when her phone dinged with a text.

Zac: I just got home. Are you working late to write up notes? If you are, I can bring food (or Skittles) and keep you company.

Nora: As tempting as that sounds, I’m heading home now. Although, I don’t see why there can’t be food and Skittles waiting on the kitchen counter.

Zac: Food will be on the counter. I might hold the Skittles hostage until I get a kiss.

Nora: You drive a hard bargain, Pierce. I’ll take that deal.

She dropped her phone into her bag and left her office, locking the door after her. Outside, she stopped short of the parking lot when she remembered the note from Taylor and rummaged through her bag, finding the folded piece of paper beneath her phone. Quickly, she pulled it out and read it.

Hi Miss Slade,

Before I leave, I wanted to write you a letter to say thank you. When I first came to you, I felt so stuck and overwhelmed. I think you’re the first person to ever really notice and care. And to listen to me. Like, actually listen. I don’t think my life would be changing if it wasn’t for you. For the first time in a long time, I feel excited about my future. Thank you. I won’t forget you.

And I know you wanted information on Blue Cherry. The drugs are being made in the back of the new barbershop here in Deep River. The

owner approached Toby and some other kids to distribute them around the school.

I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. But I hope you're able to shut it down. I don't want anyone else getting hurt.

Taylor

Nora reread the last bit.

The drugs were coming from the new barbershop. From Gerome. The sheriff's son.

Air skittered through her lungs, and she was about to grab her phone and call Zac when a scream sounded from around the corner of the school.

Her gaze flew up, and she raced around the side of the building.

Then she stopped, her stomach dropping.

Taylor. She lay on her stomach. On the ground and unmoving. Blood pooling around her middle beneath her.

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Footsteps sounded behind her. Nora gasped and swung around, only for air to rush from her lungs at the sight of Adam, who stopped, mouth open in shock, eyes only for Taylor.

Nora turned back to the girl, but Adam was faster, dropping to Taylor's side and rolling her over.

Nora's stomach dropped at the blood. It was all over Taylor's stomach.

"Nora." Adam's voice broke through the shock. "Call an ambulance and the sheriff's office."

Jerkily, she searched through her bag for her phone. Where was it? Shit, where was her cell? She'd just had it.

Her fingers shook when she finally felt it and she pulled it out and called 911. She wasn't even sure what she said. There was a buzzing between her ears, and everything was a blur.

The ambulance arrived quickly, within ten minutes. In that time, a few more teachers had come outside. Taylor had a pulse, but she was unconscious.

Her phone vibrated with a text, pulling her gaze away from the paramedics who knelt beside Taylor.

She had to blink a few times to clear her vision and read the words on her screen.

Zac: You're still not home. Are you okay?

Nora: Can you come to the school? Something happened. I need you.

"Nora?"

Her gaze shot up as Sheriff Ward stopped in front of her.

Her phone rang, with Zac's name on the screen, but she canceled the call and sent off a quick text.

Nora: I'm speaking to Ward.

"Sorry." She locked her phone and looked at the sheriff. "How is she?"

"She was stabbed in the stomach."

Nora's stomach lurched.

"We'll know more once she gets to the hospital." He cleared his throat and ushered her to the side, away from other people. Then he lowered his voice. "Adam said you were first on the scene. Can you tell me what happened?"

"I stepped outside, heard a scream, and ran around the building. I saw Taylor on the ground." She swallowed, gaze returning to the girl, the paramedics hovering over her.

"You didn't see anyone else?"

"No." Could this be Toby? Could Taylor have told him that she was leaving and he attacked her?

"Did you have a session with Taylor today?"

She blinked at Ward's question. "What?"

"Did you have a session with Taylor today?"

"Y-yes."

"Did she say anything?"

"About what?"

Ward glanced over his shoulder before looking back at Nora, a new... focus in his gaze. "Did she say anything that I should know?"

For a second, she just stared at him, her stomach doing something between a tightening and a roll.

Did he know about his son? Did he suspect Taylor knew...and that's why she was hurt?

Suddenly, something inside her urged Nora to keep her mouth shut.

"She told me she's leaving town. Tonight. To live with her aunt out of state." It was the truth. It just wasn't the most important thing the girl had told her today.

Ward's eyes narrowed. "That's it?"

"That's it."

Ward was silent for a second. And without words, she knew he didn't believe her. It was in the way he watched her, like she was a problem.

He cleared his throat and said in a low voice, "Your mom was schizophrenic, right?"

She flinched. "How do you know that?"

"Look, it'd be smart to stay on my good side, Nora." He took another step closer. "I'm the sheriff. Around here, my word carries some weight."

She frowned.

"If I told people something happened between you and me, like you had some sort of psychotic episode, they'd believe me before they believed you."

Her stomach dropped.

"And if I started saying you were becoming unstable..." He let his words hang. "Well, it wouldn't take much digging to see where you'd inherited that from."

He cleared his throat. "And if anyone decided to stand beside you... your brother, your boyfriend..." He shrugged. "Accidents happen. People disappear. Lives get ruined. So think carefully before you make me your enemy."

"Are you threatening me, Sheriff Ward?"

"No. I'm telling you that if you speak a bad word about my son, things might not end too well for you and your friends. Or your brother."

Ragged puffs of air escaping her lungs became the only sound between them.

She wanted to call his bluff. Yell in his damn face that he'd lose his job for threatening her.

But he hadn't just threatened her. He'd threatened Zac. Ryan. He'd used her mother's schizophrenia against her.

"Nora."

She jumped at Zac's voice and turned to see him sprinting toward her from the parking lot. The second he reached her, he cupped her cheeks and studied her eyes. "Are you okay?"

No. She wasn't. Her gaze shifted to Taylor, but Taylor wasn't there anymore. They'd rolled her into the ambulance.

Had Toby hurt her? Or Gerome? Ward even?

She swallowed and looked back at Zac. "I'm ready to go home."

His brows flickered, but he nodded.

Before leaving, Zac spoke to Ward, then Adam.

She didn't move. Her feet felt rooted to the spot. But she felt Ward's eyes on her. They were heavy and watchful, like one wrong step and he was willing to act.

She wasn't sure he was really capable of everything he'd said. But did she want to take the risk? She had no idea *what* to think. Her head was a mess. Between Taylor and Ward, everything felt heavy and complicated.

When Zac's arm slid around her, she jumped.

His frown deepened. "Nora?"

Her gaze slipped to Ward—still watching—before returning to Zac. "Can we go now?"

"Yeah. I'll drive. We'll pick up your car tomorrow."

They moved to his truck. He helped her into the passenger seat before moving around to the driver's side.

She was still in her head when she noticed Zac's hands as he started the truck. Were they shaking?

She looked up at him. There were lines beside his eyes. Strain. And there was something else about him that seemed...not right. "Zac? Are *you* okay?"

"Yeah, I've just been feeling a bit off this afternoon."

"Off?"

"I'm sure it's nothing." But the hard set of his jaw told her maybe that wasn't true.

She glanced out the side window as they pulled out of the parking lot. And yep, Ward's eyes were still on her.



SOMETHING WAS WRONG. Not just with Nora and how pale she was. Something was wrong with *him*.

He lifted his fingers off the wheel. They were shaking.

The fuck was that?

He glanced over at Nora, but she wasn't looking at him. Her eyes were on the passenger window, her hands wringing tightly in her lap.

"I'm sorry about Taylor," he said gently. But even his fucking voice sounded different. Strained and raw. He didn't recognize himself.

She looked at him, her own brows creasing, like she saw everything he was feeling. “What’s going on with you, Zac?”

She heard it. Of *course* she did.

He opened his mouth, not sure what words were going to come out, but his heart suddenly started to race, huge fucking thuds in his chest that he felt throughout his entire body.

He pressed his foot harder to the gas.

Home. He needed to get home now and work out what the fuck was going on with him. Was he getting sick?

“I’m going to shoot you.”

He swung his gaze back to her. “What?”

She frowned. “I said I’m worried about you.”

He pulled onto his street.

Almost there.

In his driveway, he used the remote to open the garage. Once the garage door closed after them, the only light was from the garage. He shut his eyes to gather himself.

The scent of wet dust tinged the air.

“Zac. What’s wrong?”

He scrunched his eyes closed.

“Movement left.”

His teammate’s voice sounded in his ear, making his pulse race.

Ryan.

Zac’s eyes opened to look beside him. But it wasn’t Nora. It was the woman in red. And she was reaching inside her jacket.

Zac shook his head, scrunching his eyes harder this time. When he opened them, it was Nora next to him. Just Nora. In her pale blue dress. There was no wet dust smell. No Ryan in his ear.

“Something’s wrong with me,” he whispered.

Her eyes flared, worry darkening them. “What?”

“I don’t know. It almost feels like I’ve been...”

