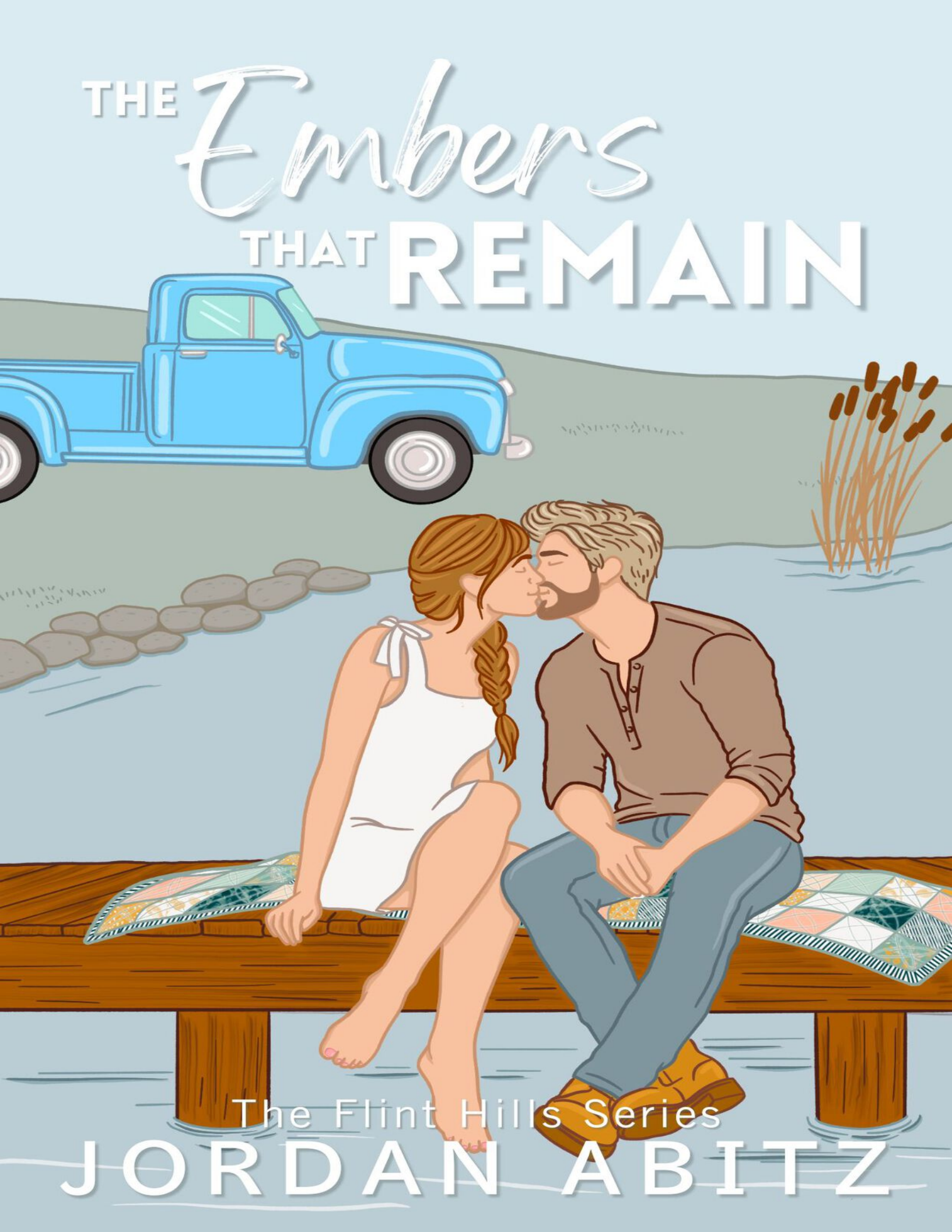

THE Embers THAT REMAIN
The Flint Hills Series
JORDAN ABITZ

THE Embers THAT REMAIN

A NOVEL



The Flint Hills Series

JORDAN ABITZ

OceanofPDF.com

This is a work of fiction. Unless otherwise indicated, all the names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents in this book are either the product of the author’s imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or events, is purely coincidental. Following the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the publisher's permission is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use material from this book (other than for review purposes), you must obtain prior written permission by contacting the publisher at authorjordanabitz@gmail.com. All rights reserved. For information on getting permission for reprints and excerpts, contact authorjordanabitz@gmail.com.

2026 by C.J. Walker Publishing LLC and Jordan Abitz

No part of this book (words or artwork) may be used to train artificial intelligence.

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-9963311-4-7

Paperback ISBN: 979-8-9963311-5-4

Copyedit and Proofreading: Alicia Whitaker @aliciasalwaysreading

Cover and Illustrations: Erika Plum Customs

Formatting: C.J. Walker Publishing LLC

OceanofPDF.com

Dedication

For every son and daughter
brave enough to forge a new path.
For those who chose to heal what hurt them rather than pass it on.
I’m proud of you.

OceanofPDF.com

Books by Jordan Abitz

The Magic of Light

The Embers That Remain

Children's Books by Jordi Lou

I Hear Whispers Under My Bed: A Story About Bravery

My Brain is a Wonder: A Story About ADHD

When I Feel Safe: A Story About PTSD

My Patchwork Family: A Story About Belonging

OceanofPDF.com

A Note from Jordan

I spent quite a bit of time considering whether I was going to write this letter because it required vulnerability, and the older I get, the more I feel inclined to withhold the pieces of me that feel too raw, too open, because I might be misunderstood. Sometimes it's just easier not to rock the boat, even if it may need to be flipped upside down. As with everything in my life, I evaluated what the most loving choice would be, and I decided that being misunderstood is a small price to pay when it comes to something that matters this much.

I hope that when you read Lane and Cali's story, you see two people who obliterated their family trees and left behind a legacy different from the one they inherited.

We all have perceptions of what "normal" is that are shaped by the way we were raised. Sometimes, things need to be shaken to see whether they can stand on their own two feet. If something is true, it can withstand being tested without being propped up. Sometimes a storm makes us realize, through experience, just how unwavering things really are.

Like a lot of children in the 1990s, I grew up in the "pray it away" culture. But I couldn't comprehend why I was supposed to pray away a chemical imbalance when I was supposed to take acetaminophen for pain. I couldn't make it make sense in my mind.

I began to wonder if everyone felt as deeply as I did, and if they experienced the same social anxiety I did. Several years ago, I was involved in a series of bank robberies that targeted the location where I worked. Ever

since then, I've become increasingly aware of how much I wanted to stay away from crowded places and unknown people.

Last year, I remember telling my sister, and then my best friends, "If I feel this way in a couple months, I'm going to do something." That "something" was going to see a doctor. I felt like I needed qualifiers to ask for help.

The more I researched SSRIs, the more I realized that they can sometimes take up to eight weeks to become truly effective—and I couldn't wait that long.

So I went to a walk-in clinic. I had finally gathered enough courage to ask for help. I remember saying, "I don't know what to say other than I don't think I should feel this way when my life is this great."

That day, I walked away with a prescription that changed my life. Maybe I'll take it for the rest of my life; maybe I won't. But it was what I needed then.

I understand that this is not everyone's story, but it is mine.

And maybe that is what breaking a generational cycle looks like sometimes—it's not always rejecting where you came from, but being willing to question the premise of what you inherited. It means getting into the weeds and uprooting the things that no longer serve a purpose. Not assuming that something is "normal" simply because it has always been familiar to you. Some cycles take intention and repetition to change, and some may be as simple as saying "That's not for me."

The beautiful thing about being an adult is that you get to choose, every day, what kind of person you want to be. Breaking generational ties isn't easy, but good things seldom come easily. You are not limited by where you came from, how you were raised, or what you have survived.

You can do hard things.

I believe in you.

Love you, mean it.

Jordan

OceanofPDF.com

Content Considerations

This story is a contemporary romance with fade-to-black intimacy and some adult language. It also touches on sensitive themes that have been handled with the utmost care, including anxiety, addiction, bullying, and domestic violence (adult/child).

OceanofPDF.com

Contents

Prologue
1. One
2. Two
3. Three
4. Four
5. Five
6. Six
7. Seven
8. Eight
9. Nine
10. Ten
11. Eleven
12. Twelve
13. Thirteen
14. Fourteen
15. Fifteen
16. Sixteen

17. Seventeen
18. Eighteen
19. Nineteen
20. Twenty
21. Twenty-One
22. Twenty-Two
23. Twenty-Three
24. Twenty-Four
25. Twenty-Five
26. Twenty- Six
27. Twenty-Seven
28. Twenty-Eight
29. Twenty-Nine
30. Thirty
31. Thirty-One
32. Thirty-Two
33. Thirty-Three
34. Thirty-Four
35. Thirty-Five
36. Thirty-Six
37. Thirty-Seven
38. Thirty-Eight
39. Thirty-Nine
40. Forty
41. Forty-One
42. Forty-Two
43. Forty-Three

44. Forty-Four
45. Forty-Five
46. Forty-Six
47. Forty-Seven
48. Forty-Eight
49. Forty-Nine
50. Fifty
51. Fifty-One
52. Fifty-Two
53. Fifty-Three
54. Fifty-Four
55. Fifty-Five
56. Fifty-Six
57. Fifty-Seven
58. Fifty-Eight
59. Fifty-Nine
60. Sixty
61. Sixty-One
62. Sixty-Two
63. Sixty-Three
64. Sixty-Four
Epilogue
Acknowledgements
About The Author
Let's Connect!
Thank you!

OceanofPDF.com

Prologue



Lane

Age Six

“No, Dad!”

I scooted down from the dining room chair too fast, and the legs scraped the floor, making that sharp noise that made Dad’s jaw clench. My socks slid on the shiny wood, and I almost fell, but I didn’t stop. Dad’s hand was already squeezed around Snuggles’s arm, pulling it long and thin like it might tear off.

Snuggles didn’t like that.

Snuggles liked warm hugs and quiet. He liked being tucked under my chin when I slept and being squished against my chest when I was scared. Dad yelling made him scared. I knew that because when Dad yelled, my stomach hurt and my hands got all shaky, and Snuggles always felt those things too. He always felt everything I did.

“Dad, please,” I said, running toward him. “He doesn’t like it!”

I wanted to tell Dad that Snuggles would be good. That he wouldn’t come to the table anymore. That I’d leave him in my backpack or under my bed. Dad would only be mad for a short time, is what Mama always said. Mama said when Dad got loud, we just had to stay out of the way until it passed over. Then he’d buy me ice cream or a new toy. And everything would go back to normal.

We just had to be patient. I hated waiting.

I slipped on the floor before I got to him. My feet flew out from under me, and my elbow slammed against the rug on the wooden floor. It burned, but I didn’t cry because crying made Dad get even more mad and louder.

Mama’s arms wrapped around my shoulders before I could get back up. She smelled like the puffy flowers that grew along the iron fence outside. Pink ones that bent down in the wind but never broke. Mama always smelled pretty. Even when Dad didn’t.

“No son of mine is going to carry around a stuffed animal at six years old!” Dad shouted.

His voice was big. Bigger than the room. Bigger than me.

I turned and pressed my face into Mama’s side and watched Snuggles swing from Dad’s big fist. His button eyes caught the light, and for a second I thought he was looking at me, like he wanted me to fix it, but I didn’t know how.

“I can’t believe you let him carry that trash in his backpack, Diana!” Dad said.

Trash.

Snuggles wasn’t trash. Trash was sticky and smelled bad and got thrown away. Snuggles was soft and warm and knew all my secrets that I’d whispered at night after Mama tucked me in under the quilt she made and kissed my forehead.

“He’s never going to be a man if he’s always acting like a sissy!”

I didn’t know what a sissy was, but I knew it was something Dad didn’t like. Dad didn’t like a lot of things.

Mama’s arms locked around me, her fingers digging into my back like she was holding on so I wouldn’t disappear. Her chest moved fast under my cheek. I could hear her breathing, quick and shaky, like she’d just run a long way.

Dad stood in front of the giant fireplace. The fire was already going, the orange and yellow light flickering shadows on the walls. The fireplace was pretty at Christmas, and I liked it when Dad let me help carry the wood in for it. I didn’t like it now. With a quick flick of his wrist, the most important thing in the world to me went up in flames.

Snuggles was there—and then he wasn’t.

The fire jumped up and made a loud crackling sound. Something smelled wrong and different. My chest felt tight and my throat hurt because I wanted to scream but couldn’t find the sound. So I did what I knew to do when Dad showed his disappointment in me. I stayed quiet.

Mama made a small sound, like air leaking out of a birthday balloon. Her chest shook once. Her pretty painted pink nails pressed into my arm so hard it hurt, but I didn’t tell her to stop. I didn’t want her to let go.

She cried silently, the way Mama always did. Dad didn’t like loud crying. After a few minutes, Dad’s shoulders dropped. The room grew quieter, as if the walls were holding their breath. Dad reached for Mama’s hand and squeezed it. Mama winced, and then she smiled. It was her too-perfect smile. The one that said everything was okay even when it wasn’t. Dad liked that smile.

Later that day, Dad bought me a baseball glove.

It smelled of leather and new things. He told me I’d be a man like him someday. Dad didn’t say he was sorry because he didn’t think he had to. Grown-ups didn’t say sorry to kids. That night, I lay in bed staring at the ceiling. My arms felt empty and too light.

Snuggles wasn’t there.

I wondered if he was still scared or if he was mad at me for not saving him. I wondered if Mama was right—if Dad’s love was just “different.” I wondered if Dad would tire of me and toss me into the fire too.

But as I listened to the fireplace crackle and pop in the dark down the hallway, I thought maybe love wasn’t supposed to burn. And I wondered, very quietly, if being a man really meant becoming someone like Dad, and if I really wanted to be like that at all.

OceanofPDF.com

One



Cali

Present Day

"Dang, Doc! Bruh, I wanna at least be able to live long enough to graduate high school!"

The car rattled as the tires drifted over the rumble strip, a low vibration that ran straight through the steering wheel and into my achy bones. My son's voice bounced off the windshield as he fought with his navy activewear shirt, one arm flung across the center console, almost

clotheslining me. His forearm blocked half my view as I jerked the wheel back into our lane, heart thudding harder than it should have.

“Jace,” I snapped, tightening my grip on the steering wheel. “I need to see to keep us alive!”

“That is *not* comforting!” he shot back, finally yanking his head through the neckhole. His hair exploded in every direction, as if he’d lost a fight with static electricity, and he glared at me like I’d personally wronged him. “Seriously. I’m not sure how they let you have a kid when you drive like this.”

“One,” I said, swerving just enough to make my point, “I am not a doctor. And two, I drive perfectly fine when your tarantula arms aren’t blocking my view, *bruh*.”

I bit back a smile, but he caught it anyway.

“Close enough, Doc.” He bent forward, tugging on one sock, then the other, football cleats clutched between his knees. “What’s your excuse the rest of the time? Think you can get me to tryouts in one piece?”

“I’ll consider it,” I said lightly. “If I don’t pass out from the odor,” I said, dramatically waving a hand in front of my nose.

He huffed, rolling his eyes so hard I wondered if they’d get stuck. “That’s called *testosterone*. You wouldn’t get it.”

“Oh, trust me,” I muttered. “I get it.” I blew out the side of my mouth to move a strand of hair out of my face. The highway narrowed as Kennedy came into view, the familiar bend in the road causing my chest to constrict before I even realized what was happening. Muscle memory. My hands adjusted on the wheel unconsciously. I’d driven this road hundreds of times as a teenager, always with the same knot in my stomach, always with the same quiet hope that today wouldn’t be worse than yesterday. The school secretary had told me tryouts ended at six o’clock sharp. Kennedy High had always been meticulous about its rules. Precision disguised as discipline. Discipline disguised as care.

“Practice is over at six,” I said. “Do you want me to stay? I was thinking of grabbing dinner from the diner and bringing something back to Grandpa’s.”

Jace paused, fingers tugging on his laces.

“Are you sure,” he asked, staring out the window, “that Grandpa’s gonna be cool with us living there?” His knee bounced once, twice, then stilled.

His hand flexed against his leg, fingers curling and uncurling as if he was bracing for something unseen.

“He’s going to love it,” I said without hesitation. And I believed it in the same way I believed the sun would rise.

Jimmy Walton had never been a man of many words. He showed up instead. Fixed broken things. Sat beside you in silence that offered shelter. Even now, as his memory slipped in and out like a tide, that steadiness remained because things didn’t fade when the moments were buried too deep. Some people were built so strong that even memory loss couldn’t change the goodness at the center of who they were.

Jace nodded, processing. He always did that, taking things in quietly, carefully, like he was stacking pieces of information into place in his head, trying to figure out the pattern of what to expect. Our lives had been turned inside out with little warning, and I’d shoved my own reactions down so hard they barely had room to breathe.

There wasn’t time to process the last few weeks. There never seemed to be enough time to truly process anything. Never enough time to dig into the root of why things tugged just a little too hard, hurt just a little too much. One thing I knew was that Kennedy, Kansas, hated me, and I hated it right back. I hated that this was where I had to come, but for Grandpa, I’d go to the ends of the earth.

I took the last turn into the parking lot far too fast, tires squealing as I swung into a spot like I was racing an invisible clock. Two minutes to spare.

“Whew,” I breathed.

“Jesus, take the wheel,” Jace sang dramatically, clutching the dash, and I wasn’t sure I’d ever had a prouder moment as a mother that his taste in music came directly from me. “Cal, how are you gonna teach me to drive when you drive like this?”

“Har, har.” I shoved a bottle of blue Powerade into his chest. “Alright, dude. You have everything?”

He nodded, already opening the door. “Yep. I’ll see you at six.”

“Call if you need anything!” He gave me a quick nod and took off running, long legs eating up the distance between the parking lot and the field. I watched him merge into the cluster of boys gathering near the sideline, his shoulders squared, his head held high. He would be okay because I would make sure of it, as I had for the last four years. The buffer

between him and the reality that was his life was me. I'd stepped in to protect him, just like my grandparents had stepped in to protect me.

I didn't get out of the car because I didn't have a reason to, but I let my eyes wander over everything around me. The school looked completely unchanged. Same limestone. Same windows. Same flagpole standing tall and unchanging. The cracked steps that once had resembled a finish line and a firing squad all at once.

The breath whooshed from my lungs as I shut off the memories this building ignited before it became like a dry grass fire in early spring that had dozens of volunteer firefighters responding because the wind was mercilessly pushing it across dozens of acres in the time span of seconds.

Memory pressed in like humidity—thick, uninvited, and heavy, as if you could taste the air you were breathing. Lockers slamming. Conversations that stopped abruptly when I entered the room. Eyes that tracked me through hallways, through classrooms, through years. Whispers they thought I couldn't hear, and then the words they wanted to reach my ears. Slut. Whore. White trash. The sense of always being slightly out of place, no matter how carefully I tried to belong. Grandma and Grandpa had never had much, but they'd always had me in clean clothes, even if they were hand-me-downs from trends two or three years prior.

And beneath everything was *him*. The suffocating memories I wished I could bleach from my mind. Tear up by the roots and make them disappear completely. I shut that door in my mind before it could open too far. Before it could reignite. The pain it caused was too much.

"You're thirty-two years old, Cali," I whispered, gripping the steering wheel until my fingers ached. "You've survived worse than this. You can do hard things." The words sounded hollow in the quiet car. They didn't feel true, but if you said something enough, you would learn to believe it. I hadn't come back for closure, or to reopen old wounds, or rewrite history. I'd come back because love demanded it.

And love had always been the most reckless thing I'd ever felt.

From where I sat, I could see the football field stretching out under the afternoon sun. The bleachers loomed to the side, empty now, but I could already imagine them filled with voices rising and falling, judgment passed in under-their-breath whispers or in silence alike. I told myself I was here for Grandpa. Only Grandpa.

But my eyes drifted toward the stately limestone school anyway, toward the doors I'd walked through countless times before, the offices tucked just inside and a past I'd outrun for fifteen years and somehow never quite escaped. I wondered how often he was in town. Probably not too much, considering he probably lived in some mansion with one of the supermodels that often adorned his arm. The thought slipped in uninvited, settling heavy in my chest.

Fifteen years was a long time.

Long enough to build a life. Long enough to lose pieces of yourself and learn how to function without them. Long enough to accommodate a limp without even realizing it was there. Deciding to support an ingrained habit without taking into consideration that it was past time to move forward. Long enough to convince yourself that certain chapters were closed for good.

I'd been so sure I could do this: come back, keep my head down, take care of what needed taking care of, and exist without reopening wounds that had never really healed. But sitting there, watching my son step onto the same football field where so much of my life had fractured, I wasn't so sure. At six o'clock, I told myself, I'd pick him up. Until then, I would breathe. Just enough until I decided if I had any other options. Damn love and the things it made you do.

OceanofPDF.com

Two



Cali

I didn’t realize my hands were strangling the steering wheel until my palms ached from the pressure. The house sat at the end of the gravel drive, almost unrecognizable, two stories of white paint gone chalky and thin, boards swelling where rain had gotten in. One gutter drooped as if it had given up the fight years ago. A crack glinted from a porch window, spidering outward, catching the late-afternoon sun in sharp glimmers of light. This place used to shine with care, never flashy but always well maintained.

I remembered it standing proud, flower beds edged just so, my grandmother’s roses climbing and spilling in puddles of blooms as if they had something to prove to every other gardener around. Now weeds choked the dirt where she’d once knelt with her soil-covered gloves and her quiet humming of hymns. The air smelled like soil and freshly mowed grass, which made little sense with everything I’d been told. My heart squeezed at the sight.