No. He couldn’t have been drugged. That wasn’t—

His gaze flew to the water bottle in the middle console. The same water he’d had at school today, during his last session with the kids. There’d been a number of times he’d gone to find students and left it where he couldn’t see it. He’d forgotten to drink all day, then downed half the bottle an hour ago.

He lifted the bottle and studied the water.

There, at the bottom...small white flecks.

The fucker! Toby had ground up a pill and put it in his water.

The racing of his heart sped up again, thudding behind his ribs, pounding in his ears.

His entire body jerked at the sound of his phone vibrating in the middle console, his mind snapping back years ago. To the vibration of the ground beneath his feet from the explosives going off a few hundred meters away from him.

Stop it, Zac. You're not back there.

He lifted his phone and forced his eyes to focus on the text.

Ryan: Raid is scheduled for eighteen hundred.

The raid on the barbershop.

"Zac. Talk to me." Nora touched him, and he flinched, yanking his arm back. "You're scaring me."

"You need to go inside, Nora."

"Why?"

"Because I—"

A sharp crack sounded through the garage.

He froze, no fucking idea if that had been real or in his head.

"What was that?" Nora whispered.

Real.

Another crack.

Shit.

He gripped the back of Nora's neck and pushed her down, covering her body with his own. "Stay down, Nora."

Her eyes widened. "Is someone shooting at us through the door?"

"Yes."

The garage lights flicked off. Good. He wanted darkness. It was already getting dark outside, and if someone was getting inside this garage, he didn't want them to have a good visual of him or Nora.

He grabbed the Glock from the middle console. He was in no fucking state to use it, but he had no other choice.

"We have to move. Wait for me to come around." He climbed out of the truck and moved around it in a low crouch, keeping the truck between him and the garage door.

When he reached Nora's side, he opened her door and pulled her out, shielding her with his body. He wanted to lead her inside, but there was an entire empty parking spot between him and the door. It was where Nora had been parking. And bullets were peppering that area. He couldn't risk it.

Instead, he moved behind the truck, pushing Nora down.

More gunshots burst through the bay door.

He looked down. But it wasn't Nora.

The woman in red held a gun to him. A gun pointed right at his chest.

He squeezed his eyes shut again.

No. Not now.

He had to focus. He had to keep Nora alive.

"Do you have your phone?" he asked, voice low and rough.

She nodded.

"Call Ryan. Get them here *now*."

She pulled out her cell, but before she could make a call, the garage door started to lift.

The motherfuckers. They must have cut the power. That was the only way they'd be able to lift the door from the outside.

Early evening light slipped into garage, cool air spilling inside. Visibility was still low though.

He pushed Nora lower to the floor, feeling the shake in her body. "Don't move."

"Zac—"

"For any reason."

A flashlight beam cut through the garage. The door opened another foot. A second flashlight appeared on the other side of the truck.

His eyes flashed to the woman in red. The woman with the gun.

He blinked.

Not a woman in red. Nora. And no gun.

Focus.

He lowered to the floor, counting the boots as men entered the garage.

Two sets of boots, one on each side of his truck. Two against one. He'd had worse.

He shot an ankle. A man cried out and fell.

The second flashlight jerked wildly through the darkness. Gunfire erupted, bullets slamming into the metal of his truck.

Nora screamed and ducked lower.

Zac leaned out, fired twice toward the second flashlight. A grunt sounded. The flashlight dropped.

Zac glanced out again to see a hooded man still on his feet, clutching his shoulder.

Zac fired one kill shot to the chest.

The man dropped.

But as Zac turned back, the other flashlight lit up his face. He fired blindly.

The man dropped.

Nora went to stand, but he shoved her down again. “There might be more out there.”

Her eyes flew to the man on the floor. “Who are they?”

Zac blinked.

“Who are you?” Zac looked at the woman. Her red jacket. Her sad eyes. “I can help you.”

She nodded but didn’t speak. Not a surprise—she was an aid worker who’d been kidnapped. She was likely in shock.

He put a hand to her back and led her toward the truck. He’d just opened the door when she pulled a pistol from her red jacket.

Zac jumped back, aiming his Glock at the woman in the red jacket. Only they weren’t in the middle of an op anymore. They were in his garage. “What are you doing here?”

The woman was silent for a moment, a confused, shocked expression on her face. And fear. Lots of fear. “Zac...what are you doing?”

Not a stranger’s voice. Nora’s voice.

He closed his eyes, and when he opened them, he saw Nora. He was holding a gun to Nora’s chest.

His hands dropped. He shuffled back. Two quiet words slipped from his mouth. “Run, Nora. I can’t let you drive away because there could be more shooters out there ready to follow. So I need you to get inside the house. Lock yourself somewhere. Hide and call for help.” He shoved his Glock into her palm.

Her top started to flicker again, shifting from pale blue to a deep red.

He blinked.

“Zac—”

“I’ve been drugged.” He opened his eyes again, pleading with her. “Run. Hide. And don’t let me find you.”

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Nora's thundering heart drowned out the sound of her heavy breathing. It drowned out the sound of the rain that now tapped against the roof. And the echoes of gunshots that still rang in her ears.

She slammed the door separating the garage from the house and flipped the lock.

The lock wouldn't keep Zac out for long. He had a key in the truck, but even if he didn't, if he wanted to get in, he could. He was trained to get in.

The house was dark and quiet as she turned.

Run. Hide. Call for help.

Zac's words repeated in her head.

Her legs wouldn't move.

Drugged. Zac had been drugged.

Her breathing stuttered. It explained everything. The shaking fingers. The way he'd trained the gun on her and, just for a second, looked at her as if she were the enemy.

A terrified pressure squeezed her chest.

Zac was dangerous. A former Navy SEAL. Trained to find people. Kill people. And if he thought she was a target...

She sprinted through the house.

Run. Hide. Call for help.

She stepped into the hallway. Where was she supposed to go? This was his home. He knew it better than she did.

A bang sounded from the garage door, almost causing her to stumble over her own feet.

Zac...he was breaking in.

She could run outside. She didn't. For the same reason he hadn't sent her away in the truck. If more shooters were out there, it would take just one bullet to kill her.

She raced to the bathroom off the hall, but instead of hiding inside, she slipped the lock and pulled it closed with her still in the hallway.

Maybe he'd think she was in there. Maybe it would buy her time.

She raced to the spare room and hid behind the door.

It was a terrible hiding spot. But right now, it was the best she had.

She lifted her cell, turning the screen light right down until everything on the screen was barely visible, before texting her brother.

Nora: I need you at Zac's house right now!

Ryan: What's wrong?

Nora: Two shooters attacked us in the garage. Zac shot them but he's not okay. He's been drugged.

Her phone rang, but she canceled the call and texted him again.

Nora: Can't talk right now. I locked Zac in the garage but he's breaking in. I'm not sure if there are more shooters outside. Zac thinks I'm a threat. Please get here fast!

Ryan: Hide. I'll be there in two minutes.

She closed her eyes, working hard to silence her ragged breaths.

Two minutes. That was all she needed to last. But right now, two minutes felt like a lifetime. It was certainly enough time for Zac to break in and find her.

At that exact moment, a loud crash sounded from somewhere down the hall. She flinched, knowing it was the door to the garage breaking open.

He'd breached the house.

She looked at the gun in her hand, the weapon shaking in her grasp. She couldn't shoot him. No part of her was capable of that. She pushed it into the waistband at the back of her jeans before opening the flashlight function on her phone. But she didn't press it. Not yet.

Eyes closed, she listened, but if Zac was moving through the house, his footsteps were silent. Probably something he'd learned in the military. To move without making a sound. To hunt without alerting his prey.

And she was his prey.

It would be okay. Ryan was coming. He was close. And he *would* make it in time.

She jumped at the sharp crack of wood splintering. It sounded like a bullet going through a door.

He'd already reached the bathroom off the hall.

Shit, shit, shit.

She forced her eyes open, hands shaking as she held up her phone. Again, she heard no footsteps. She was blind and had no idea where he was. He could step into this room at any moment.

The soft thud of a door opening came from somewhere in the house. Maybe the master bedroom? Maybe he assumed she was hiding in the second bathroom. Exactly why she hadn't gone there.

But as soon as he was done checking that room, he could come here.

Her fingers tightened on the cell.

She whispered in her head, reminding herself to breathe.

She didn't hear him coming. There wasn't so much as a creak of a floorboard. One second she was looking at the back of the door, the next, the door flew away and he was there, looking impossibly big and dangerous and angry.

She tried to hit the flashlight function on her phone to blind him, but he was too fast, hitting the cell from her grasp.

"Give it to me." His voice was low and dark, reminding her of her mother's when she'd thought Nora was the enemy. But this wasn't her sick mother. Zac was a lot more dangerous.

"Give you what?"

"The pistol. Give me the pistol. Now." There was no recognition in his eyes. None.

"I don't have a pistol."

"Stop lying to me. You have three seconds to hand it over before I kill you."