Fifteen years. That’s how long it had been since I’d stepped through that front door. It’d been two years since I’d last seen my grandfather, meeting in Kansas City because I was unwilling to get any closer, like the town of Kennedy itself had something contagious. I’d hugged him too fast and kept my smile too fixed. Promised I’d visit soon, but soon never came.

“Yo, Cal.” Jace’s voice snapped through the quiet like a rubber band against skin.

“Are you going to get out, or are we just gonna sit and stare at the haunted house all night?”

I let out a breath that wasn’t quite a laugh and nudged his shoulder. “I hear the ghosts here prefer teenagers. Keeps them entertained.”

He snorted, but his eyes stayed on the house, sharp, curious, cataloging everything. Jace was always watching. He’d learned that before we met, before paperwork and courtrooms and signatures that didn’t feel big enough to explain that he meant everything to me.

I pushed the driver’s door open and climbed out on jelly legs. Gravel crunched under my shoes, loud in the open space. Jace popped up over the roof of my car—Brenda—which had seen better days and was currently packed to the ceiling with everything we owned. Boxes, duffel bags, a milk crate full of Jace’s comic books. The back seat sagged under the weight of our lives.

Everything we could take with us that didn’t need to be sold.

The nausea crept in, acidic and familiar. I swallowed it back and focused on the kid standing beside me, too tall for his age, dark hair falling into his eyes no matter how many times I told him he needed a trim. He leaned against the car, trying to appear relaxed, but the tension in his shoulders betrayed him.

This was my fault.

I’d promised him security. A home. A future that didn’t feel like instability. I’d said a lot of things before I learned how quickly they could

be taken, and I'd let Brett have everything just so that I could have Jace.

The colonial house with the enormous windows on the family-friendly cul-de-sac and the new car that still smelled like expensive leather and fresh possibilities, along with the ring I'd worn for less than six months. People wanted to hear a version of the story where he was blindsided, broken, and brave for surviving me. Survive the fact that I wouldn't let a child end up in the system when there was a possibility of a kinship placement. If they only knew all the things I did. The recklessness. The debt. The pills. The things I'd kept quiet. How he'd gone from being a stable hero to becoming someone I didn't want to know. He was loud, charming, and easy to believe.

I was the one who didn't fight back, and I hated the part of me that never found the courage to.

That had always been my specialty: staying small, smoothing edges, asking questions instead of answering them. One of my instructors once called it a gift, the way people opened up around me. She didn't know it was just practice. A lifetime of redirecting attention away from myself somehow translated into the gift of a great bedside manner.

When you stayed on the surface, no one noticed how deep the fissures went. You didn't have to explain dysfunctional family dynamics if you kept people talking about themselves long enough that they forgot their interest in knowing anything about you.

The oak tree beside the house cast a wide shadow across the porch. I stopped beneath it and really looked, the way I'd been avoiding since the drive ended. The place had aged hard. Sagged in places it never had before. Grandpa had always prided himself on everything being nice, even when money was thin. I could remember him repeatedly telling me to "always leave things better than you found them." We never went hungry, but Grandpa's clothes were mended until they were threadbare. Grandma had been clever like that, making things last and using a handful of ingredients to make a filling meal.

The grass was cut, but the flowers were a chaotic mess of blooms and weeds. I tipped my head to the side, taking it in. It was an odd contradiction that was unsettling.

Jace followed my gaze, his mouth tugging down just slightly. "So," he said, quieter now. "This is home?"

The word felt foreign because this wasn’t the home I remembered growing up in.

“It’s not the way I remember it, but we’ll fix it up and make it good as new.” The optimistic tone was just a tad too cheerful, as if my own words would convince me it was true. He didn’t argue, just nodded once and headed toward the porch with me.

I knocked hard, knowing that Grandpa might not be able to hear me.

“Grandpa?” My voice sounded younger than I was. “It’s Cali. I’m here with Jace.” Nothing. I knocked again, louder. I tried the handle, squinted past years of dust through the window; nothing moved inside.

“Grandpa!” I raised my voice, the way I used to when he’d been working in the barn. “It’s Cali!”

Jace wiped a clean spot on the dusty glass and peered in, he pulled back with a shrug.

“Are you here to play?” The voice came from the far end of the porch, singsong and bright. I spun around, startled.

Grandpa stood by the railing, holding up a small green toy tractor as if it were a prize. He was wearing only gray boxers, which were being held up with suspender straps, and a huge smile that was borderline too wide with eyes equally as big. Jace choked on a laugh, then immediately began scrubbing above his top lip with the side of his index finger, as if he had an allergic reaction to what he was seeing but didn’t want to be so rude as to cover his eyes.

I couldn’t move. This wasn’t forgetfulness. This was something else entirely. Something that had been growing quietly while I stayed away. There were a lot of things I’d like to see in this life, but my grandpa being naked as a jaybird wasn’t one of them.

“Hey,” I said finally, softly. “Hi, Grandpa.”

He stepped closer, bare feet slapping against the porch boards. “Grandpa’s not here,” he said cheerfully. “I’m Jimmy.”

He poked a finger at his bare chest as if he were proud of his name. His hair was askew in every direction, silver straight on end.

“Are you here to play?” he asked again, thrusting a toy tractor forward, before reconsidering and yanking it back. “This one’s mine. I’ve got more to share.” He took off toward the side yard, and we followed, slow and stunned. Jace leaned toward me and whispered out of the side of his mouth.

“Why isn’t he . . . dressed?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered. “But we’ll figure it out.”

He swayed back and forth while he ambled, as if he were dancing to music that no one else could hear. As we rounded the corner of the house, I stopped, glued in place as my brain raced to absorb exactly what I saw.

A farm.

Not the real one, but a miniature one. Fields carved into the dirt. Tiny hay bales stacked with care. A barn built from scrap pieces of wood, with doors that actually opened and closed. Toy tractors lined up in neat rows. It was meticulous. Detailed. Hours and hours of intricate work.

“Whoa, this is pretty cool.” Jace crouched, awe cutting through his confusion.

Grandpa beamed. “Do you wanna be my best friend?” The question hung there, raw and hopeful.

Jace swallowed. “Yeah,” he said. “Sure, dude.”

“I’m not dude. I’m Jimmy,” he corrected. “You can play with the swather.” He pointed toward the row of toys, but Jace hesitated.

“Second from the right,” I whispered, since he was unfamiliar with farm equipment. They sat together in the dirt, Grandpa explaining every feature of the toy as if it were real. I watched, rooted in place, guilt blooming hot and heavy in my chest.

“I’m gonna unpack our stuff,” I said eventually. “Okay?”

Grandpa . . . uh . . . Jimmy nodded without looking up. “The front door is locked ’cause of strangers. But you’re not strangers. You’re my best friends.”

Friends.

Tears welled in my eyes as he grinned widely; the quiet, stoic man of my childhood was nowhere to be found.

“We’re here to live with you, J-J-Jimmy.” I nearly choked on his given name.

“Okay!” he said with another too-wide grin. “I always wanted a family.”

My eyes met Jace’s, and I knew that no matter what happened, we’d figure out how to take care of Grandpa, even if the situation differed from what we had thought.

I stepped away, toward the house that had built me and the life I’d run from. As we crossed the county line, I understood that coming back hadn’t just reopened old wounds. It had ripped them wide open. Because there was

no way I was going to be able to fly under the radar when my grandpa needed far more help than I anticipated.

OceanofPDF.com

Three



Cali

The back door stuck as I attempted to open it. I braced my shoulder against the frame and pushed, the wood groaning as if it resented me for coming back. For a moment, nothing happened. The door gave with a sharp whine, the sound echoing through the kitchen like an accusation, and I mentally began building a list of things I would need to get this place in better shape. Dust motes floated in the air, catching the light in slow, lazy spirals as if it had been undisturbed for far too long. The thick, stale smell engulfed me first. Old coffee. Sour milk. Something faintly metallic, maybe

chemicals or paint left open on a shelf. Under it all, the ghost of my grandmother's bacon grease used for cooking and homemade wheat yeast rolls and Sunday mornings that didn't exist anymore. The money I would spend to relive just one Sunday morning breakfast with them while my grandpa read the weekly farm journal and my grandma finished up a batch of cookies so she and grandpa could "go visit the old people" at the nursing home, which always made me wonder what was old if people existed who were older than them.

I stood there longer than I should have, keys still clenched in my hand, heart pounding as if I'd broken into my past, like I wasn't supposed to be here anymore. The kitchen appeared smaller than I remembered, or maybe I was just bigger now. The table sat crooked, one leg shimmed to level with a piece of folded cardboard. A stack of mail fanned out across the counter—utility bills, old newspapers, envelopes stamped FINAL NOTICE in red that made my stomach clench in anxiety because I wasn't the only person getting notifications like this, and now I'd be responsible for these too.

I set my purse down slowly, afraid the house might spook if I moved too fast.

"Okay," I whispered to no one. "You're okay."

I moved through the house the way I was trained to assess a medical condition: methodical, detached, cataloging things as if they didn't belong to me. As if I weren't standing in the place that had shaped me. The first place that made me feel truly loved.

The living room couch sagged deep in the middle, cushions worn smooth. A blanket lay bunched on the floor, needing a wash. The television was paused on a local news station, the screen frozen on a weather alert from days ago. The walls were bare where Grandma's cross-stitch used to hang, the nails still there like they were waiting, with a dusty outline of what used to be there.

The bathroom was worse. I added item after item to my mental list. Bleach. Rubber gloves. Air freshener. Scrub brushes. Toilet bowl cleaner. Pill bottles crowded the sink. Some were empty, some half full. A rusty razor on the counter. Towels crusted stiff, folded and refolded in different styles, as if someone had tried to make order out of chaos. I turned away before the ache behind my eyes could turn into something messier. My chest caved in on itself because I hadn't been here when he'd needed me.

Upstairs, Grandpa's bedroom smelled of sweat and vacancy. His bed was unmade, sheets tangled as if he'd fought them and lost. A walker leaned against the dresser, dust-free, as if it were used often. I sat on the edge of the mattress and pressed my fingers into it, breathing through the pressure in my chest. I should have been here. Why had I let the fear of coming back stop me from being here for two of the people I loved most? I should have swallowed my pride, my fear, the weight of the memories that waited in this town like land mines. I should have noticed sooner. Should have called more, visited, done anything other than pretending distance made things safer. The selfishness of my choices burned like acid in my stomach.

Laughter drifted in through the open back door, Jace's low and surprised, Grandpa's high and unfiltered. It grounded me enough to stand again. This place would not clean itself, and right now I needed something to do besides think of all the times I'd failed the people I'd loved most. Walking back outside, I began hauling boxes to the porch because I had clean sheets that would get us through tonight; then I could tackle the house after a night of sleep, because the exhaustion from the drive was seeping into my muscles.

Jace jumped up the moment he saw me struggling with the first box.

"Hey. I got it."

"I've got it," I said automatically, but he took it anyway. We moved in quiet tandem, box by box, sweat streaking down our backs, dust clinging to our skin as we stirred it up with the movement. Grandpa—Jimmy—followed us around like a tour guide, narrating everything we did with unfiltered enthusiasm, as if every thought that popped into his head needed to come out of his mouth.

"That's the kitchen. That's where snacks live."

"That room's boring. Don't go in there."

"I built the farm myself."

"I know," I said softly, meeting his cloudy blue eyes. "It's incredible."

He grinned as if I'd handed him a medal. I cataloged his condition, and I became more concerned as the list grew.

By the time the car was empty, the sun had dipped low enough to stretch shadows across the yard. My arms shook from exhaustion, but there was no relief in it, just the dull understanding that this was the simple part.

"Do you have food here?" I asked, crouching in front of Grandpa as he chowed down on the burger we'd brought from the diner. I kept my voice

light, the way I did with patients who were scared but didn't want to admit it.

His forehead wrinkled. "Sometimes." Not good. Jace hovered nearby, pretending not to listen while absolutely listening. I caught his eye and canted my head toward the car.

"I need to run to the store and get some basics and cleaning supplies," I said. "Text me if you need anything specific."

He hesitated, eyes flicking from me to Grandpa. "You sure?"

"I'm sure. I won't be long, and we're going to need some fuel if we're going to tackle this place tomorrow."

He nodded once. I grabbed my keys and jogged across the yard after telling Grandpa what the plan was, because sometimes he paid rapt attention and other times he seemed to drift between the present and his childhood. I knew I only had a short time before the local grocery store closed, because everything closed early in Kennedy, and the next grocery store was almost an hour away.

The town hadn't changed much . . . same brick storefronts, the same faded banners advertising festivals that hadn't meant anything to me even when I lived here. The same weight pressing down on my chest, the unspoken awareness of eyes that would recognize my face. I tugged the vintage Kennedy Mustangs baseball cap I'd rummaged around for lower on my brow as if it would somehow hide the bright auburn braid down my back.

Word would spread fast:

"Cali's back."

"With a kid."

"After everything."

"That poor Massey boy."

I rubbed my palms against my jeans and opened the car door. It was now or never, because if I thought about it too much, I'd puke. Was it dumb to pull the ball cap down even farther, knowing it would do nothing to hide who I was? Yes, but maybe I could just play pretend for a little longer.

OceanofPDF.com

Four



Lane

“Are you ready for football practice to fully get started tomorrow?” Soren asked, tossing a perfectly crisp fried-pickle chip into his mouth.

We’d shoved two tables together to make room for all of us at Ronnie’s Diner. The original 1950s decor felt more like home than my childhood house did. Jonah’s infant carrier contraption held his niece, Hope, who was gnawing on a soggy fry as if it were a lifeline.

“Yeah,” I said, drowning a fry in local barbecue sauce before tossing it back. “I think so.” I lifted my water and took a long drink. “Are you still planning to help with Thursday’s practices?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Soren said.

“What about you?” I asked Jonah. He nodded once, quiet as ever.

“Any solid freshmen coming up?” Soren asked.

“That Albright kid,” I said. “And the Lunden boy. There were a couple of new kids today. A couple of names I didn’t recognize. Sign-ups are online now. Alicia Lunden emailed me the list, and it looks like a solid group of kids.”

“That Albright kid’s fast. I remember him making the local newspaper regularly in middle school,” Soren said. “The question is whether he’ll play like it’s a team sport.”

I huffed softly. That was always the question—whether it was high school, college, or the pros. Talent could only carry you so far, but being able to recognize the strengths of your teammates along with your endurance and teachability as an athlete could make you one of the best.

We’d all played together on teams for football, baseball, whatever was in season. For a while, I thought football was my future, and deep down, if I’d had a choice, it was my first love. A college scout showed up to one of our baseball games, and three months later I committed. Baseball had been the exit ramp I didn’t know I was searching for. Four years later, I was pitching in the MLB.

It was easier on the body, I guessed. Mostly. My shoulder throbbed on cue, as if it knew exactly what I was thinking. Two surgeries to repair my torn rotator cuff had made the choice for me—or so I told myself. The truth was messier. I’d been chasing his dream, not mine. Even if it had been a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It was hard to look back on two consecutive World Series wins and not feel guilty that it wasn’t my dream, when so many players would have killed for the opportunity.

When I came back to town, everyone assumed I’d end up involved with the baseball team. Coach Walder still ran the program with military precision. She scared the hell out of me; she’d always been about five feet tall and built like she could knock down walls with her bare knuckles. So when the high school football coaching spot opened up, I took it. Football had been my dream, but baseball had found me first, and now, after all these years, I had a split affection for both. Practices had always been my escape

growing up. As long as I performed, my dad stayed pleased, smiling and quiet.

"Yeah," I said, shifting my glass from side to side. "That's always the thing."

I glanced across the table, meeting Sawyer's gaze. "How are the self-defense classes going?"

Jonah, Sawyer, and Landry had teamed up to teach classes at the gym; the fees were covered by the foundation Soren, Jonah, and I ran in memory of Soren's brother, Abel.

"We had seventeen sign up," Sawyer said, eyes bright.

Soren's mouth tugged into a small smile, because Soren Roberts had a soft spot for her that was as big as the Kansas skies. Sawyer fit in here as if she were always meant to be, and he liked that.

"We're kicking butts and taking names," Landry said, swiping a limp fry out of Hope's fist to hand her a sippy cup. "Right, Hopie?"

Hope answered by babbling as if she were part of the conversation.

"I connected two single moms with the center," Sawyer offered.

"That's great," I said.

Sawyer blushed, and she ducked her head as if she wasn't sure what to do with the attention. We'd made the right decision in hiring her as the director for The Hope Center. She had the experience, but more than that, she had a deep compassion and strength that clung to her like a warm cardigan. My phone rattled against the tabletop. I flipped it face down without looking. It vibrated again, and I already knew.

"Sorry," I said, standing. Jonah gave me a knowing look. "I've gotta take this."

The bell on the diner door chimed as I stepped outside, the sound far too cheery. Leaning against the building, one hand braced on the metal frame of a window, I answered.

"Hello."

"You failed to attend family dinner last night," he clipped in place of any kind of greeting.

I stared at the parking spots along the front of the diner. "I couldn't make it."

"What could be more important than seeing your family?" This was the Bryant Massey no one got to see; he was more than likely three or four drinks into his evening. He had lost enough control to call me because he

much preferred short, clipped text messages that came across like orders you'd give a trained dog. The word *family* scraped like road rash. We'd been everything but a family.

"There was an event. It couldn't be rescheduled," I said.

Silence, thick and deliberate. The head games were familiar, so I waited. I wouldn't speak first.

"I see," he said finally, disappointment dripping into every syllable. His fingers would be twisting that thick gold pinky ring—the one he wore like armor, the same one that had left scars on me. "I won't excuse you for disappointing Julia again. Seven o'clock. Thursday."

My jaw tensed while unease took root in my stomach.

"Yep," I said, ending the call.

For a second, I just stood there, phone in my grip, knuckles white. I couldn't quite get a full breath against the suffocating band across my chest. The glass reflected my face back at me—jaw set, shoulders tense, eyes already distant. I shoved the phone into my pocket and headed back inside, letting the familiar voices and faces of the people I cared most about pull me out of my head.

"Everything good?" Jonah asked, reading me better than I wanted him to.

"Yeah," I said. "Want to spar tonight?" Jonah's chin dipped as if he'd already planned on it.

If I didn't burn this off, sleep wasn't happening. Bryant Massey always made me question the move back, but one glance around the table made the answer clear. I'd made the right choice, even if it meant sharing a town with the man who claimed credit for raising me.

OceanofPDF.com

Five



Cali

As I tossed a box of Lucky Charms into the shopping cart for Jace, I grabbed a couple of boxes of peaches-and-cream instant oatmeal for myself and Grandpa. I remembered him liking it when I was a kid, which is where my fondness for it began. The front wheels on the cart kept tugging left as I pushed ahead, keeping my head down as much as possible. I wanted to move in and out of the store quickly, hoping no one would recognize me. The bright grocery store lights felt much more exposing than the dusky sky had when I darted inside.

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry!” a woman exclaimed as her cart bumped into mine.

“No worries,” I muttered, hoping to keep moving and also realizing it was probably my defective cart that actually caused the crash.

“Cali?” the same voice asked hesitantly. I mentally counted to three before looking up. It was Landry Gaines, the pastor’s daughter and the epitome of perfection. She still looked flawless, with her onyx-black hair hanging straight down her back, oversized eyes framed by thick dark lashes, and a sprinkling of freckles that highlighted the caramel in her irises.

“Landry,” I said in place of a greeting.

She smiled, a soft, almost sad curve of her mouth, and hugged the chunky baby in her arms a little closer. The little girl had more hair than I’d ever seen on someone that small—fine strands pulled into two uneven pigtails that stuck out on either side of her head like they couldn’t decide where to go. With bright blue eyes and a mess of blonde curls, her daughter clearly took after her father.

I stayed where I was, grateful for the baby providing a buffer between us. Landry and I didn’t have bad blood, but there was enough history that silence sometimes felt safer than conversation. Although she was younger than me by a few years, that had never mattered much in a town like this, especially when everyone knew her name before they knew mine. She was the standard against which all other girls were measured without much thought.

It was impossible not to have feelings about someone like that.

“It’s been forever since I’ve seen you. Are you here long?” she asked with genuine enthusiasm.

“As long as I need to be,” I replied, knowing I was being curt but frustrated that I ran into the pastor’s daughter on my first day back.

“I see. Well, I’d love to get coffee sometime or go for a run or something.” She looked away, eyes glassy. If I was going to live here, even if only for a little while, I needed to chill the hell out. Right now, a run sounded just like what my body needed. Maybe exhaustion would quiet my mind.

“I might take you up on that run,” I said. The baby flashed me a toothless grin as slobber dribbled down Landry’s shoulder. She looked surprised by my response.

“I’d really love that.” We parted ways after exchanging numbers, and I wondered if I’d just made another mistake. Landry was Jonah’s sister, and Jonah was *his* best friend, and the last thing I needed was someone letting him know I was back in town.

OceanofPDF.com

Six



Lane

Jonah threw a quick jab to my ribs while simultaneously parried my punch to his chin. I rubbed the sweat dripping from my chin onto my shoulder, watching his eyes for any indication of his next move—a dart of the eyes, a shift of his feet—anything that would reveal where his next blow would land.