Air stuck in her throat. "Zac—"

"Two...one..." He stepped toward her.

She ducked to race beneath his arm, but he was faster, hooking an arm around her waist, taking the gun and pulling her into his chest.

"Zac. It's Nora."

He tensed against her.

"Zac, please," she whispered. "Give me the gun."

He lifted it like he was surprised he was still holding it.

The gun started to lower, but then his body tensed behind her.

She heard it too.

Before she could comprehend what was happening, he pulled her into the hall, aiming a gun at the door.

Nora looked ahead to see Ryan stepping into the house, arms raised.



ZAC TRAINED his pistol on the man in the doorway. It was dark and the asshole wasn't holding a weapon, but he sure as fuck was carrying. His hand was close to what Zac knew was a concealed holster. It would take the fucker under a second to pull it and shoot.

Zac tightened his hold on the woman in the red jacket, keeping her pinned to his front.

"Easy," the guy in the doorway said, voice quiet.

The man held his hands up, as if that would make him appear less of a threat. It didn't. His eyes, his posture, the way he'd been able to break into the fucking house...all of it gave him away.

Zac's fingers tightened around the gun. "Get out."

"Zac," the woman in red whispered, voice almost pained. "Don't."

He could have laughed. If that wasn't confirmation they were in this together, nothing was. "Gun on the floor. *Now.*"

There was no change in the man's features. And not a flicker of movement.

"You think I won't shoot?" Zac growled.

The woman's breath hitched. Only...the sound was almost familiar. It made his fingers loosen around the grip of the gun, just a beat of hesitation slipping through him.

He flinched and shook his head.

A footstep sounded.

His eyes flashed open and he retrained the gun on the man. But he was closer now. Several steps closer.

Enemy.

"Get. Out. *Now.*"

The man shook his head. "Can't do that. Not while you're holding Nora."

Zac frowned.

Nora...

He looked down at the light strands in her brown hair. He breathed in her vanilla scent.

Nora.

He released her and stumbled back, shaking his head.

What was going on? What *the fuck* was he doing?

The scent of wet dust tinged the air again. Voices buzzed around him, a blur of sounds and words he couldn't pull together, like echoes in his head.

He squeezed his eyes closed again. This time when he opened them, the woman in red was walking away.

"Stop. Or I shoot." He trained the gun on her.

"No!" the man by the door growled and shot forward.

Zac swung the gun to him, his finger poised to shoot the asshole. "Who are you?"

"You know who I am, Zac. I'm Ryan."

He shook his head. "Don't fucking lie to me! You're the target."

The woman gasped. He trained the gun on her again. "And you're the woman who shot me."

"No, I—"

"I said, *don't* lie to me."

"Hey." The guy across the room drew his attention back. "Look at me. Focus on me."

The Glock shifted toward him instantly. Zac should have shot him by now. He was a threat. Why hadn't he shot him? What was stopping him?

"You shouldn't have come here," Zac growled, keeping the woman in his peripheral vision. "You shouldn't have tried to find me."

"Zac, look at me."

At the woman's voice, he shifted his attention, and the gun, to her yet again. He'd underestimated her once before and almost died because of it. He wouldn't do that again.

"Zac..." The man growled. "Get that gun off her."

"It's me," she whispered, ignoring the guy behind her. "Nora."

"Stop fucking with me."

"*Nora. Stop it!*" the man barked louder.

She didn't look at him. Neither did Zac. He couldn't take his gaze off her. Her eyes. The most beautiful brown he'd ever seen. Her lips. So full. So familiar.

"It's me," she whispered.

Her red jacket flickered. One second she wore it, and the next it was gone. "Nora..."

Tears welled in her eyes and she nodded. "Yeah. You need to put the gun down, Zac. Please."

He looked at the gun in his hand. The gun pointed at Nora.

Fuck!

He was lowering the weapon when he heard something in the house. The flick of a lock, maybe? The opening of a door.

His pistol shot back up. The woman in the red jacket gasped and the other man pulled his gun.

Zac swung the Glock toward the man, needing to take out the bigger threat first.

"No!" The woman suddenly flew forward.

The man by the door shouted.

Zac should have retrained his gun to her. He should have shot her.

He didn't. He just stood there as she flung her arms around him, like she was *protecting* him from the man near the door.

"Zac," she whispered, voice weaving inside his chest. "Don't look at him. Look at me. Just me."

Gun still trained on the guy by the door, Zac glanced down. At her eyes. So brown. So beautiful. He breathed her in...vanilla.

"Come back to me," she whispered.

Nora. No red jacket. Just Nora. And Ryan.

Reality punched him so hard in the chest, he gasped for air.

"Knock me out." His gaze lifted to Ryan. "Knock me out! *Now.*" Quickly, he tilted the muzzle toward the floor and the Glock dropped. "Nora?"

"Yeah." A tear dropped down her cheek. "It's me."

The red jacket started to flicker.

He gripped her shoulders and pushed her back. "Ryan! Knock me the fuck out! I don't have enough control."

The creak of a floorboard sounded behind him. But he didn't have time to turn before something hit him in the head, and his world went black.

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Voices cut through the haze. Fast-moving, angry voices. They were whispering, but Zac made out everything.

“It’s not necessary.”

Zac’s body jolted at Nora’s voice.

“It is, Nora,” Ryan growled. “I know it’s hard to see him in cuffs—”

“He’s not a criminal.”

“I know that. The restraints are for *his* protection, as well as yours.”

“I don’t need protection.”

Were they talking about him?

He lifted his right hand, only slightly, feeling the cold, heavy metal against his wrist.

Why was he—

Suddenly, it all came back to him.

The attack in his garage. The masked intruders. The red jacket.

He scrunched his eyes.

And Nora. He’d pulled a gun on Nora. He could have hurt her. Worse...

His eyes flew open, going straight to her. Scanning her up and down as she spoke to Ryan.

Okay...she was okay.

At least, as far as he could tell.

“No, you’re not listening to me. I don’t want—” Nora stopped mid-sentence, her gaze meeting his.

She gasped and started toward him, but Ryan was faster, grabbing her arm and holding her back.

Her eyes narrowed on her brother. "Let go."

"No. We need to make sure he's himself again." Ryan turned to Zac. "How are you feeling?"

Zac looked at Nora. At her deep brown eyes. The shadows beneath them.

He glanced over to Ryan. Completely unreadable.

Then he scanned the room. No red jacket. No wet dust smell. Just a plain old hospital room. "I think I'm okay, but we should keep the cuffs on for a while."

"See, he's okay." Nora tried to step toward him, but again, Ryan pulled her back.

"He's also okay keeping the cuffs on," Ryan pressed, voice gentling.

Zac studied Nora. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." Tears misted her eyes, but she blinked them back.

"I didn't...hurt you?" Fuck, he could barely say it.

She shook her head. "You didn't hurt me."

Thank God. He closed his eyes and tipped his head back, letting the relief soften the knot in his chest.

Footsteps sounded. Then the bed dipped and a warm palm touched his cheek. He opened his eyes to see Nora beside him. Her vanilla scent drowned out the sterile hospital smells.

"Hey." She grazed his cheekbone with her thumb. "I missed you."

"How long have I been out?"

"We brought you straight here," Ryan said, stepping closer. "They gave you a sedative, and you've been out for a few hours."

"It was in my water." A vein throbbed in his temple, rage pulsing through his blood. He'd been drugged. Fucking *drugged*. And he wanted to kill the kid for it.

"I know." Ryan dipped his chin. "We brought it in."

"You had a lesson with Toby today, right?" Nora asked.

"Yeah, but I didn't drink any more until after school finished. The asshole."

Nora shook her head, not waiting for a response. "I can't believe he did that. Well, I can, but God, it makes me so angry!"

“That makes two of us.” Zac’s mind went back to the guys in the garage. “Who were they? The guys I shot.”

“Gerome and Pen,” Ryan answered.

Idiots. “They knew I was on to them after my visit to the shop yesterday, so they came to kill me and keep me quiet. Are they alive?” Usually, he’d know if his bullet was a kill shot, but everything from that moment was a blur.

“Both in surgery,” Nora said gently. “We’ll find out soon.”

A knock sounded at the door, and Connor and Ethan stepped in, gazes going straight to Zac.

Ethan studied him for a moment. “Hey. You all right?”

“Not really. But I’m not going to attack anyone.”

“Glad to see you’re awake.” Connor shifted his gaze to Ryan. “State police are in town. So are the feds who conducted the raid on the barbershop.”

Zac straightened. “And?”

“They found a full operation in the back,” Ethan said. “Glassware, product in three stages of processing. It was pretty high tech, and it explains why Gerome took so long to open the barbershop. He was building all that.”

“There was also a book that had all the distributors written down,” Connor added. “Toby was a big distributor inside the school.”