"Time," Soren called from outside the ring. I let out a breath; I wasn't sure how many more rounds I could go. Soren had already sparred with me, and I had been going round after round with Jonah, waiting for him to give

up. But I should have known better; he would fight me until he was in extreme pain before he stopped. That was what made him the Marine he was. He never gave up. I grabbed my water bottle and squirted a stream into my mouth as I toweled off the sweat.

“What’s up with you?” Jonah asked as he climbed out of the ring.

“I just need a good workout,” I answered, not wanting to dive deeper into some of the things I had been realizing lately. I had moved back to Kennedy a year ago after being away for fourteen years for college and playing in the MLB. There were things you noticed in your thirties that you were too self-absorbed to recognize when your prefrontal cortex was still developing.

“I noticed,” Jonah said, his perceptive eyes watching me. I suspected I had winded him a little, which had never happened. The guy missed nothing, and it was annoying as hell sometimes.

“Just working out some things,” I mumbled before taking a seat on a weight bench. We all knew we weren’t leaving until we hashed it out, and I debated how much I wanted to share. I didn’t miss the looks they exchanged.

“Like?” Soren nudged.

“Like the fact that no matter what I do, it’ll never be enough for him.” There was no point in hiding anything from these two; they knew almost everything anyway, even when I pretended they didn’t.

“What’s his issue now?” Soren asked, settling in. I wiped the towel across my brow, swiping at the sweat that had gathered there.

“I didn’t go to dinner this week, and Julia was ‘disappointed.’” I couldn’t stop myself from rolling my eyes at the thought.

“Disappointed she’s younger than you and married to him?” Jonah said.

“Hell, does he even realize how awkward that is, considering you dated her?” Soren asked.

“He doesn't care. He never has.” The band around my chest tightened as the truth of the words sank in. Deep down, I knew the only reason he was with her was to show me he could take anything from me. But my father wasn’t someone you could ignore. You didn’t ignore Bryant Massey. I had listened to enough audiobooks about creating boundaries, but how did you set limits with someone who obliterated anything you tried to put in place? It made me feel incapable. At thirty-two years old, I couldn’t tell him no—and I didn’t just feel pathetic; maybe I really was. Perhaps I was too much like my mother. I pitied Julia, living under his control in that house—the

instability, the mood swings, the endless chatter of him praising himself as if he were talking about someone else. The moments when you held your breath, unsure how he'd react, and stepped softly to avoid notice. The thing about Bryant Massey was that everyone liked him; everyone wanted to be him—everyone but me. No one realized what it was like behind closed doors with the local baseball legend. No one saw the things he didn't want anyone to see.

I hated "family" dinners. I hated feeling trapped in that house with him. If that house could talk, the stories it could tell! The walls would weep, the door would shudder at the shouting, and the grandfather clock would just wait for his next explosion, sounding like a ticking bomb. It wasn't a question of if, but only when. When would I disappoint him next? When would I have to remind myself I wasn't a little boy anymore and that I didn't have to play his games and say "yes, sir" as if I were grateful he deemed me worthy of talking to him? Bryant Massey was the man I never wanted to be, and even with all of that, I couldn't tell Soren and Jonah the extent of it. There was a part of me that felt loyalty to him because he was my father, and I hated that part of me the most. Nausea rose in my stomach.

"Lane?" Jonah's voice broke through my thoughts.

"Yeah?" I said, shaking my head. The door flew open, and we all turned in surprise. Landry came storming through, little Hope propped on her narrow hip.

"You won't believe who I just saw at Driscoll's," she said, her cheeks tinged pink with exertion.

"Who?" Jonah asked, his brow wrinkled in curiosity.

"Cali Walton," she said. I sucked in air between my teeth, and everyone looked at me. What? Why? It had been almost fifteen years since she'd darkened the door of Kennedy—fifteen years since she'd left and given the town a proverbial middle finger. Fifteen years since she'd meticulously ripped my heart to shreds and left me wondering if it was possible ever to feel that way about someone again. Maybe I should have been heartbroken, but all I carried was anger. Resentment that she had promised me forever, then escaped in the night with my heart in her hands. A bandit. A thief. Another person who said they loved me but didn't bother to stick around. Another person who walked away as if I were easy to leave and easier to forget. Another person who left me alone with him.

In a way, I was thankful that Landry had warned me, because I would stay away until she was gone. The last thing I wanted was the rumor mill reigniting the tales of “poor little Massey” and his broken heart. She didn’t have that power anymore; she didn’t get to hurt me. I knew her games now, understood how little I had mattered to her, so little I didn’t even deserve a simple goodbye, even though I wasn’t sure a single day had passed since then that I hadn’t thought of her.

OceanofPDF.com

Seven



Cali

“I’m going to make lunch,” I told Grandpa as I wiped down the counter, where he had been polishing one of his toy tractors. “Is that okay?”

“Okay,” he replied easily. “Just don't burn it like last time.”

My lips tugged at the reminder. “I won't.”

After a quick trip to the store two nights ago, I cooked a frozen pizza I’d picked up just a tad too long the next night. The edges ended up more crispy than crunchy.

The kitchen felt like it was fighting me every step of the way. The fridge hummed too loudly, half the cabinets were empty, and the stove clicked too many times before it finally caught. I washed dishes that had been sitting for too long, my hands moving on autopilot while my mind raced with worry. What doctors had he seen? What medications was he supposed to take? Who had been checking on him? How long had he been in this condition? I'd already had worries based on the times we had talked on the phone, but when his neighbor had tracked me down and called me in Austin, her voice was heavy with concern. She said she would do what she could, but she had her own health issues and was glad I was coming home.

Home.

It took two days for the reality of it to settle into my bones—not all at once, but through small moments that piled up until there was no room left to set them down. The past pressed in on the present. Grandpa paused mid-step, staring at me as if he were dusting off old memories, trying to make one match. His eyes sharpened with recognition—then slid away again. Sometimes he knew me; sometimes he didn't. The shift between those two states could happen in the space of a breath. Other times, he was like an eight-year-old boy, content to play with his miniature farm outside.

Cleaning the house took an entire day. It wasn't quite eligible for one of those hoarder shows, but it was close enough that I didn't want to think too hard about how long it had been slipping. I filled black trash bags until my back screamed. I burned a mountain of empty take-out containers in the barrel out back since garbage pickup this far out wasn't in the budget, the plastic curling in on itself as if it were ashamed to be there. It was miraculous that any money was left at all, because it looked like he had eaten out for every meal. At least I was relieved he hadn't burned down the house trying to cook. When I was a kid, eating out once a week was a luxury. Saturday nights meant burgers or pancakes, with Grandpa letting me order whatever I wanted from Ronnie's Diner as long as I finished it. I had known—even then—that it was something he made room for in the budget. Now, the receipts were everywhere. Convenience stood in for care. When I finished scrubbing the last surface and the floors no longer stuck to my feet, the entire place smelled of disinfectant and exhaustion. Jace kept Grandpa occupied for most of the day, which I was learning was a full-time job. By nightfall, all three of us had collapsed where we stood.

Mrs. Lillis, the neighbor, stopped by that afternoon. She talked too loudly, repeated herself, and stood too close. When she left, my gratitude felt tangled with a fresh wave of regret. If she hadn’t called, how much longer would this have gone on? It seemed as if she could use some support as well.

I had convinced Grandpa to wear overalls. It took some coaxing, but once they were on, he smiled as if I had given him something precious. He didn’t know how to operate the washer or dryer, standing in front of them as if they were puzzles missing pieces. Once dressed, he wandered the house like he was searching for something he couldn't name.

At least the nudity had stopped. Small miracles.

Most of the time, he was cheerful. During some moments, he grew quiet and watchful, with frustration leaking out sideways. The forgetfulness irritated him the most—some part of him aware that something was wrong but unable to identify it. The childlike moments were particularly confusing for me. While we sat at the table, I noticed a large scar across the top of his head that must have come from an injury, but when I asked about it, he didn’t know what I was talking about. Once things settled down, I'd get a full workup for him, but I didn’t want to disrupt him since I had only been here a couple of days.

Jace handled it better than I did.

He asked quiet questions last night about memory loss—whether it would get worse. I answered what I knew and acknowledged what I didn’t. He never pulled away. If anything, he leaned in, wanting to understand better what was going on.

I made calls late at night and during naps. Grandpa would need a caregiver on the days I worked. Mrs. Bailey, an old family friend, recommended Helen—a retired nurse, widowed, with no kids, living ten minutes away. By the time we hung up, my shoulders had relaxed an inch. Helen was coming this afternoon to meet Grandpa and assess the situation.

Outside, Jace and Grandpa were bent over the toy farm again. Grandpa explained every detail like it had great significance, and Jace listened as if it did. I stood at the sink and wrapped my hands around a mug I had forgotten to drink from. I needed to cry, but that would have to wait.

Someone had to hold everything together: a fourteen-year-old boy, a grandfather slipping further away with each passing day, and a life uprooted and replanted in soil that didn’t want me. I had only three days before I

began working at the hospital, three days before Jace stepped into Kennedy High as a freshman.

I gathered hope in tiny careful pieces: a clean kitchen, fresh sheets, and Grandpa's laughter. If I thought too hard about how far off course my life had gone, I would fold in on myself, but I didn't have the luxury of falling apart.

This town had abandoned me once, and living here again felt like pressing on an old bruise just to see if it still hurt. It did.

But for now, the house was clean, the overalls were on, and the farm was still here. That would have to be enough. I tucked those minuscule pieces of hope into my pocket like rocks collected by a child, carrying them with me and trusting they would be enough to sustain me as more people realized I was back in town.

OceanofPDF.com

Eight



Cali

The water stain shaped like Alaska was still there. It stretched across the painted wood ceiling exactly where it had when I was a kid, when I'd lain awake counting knots in the boards while Grandpa promised everything looked worse in the dark. The ceiling fan ticked with every slow rotation, stirring cool morning air that carried the faint scent of old pine and laundry detergent. Somewhere down the hall, a floorboard creaked. For one blissful second, I forgot where I was. The memories flooded back: Kennedy, Grandpa, working at the hospital.

Day seven.

I lay still, staring at Alaska until my pulse slowed into something manageable. Seven days back in town. Seven days since I'd unpacked my life into the old farmhouse. Seven days since everything became real. Today was my first shift, and I was so grateful that I had been able to complete the orientation modules online. I slipped out of bed and padded down the hall. Grandpa's door was open, which made my stomach lurch before I even saw him.

He lay asleep on top of the covers, still wearing yesterday's overalls. One sock had disappeared sometime during the night. His silver hair pointed in every direction, and one weathered hand clutched the edge of the blanket as though someone might take it from him. Relief washed through me so fast it made my knees weak. I crossed the room and tucked the blanket over his shoulders. The man who held my world together as a child. Taught me to drive a tractor before I was old enough to reach the pedals without scooting forward. Held our little family together while my mother drifted in and out of our lives like the weather—arriving with a new boyfriend or another modeling job before disappearing again. His eyes fluttered open.

"Rose?" he whispered.

My throat tightened. "It's Cali."

His blue gaze sharpened for half a second. Recognition flickered there—bright, like a match catching fire. "Cal." His mouth curved. "You're up early."

"I've got to go to work."

He blinked. "At the hospital?"

"Yeah." Every time he remembered something on his own, I felt like I'd won a prize at a carnival.

He nodded as if that made perfect sense. "You always were the smart one."

I swallowed around the burn in my chest. "Go back to sleep." His eyes drifted shut before I reached the doorway.

A hot shower chased away the last vestiges of the morning fog. I braided my thick auburn hair into a loose rope over one shoulder before pulling on my favorite dusty rose Figs and slipping into my white On Clouds.

The drive to Kennedy Community Hospital would take twelve minutes. Twelve minutes to become Nurse Practitioner Cali Walton instead of granddaughter, mother, caretaker. I grabbed my bag and headed downstairs.

Jace was already in the kitchen, sitting on the counter like it was a throne, holding a spoon halfway to his mouth and cradling a bowl of Lucky Charms.

“You’re up early,” I said.

“So are you,” he said around a mouthful of cereal.

“The difference is, somebody pays me to be awake.”

He rolled his eyes and shoved another bite into his mouth. “Football conditioning at six.”

Right. The coach ran early-morning practices before school, and the first day of school was today. I tried to fuss over Jace’s first day, but he told me, in no uncertain terms, that he did not want a photo shoot of him holding a backpack in front of the school “like a loser.” Message received.

“Are you nervous?” I asked. Jace had excelled at soccer, but there wasn’t a team close enough to join here. Football was new to him, but he was an athlete through and through, able to do anything he set his mind to.

“Nah.”

“Liar.”

He grinned as he slurped some milk. “. . . Maybe a little.”

“You’ll be fine.”

“I know.” He shoveled another spoonful into his mouth before pointing the spoon at me like a wand. “You’re the one starting a new job, Doc.”

I filled my water bottle at the sink.

“You nervous?” he asked.

The stream splashed against stainless steel.

“A little.”

He watched me over the rim of his bowl.

“You’re gonna be great,” he said.

I reached over and scrubbed the top of his head until he protested.

“Hey.”

“You’ll survive.”

“Barely.”

I laughed, grabbed my lunch from the refrigerator, and texted Helen.

Me: Leaving now. Jace is up. Grandpa’s still asleep.

Three dots appeared almost immediately.

Helen: Already on my way. Don’t worry about anything.

I slipped my phone into my pocket. Helen had become the thread holding our days together. She’d stay with Grandpa, make sure he ate lunch, keep him company until she drove Jace home after school. Every hour she spent here

stretched the budget a little tighter, but I'd sort through the stack of overdue bills one at a time. One shift, one paycheck, one day at a time. That was enough. It had to be.



The helipad came into view before the hospital did. It stood vacant, which was an immediate relief. An empty helipad meant no one was waiting to be transported to Omaha or Kansas City due to the severity of their situation. The hospital stood beyond it, the same faded brick building I'd passed a thousand times growing up. The automatic doors still hesitated before sliding open, like they were trying to decide if they wanted to open. The scent of antiseptic and burnt coffee flooded my senses the second I stepped inside. A new badge rested against my scrub top.

Cali Walton, FNP-C.

My fingers brushed the edge as I walked toward the emergency department. From the nurses' station, I could see all eight beds. In Austin, we'd have filled eight rooms before I'd finished my first cup of coffee. A phone rang somewhere behind the desk; a monitor chimed in room two. Someone laughed farther down the hall before a door clicked shut. Trauma centers and community hospitals were just different—distinct paces but the same medicine. Small-town medicine was more complex in ways because it was personal. You weren't just treating a man with chest pain; you were treating Nancy's husband, who was a fifth-generation farmer who had helped your grandfather harvest wheat every year. The level of care wouldn't change, but the eyes that watched me would. We were the front line for every emergency.

"Cali Walton?"

I turned to find a woman with dark curls and crystal clear pale-blue eyes striding toward me; her smile was warm enough to cut through every first-day nerve I carried.

“You made it.” She held out her hand. “I’m Lacy.”

“Cali.”

She gave my hand a quick shake before tucking a clipboard under her arm.

“Sorry, we don’t have balloons or a welcome committee.” She grinned. “We’re short two nurses, one tech called in sick, and the coffee tastes like regret.”

I laughed. “So . . . business as usual?”

“You catch on fast.” Lacy casually anchored a hand on her hip. “This is your workstation. The supply room is over there. Pyxis is around the corner. If you need respiratory support, just yell louder than everyone else.”

“I can manage that.”

“Oh, and don’t trust room three’s privacy curtain,” she continued.

I gave the curtain a double take. One side sagged several inches lower than the other.

“It gave up sometime during the Clinton administration.”

I snorted.

“I’ll remember that.” Before I could ask another question, an overhead tone chimed.

“Incoming laceration,” the radio crackled. “Male, sixties. Farm injury. ETA three minutes.”

Lacy was already moving. She handed me a trauma gown with one hand while reaching for the chart rack with the other. The ambulance doors swung open before the bay had fully cleared.

A gray-haired man climbed down under his own power, one hand wrapped in a blood-soaked towel.

“I told ’em I didn’t need the ambulance,” he grumbled to no one in particular. “Waste of good diesel.” The paramedic grinned as if this wasn’t the first time he’d heard this complaint.

“You tell her that.” He pointed at me.

The farmer looked me up and down, his expression landing somewhere between suspicion and annoyance.

“You the provider?”

“I am.”

He lifted the towel to an extent for me to catch a glimpse. A deep laceration with jagged edges and plenty of dirt mixed in with a lot of blood. It looked worse than it was, but it still needed prompt attention.

“I just need stitches.” He walked toward the bed. “I’ve got hay on the ground.”

“You might.” I pulled on a pair of gloves. “But first I’m going to make sure you didn’t cut anything you’ll miss tomorrow.”

“My fingers work fine.” He wiggled them for emphasis.

“They usually do until they don’t.” That earned me the ghost of a smile and a half-hearted humph.

“Just stitch it up and send me home,” he muttered.

“I’ll stitch it,” I said calmly. “After we irrigate it, assess tendon involvement, and make sure you don’t lose function in your hand.”

He grumbled but let me work.

My brain shifted into clinical mode, the place where everything made sense. I focused on the rhythm of it—gloves snapping into place, saline flushing out dirt, the precise pull of sutures through skin. The cut had missed the radial artery by less than a centimeter. Here, I knew what to do. Here, I wasn’t the girl who’d fled town. I was competent, capable, and essential—damn good at my job. I gave him a small list of instructions so that healing would go as easily as possible.

“Where’d you go to school?” he asked eventually, watching me with dark brown eyes under eyebrows that hadn’t seen a tweezer lately.

“Austin, Texas.”

“Huh.” He squinted at my badge. “Walton. You’re Jimmy’s granddaughter?”

My stomach tightened.

“I am.”

“How’s he doing? Heard he’s not been well,” he said.

“He’s hanging in there.”

He nodded slowly.

“Jimmy helped my dad bring in wheat more summers than I can count.”

A beat passed.

“Good man.”

“He is.”

The farmer shifted on the bed before offering a crooked smile.

“Glad you’re back, kid.” Four simple words. I’d spent the last seven days bracing for sideways glances and whispered conversations that never came. Maybe I’d been carrying ghosts no one else could see.

“Thank you.”

He nodded his head in approval. “Town could use another Walton.”

Lacy handed him his discharge papers. “I’d listen to her about the lifting,” she said.

He folded the papers without looking at them. “I’ll think about thinking about it.”

“That’s the best we’re getting,” Lacy said after he disappeared through the doors.

“I’ve heard worse.”

She bumped my shoulder. “You handled him just right.”

I watched the automatic doors slide closed behind him as he caught the ride to take him home. One patient down. One less reason to wonder whether I’d made a mistake coming home. Maybe I just needed to stop being so on edge every time someone talked to me. Maybe this wouldn’t be as hard as I thought, although I didn’t think I could be that lucky.



By noon, the department had found an easy rhythm. A middle-aged woman with dehydration after insisting coffee counted as water. A teenager who’d rolled his ankle trying to jump down from a hayloft. And a six-year-old whose mother couldn’t understand why his breath smelled “like something died.” The answer turned out to be half a blue crayon he’d shoved up his nose three days earlier. Lacy laughed so hard that she had to leave the room. I wasn’t far behind. A dab of Vicks beneath my nose was the only thing that kept me from gagging while removing the waxy culprit. By the time they left, both of us were laughing.

I finished my notes at the nurses’ station while Lacy leaned against the counter beside me, flipping through a chart.

“You’re fitting right in,” she said, her eyes shining.

“High praise.”

She snorted. “Just wait for Friday nights when the football team decides they’re invincible.”

My fingers stilled on the keyboard. Lacy clipped another chart onto the rack.

“Football?”

“Yeah. Coach runs them hard,” she said as she glanced down over a clipboard, her curls dropping to cover her face. A smile tugged at my mouth despite myself.

“Jace mentioned conditioning this morning.”

“He’ll sleep well tonight.”

“I’m counting on it.”

Lacy laughed.

“Coach Massey doesn’t believe in easing anyone into the season.”

The world shifted slightly. Not enough for anyone else to notice, but enough that I tightened my grip on the edge of the counter to steady myself.

I kept my voice even. “Massey?”

“Lane Massey. You know him?” She looked up.

The name echoed somewhere deep in my chest.

“We went to school together,” I said carefully.

“Oh.” Her eyebrows lifted slightly, interest flickering there, but she didn’t push. “I didn’t move here until last year. Everyone says he’s good with the kids. You’ll probably run into him, along with half the town, sooner or later.”

“Yeah,” I agreed quietly. I looked back at my computer screen, but the words blurred together. Jace had never mentioned the coach’s name; he just said “coach,” but now I was wondering what I had done by insisting he try another sport since soccer wasn’t available. Lane was here, and that felt like it changed everything. The man I’d spent years avoiding without ever saying his name out loud was coaching my son. Two World Series championships, endorsements with all the major brands, magazine covers in grocery store checkout lines. Every time I caught a glimpse, I’d looked away before the memories could catch up. He belonged on television or on a stadium field. Anywhere but Kennedy, Kansas. What was Lane doing here of all places?

OceanofPDF.com

Nine



Cali

My shift ended at six. Stepping outside, the sky was streaked pink and gold. A familiar, earned ache deep in muscles that had carried me through twelve hours on my feet. The good kind of tired. Maybe I could do this. Maybe I could build something here.

Just as I reached the car, my phone vibrated in my pocket. The notification came from the school's generic football email account. I hesitated before opening it.

Subject: Meeting Request

Hi Ms. Walton,

I want to schedule a time to meet regarding Jace and the upcoming season. Please stop by my office at Kennedy High this week.

– Coach

Lacy’s comments echoed in my head.

Coach Massey.

Jace hadn’t mentioned any problems. He’d come home sweaty and smiling, talking about conditioning and how he thought he might enjoy playing wide receiver. What reason would prompt the coach’s meeting? Was there paperwork missing? Eligibility issues? Something disciplinary? I read the email three times, as if the words might rearrange themselves into something less ominous.

Coach. The screen dimmed before I looked away.

Surely, there were multiple coaches on staff. Assistants. Coordinators. It didn’t have to be— Don’t spiral. Before doubt could take over, my fingers were already moving across the keyboard.

Thank you for reaching out. I’m available Thursday after 4 p.m. Please let me know what works best.

Cali

My thumb hovered over Send for half a second, before I pressed it. The message whooshed away, carrying a piece of my equilibrium with it.



The house was loud when I got home. Jace and Grandpa were arguing over the placement of a toy silo while Jeopardy played on the TV at a volume that felt like they'd been trying to listen to it from outside. I grabbed the remote and turned it down to a reasonable level.

"It doesn't go there," Grandpa insisted, like a child who hadn't gotten his way.

"It makes more sense with the wind direction," Jace countered, as if he'd been a farm kid his whole life. I paused in the doorway and let the sound wash over me. This. This was why I'd come back.

"Hey," I said, stepping inside.

Jace looked up first. "How was day one?"

"Good," I said, slipping off my shoes and discarding my bag on a chair.

Grandpa squinted at me. "You're late."

"I told you I'd be late."

He considered that. "Did you bring pie?"

I blinked. "No?"

Jace gave an exaggerated sigh. "Rookie mistake."

Grandpa grinned. "We'll train you."

For a few minutes, it felt almost normal, like we'd lived here forever, as they recounted their day with Helen and how she'd taken them to get pie at the diner. According to Jace, the pie was life-changing, so they must still make it from scratch. I laughed at their antics as they began arguing over which pie was better. I shook my head, smiling as my phone vibrated again. I froze when I reached for it in my pocket—an email reply.

Thursday at 4:15 works. I'll see you then.

–Lane

The name slammed into me like a collision. Lane. Not Coach or Coach Massey. Lane.

The kitchen canted, the edges of the room blurring as heat climbed my neck. Of course it was him. Beneath the noise of Grandpa and Jace arguing over plastic silos, years of thoughtfully buried memories clawed their way to the surface. Friday night lights. Whispered promises beneath a blanket of stars. The focus in his forest green eyes that made me believe I was worth fighting for. His arms wrapped around me when I finally gave him everything. Soft kisses and whispered declarations of forever against my skin. Months of waiting until I trusted him enough to give him that part of me. Trusting him more than I'd ever trusted anyone—and then I left. I lost him and let myself believe I'd never mattered to him at all.

"Cal?" Jace's voice cut through the noise in my head. None of the panic reached my face.

"Yeah?"

"Are you okay?" Jace watched me.

"Yeah." The word scraped. "Just work stuff."

Kennedy wasn't big enough for both of us, and yet here we were. Thursday was two days away, and there was nowhere left to run. I stared at the email until the letters blurred. Fifteen years ago, I'd run. This time, I would stay. I slid my phone into my scrubs pocket and forced a smile.

"Alright," I said. "Who's winning the farm war?"

Grandpa quickly raised his hand. Jace scoffed. And somewhere under the noise and our history, a single unwelcome truth became impossible to ignore. The embers I deemed long dead still remained. Would they ever burn out when it came to him? Would I be able to move past the one who held my heart in the palms of his reckless hands in high school? When would I forget the future we'd planned together? When would it not hurt to just hear his name?

OceanofPDF.com

Ten



Lane

The words refused to change, no matter how many times I went over them. I stared at the cinder block wall of my office at Kennedy High School. Framed team photos lined up in careful rows behind my desk, each one holding a piece of a life that seemed simpler the farther away I got from it. The glass on the frames had dulled over the years, collecting a thin layer of dust around the edges, but the faces behind it were still sharp enough to pull me back. State semifinalists. District champions. Boys caught in the kind of moments they never realized they were living through, their smiles

wide, their shoulders squared, their eyes carrying the certainty that there would always be another season, another game, another chance to get it right until there wasn’t.

I knew every face on that wall. I knew the names, the stories, the ones who went on to play at the next level and the ones who left Kennedy behind the moment they crossed the graduation stage. I remembered the nearly palpable excitement under Friday night lights, the way an entire town could hold its breath together for the last few seconds of a close game. Back then, winning felt permanent, and the people around me felt even more permanent. The pictures had stayed, while most of the people hadn’t. All of the frames faded as I thought about the email again.

Cali Walton. Back in Kennedy.

A name I hadn’t seen written down in years, suddenly sitting there on my screen like it belonged. Like she hadn’t been a part of a chapter I’d spent years trying not to reread. Like she hadn’t been someone I still remembered far too often—the sound of her laugh, the way she could walk into a room and make everything else feel quieter, the version of myself I could be with only her.

Forty-eight hours.

That was all the time I had before she walked back into this building, through these same doors, down these same halls, and into this office.

Into my life. My jaw locked so tightly there was a dull ache beneath my ears. Until Landry came barreling into the gym last week, I hadn’t even known Cali was back in town.

The announcement came with the force of a line drive straight to the ribs, knocking the air from my lungs before I had the chance to brace for it. The kind of blow every ballplayer knows—sharp enough to make your vision blur for a second, deep enough to leave a bruise blooming beneath the surface long after everyone else has forgotten it happened. You straighten your shoulders, wave off the coach, and pretend it didn’t hurt like hell. I should’ve done the same and shrugged it off. Gone back to sparring. Let the name drift past like every other piece of small-town gossip—except this wasn’t like everything else.

Instead, it followed me.

Then there was the new kid, who had already found himself at odds with several teammates. A conversation with his parents might give me some

insight into what was going on outside the field and what might be driving the tension. I saw his last name on the freshman roster.

Jace Walton. A single surname was all it took to pull me up short. A transfer from Austin, Texas. The room had gone strangely quiet around me as the possibilities fell into place, each one heavier than the last. Coincidence would've been easier to believe if I hadn't already known better. Before I could talk myself out of it, I'd opened his file.

Emergency Contact: Cali Walton.

After all these years, she'd come back to Kennedy, and of all the sports she could've chosen, she'd enrolled her son on my team. I leaned back in my chair, rubbing a hand over my jaw, but the tension refused to ease. Whether it was confidence, carelessness, or some cruel joke fate had played, I couldn't say. I only knew every answer left me wishing for a different one.

A sharp knock cracked through, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Yeah," I called. Soren leaned against the jamb, arms crossed over his chest. "You look like someone just told you that preschoolers have replaced the team."

"Worse."

He stepped inside, shutting the door behind him. "Spill." I swiveled the screen toward him. He scanned it and slowly looked up. "Well."

"Don't start," I said.

"Cali's back," he stated.

"I'm aware."

"And her kid's on your team."

Like I hadn't just shown him the screen to discover this little nugget of information. I was still processing the fact she had a kid. Cali was a mom. *My* Cali, except she wasn't mine anymore.

"Also aware."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Are you okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

Soren's silence said everything. I couldn't stay seated. I crossed the office once, turned around and did it again, every step fueled by the restless pull of everything I hadn't said and everything I still didn't understand.

"I don't care," I said finally. "It's been fifteen years."

"That's not what I asked."

I stopped walking, my feet coming to a halt before I had even fully processed the question running through my mind. Did I care?

The answer came as anger first, sharp and immediate, the kind I had learned to carry so well that I could aim it at almost anything and convince myself it was enough—anger I used for fuel. It was easier than the questions that always followed, easier than admitting there was still a part of me that wondered what happened, where things had gone wrong, and how someone who had once been my entire future could become someone I couldn't reach at all. Cali left without an explanation, without a goodbye, without giving me even a single conversation to understand why everything we had built suddenly meant nothing to her. One day, we were making plans and talking about the life we were going to have together, mapping out a future that felt so certain I never thought to question whether we would actually get there.

The next day, she was gone. Her phone was disconnected. Her bed was empty. There was no note, no message, no final moment where she looked me in the eye and told me she was walking away, that she'd changed her mind about us. She had disappeared from my life so completely that there were days when it felt like I had imagined it all, like the memories were something I had created because I wanted them to be real.

But they were real. I still had the photos.

They were tucked away where no one else would find them, hidden in a place I told myself I had forgotten about, even though I knew exactly where they were. Every so often, I would pull them out and stare at the two of us frozen in those moments, trying to find some clue I had missed, some warning sign I should have seen, some explanation buried in the way she looked at me.

I kept searching for the place where everything fell apart. Because that was the part I couldn't understand. How did we go from her looking at me like I was the center of her world, like I was someone she couldn't imagine living without, to me not being worth a goodbye?

"You want me to sit in on the meeting?" Soren asked, his voice deliberately casual, though I knew him well enough to know he was watching me more closely than he wanted me to realize.

"No."

The response came out faster than I intended, because the last thing I needed was someone else in that room watching me try to pretend I was

unaffected. I had spent years convincing everyone, including myself, that I was fine, and I wasn't about to have an audience when that illusion finally cracked.

"You sure?" His brows pulled together as he studied my face.

"I'm not a teenager," I said, forcing a small laugh as I tried to pull the conversation somewhere lighter than the place my thoughts had taken me.

Soren only raised an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced.

"That's debatable."

I shoved him toward the doorway before he could enjoy the satisfaction of being right, and he laughed as he stumbled into the hallway. For a moment, the sound reminded me that life outside my own head was still moving, that the world hadn't stopped just because someone from my past had suddenly stepped back into it. He paused at the doorway and looked back at me, the humor fading from his expression.

"Just call if you need to talk, okay?"

I didn't answer because I wasn't sure I could make that promise without breaking it. The meeting had been scheduled for a reason, or maybe two reasons if I was willing to admit the truth. I wanted answers. I wanted to understand why she left and why after all these years I still felt like I was standing in the middle of a story that had ended without a last page.

But I also wanted to see her.

I wanted to look at Cali Walton and know whether the woman walking back into my office was the same one who had once held my heart in her hands or if I'd spent all these years holding on to a version of her that no longer existed.

And I needed to do it alone.

Not because I didn't trust Soren, but because I wasn't sure I could find the words with someone else there. I wasn't sure I could sit across from her, with all those years of questions and hurt pressing against my ribs, and only talk about her son.

OceanofPDF.com

Eleven



Cali

Thursday came too fast. The ER had been steady all week, the kind of busy that kept us moving without tipping into chaos. The shifts that kept your mind occupied as much as necessary that you didn't have to think too hard, but somehow, I thought about him anyway. About Lane. His name hadn't passed my lips in years; it felt foreign there.

By the afternoon, I changed out of my scrubs into jeans and a lace blouse that looked effortless without looking careless. Why did I care? I didn't.

That was what I told myself. But some part of me still wanted to look put-together, even though I knew I meant nothing to him anymore.

My hands shook anyway as I rebraided my hair, trying to tame the copper wisps falling around my face. This wasn't about us—this was about Jace. That was the boundary. The caution tape keeping the heartbreak contained to one small manageable area. The only reason I was stepping foot inside that building again.

The drive to Kennedy High School left my stomach twisted into knots. The faint smell of cut grass and adolescence still lingered in the air. I hadn't walked those halls in over a decade, and somehow, my body remembered every inch of them.

The school secretary, Alicia, glanced up when I stepped inside.

"Can I help you?" Her dark copper curls barely brushed her shoulders.

"I'm here to see the football coach." The words felt distant, as if they were coming from someone else's mouth. I had spent years believing I would never see him again, and now I was standing in the school he apparently coached in, walking toward a meeting with him.

"Sure thing. What's your name?" she asked with a freckled smile as she carried a stack of files over to the desk behind the counter.

"Cali Walton."

Recognition flickered over her face, and I thought I remembered a younger version of her from high school. She had always been involved in community volunteering and choir, if I remembered correctly. We had never really been close, but she was always someone who seemed genuinely kind, which had stood out back then.

She picked up the phone, her gray-green eyes glancing toward me. "Coach? Ms. Walton's here." A pause.

"He says you can head to his office. Just down the hall to the right," she said with another smile.

Of course he'd expect me to come to him. The walk through the hallway felt longer than it should have. The trophy case gleamed beneath the fluorescent lights—the scent of floor cleaner mixing with old memories. My heartbeat thudded in my ears as I searched the office doors for his name.

LANE MASSEY

Head Football Coach

The name on the plaque looked wrong and right all at once. My hand lifted slowly, hesitating before knocking.

“Come in.” His voice was deeper and rougher than it used to be, but just as recognizable.

My hand trembled as the door opened, and there he was. Lines etched faintly into his tanned skin around his eyes only intensified the green I remembered. His sandy-blond hair was longer. His shoulders filled out the polo, and I hated how easily I noticed. He was older, but there was a hardness around him now that I didn’t remember. But his eyes were the same. Those same stormy green eyes locked onto mine, and the air disappeared from the room.

For a full second, neither of us moved.

“Well, if it isn’t California Walton. Glad to see you could stop in to see your grandpa. After all, it’s been—what—fifteen years?” he said, leaning back in his chair, arms spread wide, looking around as if there were other people witnessing this conversation. The words pressed like a hand around my throat, cutting off my supply of air. Every hope that this could remain professional seeped out of me and disappeared onto the floor.

No response came because breathing had suddenly become difficult.

Lane stood, knocking the rolling chair against the wall a few feet away, arms crossed over his chest, a file in his hand. The cinder block reminded me of the half-wall I used to sit on while waiting for him after practice. The same hallway where he had once kissed me slowly with certainty, as if I wasn’t going anywhere.

My throat narrowed even more. I had expected whispers from the townspeople. Side-eyes in the diner. Conversations that thinned when I walked in. But not this. Not from him. He had been the only place that never felt sharp or cruel until now, until then.

A swallow barely made it past the tightness in my throat.

“Not nearly long enough.” The crack in my voice betrayed me. His jaw ticked at the sound, a brief flare of something—regret? irritation?—before his expression shuttered.

“Why are you here?”

His voice had lost its edge of mockery. Now it was rough, controlled, demanding answers I didn’t want to give and forcing a conversation I wasn’t ready to have.

“I received an email that I needed to meet with the football coach about my son.” The answer avoided the real question entirely.

His head cocked to the side, his eyes sharpening as if the reason were written somewhere on my face. A beat passed, stretching too long and making the quiet between us unbearable.

“I’m the football coach,” he said finally. “Follow me.”

He turned without waiting and walked out of the room. My legs forced themselves forward down the hallway. His polo stretched across his back as he sauntered ahead of me, the fabric pulling over broad shoulders I remembered wrapping my hands around.

The memory came uninvited—Friday nights, my cheek pressed against his shoulder while he drove us nowhere in particular through the rolling Flint Hills. The rush of hitting the hills just right, feeling my stomach lift with every drop, and laughing through that little burst of fear and excitement. Those moments made the ride feel like pure freedom.

My gaze forced itself higher, hating the memories that arrived every time I looked at him. Lane was Jace’s coach. The coach I would have to deal with for the rest of the season.

The hallway seemed narrower with every step. The reality crept over me slowly and heavily. This wasn’t a one-time conversation because I would see him at every game. I would have to exist in the same spaces, surrounded by the same memories, pretending none of them mattered. The familiar corner closed in around me again—no room to move, no easy way out, no option except to keep standing.

Taking care of Grandpa. Getting Brett to stop contacting me. Making sure Jace had something solid beneath him while keeping him protected from the things no child should have to carry. Succeeding at work because too much depended on me.

Falling apart wasn’t an option.

Lane pushed open an office door; the windows looked out onto the parking lot.

“Have a seat.” His tone had shifted. Less bite, more distance.

I lowered myself into the metal chair across from the conference table. It scraped loudly against the floor, and I resisted the urge to flinch.

“Will your husband be joining us?” he asked stiffly, flipping through a stack of papers.

My face heated instantly. “No.”

Let him assume whatever he wanted. Let him think I had built a whole life somewhere else, neat and respectable and complete.

He nodded once and sat down, bracing his forearms on the table. The movement was deliberate and professional, but purposefully intimidating. Or maybe it only felt that way because it was him.

“The reason I requested a meeting is that I wanted to talk about Jace.”

My fingers laced together in my lap.

“Jace has talent. There’s no doubt about that,” Lane continued. “He’s quick. Strong. Focused.” His gaze flickered to mine. “But he seems to have trouble controlling his temper.”

My stomach dropped.

“I’ve already given him a verbal warning, a written warning,” he continued. “Before I have to suspend him for a week of practice and the first game, I wanted to see if there was a way to avoid that.”

The word *suspend* rang through my head. The mama bear in me wanted to launch out of my seat and insist there had to be more to the story because Jace wasn’t like this.

“Can you give me an example?” I asked carefully. “Of him not controlling his temper?”

“Monday at practice.” Lane didn’t look down at the papers anymore. He looked directly at me. “He shoved a teammate to the ground.”

My head shook before I even realized it. “That can’t be right,” I said.

“I saw it with my own eyes.”

My gaze dropped to the file in his hand, as if the words might leap from the pages and explain what I wasn’t ready to hear.

His voice seemed louder in the space—not because it was raised, but because he sounded certain. I met his gaze. Once, I had trusted those eyes more than my own instincts. They had looked at me like I was the only thing in the world that mattered. Now they assessed me, weighed me, judged me.

“There had to be more to it,” I whispered. “Jace doesn’t just—”

“He’s intense,” Lane interrupted. “He reacts fast. Like he’s already expecting a hit.”

I folded an arm across my stomach as my breath caught.

Images flashed through my mind—Jace stiffening when a door slammed. The way he watched exits in unfamiliar places. The way his jaw locked when Brett’s name appeared on my phone screen. The way he used to say

“No hugs, please,” as if he expected me to push past a boundary I would never cross.

“He’s not a problem kid,” I said.

“I didn’t say he was.” The unexpected softness in his voice almost hurt more.

Silence stretched between us, heavy with everything neither of us had said. He leaned back slightly, studying me.

“Is there something going on at home?” he asked.

My spine straightened instantly.

“No.”

His eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly.

“I’m just trying to avoid benching him,” Lane said. “He’s got talent, Cali.”

The way he said my name—soft, familiar—slipped beneath my defenses. I jerked to my feet; the chair scraped against the floor as my knees bumped into it.

“I’ll talk to Jace,” I said, the words stuck in my throat.

Lane stood. “Cali—”

For a moment, he sounded as if he didn't want the conversation to end this way.

My hand rested on the door, ready to exit. “What?”

A flicker of something vulnerable crossed his face before he buried it.

“He’s got potential,” he said instead. “I don’t want him to throw it away.”

Neither of us missed the double meaning.

“I won’t let that happen,” I replied, leaving the room as if it no longer contained enough air for me to breathe. The office door flew open as I raced down the hallway, the air outside feeling cooler, thinner. I didn’t slow down until I pushed through the school entrance and into the parking lot. Only then did I breathe. My shoulders heaved as I dragged in oxygen, but it never felt like enough. It was as if a band cinched around my lungs, allowing only shallow breaths. Not too many. Not too deep.

I could do this.

This town wasn’t the worst thing I’d survived. Worse than Lane looking at me as if I were a stranger. Worse than young love shriveling into something sharp and brittle.

At seventeen, I’d left with nothing but a backpack and a promise to myself never to be trapped again. And yet, here I was. Back in the same

town, the same school, the same parking lot where Lane had once held my face in his hands and told me I was everything. My chest ached at the memory.

Had Jace shoved someone to the ground? I knew my son. I knew the quiet things he carried—the way he swallowed everything whole until it burned. We'd talk, and I'd get the truth. This wasn't like Jace. There had to be more to the story.

I'd fix it because that's what I did. I held everything and everyone together for Grandpa, for Jace, and for the fragile life I'd built from the wreckage of choices that couldn't be undone. I slid into my car, gripped the steering wheel, and stared straight ahead.

Inside that small office, Lane had looked at me as though he was trying to reconcile the girl he'd loved with the woman sitting across from him. I didn't know which hurt more—the judgment in his voice or the concern he tried to hide when I left.

At six o'clock tomorrow night, Jace would step onto the football field under Lane's watchful eyes.

And I'd have to trust my first heartbreak with my heart.

My lungs burned. I turned the key in the ignition, because there wasn't another option. Jace and I would talk. Then I'd figure out how to survive football season.

OceanofPDF.com

Twelve



Cali

Jace stood in the side yard as the farmhouse came into view. I shut off the engine, but I didn't open the door. Through the windshield, I watched my son stand beside Grandpa's miniature farm, football tucked beneath his arm, shoulders carrying more weight than any fourteen-year-old should. Fourteen and already taller than me. Shoulders widening. Jaw sharpening. But moments like this still brought back the little boy who used to fall asleep on the couch with one hand fisted in my shirt, holding on like letting go meant I might disappear.

I stepped out of the car. Grandpa—Jimmy—sat cross-legged in the dirt, carefully repositioning a toy cow.

“Hey.”

Jace glanced up as he tossed the football lightly in the air and caught it again.