“He was involved.” Fuck. They knew it. They all knew it. And now they had proof. “So it’s over. Toby will be arrested. The production of this shit will stop. It’s done.”

“Almost.”

Zac’s gaze swung to Ethan. “What do you mean, almost?”

“We don’t know who designed the formula. Gerome and Pen aren’t smart enough, so we know it can’t be them. The book called the guy Chem, but we don’t know who that is.”

“We’ll find him.” Nora squeezed his hand before looking at Ryan. “Can you take these cuffs off already?”

Ryan sighed before leaning over and unlocking them.

Immediately, Nora lifted his hand and kissed the back of it.

He turned his hand over and wrapped his fingers around hers. Shit, it felt good to touch her.

Ethan’s phone dinged. He read something before looking at Zac. “State police are coming this way. They want to talk to you.”

“Good. I want to talk to them too. Bet Ward hasn’t taken any of this well. Gerome getting shot. The state police busting him.”

There was a small change in Nora. A distinct tensing of her fingers around his. A tiny flicker of her eyelids.

Zac looked at her. “What is it?”

“Ward will be, or maybe already *has* been, arrested.”

“Was he involved in this?”

“He threatened me.”

“*What?*”

“After I found Taylor, Ward asked me about my session with her. He asked if she said anything to me that he should know about. I lied and said she hadn’t, but she’d actually written me a note, letting me know the drugs were being manufactured in the barbershop.” Nora swallowed. “*Then*, he said if I told anyone anything incriminating about his son, he’d tell people that I was just like my mother. Either that, or he’d hurt you guys.”

“I’m going to kill him.” He was going to tear that fucker apart limb by limb.

“I’ve told the police,” Nora said gently. “He’ll be arrested.”

That wasn’t enough.

“It’s enough,” she said, as if reading his thoughts. “There’s been enough violence. Let’s leave this one to the authorities.”

He knew she was right. He still wanted to kill Ward though. He tightened his hold on Nora’s hand as a knock sounded at the door. When it opened, two male police officers entered.

“Hi. Is this a good time?”



NORA UNLOCKED the door to the studio over Polly’s garage and stepped inside. They could have gone back to Zac’s house, but his garage was a crime scene and the lock on the garage door was broken.

Besides, she loved this studio. Even though she hadn’t been here in a while.

Polly had changed the locks, plus, she and Joel were close by if needed. Not that she expected to need them for anything.

“Does it feel smaller to you?” she asked, turning back to Zac. “I think it feels smaller.”

Zac didn’t crack so much as a smile as he closed the door. “You could have stayed at Ryan’s house.”

You...as in just her. Not both of them. “I didn’t want to stay at Ryan’s house. I wanted to be alone with you.”

His biceps flexed as he engaged the lock.

As soon as he turned back toward her, she closed the small space between them and cupped his cheeks. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m fine.”

“Don’t lie to me, Zac Pierce.”

“I think it’s just going to take me some time to...come to terms with what happened tonight.”

“What happened tonight is you were drugged.”

“And I pulled a gun on you.”

“No. That wasn’t you. Just like when I was drugged, it wasn’t me.”

“I scared you.” He looked around the room as if searching for answers.

“Zac...someone *drugged* you. They took away your control.” She slipped her palms to the back of his neck. “But even when you were gone... part of you still knew me.”

“I could have hurt you.”

“I don’t think you would have. You had the opportunity to shoot me.” He flinched beneath her touch. “You could have shot Ryan the second he stepped inside the house. You didn’t.”

“If I’d done something—”

“You wouldn’t have. And you know what I remember most?” She leaned closer. “Every time you looked at me, you were fighting to come back. I could see it in your eyes.”

He blew out a long breath and touched his forehead to hers as he gripped her waist. “Shit, I love you.”

“I love you so much.” She closed that small space between their lips and kissed him.

And bit by bit she felt the muscles in his neck start to relax. His arms curved around her waist, and the tension that had been rolling off him in waves since he’d woken in the hospital finally started to soften.

He was just deepening the kiss, letting her taste him, when Zac’s phone vibrated. He glanced at the screen. “It’s the group chat.”

She read the message with him.

Ethan: Pen didn't make it.

Zac tensed beside her. She squeezed his arm.

Ethan: Gerome's still in surgery.

Ryan: A result of their own actions.

Tate: I got something to share too. As per instructions, I waited at the sheriff's station and took this clip for everyone to enjoy.

A video from Tate came through.

Zac hit play. Nora's jaw dropped at the sight of Sheriff Ward being hauled out of the station in cuffs.

"Get your hands off me!" Ward yelled. "I didn't do anything. They're all lying!"

Oh, that scumbag. Zac had passed on information about the suspicious conversation he'd overheard in the alley too. Good. The more they had against him, the better.

Ward continued to curse and fight the officers as they threw him into the back of a patrol car. The camera flicked around to Tate's face at the end. "I hope you enjoyed that as much as I did."

That put a small curve on Nora's lips.

"And let's hope we never see him again," Zac said, locking his cell.

"I wonder who our new sheriff will be. None of the deputies seem to have much experience."

"I'm not sure."

She grinned. "Maybe the county will ask you or one of the guys to be an interim sheriff before an election can be held. You've all proven leadership under pressure. What do you think of a new uniform?"

"Not really my thing. Maybe one of the others. They all like bossing people around, especially your brother."

She chuckled. "True. Are you hungry? Actually, other than Skittles, I'm not sure I left much here, but I could order something." She went to step away, but he tugged her back.

"I'm not hungry."

"No?"

"Not for food, anyway."

Her heart skipped a beat. "Is that right?"

"Yeah. That's right." His gaze darkened, shifting between her eyes. Then he kissed her again, diving straight into her mouth and tasting her.

“Fuck, I’m so grateful you’re okay.” He lifted her before laying her on the center of the bed. “And I will *never* let myself forget it.”

He kissed her again. And she was lost. Lost in Zac. In the love she felt for him. In the world they were creating for themselves.

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Nora tapped the screen of her phone to check the time. It was already four thirty. Not a surprise. It was her first day back at work in a week and a half. Her first day back since everything happened with Gerome and Pen and the drugs. Somehow, that day felt like both a lifetime ago and as if it was yesterday.

One of the best parts of taking the time off, time the principal had surprisingly encouraged her to take, was that she'd gotten to spend it with Zac. He hadn't needed help physically, but mentally, what happened that night had scared him. So she'd spent a lot of her time reassuring him, *reminding* him, that he hadn't hurt her. He hadn't hurt Ryan, and Joel had knocked him out before he could do anything he couldn't take back. He'd shot two intruders before they'd shot *them*.

A knock at the door had her straightening in her seat. "Yes?"

Adam stepped in and leaned against the doorframe. "First day back was so good you decided to sleep here?"

"First day was so *busy* I *could* sleep here."

"Don't do that. Those seats do not look comfy enough." He cocked his head. "You doing okay?"

"Yeah, I am, actually. It's good to be back and to put everything behind me. I spoke to Taylor. I'm so glad she's home with her mom and on the mend."

"I can't believe Toby stabbed her just so she didn't tell you he was distributing drugs. Hell, I can't believe he was involved in all of it."

Really? It hadn't surprised her at all.

Adam scratched his head. "I'm sorry about the key to your office."

She lifted a shoulder. "Not your fault."

Toby had admitted to stealing the key from Adam. A key that opened a number of offices in the school, not just hers. That's how he'd gotten inside to move things around in an attempt to mess with her.

After some pressure from police, he'd also admitted to seeing her address written down in the main office of the school. Apparently, he'd gone to throw rocks at her door all those weeks ago to mess with her. But that same night, he'd seen Polly use the spare key in the rock. That's when he'd stolen the studio key. It wasn't until he'd overheard her talking to Ryan about her mother that he'd decided to use it to mess with her.

Everything had aligned so perfectly for him.

"You mentioned that it didn't look like Gerome was going to pull through?" Adam asked.

"Yeah, it's not looking good." A lie. Gerome was on the brink of coming out of a coma. In fact, they thought today might be the day.

The feds were still in Deep River waiting to talk to him, and they didn't want anyone knowing, because then this Chem guy would likely flee town.

Adam nodded. "Well, guess he got what he deserved. As sad as that is."

"Yeah."

He tapped the doorframe. "You have a good night, Nora."

"You too."

The door closed behind him, and then it was just her again. Quickly, she saved the notes from her last couple of appointments and closed her laptop.

Maybe after dinner, Zac would want to watch another episode of *The Great British Bake Off*. He had three to go and he'd have officially watched every single one.

For some reason, he was trying to convince her to branch out. Watch some other shows, even if they were other baking shows. She'd tried a few. They just didn't hook her like *Bake Off*.

She'd just lifted her bag when her phone rang.

Her smile widened as she answered. "Almost an hour has passed since your last text. I was getting worried."

Zac's deep chuckle thrummed over the line. "Too much?"