“How was practice?” I asked, keeping my tone light.

“Fine.” The football thudded into his palm again.

Grandpa looked up and squinted at me. “You’re late.”

“I know.” I stepped closer. “I had a meeting.”

Jace’s toss faltered for half a second before he caught it again. “With who?” he asked, aiming for casualness and missing by a mile.

Before answering, I crouched beside Grandpa and pressed a kiss to the top of his wild silver hair. “Hey, Jimmy. Did you win the farm war?”

He grinned. “Always.”

Jace snorted. I stood and brushed dirt off my jeans. “Inside,” I said gently to Jace. “When you’re ready.”

His shoulders tensed.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because we need to talk,” I said as he met my eyes.

The football stopped moving. Grandpa hummed to himself, pushing the tiny tractor in slow circles. Jace and I held each other’s gaze for a long second. He nodded once and headed for the back door without another word.



The kitchen seemed smaller in the evening light, shadows trickling through the windows. Jace leaned against the counter, arms crossed over his chest. I stayed standing across from him.

“I met with your coach today,” I said. He scrubbed the back of his thumb across his forehead.

“Oh.”

“Do you want to tell me about Monday?” I asked.

He stared at the floor and toed the cracked linoleum tile near the fridge. His foot nudged at the edge of it like he could peel the whole week up and throw it away.

“Nothing happened.”

“Lane says you shoved a teammate.” His name felt foreign on my tongue.

His head snapped up at the name. “Lane?”

He didn’t miss it.

“Yes, Coach Massey.”

He looked away again. A muscle twitched in his cheek.

“I didn’t start it. It wasn’t like that,” he muttered.

“Then help me understand.” Jace picked at the loose thread on the hem of his shirt, eyes fixed on the floor. He always tended to hide the things he thought would disappoint me.

“This jerk was talking,” he said finally.

“About?” I prodded.

“Stuff.”

“I’m gonna need more than that.” I stayed where I was, giving him the space to find the words.

“About you.” He glanced up quickly to meet my eyes before darting away.

Cold washed over me. My spine went rigid. “What about me?”

Jace’s shoulders curved forward, a silent shield between him and the questions he knew were coming.

“Just stuff,” he repeated. “That you used to live here. That you left. That you came back with a kid and no ring. That maybe you came back because nobody else wanted you.”

My mouth went dry.

“He said,” Jace continued, voice strained now, “that Coach Massey probably remembers you *real* well.”

The air left the kitchen as my stomach hollowed out.

“And what did you do?” I asked softly.

He laughed once. Sharp. “What do you think I did?”

“I want to hear it from you.”

“He got in my face,” Jace said, eyes flashing. “Like this.” He stepped forward suddenly, invading my space to demonstrate. “And he said maybe I should ask Coach what you were like in high school.”

My heart slammed against my sternum. “And you shoved him,” I finished.

“He shoved me first.” The rims of his eyes were red.

“Jace.”

“He did.” His voice rose. “He put his hands on me.”

“And then you put your hands on him,” I countered.

“He deserved it,” he shot back.

I crossed my arms, not as a shield, but as an anchor.

“You can’t respond to every idiot who says something you don’t like by putting them on the ground,” I reasoned. His shoulders were high enough to touch his ears. I searched his hazel eyes; he acted out of impulse because he cared, and he’d never handled unexpected touch well.

“He wasn’t just saying something I didn’t like.”

“I know,” I said, resigned.

“You don’t know.” His voice cracked. “You weren’t there.”

I remembered what it was like to live on the outskirts, to hear the things that people said when they thought I couldn’t hear them.

“What did it feel like?” I asked quietly.

“What?” He blinked away glassy eyes, thrown.

“When he said those things,” I said.

His jaw trembled once before he locked it down.

“It felt like . . .” He swallowed. “Like he thought he could say it because it was true.” My chest split open.

“It’s not true,” I said immediately. He shrugged one shoulder, but his eyes were shiny.

“I don’t know what’s true,” he admitted. “I don’t know anything about this place. I don’t know anything about you before me.”

He didn’t know because I hadn’t told him.

“You don’t talk about it,” he went on. “About why we left. About why we came here. About why people look at us weird.” His fingers curled into fists at his sides. “I’m not stupid, Cal,” he blurted.

“I know you’re not.” And I couldn’t easily distract him with Nerf guns and building a Lego car like I could when he was eleven years old.

“Then stop acting like I am,” he said.

I couldn’t keep him in the dark forever. I exhaled slowly.

“You’re right,” I said. He froze.

“I should have told you more.” His brows knit together.

“I thought I was protecting you,” I continued. “From my mess. From my mistakes. From the way this town can chew people up and spit them out. I had hoped that maybe things had changed.”

“I can handle it,” he shot back.

“I know you think you can.”

“I can,” he said as if trying to convince himself.

His hands were shaking. I reached out carefully and wrapped my fingers around one of his fists. He stilled for half a second before his muscles relaxed.

“You don’t have to fight every battle for me,” I said.

“I’m not fighting for you.”

“No?”

“It’s not right.” He huffed. “When someone talks about you like that,” he said, eyes bright now, “it feels like they’re trying to take something away from me.”

My throat burned because he understood what it felt like to have something taken.

“What are they trying to take?” I asked gently.

“You.” Oh. My sweet boy. There it was. The fear that one day I’d disappear too. Nothing on this earth was going to take me away from him. He was my son, and nothing could change that.

“I don’t want them thinking they know you,” he said. “They don’t.”

“I don’t even know you,” he muttered.

I swallowed.

“You’re right,” I said again. “You don’t know everything about me, and I don’t know everything about you.” His hazel gaze flicked up.

“Then tell me,” he said.

The house creaked around us. Grandpa’s faint humming drifted in through the open window. I leaned back against the counter and took a breath.

“I left Kennedy because I had to,” I said deliberately. "I was seventeen. I made choices that people didn’t like. Some of them were my fault. Some weren’t.”

He studied me carefully.

“I dated someone here,” I continued. “The whole town had opinions about it. About me. And it ended badly.”

“Coach?” he asked.

“Yes.” His eyes widened slightly.

“You dated Coach?” he asked incredulously, as if he’d wanted to believe it wasn’t true.

“Once upon a time,” I said.

He let out a disbelieving huff.

“So that’s why he looked at you like that,” he said, like he was putting together a puzzle. My fingers clenched around a spatula as I gathered the things needed to make dinner.

“Like what?”

“When you walked down the hall at school today. Like he wanted to yell at you and hug you at the same time.” So he had known about the meeting.

Heat crawled up my neck. “He doesn’t matter,” I said too quickly.

Jace’s brows lifted. “Okay,” he said slowly, clearly not believing me.

I pushed forward. “I left because, in the end, the only person who I thought was worth staying for didn’t think the same about me.”

His gaze softened just a little before his forehead scrunched in question.

“So you ran,” he said.

“Yes, in a way.”

“From him?” he asked, defensive again, his brows drawn in.

“From a lot of things.” There was no point in pretending otherwise. I cracked eggs on the edge of the skillet with one hand while butter hissed across the pan.

He was quiet for a moment. “Did you love him?”

The skillet sizzled between us. Years disappeared in seconds, and somehow I was seventeen again.

“Yes,” I answered, because we had promised each other honesty.

“Do you still love him?” he asked, toeing the floor again.

I laughed in surprise. “Stop worrying about us, Casanova.”

“Do you?” he said, not willing to be put off.

“That’s not the point.”

“It kind of is,” he said, chewing on the inside of his cheek.

I stepped forward and cupped my hands on his shoulders.

“The point is this,” I said firmly. “You do not get to solve your questions about my past by putting your hands on someone.”

“He shoved me first,” he protested.

“And if he does it again, you walk away.” I raised an eyebrow.

“And let him talk about you like that?” he asked, astonished.

“Yes.”

“No.” His eyes flashed.

“Yes, Jace.” I blew out a breath.

He immediately shook his head.

“I’m not going to stand there and let someone say those things about you.”

“I don’t need you to protect me,” I reasoned.

“Too bad.” The fierceness of his statement startled me.

“Jace,” I said gently. “You don’t become strong by fighting every annoyance that crosses your path that scares you.” His eyes narrowed.

“You think I’m scared?”

“I think you’re angry and scared that there’s something that could separate us, and this is not it. You. Are. Stuck. With. Me,” I said, drawing out the words.

“And you’re not angry?”

“Yes,” I admitted on an exhale. His eyes moved over my face, searching for an answer I wasn’t sure I had.

“At him?” he asked.

“At myself.”

“For what?” His brows met.

“For not telling you sooner. For bringing you back here without explaining what it would stir up for both of us,” I said honestly.

His shoulders lowered slightly. “I don’t care about what they think,” he said.

I flipped an egg in the skillet. “Then why did it matter so much?” I asked, looking over. He hesitated.

“Because he said you left him,” Jace said finally. “Like you ruined Coach.”

My stomach dropped.

“And I didn’t like the way he said it,” Jace pressed. “Like you were something cheap. Like you were someone who leaves people.”

I closed my eyes for half a second.

“I left, but that doesn’t mean I’ll ever leave you. For the rest of your life, you’re stuck with me,” I said again, because I’d probably be repeating it for

the rest of my life. Some fears only loosened after hearing the same words over and over and over again even if they were always backed up with action.

“But why did you?”

“Because sometimes loving someone isn’t enough if they don’t love you back.”

He absorbed that, and I felt like my heart was already raw from the last few minutes.

“Did he hurt you?” The fierce expression was on his face again.

“No.” The answer came quickly; I didn’t have the capacity to explain how deep the hurt went, even if it wasn’t physical. Not tonight.

“He thinks I hurt him,” I said as I tried to comprehend what Lane could be thinking.

Jace’s brow furrowed. “Then why do you look like you’re the one bleeding?”

I let out a shaky breath and dropped two pieces of bread into the toaster. Nothing slipped past him. “Because sometimes hurting someone you love feels worse than being hurt.”

He went still. “That’s dumb.”

“It is,” I agreed.

He stared at the floor again. “So what now?” he asked.

“Now,” I said, “you go to your game tomorrow. You apologize for shoving your teammate.”

His head jerked up.

“I’m not apologizing to that twerp for defending you,” he argued.

“You’re apologizing for losing control.”

His jaw worked.

“He already warned you,” I said. “You want to sit out your first game?”

Jace hesitated. “No.”

“Then you handle this like someone who knows his own strength.”

He looked at his hands.

“I don’t want to be like—” He stopped.

“Like who?”

He shook his head as if he were trying to clear a memory. “Like someone who just explodes.”

I stepped closer.

“Hey,” I whispered. “You’re not.”

His eyes flicked up.

“You’re not your temper,” I continued. “And you’re not anyone else’s version of being a man. You’re a good person, Jace Walton.”

He swallowed.

“You get to decide who you are,” I reassured, the sound of fried eggs crackling in the pan the only noise.

Then, almost reluctantly he agreed. “Okay.”

“Okay?” I asked.

“I’ll apologize,” he muttered.

I pulled him into a hug before he could change his mind. He resisted for exactly one second before his arms wrapped around me. Not because he didn’t want the hug. Because he was fourteen. He was almost too tall. My cheek rested against his collarbone instead of his hair.

“You don’t have to fight my battles,” I whispered.

“I know,” he said into my shoulder.

“But I’m glad you’d want to.” My sweet boy.

He huffed a small laugh. “Yeah.”

I gave him a quick squeeze before Grandpa’s voice drifted in from outside.

“Best friends! The cows are escaping!” he bellowed.

Jace pulled back first, wiping at his eyes as if he’d just gotten something in them.

“Guess we should go save the herd,” he said with a laugh, knowing Grandpa was most likely talking about plastic figurines.

“Guess so.”

He paused at the doorway and looked back over his shoulder. “Cal?”

“Yeah?”

“If Coach ever talks about you like that guy did . . . I’m gonna want to punch his lights out.”

I smiled despite myself. The same protective instinct ran deep in our bones, and we’d do whatever it took to take care of each other.

“Don’t.”

“No promises,” he quipped before disappearing into the fading light.

I stayed in the kitchen for a moment longer, palms flat against the counter, tears welling in my eyes before I finished dinner. Lane had said Jace played as if he were bracing for impact. Maybe he wasn’t only bracing

for the game; maybe he was bracing for the world to come after the only stable thing he'd ever known. Me.

And maybe I had spent years doing the same thing—waiting for everything I loved to disappear.

Outside, Jace's laughter rang out, mingling with Grandpa's. The embers weren't dead. Not in this town. Not in my chest. But maybe—just maybe—we didn't have to let them burn us alive.

Maybe that was the thing about family. It wasn't about where you came from. It was about who stayed.

And I was staying.

OceanofPDF.com

Thirteen



Cali

Friday night football in Kennedy arrived wrapped in amber light. Stadium lights clicked on one by one with a low electrical hum; the bleachers trembled as bodies shifted, aluminum rattling beneath boots and restless legs. The smell of popcorn and concession-stand nachos drifted thick and salty through the air, tangled with cut grass, sweat, and anticipation.

Grandpa sat beside me, three rows up from the railing, in his pressed flannel shirt and overalls, as if this was church instead of football. He'd insisted on arriving forty minutes early, just like always. Some habits

remained, even when other things didn’t. He tapped his cane against the bleachers like he was making sure they’d hold. A hospital bracelet still circled his wrist beneath the cuff of his flannel. He’d waved me off when I’d offered to cut it off. The tests wouldn’t be back until tomorrow. Until then, there wasn’t a thing to do but wait.

“Gotta see the boy’s first touchdown.”

He didn’t use the cane often, but I was glad he’d brought it along tonight, even if he kept tapping it on things like it was a wand, making me want to temporarily confiscate it. He’d demanded popcorn no less than three times, so that had been our first stop before finding a seat. I wasn’t sure I could survive a touchdown if it involved Jace getting tackled.

Down on the field, helmets flashed beneath the lights. Pads thudded as the players bumped against each other in excitement for the first game of the season. Whistles pierced the breezy September air. The band warmed up in uneven bursts of brass and snare. The whole town seemed to breathe in sync with the excitement on the field. Friday night lights and high school football were the lifeblood of Kennedy, Kansas. The only thing they were more passionate about was the rivalry between Kansas State University and the University of Kansas.

I scanned the players’ numbers, finding Jace. Twenty-three. He stood near the forty-yard line, helmet tucked beneath his arm, chin lifted as he searched the stands. He was trying to look calm. Casual. Like this was just another practice.

His fingers flexed around the helmet. His shoulders rolled once, twice. Bracing.

I leaned forward, elbows on my knees, because my stomach wanted to hurl at the possibility of him getting hurt.

“Which one’s ours?” Grandpa asked.

“The one pretending he’s not nervous,” I said, nodding toward Jace.

Grandpa squinted. “Ah. That one. Good kid. Bad farmer.” A giggle burst out.

A whistle blew, sharp and commanding. Players snapped into motion, lining up. Across the field, the visiting team clustered in red and white. Kennedy navy and orange stretched wide and bright beneath the lights.

Scanning the field again, Lane stood near the sideline, headset crooked over one ear, clipboard tucked beneath his arm. He moved with contained energy, pacing once, stopping to lean in close to a player. His hand clapped

on a player’s shoulder, grounding. Coaching seemed to fit him in the way breathing did; he was direct but not forceful. I looked away before he caught me watching.

The announcer’s voice boomed overhead, names rolling across the speakers. When he said Jace Walton, something in my lungs seemed to contract. The kickoff sailed high, spiraling against the darkening sky. The crowd cheered in a wave, noise swelling instantly from a hum to a roar. Pads collided with hollow thuds that echoed up into the bleachers. Cleats tore into grass. The quarterback barked commands. Jace moved as if he belonged there—quick off the line, reading plays before they fully formed.

He caught his first pass mid-stride.

For a split second, the world narrowed to the arc of the ball and the stretch of his hands. Impact. The ball smacked into his palms. He tucked it in securely against his ribs, turned his shoulder, and cut left. A defender lunged. Jace slipped past him, legs churning, face set in fierce concentration. The bleachers shook beneath us.

“Go!” Grandpa shouted, half rising.

An opponent tackled Jace ten yards later, and he crashed heavily into the grass. The sound of bodies colliding carried all the way up to me. My heart stopped. He rolled to his feet, handed the ball to the referee, and flashed a grin that finally let me breathe.

The lead seesawed between the two teams. The first quarter slipped into the second. Sweat darkened jerseys. Helmets knocked. The scoreboard ticked up slowly and stubbornly, with each team pressing to get enough of a lead to take a deep breath.

And then it happened.

Midway through the third quarter, a run up the middle collapsed into chaos. Players tangled in a sudden knot of blue and red. A whistle shrieked. The pile untangled, but one body stayed down, not moving. The noise shifted. Roars dulled into murmurs of concern. A ripple of unease rolled through the stands.

Jace stood a few yards back in shock before dropping to a knee, helmet falling to the ground where a boy lay motionless. Lane was already moving across the field, immediately kneeling beside the player. Staff rushed in from the sidelines. The stadium lights glared too bright against the stillness on the field as every player looked on, concern marring their expressions. The panic vanished as training took over.

Grandpa’s hand brushed my arm. “Cali.”

I was already standing because muscle memory didn’t ask permission. I moved down the bleachers fast, metal steps clanging beneath my shoes. Voices blurred around me. Someone said my name, but I didn’t stop. At the gate near the end of the stands, a security volunteer automatically lifted a hand.

“Ma’am—”

“I work at the hospital,” I said, already ducking under the rope.

The field felt different from down here. Larger and louder. The grass was damp against my shoes. The staff had stabilized the boy’s neck with a brace. His helmet was off, resting beside him. His eyes were open but unfocused, blinking slowly against the lights.

“Hey,” I said as I approached, kneeling opposite Lane.

His head snapped up at the sound of my voice. For half a breath, the noise of the stadium disappeared.

Stormy green eyes locked onto mine.

“Cali.” His voice was strained.

“What do we have?” I asked.

“Helmet to helmet,” one of the staff said. “He’s responsive. Says his neck hurts. Tingling in his right arm.”

The world narrowed to the boy’s face.

“What’s your name?” I asked him gently.

“Tyler,” he whispered.

“Hi, Tyler. I’m Cali Walton. I work in the emergency department at the hospital. I’m just going to check a few things, okay?”

His eyelids fluttered.

Lane scooted over to give me space. Our hands nearly touched. I could feel the heat radiating off him even through the cool night air.

My voice was steady, measured. “Can you wiggle your fingers for me?” His left hand obeyed immediately. The right hesitated, then twitched.

“Good,” I murmured. “That’s good.”

The ambulance siren wailed faintly in the distance, growing louder with every second. The crowd had fallen into an uneasy hush. The band stood frozen. Helmets were off now; players gathered in loose clusters, having taken a knee in solidarity. Jace knelt closest. His face was pale beneath the stadium lights.

“Tyler, I need you to stay very still,” I said. “You’re doing great.”

His breathing quickened. Lane leaned closer to the boy's line of sight. "Hey. You're alright, okay? Just stay with us."

The familiarity in his tone—steady, anchoring—pressed against something old inside me.

The paramedics burst through the gate with a stretcher. I rattled off findings automatically. "Right arm paresthesia. Responsive, oriented." They nodded, reminding him to be still. Hands worked in practiced synchronization. As they lifted him onto the board, Tyler's gaze darted wildly.

"I can't move," he whispered, panic creeping in.

"You will," I said firmly. "This is just a precaution to keep your neck stable. You're going to the hospital so we can make sure everything's okay."

The stretcher clicked into place. The siren cut off, replaced by the low rumble of the engine idling, but the lights were still flashing. They wheeled him toward the ambulance.

Lane rose slowly beside me. For a second, neither of us moved.

"You didn't have to—" he started.

"Yes, I did," I whispered. I would not stand by and do nothing, regardless of who was across from me.

His jaw worked.

Jace moved toward us, his helmet hanging from his fingertips. His eyes flicked from me to Lane and back again.

"Are you okay?" I asked him. He nodded too quickly.

"Is he—" Jace swallowed. "Is he gonna be okay?"

"We don't know yet," I said honestly. "But he was moving his fingers, so that's a really good sign."

Jace's shoulders sagged with relief he didn't try to hide.

Lane cleared his throat. "Once we clear the field, we'll restart. Everyone take a break," he called out to the team, voice carrying again. Command snapping back into place.

The ambulance doors slammed shut with a final, hollow thud. The doctor on staff tonight was a veteran in the emergency department. Tyler would be in excellent hands. The siren pierced the night as it pulled away, lights flashing against the darkening sky. Only when it disappeared past the stadium gates did the noise creep back in. A murmur at first, before boisterous applause, loud and supportive, for Tyler. For the fragile understanding that this game could turn in an instant.

I stepped back toward the sideline. “I should go,” I said.

Lane looked at me as if he wanted to say something else. Like he was standing on the edge of the words. Instead, he nodded once. “Thank you.” His voice carried the same steadiness that I remembered. Lane squeezed Jace’s shoulder before returning to the sidelines.

“You’re not supposed to run onto the field,” Jace muttered, but there was no heat in it.

“You’re not supposed to shove people,” I returned lightly because this was us. His mouth twitched. The whistle blew again to catch the players’ attention. The game resumed.

I climbed back into the stands, legs suddenly heavy. Grandpa reached for my hand and patted it.

“Is he gonna be alright?” he asked.

“I think so. More than anything, it just really knocked the air out of him, but it’s always good to play it safe.”