"No such thing." She frowned at the background noise. Muffled voices, echoing footsteps. "Where are you?"

“The hospital. Gerome woke from the coma.”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “Wow. Have you or federal agents spoken to him about this Chem person?”

“Police are in there now. We’re just waiting in the hall.”

Nerves tickled her spine. This was the last piece of the puzzle, then it would be over. “Call me as soon as you know anything.”

“I will.” There was a small pause. “I saw Taylor here.”

“You did?”

The teenager had gotten out of the hospital a few days ago. Nora had visited her and she was recovering well, but Taylor’s energy had been low. She and her mom hadn’t spoken about the move again, so Nora was worried it wouldn’t happen now.

“Did you talk to her?” Nora asked, nibbling her bottom lip.

“Yeah. She stopped and said hi. She was actually with her aunt. She was here for her last checkup before her flight. They’re leaving tonight.”

Air whooshed from Nora’s chest, relief dropping her shoulders. Thank God. She’d been so worried. Not just about the physical injuries Taylor had sustained, but that the entire incident would give her mother time to change her mind and keep Taylor in Deep River.

“Are you okay?” Zac asked gently.

“Just relieved.” And slightly emotional. “All right, I’m going to get out of here before I do something crazy like work for another hour.”

“You do that and I’ll have to come drag your ass out. Or I’ll get Tate to do it before he leaves.”

“Tate’s here?”

“He’ll be there in five minutes. He’s grabbing the SAR equipment I left in Adam’s office.”

“I’ll get it for him. I think Adam’s gone, but my key opens his office. Where did you leave it?”

“It should be under a desk. I’m surprised Adam left—he said he’d wait for Tate.”

“He probably forgot. Either that or the couch at home was calling.” Neither would surprise her. She rose and moved to the door. “Good luck with the Gerome stuff.”

“Thanks. I love you.”

She stepped into the hall. “Love you too.”

She hung up and pushed her cell into her back pocket, nerves racing up her spine that they were finally going to find out who designed the drug. Right now, they had no idea. Because what local knew how to do that sort of thing? No one she was aware of.

She knocked on Adam's door and waited. When he didn't answer, she tried the handle.

Locked.

She lifted the key from the chain around her neck and unlocked the door before stepping inside Adam's office. The overhead light was on.

Anyone else and she'd hesitate before unlocking their office door, but Adam had a very low care factor for most things. Most days he had half the school football team in here eating lunch.

She scanned the room. There were bags everywhere. Most of them half open, with balls and jerseys visible inside.

A plain black bag beneath the desk caught her attention. It was different from the others. It was bigger, clean, and completely zipped closed.

She laughed to herself as she crossed the room and crouched to unzip the bag.

Flashlights. First-aid kits. Rope.

Yep. This was a SAR bag.

She was about to lift it when something inside the half-open bottom desk drawer caught her attention. An envelope. But it was what was *on* the envelope that had her heart picking up speed.

Chem.

With trembling fingers, she reached into the drawer and pulled it out. It was a stupid thing to do. She shouldn't touch it. Hell, she should be getting the hell out of there and calling the police. But she had to know what was inside.

The envelope was heavy as she lifted it. She peeked in, and her heart stopped.

Money. Lots and lots of money. God, there had to be thousands of dollars.

That's why police never found a money trail from Gerome's accounts... he was paying in cash.

"You weren't supposed to see that."

Nora gasped and shot to her feet, the envelope dropping from her fingers. "Adam. I...I thought you went home."

He closed the door and flicked the lock, an expression she'd never seen before distorting his features. A mix of suspicion and annoyance and... something else. Something more dangerous. "I forgot something." He looked down at the envelope, eyes narrowing.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "Saving for a rainy day?"

That was her best option. Play it dumb. He didn't know police were searching for this Chem.

"Something like that." He stepped toward her.

"I should go." She offered a tight smile, but as she stepped toward the door, Adam didn't shift out the way.

"You know what I find strange?" He shoved a hand into his pocket. "Feds and state police are still in town."

"Well, I mean, city council hasn't appointed an interim sheriff yet."

"They're not just in town," he continued, like she hadn't spoken. "They're at the hospital. Why would they be there if Gerome was at death's door?"

She gripped the edge of the rolling chair beside her, nerves running down to her fingertips. "I don't know."

"I went there today. The hospital."

"You did?"

"Yeah. Zac was there too. And a few members of his team. It looked like they were waiting for something."

"I don't know much about Zac's work."

"No? So when you asked Zac if he'd spoken to police about Chem, what did that mean?"

Her lungs constricted. "You were listening to my call?"

"Of course I was listening. I've been watching and listening all day."

"That's why they never found the drugs the night of the dance, isn't it? You took them?"

"The boys don't know I'm Chem. I just offered to take anything they needed to hide. They thought I was being a cool teacher. Which I was. I was also the one who recommended Toby be the school distributor."

"You're the reason he's in jail right now."

Adam laughed. "Nora, work in a school as long as I have, and you come to recognize the kids who have no hope of a good future. He would have ended up there with or without my help."

"I'd like to go."

“Can’t let you do that. I put a lot of work into Blue Cherry. I’m the one who found the location. The cover guy. The distributors. I was the biggest player, which means I have the most to lose. If I let you go, you’ll tell everyone. Not only will all that time I put in be wasted, but I’ll go to jail.”

“I won’t tell anyone.” She internally cringed. Because it sounded as hollow when she said it out loud as it did in her head. But what else could she say?

“I don’t believe you. I think if I let you go, you’ll run off to your little boyfriend and tell him everything before I have the chance to hightail it out of here.”

“Lock me in this office. Take my phone.” Anything for him to let her live.

“Or...” He grabbed a large trophy from a floating wall shelf. “I could knock you out. Make sure you don’t wake up for a long time. Or ever.”

Her heart slammed against her ribs.

Suddenly, he shot forward, trophy raised above his head.

She moved on instinct, yanking the rolling chair toward her and shoving it into his shins.

He stumbled back, the trophy swinging through the air inches from her head, the edge of the marble base catching the filing cabinets.

She ducked beneath his arm and raced toward the door, but before she could reach it, fingers gripped her hair and yanked her back. Pain seared her skull. She tried to dig in her heels but had no way to anchor herself. She hit the floor, landing at Adam’s feet.

He lifted the trophy again, but before he could slam it down on her, she kicked, getting him between the legs.

The trophy dropped. She rolled to the side, narrowly avoiding getting hit.

She’d barely pushed up to all fours when his weight dropped to her back and his arm locked around her throat, digging into her windpipe.

She clawed at his flesh, panic making her clumsy.

She couldn’t breathe.

Zac paced the hospital hallway, waiting for the police officers to step out of Gerome's room. Every minute felt like a fucking hour.

He didn't want to be out here. He wanted to be in *there*, getting the information they needed from Gerome firsthand. But at least it was the feds doing the work, not their old sheriff.

Ryan leaned against the wall. Even though he looked calm, Zac knew he wasn't. Ethan stood beside him, arms crossed, a deep frown on his brow.

All three of them were waiting, and the rest of the team was waiting for their text with a name. Who exactly that name would be, Zac had no fucking clue. Who had the knowledge of how to build a synthetic drug in this town?

After what felt like hours, but was more likely minutes, the door opened and two officers stepped out, Turner and Watts.

Ryan pushed off the wall. "Did he tell you who it is?"

Turner nodded. "A teacher by the name of Adam Sawyer."

Blood drained from Zac's head. "*What?*"

"We got the office to do a background check," Watts said. "His last job was teaching high school chemistry in Gardiner. Explains the nickname. A similar drug problem popped up over there, and he suddenly put in his resignation. That's when he came here."

Zac's heart started to beat faster as he looked at Ryan. "Nora."

Ryan frowned. "What about her?"

“She’s still at school. She was going into Adam’s office to get the SAR bag.” He cursed and pulled out his cell to call her.

Come on, Nora, pick up.

She didn’t.

Fuck.

“Tate,” Ryan said quickly.

Zac hit his friend’s number next.



TATE WILDER CLIMBED from his truck and crossed the parking lot toward the school.

This still didn’t feel real. Being here. Being out of the Navy.

And losing his mother.

Pain squeezed his chest, but he pushed it down.

Fuck, he’d loved his mom. His father had died when he was three, and his mother had raised him alone, apart from a brief marriage to his stepfather when he was six. That lasted all of five minutes. Of course, that was how he’d gotten his half-brother, Dale.

He shook his head. He couldn’t think about Dale right now. The jerk didn’t deserve his time or energy. His mother should be all he thought about.

Fuck cancer. Fuck any sickness that could so unapologetically take good people out of this world. It was the second time she’d fought it. They’d thought it was gone. It *should* have been gone. She did the work. She got better. She’d deserved to live.

She hadn’t. She was gone, while he was still here, and he had too much fucking time on his hands right now.

He liked being busy. Even when he wasn’t dealing with the grief of losing his mother, he liked to know exactly what he was doing and why he was doing it.

The only good thing to come out of the last month was that he was back with his team. Having them at the funeral had helped. Following them back to Deep River had been a no-brainer.

And this town felt like a good fit. Small, cozy...everyone seemed to know everyone else.

He just needed something meaningful to do with his time.

Ryan had been approached by the county to fill the interim sheriff's position. He'd turned it down because he already had a job he loved. He wanted to be out in the woods, leading search and rescue.

That's when Ryan had approached *Tate* about the position.

But the county and its residents didn't know Tate. They might not want him. Hell, *he* didn't know if he wanted to do it. Or if he was in the right head space.

He knew why Ryan had suggested it though. Tate's father had been a sheriff who'd died in the line of duty. And Tate had always said if he retired from the military, he'd go into law enforcement. He just wasn't sure if this was the right time or place. This town didn't trust him. And there would be a hell of a lot of mistrust for the sheriff's office after what their *last* sheriff had done.

He stepped into the school hallway, taking in the rows of metal lockers. The trophy cases against one wall.

When was the last time he'd been in a school? A long fucking time ago.

He was halfway down the hall when his phone rang, Zac's name on the screen. "Hey."

"Are you at the school?"

Tate stopped at the urgency in his voice. "Yeah. Going to the office you told me to head to now. What's wrong?"

"Adam, the gym teacher, is Chem. And Nora was going to his office to grab the SAR bag. Now she's not answering her phone."

"Shit." He started moving again, faster this time.

"Her office is right next to his. Maybe she's still there but—"

"I'll check both."

"We're coming now." Zac paused for a second. "Tate...keep her safe for me."

"I'll protect her with my life." Shit, he wasn't carrying though.

He shoved his cell into his back pocket as he reached the end of the hall. He checked the first office. It had "School Counselor" on the door, but the room was empty.

He shifted his attention to the office beside hers and tried the handle.

Locked.

A muffled cry sounded from the other side of the door, then a hollow clang of something dropping, followed by silence.

Fuck.

He took a step back and kicked the frame just beside the handle where the latch bolt seated into the strike plate, driving all his weight through his heel in one concentrated point of force.

The frame cracked but held.

He did it again.

This time, the strike plate tore free of the splintered wood, and the door flew inward, slamming against the opposite wall.

A man shot to his feet, Nora pinned to his chest, his forearm locked across her throat as she clawed at his skin.

“Who the fuck are you?” the guy yelled.

“Let her go. Now.” His voice was hard. Flat. He took a big step forward, his gaze sweeping Nora. She was pale, her lips parted like she couldn’t get air.

“Get the hell—”

Tate shot across the room before the guy finished the sentence.

The man shoved Nora forward. Tate caught her as she gasped for air. He didn’t have time to check on her before the asshole reached for a big trophy on the floor.

As the guy swung it at them, Tate hooked his left arm around Nora and pulled her behind him in one quick sweep. He caught the trophy mid-swing with his right hand.

The asshole’s eyes widened, as if he was shocked Tate could move so fast.

Tate lunged forward, head-butting the guy, forehead straight to nose.

The asshole released the trophy. Tate threw it behind him, a loud crash sounding as it hit the floor.

“It’s over,” he barked at the man.

But the idiot was obviously dumber than he looked. He growled and swung his fist blindly at Tate, still clutching his nose with the other hand. The punch was all rage and no aim. It arched wildly, and Tate simply leaned out of its path before delivering one hard blow to the side of the guy’s head.

He dropped.

Tate remained where he was for a second, waiting to see if the man got up. He didn’t. He was out.

Good.

Tate turned toward Nora, who was on the floor now, to see her panting, her hands on her throat, and her eyes wide.

He crouched in front of her and gentled his voice. "Hey. Can I see?"

She lowered her trembling hands.

He barely bit back the growl at the red skin. It would bruise.

Maybe the asshole would get up and Tate could take another swing.

"I'm okay," she whispered.

Not true. She was in shock. But at least her *voice* sounded okay, meaning there was no damage to her windpipe. "You will be. Police and feds are on their way. And so are Zac and Ryan."



NORA WATCHED Adam's unmoving body.

She still couldn't believe it was him. He'd been making the drugs. He'd orchestrated the entire thing, then watched passively as kids went into psychotic meltdowns. As students almost *died*.

A shudder coursed down her spine.

Tate was still with her. He'd called an ambulance and Zac and strategically placed his body between her and Adam, just in case he woke up.

A bang suddenly sounded somewhere in the school. A door slamming open. Then loud, thudding footsteps.

"Nora?"

Her pulse picked up at the sound of Zac's voice.

The door burst open and Zac raced in, followed by Ryan.

Zac stopped in front of her and gripped her shoulders. "Are you hurt?" He scanned her body, searching.

"Not really." Her voice was raspy, and she cringed at the ache in her throat, slowly getting worse every time she swallowed.

He growled. "You *are* hurt."

"He had her in a chokehold when I came in," Tate said, voice low and angry. *All* these men were angry.

Both Zac and Ryan looked at the still-unconscious teacher like they were going to kill him.

"It could have been worse," she whispered.

If Tate hadn't been there, it would have been so much worse.

Zac pulled her into a gentle hug, and she melted into him. Into his familiar warmth and strength, just letting him hold her for a while.

The moment that hug finished, Ryan tugged her close. "Shit, Nora, I was worried sick." His voice was so pained and unguarded, it was almost unfamiliar.

"I'm just glad you're here." She leaned her head against her big brother's chest.

Things moved quickly after that. Zac took her out of the office to wait at the front of the school. Police and paramedics took Adam out on a stretcher, his wrists cuffed. And she spoke to officers, telling them everything, from finding the envelope of cash labeled "Chem" in Adam's office, to Tate knocking Adam out.

Tate and Ryan were talking to police when Zac pulled her to the side. "We need to get you to the hospital."

"I don't want a hospital."

"Nora. He tried to choke you. *You* should have gotten the ambulance, not that asshole."

She swallowed, and right on cue, her throat ached. "I just have a bit of a bruised throat. I want to go home."

His jaw clenched, gaze moving around the front of the school like he was debating whether to push the issue.

She grazed his jaw with her thumb. "It's over."

His eyes returned to her, so dark and intense they were almost black. "When I couldn't reach you, I was so fucking scared."

"I'm sorry."

"*You* have nothing to be sorry about."

"Thank God Tate got here when he did." Her gaze moved to Tate's back, the tension all but rolling off him.

Zac pulled her attention back to him with a palm on her cheek. "We got lucky."

She closed her eyes and leaned her temple to his chest. "I think it's going to take me a while to truly wrap my head around Adam's involvement. Gerome and Pen and Toby didn't surprise me. But Adam did."

"I know. I saw him every week and I didn't see it."

"No one did. He played the laid-back gym teacher well." She shook her head, a frown forming between her brows. "This town's lost a lot of people

these last few weeks. The sheriff. Two barbers. A gym teacher.”

“A couple of deputies have also left.”

“It’s going to hit Deep River pretty hard.”

“The town will rebuild and be better for it. Can’t really get much worse than Ward.”

She chuckled.

His eyes darkened. “I like that sound.”

“My laugh?”

“Yeah.” He leaned in and touched his forehead to hers. “Shit, I love you. I could have lost you tonight.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Pierce.”

A smile curved his mouth. “Thank God.”

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Nora traced the faint scar beside Zac's hairline. Then the faint lines beside his eyes.

Laugh lines. He'd been doing more laughing this last week. The first few days after everything happened with Adam, he'd barely smiled. He'd been quiet and on edge, waiting for the next thing to pop up.

"You're staring."

His words brought a smile to her lips. "So?"

He shot her a glance. "You've been staring the entire drive."

"You mean the entire five minutes it took us to get here?"

Zac pulled into the parking lot behind Trap. Once he parked, he scanned the lot. "It's not too busy."

"Because it's like five p.m. and we're the nanas of Deep River."

He chuckled before looking at her. "You sure you're up for this?" His gaze lowered to her neck as if the bruising was still there. It wasn't.

"I think it's me who should be asking *you* that question."

His jaw flexed, focus going to the windshield. "I hate that I didn't know it was him."

"No one knew it was Adam."

"I was around him every time I went to that school. I saw how close he was to those boys. I should have asked Ethan to look into him. One search would have told us he had a background in chemistry."

"Hey." She cupped his cheek, drawing his attention back to her. "It's over. He's behind bars. Gerome, Ward, and Toby are behind bars too. We're

safe.”

“Let’s hope they all stay there.”

She nodded. They would. The only one of them who might stand a chance at bail was Ward. Yes, he’d verbally threatened her, but he never got physical and he apparently had no violent history. Plus, there was no evidence to show he was involved in the drug business.