Below, the players lined up again. This time when the ball snapped, Jace didn’t look like he was bracing. He seemed focused and present, treating the injury of a teammate as a reason to win. The next play came fast—a sweep to the right. Jace blocked clean and hard, driving his defender back without losing control. No wild shove. No flare of temper. Just strength.

Lane commanded the sideline, eyes sharp, jaw set, taking a note from time to time on the clipboard he carried in his hand.

At the end of the third quarter, Jace caught another pass. He ran, and this time, no one caught him. He made a touchdown in a blur of blue and orange; the stadium erupted around us. The sound was deafening. Grandpa shouted something unintelligible and pounded his cane against the bleachers like a drum.

Jace turned toward the stands after the play, scanning. He didn’t wave, but a smile split his face as teammates pounded his helmet and shoulder, congratulating him on making the touchdown. He just held my gaze, solid and certain, like he knew exactly who he was out there. My boy had found somewhere he belonged.

And I realized something as the crowd roared and the lights burned bright overhead—maybe he wasn’t bracing for impact anymore. Maybe he was learning how to stand in it. The tears came before I could stop them.

OceanofPDF.com

Fourteen



Lane

The Massey estate sat on the north end of Kennedy as if it had been planted there by decree instead of built with human hands. Stately white columns stretched two stories high, catching the last of the evening light. The cobblestone driveway curved in a slow, deliberate arc past trimmed hedges and a fountain that always seemed a little ridiculous for a town like Kennedy. The whole place looked down its nose at the world around it. From the outside, it was everything people thought a family should be.

The engine cut off, but I stayed behind the wheel for another moment. The thought of walking through those doors already felt like a mistake. The more sensible choice would have been to drive my brand-new fully loaded truck. The ’52 Chevy irritated him more.

Inside, the lights gleamed. Through the front windows, I could make out the outline of a chandelier—all crystal and quiet superiority. Bryant Massey had money, and he wanted everyone to know that. To envy it. To envy him.

I checked the time on my phone. Six fifty-eight. Dinner was at seven. I’d push it as close as I could without actually being late. The sooner this was over, the sooner I could leave.

The air smelled faintly of chlorine from the pool out back and the sweet bite of some expensive interior fragrance drifting through an open window as I walked toward the door.

The front door swung open before I knocked. Bryant stood there, framed in the doorway like a portrait that had aged but never softened. A tan that was a little unnatural against stark white teeth.

“Son,” Bryant Massey said, adjusting the cuff of his pressed navy shirt over his thick gold watch band. “You’re late.”

I glanced at the grandfather clock. Seven on the dot.

“Evening.”

He stepped back, giving me only enough room to enter without brushing shoulders.

The foyer stretched wide and echoed. Marble tiles gleamed under the chandelier’s low light. A curved staircase swept upward as if it belonged in a majestic magazine of million-dollar homes instead of a small Midwestern town of hardworking and humble people.

My footsteps sounded too loud against the floor. Somewhere deeper in the house, silverware clinked softly, and a woman’s voice hummed low.

“Is that him?” a woman called.

There was a pause, and a chair faintly scraped against the floor. And then she appeared.

Julia.

Her hair was longer now, darker than the light blonde it had been at twenty-five. It fell in careful, smooth waves over one shoulder, catching the light. She seemed older than she was, polished, with pearls at her throat like she’d spent years learning how to belong in this house. Bile rose in my throat. Her smile never reached her eyes.

“Hi, Lane.” Her voice was warm. Refined. Practiced. Just like the rest of her.

I nodded once. “Julia.”

She crossed the foyer with measured steps, placing a hand on Bryant’s forearm before she pressed a brief kiss to his cheek, then turned back toward the dining room.

“Dinner is ready,” she said lightly. “I didn’t know if you’d make it.”

“I said I would.”

Bryant gave a small hum that could have meant anything. I’d stopped trying to predict which version of Bryant Massey would show up: the baseball legend everyone admired, or the man who could level a room with a single sentence. So everyone adapted. We learned which version of him was walking through the door before he even said a word.

The dining room table had already been set. White linen. Crystal glasses. Cloth napkins folded into sharp triangles. The kind of table you couldn’t relax at. A brisket sat in the center, steam curling up in spirals. The arrangement included small potatoes in a porcelain bowl covered in fresh parsley and roasted green beans lined up like soldiers.

The chair slid against the Turkish rug as I sat. Everything about the ritual felt rehearsed. Bryant stayed standing a moment longer, surveying the table as if it were a business meeting instead of a meal with his family. Bryant took his seat at the head, nodding to Julia, as if he were deeming approval over her table.

Julia poured wine with careful precision into the sparkling glasses. “Football season started,” she said, settling into the chair at Bryant’s right.

“It did.” Here we went again, having a meaningless conversation when I’d bet she didn’t want to be here anymore than I did.

“How is the team looking this year?” Bryant asked, cutting into his meat without looking up.

“They’re young but have a lot of solid talent,” I answered.

He chewed slowly. Swallowed. I swore he drew the meal out simply by eating at a slower rate than the average person.

“I saw the team’s record book for last year,” he said.

My hand went to the water glass instead of the wine. “We were rebuilding.”

“Aren’t you always?” he asked mildly.

Julia shot him a quick look, then gave me a sympathetic half smile. The same one she used to give me in high school when I showed up to a party alone, refusing to bring anyone else after Cali left.

“I heard about the injury,” she blurted. “Tyler Bennett, wasn’t it? His mother was frantic.”

My fork paused. “A good scare,” I said. “But he’ll be okay.”

“That is good,” Julia breathed.

Bryant dabbed at the corner of his mouth with his napkin.

“You let a kid get carted off in the third quarter of your first home game,” he said. “Not exactly inspiring confidence.”

I looked up. “Football’s a contact sport.”

“Control is part of coaching,” he countered. “Or have they changed that since my day?” We were on the verge of a recount of his glory days. Stories I could recite from memory because I had heard them more times than I cared to.

My grip clenched around my fork.

“We handled it,” I said evenly.

He leaned back in his chair. “Of course you did.”

Julia straightened in her seat.

“I saw Cali Walton is back in town,” she blurted as if she were trying to break the awkwardness. What she didn’t know was that that was the worst thing she could bring up.

The name exploded across the table as if someone had dropped a bomb. I didn’t look up.

“Oh?” Bryant said, interest sharpening. “The girl who ran off?”

“Her son is on the team,” Julia said, up-to-date on all the local gossip.

My knife touched the plate with deliberate care.

“Is that so?” he asked.

She nodded. “She ran onto the field when Tyler went down. Apparently she’s a doctor or something now.”

Bryant let out a low whistle. “Well,” he said, “looks like someone managed to climb a few rungs.”

I straightened, muscles rigid. “She didn’t run off,” I said. I knew very well she had, but he didn’t get to talk about her like that. He didn’t get to have her name in his mouth.

Julia’s brows lifted slightly like she was just realizing this was not the topic to bring up.

“No?” he asked.

I kept my voice level. “She left.”

“Without so much as a goodbye,” he replied, lifting a brow.

The air thinned. Julia traced the rim of her wineglass with one finger. “People leave for all sorts of reasons.”

My father’s gaze slid to her. “Some people don’t understand loyalty.”

Her hand stilled as her eyes flickered to him. My gaze moved between them. The chandelier light caught the diamonds in her wedding ring.

“You always did have a weakness for girls who needed saving,” he said casually, and Julia flinched slightly.

My eyes snapped up.

“I didn’t need to save anyone.” The calm in my voice was the only thing keeping the anger underneath it from showing.

He arched his brow. “No? Because from where I’m at, you spend an awful lot of time picking up after other people’s children.”

Julia inhaled softly. “Honey—”

“What?” he said, spreading his hands. “It wasn’t an insult. It was an observation.”

I pushed my plate back an inch. “You asked me to come to dinner. I came.”

“And we are having dinner,” he replied smoothly. “Conversation is part of that.” He waved his fork as if it were normal to carry this much tension during a family dinner. Dinners with Soren’s family had never been like this.

The grandfather clock in the hallway ticked steadily, each second precise and unyielding, like it was reminding me of every minute I was trapped in this room with him.

Julia rose halfway from her chair. “Dessert?” she offered. “I made key lime pie.”

I almost laughed at the timing. The sudden shift to dessert, as if we could pretend the last few minutes hadn’t happened. That was the ruse of this family. We were all experts at pretending.

“Sure,” he said.

She disappeared into the kitchen, heels clicking lightly against the marble. Bryant leaned forward, forearms braced on the table.

“I heard you met with Walton,” he said, and I cursed the way this town talked.

There was no point in his pretending that he didn’t know everything.

“I met with a player’s parent.”

His mouth curved. “Of course.”

“She’s not a kid anymore.” The words left before I could stop them.

“No,” he agreed. “She’s a single mother who ran back to town. Who is the father of her child?”

He delivered it like a simple question. We both knew it wasn’t.

My chair creaked as I leaned back. Jace didn’t look like me, but the thought of her building a life with someone else twisted something deep in my gut. Fifteen years later, I couldn’t kiss another woman without seeing her face.

“You don’t know anything about her.” My voice was tight.

His eyes hardened. “I know she humiliated you.”

My pulse thudded, slow and loud in my ears. “I embarrassed myself,” I bit out.

He waved a dismissive hand. “You were sixteen. You let feelings cloud your judgment.” Seventeen. Almost eighteen. But details had never mattered to Bryant Massey unless they involved him.

Julia came back with the pie, setting it down carefully between us. The smell of sugar and key lime filled the room.

“Let’s not rehash high school,” she said brightly, grasping for a peace that had already slipped out of reach.

Bryant accepted a slice with a nod. Something about the condescending way he nodded at Julia, as if she needed his approval, made me want to deck him. I tugged at my collar. Julia set a slice of pie in front of me. Our fingers brushed for half a second. She pulled back fast. Things would always be awkward between us. The pie tasted too tart, but I swallowed anyway.

“You should have kept playing instead of coaching,” he said. This wasn’t a new topic, but it was one I was tired of hearing. He didn’t like losing control of me, and I’d made the decision without consulting him first.

“I’m not you.” Bryant Massey was a legend in baseball and played until his body wouldn’t let him anymore. I realized that no matter how much wealth I accrued, it would never give me the excitement that football did. Sometimes you could be great at something and not love it enough to keep revolving your whole life around it.

The room went still. For years, I'd swallowed every word before it reached my mouth. Tonight, I let him see exactly how tired I was. Julia's fork hovered over her plate, eyes darting between us. My father's eyes turned stony, slow and deliberate.

"No," he said. "You aren't." His words had exactly the effect he intended. They weren't a disagreement or an opinion; they were a verdict.

The clock kept ticking as I kept each breath even. I pushed my chair back. I had to get out of here.

"I have an early practice. Thank you, Julia, for dinner," I said as I laid my napkin on the table.

He didn't get up; his gold pinky ring gleamed as he tipped back a sip of wine like a shot glass.

"You always were so sensitive," he said.

I pushed in my chair anyway and walked out, unwilling to listen to his list of complaints about me as a person. Too sensitive. Too much like my mother.

Julia followed me into the foyer, while he stayed at the table.

"Lane," she whispered, stopping a few feet away. "He doesn't mean—"

"He does," I cut out, because there was no point in acting like he didn't.

She looked down at her hands. The pearls at her throat caught the light as she swallowed.

"I didn't plan any of this," she said.

"I know." She was just a casualty in Bryant Massey's life. We all were. I studied her for a long moment. Once, I'd tried to convince myself she could fill the space Cali left. She never deserved that. The thing I had not realized was that Julia wanted to be a Massey so badly that she'd marry him.

She reached out, then let her hand fall. "I'm glad the boy's okay," she said, as if ignoring everything that had been said in between.

"So am I." She didn't deserve the hand she was dealt; except she'd been the one who had a choice, and she still chose him.

I stepped outside before she could say anything else. The autumn-night air stung my face, cool and sharp. Behind me, the house stood unchanged. Windows reflective. Columns rigid. Perfect, at least on the outside.

I hurried down the stone steps as fast as I could without running. Halfway to my truck, I stopped. The fountain gurgled softly in the dark, and I looked back at the house one more time. For a second, I imagined it empty. Complete silence. No chandelier. No clock ticking like a metronome

measuring my failures. Just walls that didn't hold memories of rage and a space that held moments I never wanted to forget of my mom. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I acknowledged that the only reason I came was that it felt the closest I could be to her since she'd left.

The truck door slammed behind me, shutting out the house. The engine roared to life—loud, unrefined against the manicured quiet of the neighborhood. I bit back the smirk that I'd driven it here. As I pulled away, the house shrank in my rearview mirror. Smaller and farther away with each rotation of the tires. No longer looming in that suffocating way it always did, the band of tightness around my chest loosened up barely enough to breathe.

Instead of turning toward home, I kept driving—to the pond that held so many of my favorite childhood memories. I shut off the headlights, hoping not to get caught. Cali's grandpa, Jimmy, had let me fish whenever I wanted as a kid, and the quiet solace gave me a break from my house. Cali had already been sitting on the bank the first afternoon I wandered down here.

Bare feet in the water. History book open. Index study cards scattered beside her. She'd been struggling to memorize history dates for a test. We decided then that the pond belonged to both of us. I didn't know it, but that quiet afternoon would become the beginning of everything. The visor dropped with a soft click. Two Polaroids slid into my hand. It was us at this exact pond. We were sixteen. One photo showed Cali's freckled face thrown back in laughter. The second image was Cali kissing my cheek and me grinning like a fool. These moments were frozen in time. I wanted to believe the love I saw on her face had been real, but there had been countless nights when I'd almost thrown them away. When keeping them felt like holding on to something that no longer belonged to me. Then I'd remember the girl who made my teenage years bearable. Even if I hated how she'd left, it didn't negate the memories we had shared. Something my dad said stuck with me. Was there a possibility Jace was mine? I didn't think so, but it made me wonder whose he was and how it had been so easy to walk away from what we had so quickly.

My phone was already in my hand before I admitted what I was doing. An article popped up about a decorated firefighter who had rescued a woman and child from a house fire. The photo beside it stopped me cold.

Cali. Her smile was smaller than it used to be, but it was hers. My thumb dragged farther down the page. Decorated firefighter critically injured

saving family. Rescued his romantic partner. Severely injured. The words blurred together as I read the paragraph again. So she'd loved someone else. Enough to build a life. Enough for him to risk his life for hers.

My gaze drifted to the Polaroids resting against the steering wheel. Fifteen years hadn't been enough to throw them away. Tonight, for the first time, I wondered if I should have. My thumb returned to the article. There was no mention of him after the fire. No wedding. No engagement. No recent photos. Just old headlines of the story.

Had she left him too? The question burrowed somewhere ugly.

Denise Walton had always left. Husband after husband. House after house. Cali used to swear she'd never become like her mom.

I'm never going to be like her, Lane.

I'd believed her. Maybe she'd been wrong. The thought refused to let go. Somewhere between the article in one hand and the Polaroids I usually kept tucked behind the visor, something inside me shifted. Maybe leaving was all she'd ever known. Maybe she'd carried more of Denise with her than either of us had wanted to believe. I stared at sixteen-year-old Cali smiling back at me. I didn't know which version of her had been real.

OceanofPDF.com

Fifteen



Cali

Lacy's sleeve slid up as she reached for the chart, exposing a bruise that stopped me cold in my tracks. Purple against her pale, freckled skin, the bruise spread across her forearm in a pattern that caused something beneath my ribs to tighten. My pen stalled over the chart as I forced my expression to stay neutral, but I couldn't look away.

"Lacy," I said softly, careful not to startle her. "What happened here?" I had seen bruises like this before. Circular purple marks curved around her forearm, the skin slightly raised. She glanced down at her arm, then quickly

away, tugging the sleeve back down. Her curls bounced slightly with the motion, a small, almost childlike shield.

“Oh,” she said, her tone casual, as if the bruise were nothing more than a smudge of ink. “I bumped it on a cart this morning. Didn’t notice until now that it left a mark.”

My pulse kicked. A slow inhale through my nose did little to settle it. Outside these walls, I knew almost nothing about her. Married. No kids she’d ever mentioned. One of the best nurses I’d ever worked with. That was about it.

“A cart?” I repeated quietly.

Her fingers curled tightly around the chart. Petite, all loose curls and startling ice-blue eyes, she looked like someone the world should have handled more gently. Something about her explanation didn’t settle right.

“Yeah,” she said, voice a notch higher, just enough to betray the slight tremor in her tone. “You know, the cabinets in Trauma 2—they stick out a little. Didn’t expect it to hurt that bad.” Hadn’t she said it was a cart?

I nodded, unconvinced.

“You’re sure?” I asked, softer this time. “It doesn’t hurt too much?”

She shook her head with a laugh. “No, it’s fine. Really. I’ve had worse scrapes.”

Her laugh caught halfway out.

“I just want to make sure,” I said carefully, trying to keep my tone easy. “Sometimes bruises can be worse than they look.”

Her eyes met mine for a heartbeat. Vulnerability flashed there, then disappeared behind another practiced smile. “I promise. I’m fine. Don’t worry about me,” she said, but the edge in her voice didn’t match her words.

I kept my face carefully unreadable. Every instinct urged me to do something.

“Alright,” I said finally, leaning back slightly. “If it’s hurting later, let me know. Okay?”

Her nod was quick, eager to reassure, but the way she tugged her arm back under the sleeve again, as if it wasn’t already hidden, made my chest tighten further.

The chart waited in front of me, but every glimpse of Lacy pulled my attention back to the sleeve hiding her forearm. I tried to focus on my patients—the procedures, the notes, the vitals—but my attention kept drifting.

At the end of the shift, I caught her by the supply closet, loading up gloves and gauze.

I let out a quiet sigh. “I don’t want to pry. I just want to make sure you’re safe.”

Her fingers caught the hem of her scrub top and tugged it lower. The motion was small, but it flashed through me like a flare.

“I know,” she whispered. “I’m . . . fine.” I studied her for a long moment, weighing whether to push, whether to ask the question we had been trained to ask.

Is anyone hurting you?

“Okay,” I said finally, softer, letting my hands fall to my sides. “If anything changes, or if you want to talk . . . I mean it.”

Her eyes cautiously met mine. She nodded quickly, almost imperceptibly.

“Thanks, Cali,” she said, disappearing down the hall toward the locker room.

I leaned against the supply closet wall, watching the hallway long after she’d disappeared. The ER slipped into one of those rare quiet stretches. Patients stabilized or moved; monitors beeped softly, the distant hum of the overhead lights keeping time with my thoughts. The bruise wouldn’t leave me alone. I hadn’t said it out loud, but my mind had drawn the outline anyway. How long had it been like that? How often had she hidden it, smiled through it, pretended it wasn’t there?

Faces surfaced without invitation—patients who’d smiled around split lips, laughed through broken ribs, insisted they’d walked into a door. Different stories. Same practiced smile. I’d learned to recognize that pattern. Every instinct urged me to ask. My training warned me that pushing too soon could drive her further away. I couldn’t push. Not yet. I would watch. I would wait. But I couldn’t let it go. Not while the marks existed, not while her eyes betrayed worry she wouldn’t voice. Because that bruise wasn’t just a mark; it was a signal. And I couldn’t ignore it. Maybe I couldn’t help Lacy today, but I’d be there when she was ready.

And maybe that was the hardest part—waiting. Knowing something was wrong and not being able to fix it. I hated that feeling. The helplessness. The uncertainty. The waiting for someone else to decide when it was time to let me in. It was the same feeling I’d carried since Grandpa’s appointment.

His CT results sat heavily in the back of my mind. The scan had confirmed a traumatic brain injury, but the findings from the neurological workup afterward were what I couldn’t stop thinking about. The cognitive testing, the imaging, the markers they were watching for—all of it pointed toward a possibility I wasn’t ready to accept.

Alzheimer’s. The word felt too heavy, even silently.

Grandpa was the person who remembered everything. Every birthday. Every story. Every little detail everyone else forgot. The thought of those memories slipping away from him felt impossible.

I couldn’t sit with the fear, not tonight. A text to Landry sat half written before my thumb finally pressed send.

Me: Hey. Want to run later?

Almost immediately, her reply came back.

Landry: Yeah, sounds good! Meet me at Jonah’s gym? There’s a great outdoor track!

Jonah, her brother, was quiet and stoic. He’d been Lane’s friend for as long as I could remember. Always watching from the sidelines at football games, measuring more than anyone realized. Just because it was at his gym didn’t mean Lane would be there.

Me: Perfect! See you then.

I typed, trying to keep my tone casual. Landry Gaines and I didn’t hang out, but everyone deserved a second chance, and in the grand scheme of things, she had never done anything directly to me. Landry was much younger in school, but her father, the local reverend, had made it clear on more than one occasion Jonah should keep his distance from me.

OceanofPDF.com

Sixteen



Cali

The evening sun had begun to slip behind the buildings as I walked across the parking lot toward the gym. The historic brick building came into view, transformed by black steel, industrial lighting, and broad glass doors that caught the gold glow of the sun.

I pulled my hair back into a loose braid, tightening it once, when the first twist loosened. My running watch sat cold against my wrist as I checked the time for the third time. Lacy's bruised arm flashed through my mind. Then

Grandpa’s overdue bills and test results. Problems that would still wait for me no matter how far I ran.

Landry was already there when I arrived, stretching against the wall, long legs folding neatly, sneakers tapping against the rubber mats over concrete. “Hey,” she said, smiling, though her eyes flicked toward the door as if she expected someone else.

“Hey,” I said, forcing my shoulders to loosen. “Ready to run?”

She nodded. “Yeah, but I wanted to introduce you to Sawyer before we hit the track. She’s going to run with us.”

A blonde rounded the corner, long waves pulled into a ponytail. Her eyes found mine, and the breath left her in a sharp, ragged gasp.

“Cali?” she breathed. We both froze as the past slammed into us like a freight train. A little girl with terrified eyes. A scream I hadn’t heard in years but somehow never forgot.

The water bottle slipped from her fingers and clattered across the floor.

“Hey,” I said slowly, palms open, keeping my voice soft. “It’s me. I’m—”

“No!” she shrieked suddenly, her voice breaking as her hands flew to cover her face. Her body jerked as she stumbled backward, tripping slightly over a dumbbell, and the fear in her eyes made my stomach drop.

“It’s okay, Sawyer.” Landry rushed forward, her hands gentle on Sawyer’s shoulders, trying to anchor her.

I didn’t move. She wasn’t seeing me. She was somewhere else entirely.

“No!” Sawyer screamed again, flailing slightly, trying to push away. “Don’t touch me!”

Ice slid through me. My pulse hammered. My palms went up higher instinctively to show I wasn’t a threat as I continued to take a step back. Before I could speak again, Lane was there. His stride was long and deliberate; his shadow fell between us.

“Enough,” he said, his voice low and hard, eyes narrowing on me. His stare cut like a blade. I blinked at him. The walls seemed to close in.

“Lane—she’s panicking! I didn’t—”

“Cali. Step back.” His hand closed around my elbow, and for one second I was seventeen again. Those same hands had pulled me away from Dawton. Away from the moment neither of us could undo. The sudden pull nearly knocked me off-balance, my heart lurching. “You’re done here.”

“Lane!” I said, yanking slightly to free myself. My voice pitched with desperation. “I swear, I didn’t—”

Firm footsteps approached behind Sawyer, and Soren stepped between Sawyer and the room. Pulling her against his chest as though he could shield her from everything outside his arms, he murmured low words only she could hear. Her breathing broke into sharp gasps before gradually evening out, her hands clutched in his shirt. My feet were rooted to the floor. I couldn't leave until I knew she was okay.

"I'm good," Sawyer said finally, almost in a whisper, apologetic, still trembling in Soren's grasp.

I stepped back again, hands dropping, watching as she tried to gather herself. My stomach twisted with guilt I couldn't explain. I knew what I had done that night, why I had stepped in. Sawyer looked at me like I belonged in her nightmare.

The past came in jagged flashes. Lane's face. Jaw tight. Eyes burning. Stepping between Dawton and me. The asphalt beneath my feet, hot enough to burn through my sneakers. Sawyer's tiny arms shaking in my grasp. Dawton's voice, sharp and cruel. Lane's fists. Sirens cutting through the night. Handcuffs. My life split into before and after.

I swallowed hard. "Sawyer . . ." My voice barely held.

Her bright blue eyes widened, still held in Soren's steady grip. "I—yes. I—" Her voice caught, unsteady. "You—you helped me."

"Yes," I said, breath shaky.

The gym was quiet for a long moment. Landry lingered a step behind, her expression guarded and alert. Jonah stood on the outskirts, his tall frame watching, unreadable.

Lane's grip on my arm eased, but he didn't release me. He just stood there, eyes locked on mine, harsh and protective, but underneath it was something else. Fear. The same fear I'd seen in his eyes that night. Something passed between us. The weight of a night neither of us had ever truly escaped. I glanced at Sawyer, who was trembling but slowly regaining composure.

"You're safe now," I whispered, the words barely more than a breath.

Sawyer blinked at me, voice small and shaky. "Thank you . . . for everything."

Lane finally released my arm, taking a step back. His grip lingered long after he let go. He watched me like he had that night, as if he knew the truth and the lie in the same moment.

Soren adjusted Sawyer in his arms, giving me a small steady nod. “It’s okay,” he said simply. “You’re all right.” His eyes kept flickering to Lane with questions.

I swallowed hard, chest tight, eyes finding Sawyer one last time before dropping to the floor. My throat felt raw; my hands still hadn’t stopped trembling.

Landry finally stepped forward, breaking the tension. “Let’s go run,” she said with forced brightness. “Get some energy out.”

I nodded, shoulders still tight, but I needed space. Sawyer glanced at me one last time, tentatively, as if the memories of that night were still too sharp, and I gave her a small closed-lip smile. Landry stopped and squeezed her shoulder before saying something that only she could hear.

The gym doors swung open as we pushed outside. I could feel Lane a few steps behind us, his eyes never leaving me, a shadow I couldn’t shake. Did he remember everything as vividly as I did?

I exhaled slowly, forcing my shoulders to relax, knowing this had reopened more than just memories. Some doors didn’t stay closed just because you walked away. And Sawyer, trembling in Soren’s arms, reminded me of why I had left and why I had never wanted to return. The past wasn’t staying buried. Maybe I’d never been the only one haunted.

OceanofPDF.com

Seventeen



Lane

The air felt different after the words left my mouth. Something invisible adjusted its weight in the room. Whatever happened next, we couldn't go back to before. A beat passed before I shifted my weight. Hands stayed buried in my pockets, shoulders rounded.

"I remembered you," I said, quieter this time. "I thought there was something familiar about you, but something clicked a few months ago."

I exhaled through my nose, gaze flicking briefly to Soren, then Jonah, before settling back on Sawyer. Her gaze caught mine for only a heartbeat

before mine dropped.

“I just didn’t say anything.” A humorless huff escaped. “Figured if I left it alone, maybe you wouldn’t have to deal with it again.”

Soren moved beside her, arms folding loosely across his chest. He didn’t speak, but I sensed the quiet scrutiny. Not hostile—just attentive, like he always was. Like he was trying to understand why I’d kept it to myself. Jonah leaned back against the wall, tattooed arms crossed, watching me as if he was trying to see through whatever I wasn’t saying.

Sawyer finally spoke. “You thought ignoring it would make it better?”

I let out a quick breath, almost a laugh. “Yeah. Stupid, right?”

“No,” she said immediately. The words pulled my gaze back to hers.

The tension around her eyes eased. Her shoulders weren’t braced for a fight anymore. Whatever exhaustion lived there hadn’t dulled the sincerity in her expression.

“It wasn’t stupid,” she insisted. “It was . . . considerate. In a really frustrating way.”

My mouth twitched faintly. “Frustratingly considerate. I’ll add it to my bio.”

She took a small step forward. Not close enough to touch me, but enough to close some of the distance.

“Thank you,” she said. My head lifted.

“For not forcing it,” she replied. “For not bringing it up when I clearly wasn’t ready to process it.” She hesitated, “And for saying something now.”

Only now, since speaking, did breathing feel less like work.

“I didn’t want to drag up bad memories for you,” I admitted. “I figured if you wanted to remember, you would. And if you didn’t . . .” I shrugged lightly. “I wanted it to be your call.”

Her lips pressed together, as if she were holding on to something steadying.

“Cali didn’t do anything wrong,” she said, her head tilting slightly as she watched me. Nobody spoke.

“I know,” I finally said.

Jonah glanced between us. “You’re gonna have to give us a little more context than that.”

Soren nodded once. “Yeah. We’re missing about . . . ninety percent of what happened.”

My thumb traced the scar along my knuckles before I looked away. “Right. Yeah.”

Sawyer regarded me. “They should know.”

Silence stood between us, solid as another person. “Cali was there.”

I’d already crossed the line, and there was no point pretending I could step back over it.

“Back then,” I continued, “when everything went wrong.”

Soren’s brows knit. “The fight?”

My jaw tightened just a bit, but I kept my voice even. “It was fifteen years ago,” I said. “High school parking lot. End of the day, buses pulling out, everyone halfway between going home and looking for trouble.”

Heat baked the asphalt. Someone shouted. Then everything narrowed in the moment until all I had seen was Dawton standing too close to Cali.

“Sawyer was with her foster brother, Dawton.” I glanced at her briefly.

Soren’s expression hardened slightly. Jonah straightened up from the wall.

“He had Sawyer by the arm,” I continued. “Yanking her around like she weighed nothing. She kept trying to pull free, and he just—” I swallowed the rest of the sentence.

“He wasn’t letting go.”

Sawyer drew in a careful breath.

“Cali stepped in,” I said. “Didn’t hesitate. Just walked right up and told him to let her go.”

“That sounds like her,” Soren muttered.

I nodded. “Yeah. It does.”

“Dawton laughed,” I went on. “Then he let go of Sawyer. Only so he could turn on Cali. Started shit-talking and running his mouth. Sick threats. Every one aimed at Cali.”

I’d heard enough.

“And you stepped in,” Jonah said.

It wasn’t a question. Not when it came to Cali. I huffed lightly. “Yeah. I stepped in.” My jaw clenched.

“He got in her face, called her a—” I didn’t finish. “He was too close. Too aggressive. And I just . . . didn’t think about it. I told him to back off.”

“And he didn’t,” Soren said.

“No,” I said. “He didn’t. He swung first.”

Soren raised a brow. “That actually matters?”

“Legally? Not as much as you’d think,” I said dryly.

Jonah’s mouth twitched faintly.

“I punched him back and broke his nose,” I continued. “And then he lost it. There was blood everywhere. Teachers were yelling. Someone called it in. By the time it got broken up . . .” I looked down. “He was on the ground, and I was getting dragged off him.”

Sawyer’s voice was quieter now. “And you got arrested.”

“Yeah,” I said. “But Bryant had me out a few hours later.”

“Didn’t want his name tarnished,” Jonah stated.

By the time Bryant got me out, Cali was already gone.

Soren ran a hand through his hair, piecing it together. “Okay. So . . . something happened. Sawyer doesn’t remember it—at least not fully—and you decided not to bring it up.”

“Pretty much,” I said.

Soren’s gaze flicked to Sawyer. “And now you’re saying Cali isn’t to blame. Which implies . . . what? That someone thought she was?”

Sawyer hesitated.

I answered instead. “At the time? Yeah. People blamed her. It was easy to. She stepped in, things escalated, and suddenly it was her fault for ‘starting something.’”

“She didn’t start it.” Sawyer never looked away.

“You remember that much?” I asked.

“A feeling,” she said. “Not details. Just . . . knowing she didn’t start it.”

I nodded. She didn’t remember the details, but somehow she’d remembered the truth.

Jonah leaned against the wall, still turning over everything he’d heard. Soren rubbed a hand across his jaw, fitting over a decade into a few short minutes. Sawyer stayed where she was, steadier than she’d been when this conversation started.

My gaze drifted toward the window. Cali. We’d spent years pretending distance was enough. In a town this small, all it had really done was postpone the inevitable. We needed to talk.

OceanofPDF.com

Eighteen



Cali

Shoes struck rust-colored synthetic rubber in a steady rhythm until my lungs burned harder than the memories. One lap became two as the sun completely sank, casting everything in a silver glow from the full moon overhead and the security lights around the track. I was convinced the Flint Hills had the most striking sunsets I'd ever seen and I wanted to bottle them up somehow. Wide-open skies that melted like vivid washes of color over hills that rolled like waves of grass, stretching endlessly toward the horizon.

But even all that beauty couldn’t thaw the part of me that froze the moment I saw him. Lane. This town wasn’t big enough for both of us. How was I supposed to breathe when every corner of this town could put him in front of me again? Was there any place I could go where he wouldn’t be?

Even thinking his name felt like dragging a jagged blade across my chest. Leaving didn’t erase every good thing I’d ever done. I was still the woman who stopped to help the turtle cross the road. The woman who pulled over for strangers, patched up scraped knees, and chose medicine because helping people was the one thing I’d always been sure about.

“Hey—slow down, Speed Racer.”

Landry’s voice floated behind me, light but already a little breathless. Slowing down meant that the thoughts could catch up. And they were faster than I was today.

The first mile always lied to you. It whispered that you were fine. That your lungs weren’t burning, that your legs weren’t tight, that you could outrun whatever was chasing you. By the second mile, the truth began creeping in. Maybe you should pace yourself instead of running like you were being chased. By the third mile, there was nowhere left to hide. Every muscle screamed for me to slow down and adjust my pace.

My braid slapped against my back as I pushed harder, arms pumping, breath coming in sharp, controlled bursts.

In. Out. In. Out.

My heartbeat pounded in my ears, loud enough to drown out everything else. Well, almost everything. No matter how fast my feet moved, those emerald green eyes stayed exactly where they’d always been.

Haunting me.

I hadn’t expected to see him there or for it to feel like that every time I saw him. All these years, and he still made me feel like it was yesterday when I’d been lying in his arms in the bed of his truck under the stars, talking about our future. About having babies and building a house. Dreams that hurt to remember because they belonged to a girl who didn’t know she was being used.

Fifteen years of building walls, creating distance and convincing myself that what happened back then was buried deep enough.

That the pain couldn’t reach me anymore. But one moment in his presence, and I was that girl in high school again.

Desperate to fit in.

Desperate to feel chosen.

Desperate to believe someone could love me without it being an obligation.

Desperate to believe I wasn't too much to stay for.

And then I found out I'd built my entire future around a lie. And then there he was again, pretending my presence didn't affect him the way his affected me. He was older, broader, and aged in a way that didn't soften him, just . . . sharpened the edges.

But his eyes—his eyes were the same.

I stumbled half a step, catching myself before I broke stride. My breath hitched, my rhythm faltering. I bent over, hands on my knees, chasing the air for every breath.

What was I supposed to say? How was I supposed to keep running into him and act like it didn't matter? *Hey, remember when you destroyed me? Hey, remember when I needed you, and I found out you were just using me instead? Hey, remember how everything burned to the ground?*

No.

I'd never let him see the real me again.

I'd looked at him—really looked—and for a split second, something cracked. That scared me more than anything: the possibility that the pain in his eyes looked dangerously close to my own.

"Cali!" Landry nearly shouted my name as if she'd said it half a dozen times already, closer now.

I slowed to a walk for her to catch up, though my legs protested the change in pace. She fell into step beside me, her breathing heavier but steady.

"You trying to kill me?" she said, panting, pushing a strand of dark hair out of her face.

"Depends," I muttered. "Are you dying?"

"Actively." Her nose scrunched in mock disgust.

"Good. Means I'm not alone." I huffed out a laugh.

She shot me a look, half amused, half concerned. "You've always seemed intense, but this feels . . . extra."

I opened my mouth, ready with a defense, but nothing came. I looked away. We jogged another half lap, our footsteps syncing into a steady rhythm that allowed us both to breathe. The air smelled mildly of wild sunflowers, familiar in a way that made my chest ache.

I used to run on the gravel roads in Kennedy. Back then, running had felt like freedom. Now it felt like survival.

“Are you okay, Cali?” Landry said quietly.

I stopped. The abruptness made her stumble a step before she turned to face me fully, her forehead scrunched together in question. I bent forward, hands braced on my knees again, dragging in air as if I hadn’t been breathing properly for the last ten minutes. My fingers had hovered over Landry’s name for five full minutes before I texted her. Now I wished I’d never pressed send.

“Don’t,” I said between breaths.

“Don’t what?” Her dark eyes looked genuinely confused.

“Don’t do that thing where you pretend you care so you can get the inside scoop.” I knew it was harsh, but every nerve in my body felt raw and exposed.

She was quiet for a second as hurt flickered in her eyes.

“I know,” she said finally. “You probably see me as the same person I was back then. But I’m not.” She wiped her palms against her yoga pants.

“I’ve learned things. Hard things. I’m not looking to be anyone’s inside source, Cali. I’m just trying to raise my daughter as a single mom in a small town. Sometimes it’s a lot, but I wouldn’t want it any other way. I want to be your friend. But I’ve also learned that I need boundaries in my life. So, I’m here if you ever need an ear, but please know that I don’t tolerate people treating me like a doormat anymore.” Her voice was steady. Not angry, but firm in a way that told me life had taught her things I didn’t know about yet.

I straightened slowly, wiping sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. My pulse was still racing, but it wasn’t just from the run anymore.

Single mom? The girl I remembered wasn’t standing in front of me anymore.

“I’m sorry. You’re right. I’m not the same person, and I shouldn’t have said that. I know you’re friends with Lane, and I would never want to mess that up, but it’s just so hard to see him again, and I took that out on you.” My voice cracked. My eyes burned with unshed tears, and I swiped at the sweat dripping down my neck.

Her honesty left me with nowhere to hide. The words felt small and insufficient, but they were all I had. After all these years of carrying them alone, they were finally somewhere other than buried inside me.

“And?” she prompted gently.

I let out a short, humorless laugh. “And what?”

“And how are you going to handle seeing him more often?”

I looked at her then. Really looked. Landry Gaines. The reverend’s daughter. Little Miss Perfect on paper. Soft where I’d always been sharp. Sheltered where I’d had chaos. But there was something in her eyes now—something that wasn’t naïve.

“I’ll be fine,” I said automatically.

She raised an eyebrow.

I exhaled, scrubbing a hand over my face.

“I’m . . . not fine at the moment, but I’ll pull myself together and be here for my grandpa for as long as I need to.”

“I don’t know what happened with both of you, but I know Lane has been there for me like a brother, and even brothers can make mistakes. I’m on your side, Cali, if you’ll let me be.”

She studied me, and I immediately saw how similar she and Jonah were. Sure, Landry was more outgoing, but the ability to be perceptive was a trait they both shared.

“Can we start over?” I nearly whispered.

“Absolutely, we can,” she said. “But starting over doesn’t mean pretending none of that happened. It just means we choose what we do with it now.”

I held her gaze. Starting over didn’t erase what happened; it just meant that the past didn’t get to decide everything that came next.

“Then I guess I’ll stop running from it,” I said. “And figure out what comes next.”

Landry’s expression softened. “You don’t have to figure it all out at once,” she said. “Just . . . don’t run anymore. That’s enough for now.”

She laughed, and we both knew she was talking about more than the physical running I’d done today.

I eyed her. “Huh?” I said. “That sounded suspiciously like a healthy coping mechanism.”

She smiled, just a little smugly.

“I know,” she said. “It’s a gift. I like to bring brutal emotional stability wherever I go.”

I huffed out a laugh.

“Hi, I’m Landry. Wanna be besties?” She had a cheeky grin that made me laugh again. The sound surprised me.

“Deal,” I said as I shook her hand. “Want to walk a couple of laps?”

“If you said run, I was going to accuse you of attempted murder!” She laughed and fell into step with me.

After a couple of quiet minutes, I said what wouldn’t leave my mind.

“I didn’t expect to see Sawyer or Lane today.”

“How do you know Sawyer?” she asked.

“She . . .” I trailed off, searching for the easiest way to explain what had happened when it had always felt so much bigger. “She was a foster child when I lived here. I stepped in to help her when her foster brother was hurting her.”

Compassion flickered across her face. “You must have made a difference to her.”

“If she’s ever willing to talk, I’d love to know how she’s doing now.” I had thought about that day many times, and the one thing I never regretted was stepping in to help her, regardless of the events that followed.

“I’m sure she will be. Just give her some time to process. Sawyer is one of the kindest people I know,” Landry said.

I nodded because we all needed time to process.

“I thought I was over it,” I admitted, my voice quieter now. “I thought I dealt with it. Packed it up and moved on.”

“You built a life, right?” she said. “That counts for something.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I did.” A life that had fallen apart anyway.

“But seeing him . . .” I shook my head. “It feels like being dropped right back into it. Like no time has passed at all, except it has, and everything has changed.”

Landry studied me for a long moment. “Maybe he feels the same way? Talk to him.”

I huffed out a breath. “Yeah, I’m not sure how he could, but maybe we can smooth things over enough to at least be able to handle living in the same town.”

“I think that would be a good place to start,” she said as she redid her ponytail, which had slipped loose while she was running.

“I don’t even know what I’d say.” Where could I even start?

“You don’t have to have it all figured out,” she said. “You just have to be willing to talk and listen.”

I swallowed hard because the idea of standing in front of him again—of hearing his voice, of letting him explain—terrified me.

Because what if he had a reason? What if it all made sense? What if it changed everything? Or worse—what if it didn't?

"People change, Cali."

I wanted to hate those words. Instead, they resonated somewhere I couldn't ignore.

I crossed my arms. "I don't owe him anything, Landry."

"I didn't say you did. I'm saying . . ." She hesitated, choosing her words carefully. "Maybe there's more to it than what you've been carrying all these years."

My laugh was sharp. "No. There isn't."

"You're sure about that?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Because from where I'm standing," she said gently, "it looks like there's a lot you never let yourself question." She rubbed her forehead with the side of her thumb. I stared at her, something hot and restless stirring under my skin.

"You don't know what happened," I said.

"No," she agreed. "Not all of it."

"Then don't—"

"But I know him," she interrupted. I flinched because there it was. The dividing line.

"You *think* you know him," I corrected.

"I know the man he is now. He's been there for me, when so many people walked away, and never expected anything."

Walked away?

"That's convenient."

"It's relevant," she said, exasperation creeping into her voice.

The answer came too quickly. I paced a few steps before turning back to her.

"You didn't see what I saw, Landry. You weren't there."

"You're right," she said softly. "I wasn't."

"Then you don't get to—" I stopped myself. Because a part of me wanted to believe that the boy who'd looked at me like I was something worth fighting for hadn't just . . . used me.