“Come on.” She squeezed his thigh. “Let’s get in there and celebrate this new role of Tate’s.”

“I can’t believe we’re actually going to have a decent sheriff in this town.”

She grinned as she climbed from the car. After Tate took down Adam, Ryan had suggested him to the county commissioners for the interim sheriff’s job, and they offered him the position. “Acting sheriff. Just until the next election, right?”

Zac took her hand and led her toward the door. “That’s still over two years away. And by that time, the town will have seen what he can do and locals will vote for him.”

“As long as Tate still wants it and runs.”

Zac chuckled. “The town had better treat him good then.”

They pushed inside and Nora grinned at the sight of everyone near the pool table. Tate, Joel, and Polly held cue sticks. Ryan had his arm around Emily, and they were talking to Connor and Raven. Maggie and Ethan were at the bar talking to Dusty.

“Have I told you how much I love this town?” she asked softly.

“Best damn place I know.” He squeezed her hand before tugging her toward the group.

Zac stopped to chat with some of the guys while Nora gave Emily and Raven hugs.

“How are you?” Emily asked.

Nora smiled. “I’m good. Really good, actually.”

“Are you back at work?” Raven asked gently.

“Monday will be my first day back.” Although, she’d had a lot of those “first days back” lately. Hopefully this would be the last. “I’ve popped into the school a couple of times though. Everyone’s reeling after finding out what Adam did.”

Emily nodded. “I’m sure.”

She shook her head. “We shouldn’t think about that now. Tonight’s about celebrating Tate being here and taking the sheriff’s position.”

“I just hope Ward doesn’t get bail,” Emily said quietly. “Can you imagine?”

Nora winced. “He’ll be furious.”

“He’ll be out for revenge,” Raven said, almost under her breath. “They won’t give him bail. Surely.”

A silence fell over them, because none of them could guarantee that.

Ryan suddenly slipped an arm around her shoulders. “Nora Slade in a bar without a drink? Am I seeing this right?”

She rolled her eyes and gave Ryan a big shove. One he didn’t so much as budge from. “I can be in a bar without a drink. Do I like it? No. But it’s possible.”

He laughed. “Come on.”

When they reached the bar, Dusty stopped in front of them. “Aperol spritz?”

“Another reason to love this town.” Nora looked at Ryan. “The owner of the best bar in town knows my drink.”

“My one job. I serve drinks in my sleep.” Dusty looked at Ryan. “Another beer?”

“And one for Zac.”

“You got it.”

Dusty grabbed their drinks, but even after she and Ryan had been served, they didn’t move back to the others right away.

Ryan sipped his beer, eyes intense as he studied her. “You doing okay?”

“Better than okay. Following you here might just be the best decision I’ve ever made.” She tilted her head from one side to the other. “Could have done without the whole drugs, Toby, and Adam situation, but—”

“I’m still so fucking angry about that.”

“That’s a dollar in the swear jar, Ryan Slade.”

“You know if I actually put a dollar in the jar every time I cursed—”

“You’d be financially ruined. I know. You all would be.”

He laughed.

She sipped her drink and scanned the bar, only stopping when she found Zac. Immediately, he pulled his gaze from his friends and looked at her, one side of his mouth lifting. A familiar shudder ran down her spine.

Would that always happen? Would she always feel his gaze everywhere?

"I don't know if I ever said this to you directly," Ryan said, drawing her attention back to him. "But I'm really fucking happy for you both."

"Wow. If there hadn't been a curse word in there, that would have been really fucking sweet."

He laughed again.

"Seriously though, thank you." She reached for his hand and squeezed. "Not every big brother would have been okay with their little sister dating their best friend."

"Only because I have some pretty good friends."

"You do." Her smile softened, and she took a second before saying the next part. "Now it's my turn. Thank you for everything you did while we were growing up."

"You don't—"

"I *do*. If it wasn't for you, I'm not sure I would have survived our childhood. And even if I had, I don't think I would have come out of it so unscathed. Or at least, mostly unscathed. Thank you. For protecting me. For loving me. And for keeping your shit together when Mom couldn't."

"I'd do anything for you, Nora. You know that."

Tears stung her eyes. She wrapped her arms around her brother's middle and hugged him. "I love you so freaking much."

"I love you too." He kissed the top of her head.

And God, but it felt like she had everything she'd always craved growing up. Safety. Love. And a home she wanted to stay in forever.



ZAC WATCHED as Nora stood at the bar talking to Ryan.

He'd barely been able to take his eyes off her this last week. Knowing the woman he loved had been in danger, but not being there to protect her, was a torture he wouldn't wish on his worst enemy. Even the memory tormented him.

"You really love her, huh?"

He dragged his eyes from Nora to look at Tate, who stood next to him with a cue stick. "She owns me. And I'll always be indebted to you for

saving her life.”

“You’ve saved my ass more times than I can count. Trust me, the debt is with me.” He leaned over the table and hit the white ball, sinking one of his own.

“How are you doing with everything?” Zac asked. “Your mom. Being out.”

Tate straightened. “I was feeling a bit lost. But now that I have a new job, I have some direction again. It feels good.”

“You had any pushback?”

“I haven’t put the uniform on yet, so the only pushback has been the deputies who transferred back when Ward lost his badge. Everyone else I come in contact with seems grateful I took over. It surprised me, because they don’t even know me.”

“They know us though. And you’re one of us.” Zac leaned over the table, lining up his shot. “Plus, they know you can’t possibly be worse than Ward.” Miss. Dammit.

“He was the sheriff for over thirty years. How did he last that long?”

“Guess no one else wanted it.”

“I’ve hired a new deputy. He put in an application and is apparently a local who’s been living away. I’m hoping he’s good.”

“As long as he doesn’t have a son running a drug business.” Shit, it felt too soon to joke about that.

Ethan came to stand by the table. “Tate tell you that we searched Ward’s office?”

Zac straightened. “For information on the missing and murdered women and Lotus?”

There’d been so much going on, Zac hadn’t thought about any of that in a while.

“Yeah.” Frustration rippled over Ethan’s features. “I was so fucking sure he was involved and we’d find something.”

“He might still know something. Maybe he just wasn’t dumb enough to keep it at the office.” Zac looked at Tate. “So the guys have you up-to-date on that?”

“Five missing or dead women dating back twenty-five years, Maggie’s mother being one of them. A phone found in the floorboards at Bloom belonging to one of the missing women. She texted the person she suspected to be the killer and had photos of the forest and the old

Connoway mansion. One of the missing women was a journalist who came here to research something called Lotus.”

“That about sums it up,” Zac said.

Ethan glanced over at Maggie. “I really need to solve this for her. If her mother was murdered, I want to know who did it and why.”

“We won’t stop until we have some answers,” Zac promised.

Arms suddenly slipped around his waist from behind. Familiar arms. And a familiar vanilla scent.

He turned. Even after all this time, one look into her eyes still felt like a fucking gut kick. “Anyone ever tell you that you should never sneak up on a former SEAL?”

“Never heard that before. Like ever. In fact, I think the saying is that you *can* never sneak up on a former SEAL. As in, he’d hear you coming.” She cocked her head, a small grin on her lips. “Losing your edge, Pierce?”

His lips twitched. “I think you’re the only one who could ever sneak up on me.”

“I hold that much power?”

“More.”

“I like that.” Her smile softened. “Are you glad we came out tonight?”

“I mean, I’ll always choose to have you all to myself, but this is good too.”

“Aw.” Tate slung an arm around Zac’s shoulders. “That almost sounds like you kind of hate us.”

Zac scoffed. “It wouldn’t be smart to hate our new sheriff.”

“You’re right. I expect a lot of ass-kissing.”

“Donuts too,” Joel called from a table. “Ask for donuts. It was probably the one thing Ward did right.”

“Maybe skip the jam down the shirt though.” Zac lifted a shoulder. “People might have some PTSD from Ward in that regard.”

At Tate’s silence, Zac glanced at him to see his gaze was focused on the bar. Zac followed it.

Not on the bar. On a *woman* at the bar. She had long dark hair and wore high-waisted navy jeans, ankle boots, and a fitted white Henley.

Zac grinned as he looked back at Tate. “Someone catch your eye?”

Tate’s gaze swung to the pool table. “It’s your turn.”

Zac hit the cue ball, finally sinking one of his.

“I think you’re my lucky charm,” he said to Nora.

“That's a lot of pressure. I was just planning on being cute and distracting.”

“You can be both of those.” He kissed her cheek. “And everything else.”

“Hm, I like that.” She leaned back, smiling as she cupped his cheek. “In fact, I think I like just about everything about you, Zachary Pierce.”

He cringed. “Zachary?”

“I heard your mom use it. I think I will too.”

“Don't do that.”

She frowned. “What would you like me to call you then?”

“How about the ultimate love of your life?”

She ran her hands over his chest. “Didn't think that needed to be said out loud.”

“A little reminder here and there wouldn't hurt.”

Her lips curved, and she rose to her toes and hovered her lips just beneath his. “You, Zac Pierce, are *the* love of my life. And I don't see that changing, *ever*.”

“Promise?”

“Cross my heart. Am I the love of *your* life?”

“Yeah, I think you are. Weird obsession with Skittles and *The Great British Bake Off* and all.”

She chuckled. “Admit it...you love that show as much as me now.” Her breath brushed over his lips.

“I admit nothing.” Then he kissed her, and fuck, but his life had never felt so full.

Tate straightened from the pool table. He'd missed. Not a surprise. He wasn't concentrating on the game. He wasn't even concentrating on the guys.

Since the woman in the Henley had stepped into the bar, he didn't seem capable of concentrating on anything but her. He wasn't even sure why. He didn't know her. Had never seen her before in his life.

Yeah, she was pretty, with her big doe eyes and the way her dark, almost black hair rolled down her back. And those goddamn jeans were doing things to her ass that he had no business noticing.

But why did he suddenly feel the need to hear her voice? To know whether it was soft and gentle or firm and strong?

What was wrong with him?

Ryan, who'd taken over for Zac, cleared his throat. "Your turn."

Shit.

He looked at the table, noticing Ryan had sunk one of his balls. He'd sunk a *lot* of his balls, actually. He was kicking Tate's ass.

Tate leaned over, lined up his shot, and sent the cue ball rolling. It clipped the target ball, but it didn't find a pocket.

"Distracted?" Ryan asked.

"Only with the new job." He forced himself not to look at the woman again. To focus on Ryan. Just Ryan. "I've replaced the guys who quit, thankfully."

“The idiots probably loved never having to do any work.” Ryan lined up his own shot and sank another of his balls. “You sure this isn’t too soon after getting out and losing your mom?”

A familiar ache punched at his chest. “I need to keep busy. And I can still focus on the job regardless of what I’m going through.”

“I know that.”

A small smile pulled at his lips. “Mom would *love* that I’m a sheriff. Even if it’s just temporary. She’s probably smiling down at me right now.”

“Just like your dad.”

“Yeah. A sheriff like my old man. I have almost no real memories of him. I was too young when he died, but the stories Mom told me made me think I did.” This time, he sank one of his balls.

Finally.

“You get the office all sorted?” Ryan asked.

“Pretty much. Sorry I didn’t find anything on those women or this Lotus.”

“Maybe Ward didn’t know anything about it. Probably too much of an idiot to keep it quiet all these years.” Ryan lined up his next ball. “Your new deputy’s arriving next week?”

“Yeah. Name’s Keller.”

There was a small grimace from Ryan.

“What?” Tate asked.

“Nothing. Just never met a Keller I liked.”

“He’s apparently a homegrown local but has been working with the state police for the last few years.”

“As long as he’s a good guy.”

Tate glanced at the woman again. She was sipping some kind of red drink with a strawberry on the edge of the glass and chatting with Dusty.

A local?

“I think Ward might make bail,” Tate said, looking back at Ryan. “We should expect trouble.”

Ryan’s jaw clenched. “Yeah. You in particular, seeing as you’ve got his job.”

Tate could handle whatever the idiot threw at him. He’d handled worse in the military. He’d faced off with the scum of the earth and still come out on top.

His phone rang from his pocket. And he already knew exactly who it was. Still, he pulled out the cell and checked the screen.

“Dale?” Ryan asked.

Tate locked the screen and shoved it back into his pocket. “How’d you know?”

“The look of utter frustration on your face.”

His half-brother was six years younger than him, but they were anything but close. “I don’t hear from him in five years, Mom dies, and he’s suddenly calling multiple times a day.”

“What does he want?”

“Don’t know. I’m not answering his calls.”

“If he wanted to talk to you so badly, he would have shown up to his mother’s funeral.”

“Exactly.”

His phone vibrated in his pocket a second time. Again, Tate ignored it.

It was on the fifth call in thirty minutes that Tate lost his shit and moved into the hall to answer the call. “*What, Dale?*”

“You answered.”

“Yes, I fucking answered. You won’t leave me alone.”

There was a beat of silence. “The lawyer called.”

“I know. He told you about your inheritance and the time of Mom’s funeral. But maybe you only heard the first part, because you were conveniently absent when we buried Mom.”

“Yeah, uh, sorry. I tried to book a flight but—”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t lie to me. I’ve heard it all before.” Not only was Dale a fucking liar, he was also a gambler and a thief. “What do you want?”

“I showed up at Mom’s house. I guess your house now. It had a for sale sign up.”

“And?”

“And you’re selling Mom’s home? That was our family home.”

Tate laughed, but it came out like a scoff. “Don’t pretend you’re even a little sentimental. She left me the house because you already stole your inheritance years ago. I can do what I want with the place, and she would want a new family living there.”

“Because you knew her so well? You were always off in the military.”

“And yet I still managed to see her more than you.”

A sharp laugh cut over the line. “Okay, you fucking golden child. So, if you’re not in Wallace, where are you?”

“The fucking moon. Leave me alone and don’t call again.” He hung up, blood raging.

They hadn’t spoken in five years, and for good goddamn reason. Because five years ago, their mother had first been diagnosed with breast cancer. And what had Dale done? Instead of helping her, he’d stolen from her. Taken her money, money that should have been spent on chemo, and spent it on his fucking gambling habit.

Tate’s fingers were still too tight around the cell when he stepped back into the bar to see the girl in the white Henley in conversation with a guy. A guy who, given the way she was inching away from him as he leaned in close, she didn’t want to be in conversation with.

He closed the space between them in a few quick strides.

“Are you sure? Because I’d love to get your number.” The guy glanced at her breasts, then back up to her face.

Tate slipped an arm around the woman’s shoulders. “Hi, honey. Sorry I’m late.”

Her gaze swung to his, her brow furrowing.

“You have a boyfriend?” The guy pulled back, the bewildered expression making him look like a fucking idiot.

Tate offered a hand. “I’m Tate.”

The guy glanced at his hand, up at Tate, then back to her. “I’ve got to go.”

As soon as he walked away, the woman slipped out from beneath his arm and turned to face him. “I didn’t need saving.”

Well, that was *kind* of like a thank you...but not. “Just trying to help. I could call him back if you—”

“God, no. I was a second away from throwing my drink in his face. The only reason I didn’t was because that man *did not* deserve my strawberry daiquiri.”

“I could order a beer in a glass. We could throw that?”

“You might just be onto something.” Her lips curved slightly. It wasn’t a full smile. Maybe not even a half. Either way, it was gorgeous. “The night’s not over yet. Maybe order one in case he comes back.” She lifted her drink from the bar and sipped.

Zac turned to Dusty. "I'll take a beer. Anything's fine."

The woman's smile widened a bit.

Dusty set down the beer, and Tate looked back to the woman.

"I'm Jaime, by the way."

"It's nice to meet you, Jaime. I'm Tate Wilder."

"Giving me your last name too. I like it."

"Have *you* got a last name?"

"I do."

His lips twitched. She was going to make him work for it. Why did he like that so much? "Come here often?"

"Not recently. I used to spend my summers here. I've just come back to help a family member who's going through a rough time." Her brows flickered, like whatever it was hurt her, as well.

"I'm sorry."

She lifted a shoulder. "Hopefully, he'll be okay. I wanted to come back anyway. My grandmother left me a house, so I may as well live in it."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a pianist. I play and teach. I'll take a little break from teaching while I'm here though."

"Wow. I've never met a musician." He leaned his hip against the bar. "Where do you play?"

"Everywhere. I do live performances. I also have my music on various streaming devices. I won't lie and say I'm raking it in, but I'm doing what I love."

He could hear that. Everything about her softened as she spoke about her music. "It's always good to do what you love."

"Do you do what *you* love?" She lifted her drink again.

"I *did*. I just got out of the military."

Her glass stopped halfway to her mouth, an odd expression coming over her face. "The military?"

"Yeah. The guys over there were in my team. They're now search and rescue."

A bit of color left her face as she glanced around him at the guys.

He frowned. "Are you okay?"

"*That's* the SAR team?" There was anger in her voice. A lot of it. "And what do *you* do now?"

"I'm acting as interim sheriff."

Her jaw dropped. But the shock only lasted for a second before it was quickly replaced with rage. Cold hard rage.

He was caught so off guard, he didn't have time to brace before she threw his beer in his face.

"My last name's Ward. Rodney, the sheriff your team accused of unspeakable things, is my uncle. You're a bunch of assholes and liars. Don't talk to me again. *Ever.*"

Then she stormed out of the bar without a backward glance.

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Nyssa Kathryn is a romantic suspense author. She lives in South Australia with hubby and two daughters and takes every chance she can to be plotting and writing. Always an avid reader of romance novels, she considers alpha males and happily-ever-afters to be her jam.

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