"That doesn't undo what happened," I said, quieter now.

“No,” she agreed. “It doesn’t.”

“Then what’s the point?” I asked.

“The point is,” she said, taking a step closer, her voice steady, “maybe you don’t have the full truth. Are you sure there wasn’t a misunderstanding?”

I laughed, but it came out shaky. “I was there, remember?”

“I know,” she said. “But sometimes what we see in the moment isn’t the entire picture.”

I shook my head. “It sounds like you’re making excuses for him. What happened to being on my side?”

“I’m not making excuses,” she said. “I’m suggesting there might be an explanation.”

“I don’t need one.” The only thing worse than what happened would be having to listen to his reasons for why he’d used me.

“Maybe he does.”

I froze. The idea lodged in my chest like a stone I couldn’t swallow.

“He had fifteen years to explain,” I said.

“And you had fifteen years to listen,” she replied gently. That stung.

“Maybe you need to give him a chance,” she observed.

I let out a slow breath. “Why?”

“Because you’re still running,” she said simply.

I blinked at her. “What?”

She gestured around us—to the track, to my heaving chest, to the tension wound tightly in my body.

“This? This isn’t just about exercise.”

I didn’t respond because she wasn’t wrong.

“And if you were really over it,” she continued, softer now, “you wouldn’t feel like this. You’d write him off as some jerk from high school and move on.”

I stared down at the track, at the faded white lines marking lanes that had once felt so certain. Nothing felt clear anymore. I’d written off tons of people in my life—every boyfriend my mom ever had—but why was I still so hung up on him?

“I don’t know if I can do that,” I admitted finally.

“Talk to him?”

“Yeah.”

“Just try.”

“What if it just makes things worse?” I asked quietly.

Landry gave me a small understanding smile. “Then at least you’ll know.”

I closed my eyes for a second, letting her words settle. Know. I’d spent years avoiding that. Avoiding him. Avoiding the questions that didn’t have simple answers. Avoiding the possibility that maybe . . . just maybe . . .

I hadn’t seen everything as clearly as I thought I had.

“I hate this,” I grumbled.

She laughed softly.

“Growth usually feels like that,” she said. “Trust me, I know. I’ve walked through hell and back.”

I wiped sweat from my eyes, as some of the tension in my chest loosened just a fraction because there was a lot more to Landry Gaines than I’d realized.

“Don’t get used to me taking your advice,” I said with a huff.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” she quipped with a smirk. We stood there for a moment longer, the sun dipping out of sight, the air cooling just enough to take the edge off the sweat I'd worked up.

“Come on,” she said finally, nudging my arm. “One more lap?”

I groaned. “You’re trying to kill me now.”

“Payback.” She winked.

I huffed out a breath. We jogged, slower this time. Not running. Not chasing. Just . . . moving forward. And finally since I saw him, it didn’t feel like I was trying to escape when I ran. It felt like I might actually be heading somewhere.

OceanofPDF.com

Nineteen



Cali

Morning came slower on the farm. Not the kind that barged in with vehicle horns blaring and a to-do list already running circles in your head before your feet even touched the floor. On Saturdays, it unfolded gently, as though it had nowhere else to be. I woke to a tranquility so complete it almost felt unreal. Just . . . stillness. Broken only by the faint creak of the old house settling and birds chirping somewhere beyond the window. For a second, I didn't move. Didn't open my eyes. I just lay there, breathing it in. It felt . . . unfamiliar. And worse—precarious. Because peace had never lasted long in

my life. Not the genuine kind. Not the kind that didn’t come with a catch or a countdown. I remembered counting down the days until I turned eighteen so I could move out. Grandma and Grandpa had already done so much for Mom and me. I couldn’t bear the thought of becoming one more burden they had to carry.

I let myself absorb the haven of silence for one more second before I sighed and pushed the covers back. The floor was cool under my feet as I stood, stretching the stiffness from my back. The house carried that early-morning smell—old wood, something faintly sweet from the life that used to fill these rooms. I padded down the hallway, fingers brushing dated wallpaper, reminding myself this was real, that I was actually here. Back. Despite the things I hated about Kennedy, it had always felt like home.

The kitchen came into view first, sunlight spilling through the window over the sink in soft golden lines of morning. Grandpa—Jimmy—sat at the table. He had a spoon in his hand and a bowl in front of him, but he wasn’t eating. Just . . . staring at it as if he’d forgotten what came next. A pressure gathered in my chest, that now-familiar ache settling in.

“Morning,” I whispered.

His head snapped up, eyes lighting as if I’d just appeared out of thin air. “Hey!” he said, grinning wide. “You came back!”

I swallowed hard and forced a smile. “Told you I would.”

He nodded as if that made perfect sense, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “I was waiting.”

Of course he was. This was almost a daily routine. Him rediscovering who I was. Dr. Shannon had confirmed what I’d already suspected after several tests. Grandpa most likely had Alzheimer’s. At some point—though he couldn’t remember when—he’d also suffered a traumatic brain injury. Alzheimer's explained the forgetting. The TBI explained the childlike moments.

Guilt wrapped around me like a weight pressing against my lungs. I couldn’t do anything about the past, but I was here now, and I would do whatever I could to make his last days as good as they could be.

I crossed the kitchen and took the seat across from him, glancing at the bowl. Dry cereal. No milk.

“Want some help?” I asked.

He looked down at it, then back at me, completely unbothered. “It’s crunchy.”

I huffed a quiet laugh despite myself. “Yeah. It’s supposed to be less crunchy.” Standing, I grabbed the milk from the fridge and poured it over his cereal. He watched me as if I were performing some kind of magic trick.

“Wow,” he said.

“High-level skills,” I teased.

He nodded seriously. “You’re really good at that.”

Something in my chest twisted because he’d always been this way. He had a way of making me feel like I was worth something when I really wondered in my teenage years. It quieted the fear that I would be just like her.

“Thanks,” I breathed.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs—heavy, uncoordinated, unmistakably teenage.

“Please tell me there’s food,” Jace muttered as he appeared in the doorway, hair a disaster, eyes half closed.

“Depends,” I said. “Are you planning on being a functioning human today?”

“No promises.” He shuffled into the kitchen like a walking puddle. He dropped into the chair beside me, reaching immediately for the cereal box. “This house is weirdly quiet,” he said around a yawn, scratching his chin with the back of his hand.

“Yeah,” I said. Weirdly quiet. Or maybe just . . . normal quiet, but he had never experienced anything that didn’t have the traffic hum of the city and the chaos that constant noise thrived on. He poured himself a bowl, then glanced between me and Grandpa, who was now happily eating as if nothing had ever been wrong.

“Did you sleep okay?” I asked, trying not to be too obvious.

“Yeah.”

“You sure?”

He shot me a look. “I said yeah.” I had heard his nightmare from my room last night, but by the time I got there, he was awake and chugging water from the bottle on his bedside table.

He held up a hand with all the gusto only a teenager could get away with. “I’m alright, Doc. Relax.”

I rolled my eyes but didn’t push it.

We ate in comfortable silence. The kind of quiet that didn’t demand to be filled. No stories from Brett about how his previous shift as a firefighter had gone. No moments where Jace was desperately trying to get his attention. I hadn’t realized how much I’d stopped noticing. Every morning had begun

with tension already coiled in my chest. I braced myself before speaking, wondering which version of Brett I'd get. He had never been quiet.

Even when he wasn't talking, the space around him felt loud. Heavy. Like everything in the room revolved around his mood, his needs, his expectations. It hadn't always been that way, but the injury had made him more of the things that I didn't like. More of the things that I realized weren't just little quirks.

I pushed the thought away, focusing on the present. On Jace shoveling cereal into his mouth like he hadn't eaten in a week. On Grandpa humming a show tune under his breath, completely content. Peace filled me so gently that I was almost afraid to breathe.

A knock sounded at the front door. All three of us froze. Jace looked at me. I looked at the door. Grandpa kept eating, oblivious to anything out of the ordinary.

"I'll get it," I said, already standing.

My stomach seized as I crossed the living room because unexpected knocks usually meant trouble in my experience. I pulled the door open. An older man stood on the porch, hat in hand, a polite smile on his face. He had weathered skin, kind eyes, and the kind of posture that came from years of working outdoors.

"Morning," he said.

"Morning," I replied cautiously.

"Name's Greene," he said. "I'm here for the lawn."

I blinked. "The . . . lawn?"

He nodded toward the yard like that explained everything. "Yep. Figured I'd get an early start before the heat kicks in."

I frowned slightly. "I think you might have the wrong place."

"No, ma'am," he said easily. "This is the Walton place, right?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Then I'm in the right place," he said.

I crossed my arms. "I didn't hire anyone."

His smile didn't falter, but something flickered in his eyes that looked a lot like humor—as if he'd expected that.

"Someone did," he said.

"Who?"

He shook his head. "Someone who'd rather stay anonymous."

I stared at him. "You can't say?"

"Was asked not to."

“That’s . . . not how this usually works.”

He chuckled softly. “I get that. But the job’s paid for. I’m just here to do it.”

Suspicion prickled beneath my skin. “And I’m just supposed to be okay with some mystery person sending you here?”

“You can tell me to leave if you want,” he said simply. “No harm done. But your yard looks like it could use a cut.”

I glanced past him. He wasn’t wrong. The grass needed to be cut. Some patches were longer than others, edges overgrown, weeds creeping in where they didn’t belong. It was on my to-do list, along with a thousand other things. Grandpa couldn’t keep up with it even if he remembered it, and Jace would do it in a heartbeat if I’d asked, but I hadn’t even located Grandpa’s lawn mower yet.

I exhaled slowly, giving in. “And you seriously won’t tell me who paid you?”

“No, ma’am.” His eyes twinkled like keeping secrets was one of his favorite pastimes.

“Even if I ask nicely?” I gave a small smile.

His smile widened. “Especially then.”

I huffed out a breath, torn between amusement and . . . something else. Relief, maybe. Because whoever it was, they’d noticed. They’d seen what I walked into and had done something about it. They’d taken one thing off my plate, but it felt like they’d lifted a dozen.

“I’ll be out of your way,” he insisted. “Just need an okay to do the yard.”

I hesitated another second, stepped back. “Okay. Thank you, Mr. Greene.”

“No mister, just Greene.” He tipped his hat slightly and moved past me, already heading toward the side of the house like he knew exactly what he was doing. I closed the door slowly, my mind spinning.

“Who was it?” Jace called from the kitchen.

“Some guy named Greene,” I said, walking back in. “Says he’s here to mow the lawn.”

Jace frowned. “Did you call him?”

“Nope.”

“. . . That’s not sketchy at all.” Leave it to the city kid to be as suspicious of a handout as I was.

“Right?” I said.

Grandpa looked up, delighted. “Is he gonna use the loud thing?”

“The mower?” I asked.

He nodded enthusiastically. “I like that sound. It’s like a tiny tractor.”

I smiled faintly. “Yeah. I think he is.”

Sure enough, a few minutes later, the low rumble of a lawn mower filled the air. I stepped out onto the porch, drawn by it, and leaned against the railing, watching as Greene moved methodically across the yard, cutting clean lines through the grass. The sun had climbed higher now, warming my skin; the breeze was just strong enough to carry the scent of fresh-cut grass.

It struck me then—sharp and unexpected. I’d missed this. Not just the place, but the feeling, the quiet. The simplicity of something as ordinary as someone mowing a lawn on a Saturday morning. No chaos. No tension. No waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Just . . . this. My phone vibrated in my pocket. The peace shattered instantly because I knew who it was without looking. My stomach dropped as I glanced at the screen.

Brett.

Of course. I stared at the name for a long second before opening the message.

Unknown Number: You owe me.

Three words. Three words he’d used far too many times. Of course I couldn’t escape his reach. He was probably desperate for more pills, and I’d stopped playing his games. I was done allowing him to abuse the relationship we had.

Everyone believed Brett had nearly died saving us. They didn’t know he’d caused the fire.

I didn’t owe Brett Thornton a damn thing. I knew exactly what had happened that night. Jace and I were both lucky that he hadn’t killed us with his reckless choices. The hero everyone admired didn’t save me. I had rescued him, and sometimes I wondered if I’d made a mistake. I shook my head because I’d have saved him every time, not because of who he was, but because of who I was. After all, he was a person, but the hell he’d put us through the last eighteen months would make any logical person question how deeply they felt the need to be noble.

I leaned back against the porch post, closing my eyes for a second. *Breathe. Just breathe*. But it didn’t work the way it had before. Because peace didn’t erase history; it didn’t undo damage. It didn’t quiet the part of my brain that still kept score.

You owe me. It echoed, pulling me backward whether I wanted to go or not.

Back to late nights that turned into early mornings. The pills had started as a way to take the edge off his pain, or so I thought, but they became something he used when he didn't want to feel anything at all. After that, everything unraveled. Our engagement. The house. The money. His story was the one everyone believed. I was left with the bills. And the blame. I was still cleaning up the mess of it all.

Still trying to prove—to myself more than anyone—that I wasn't that person anymore. That I wasn't someone prone to being used over and over again by men. That I never wanted to be in a place where I felt like I owed someone. Brett knew I hated that feeling, and that was why he'd used those words. It began as a coffee date after I'd treated a minor burn in the ER. Then dinner. Then he'd "forget" his wallet. Then he'd remind me how much he'd already done for me. Before I knew it, he was controlling my entire life because I *owed* him.

My fingers tightened around the phone. I'd been so blind. The entire relationship had been a con. I could respond. I could ask what he meant. I could engage. I didn't. Instead, I blocked his latest number. I locked the screen and set the phone down on the porch railing like it might burn me if I held it too long. I didn't wait for another message.

The mower droned on in the background, and I focused on that instead. On the sharp, clean lines cut through the grass. The yard slowly looked . . . cared for again. Maybe that's what my life was—not a fresh start, but something still being worked on piece by piece until it felt like mine again. Messy, but still moving in the right direction. I wrapped my arms around myself, letting the sun warm my skin. Inside, Jace laughed at something Grandpa said.

Out here, the world felt . . . manageable. Even with the past knocking at the door. Even with everything still waiting beyond the porch. I wasn't where I wanted to be. Not even close. But for the first time in a long time—I wasn't drowning either. And maybe, just maybe—that was enough for now.

OceanofPDF.com

Twenty



Lane

“Hey, can you hold this for just a minute so I can look at it from far away?” Landry called. The bandana wrapped around her hair was already slipping, her messy bun fighting its way free at the top. She held up a framed watercolor painting of buffalo grazing across rolling hills and waited. The Hope Center renovations were finally done. It had been operational part-time as soon as the paint was dry, but we’d be opening full-time next week. After a walk-through last week, Sawyer suggested the

industrial-modern space needed something softer. Warmer. More . . . human.

Naturally, everyone thought of Landry. And she'd delivered. What had started as clean lines and sleek furniture had been transformed layer by layer with soft throws, greenery, textured art, and enough throw pillows to fill the bed of my truck twice over. The place didn't just look better. It felt different: lived in, safe, and exactly the atmosphere we'd been aiming for. Sawyer had envisioned it, and Landry had brought it to life.

Maybe I should've thought twice before handing over my black Amex to my best friend's little sister. But who was I kidding? I'd spend more than she'd ever dare use if it meant making this place work. All my ventures mattered. But this one—

This one was different. This one was here. This one he'd see.

And somehow, I already knew it still wouldn't be enough. Funny how the people whose approval you spent your whole life chasing always knew exactly where to leave a bruise. I could spend ten unlimited cards on this place, and he'd still find something to criticize. This place would earn a quiet nod followed by a backhanded comment about how his contacts could've elevated it further.

My lungs tightened, that familiar pressure settling right behind my sternum. I rubbed at it absently before setting my iPad down and shrugging off my suit jacket.

Long day. Too many meetings. Too many numbers. Not enough movement. I'd just wrapped up a video conference for a charity gala in Chicago benefiting women and children escaping domestic violence. Work like this was why retirement had never appealed to me the way it had to some of my teammates. The gala wasn't until next Spring but the organization was already marketing it, aiming to get as many donors as possible. This was the kind of work I enjoyed most because it made a real difference.

"Here," Landry said, passing me the artwork before backing up nearly a dozen feet. She squinted slightly as she studied the wall as if it might confess its secrets if she stared long enough.

"This?" I asked, angling it so she could see better.

"Maybe lift it . . . yeah—about a foot higher." She gestured vaguely, before nodding. "Yes. That's it. Hold that."

I adjusted, arms pressing as I kept it steady. She slipped a roll of painter's tape from her wrist, where it had been dangling like some oversized bracelet, and quickly marked the wall.

"Okay," she said, stepping back again. "Let's set it down for now."

I lowered the painting carefully to the floor. She stood there another moment, frowning.

"I have paint drying in the Chill Corner," she said after a second. "I'll come back tomorrow and finish up. Something's just . . . off. Not wrong, exactly. I need to sleep on it." Which was such a typical Landry response.

She pulled her phone out, glancing at the screen. Her nose scrunched. Just as quickly, it disappeared, replaced by her usual bright, effortless smile. Too quick.

"Everything okay?" I asked. Her eyes lifted to mine, her smile softening slightly as she studied my face instead. That was the problem with Landry—she didn't just look at you. She read you. Always had. She was more than my best friend's little sister. She was family. The kind that noticed too much. The kind that asked too many questions. The kind that didn't let things stay buried if she thought they mattered.

"Yeah," she said lightly. "You?"

I rolled up my sleeves, more for something to do than any actual need. "Just busy." That wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the whole truth. She studied me. Too perceptive for her own good.

"Busy how?" she asked.

"Just . . . a lot going on," I hedged. "You know how it is."

I didn't need her connecting dots that weren't hers to connect. Not when everyone already had enough on their plates. She held my gaze for another second, then nodded slowly. I couldn't tell if she bought it or if she was filing it away for later—waiting until she had enough pieces to come back with a full investigation like some small-town Nancy Drew. Knowing Landry? Definitely the second one.

"Uh-huh," she said. Yeah, she didn't believe me.

"Who's got Hope?" I asked, shifting the conversation before she could dig any deeper.

"Jonah," she said, crouching to gather her hammer and measuring tape into a small cardboard box. "They ran to the hardware store for nails."

I leaned against the brick feature wall and looked around. Landry had done exactly what Sawyer hoped she would. She'd softened every hard

edge without taking away the structure. The room finally felt like somewhere people could exhale. Funny how a place could feel finished while the people inside it weren't.

"So?" Apparently she wasn't going to let it go.

"So what?" I asked, even though I knew exactly where this was going.

She gave me a look. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Play dumb," she said, rolling her eyes and picking up the box to place it on a side table. Her hand found her hip.

I exhaled slowly because I knew we were both going there. "I figured you'd come find me," I said. It was inevitable. That had always been the pattern. If something was off, Landry didn't let it sit.

"Well, are you going to make me bring it up?" she shot back. That almost pulled a genuine smile out of me. Almost, but it faded just as fast as it came.

"Is she okay?" I asked because that was the question that felt like it pressed in from all sides.

No point pretending. Landry raised a brow. "Define okay."

My molars ground together. "Landry."

"She's shaken," she said. "And that's putting it lightly."

I nodded once, slowly because that made sense.

"For what it's worth," she emphasized, "she didn't shut down completely."

That got my attention. "No?"

"No. She ran. Hard. But she talked too."

Something in my chest loosened just a fraction. "That's . . . good," I said.

"Yeah," she replied. "It is."

I scrubbed a hand over the back of my neck, trying to work out the tension that had been sitting there since yesterday. The scene replayed in a loop of all the things I should have said and done differently.

"Did she say anything about me?" I asked.

Landry arched a dark eyebrow. "You really want the answer to that?"

"Yeah."

"No, you don't," she countered.

"Landry."

"She's hurting."

It suddenly felt harder to breathe. Maybe part of me had wanted her to hurt. But now, all I wanted was to take that hurt away. My gaze dropped to

the floor.

“Yeah,” I muttered. “I figured.”

“You should’ve seen her,” Landry went on, quieter now. “The second she saw you? It was like everything in her just . . . cracked open.”

I closed my eyes briefly. I didn’t need to imagine it. I’d seen enough. The way she’d gone still, the way her breathing had changed. The way she looked at me as if I were something she’d buried that had no business standing in front of her again. Would it be like this every time we saw each other?

“That bad?” I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

“Yes.” The thing about Landry was that she was always honest, even to a fault.

I nodded slowly. “I didn’t expect her to come back to Kennedy,” I admitted.

“You can’t keep trying to avoid each other,” Landry said.

“I know.” This town was too small.

“She’s thinking about talking to you,” Landry admitted.

My head snapped up. “She said that?”

“Not in so many words,” she said. “But she didn’t shut the idea down.”

Something loosened in my chest, suspiciously close to hope, and I didn’t trust it.

“You still care about her,” she said. Not a question. Because that answer had never changed.

“Doesn’t really matter,” I said instead, adjusting my rolled-up shirt sleeve.

“It might to her,” she whispered. Maybe. But I wouldn’t let myself mistake missing her for trusting her again. She was the one who left. She was the one who walked away without ever saying goodbye. Landry lifted the small box and held it in her arms, glancing toward the door again.

“Just don’t hide behind silence this time. You aren’t alone,” she said, concern lacing her voice.

I met her eyes. “I won’t.” I didn’t want her to worry about me.

Not again. Not if I got the chance to do it differently. There were things I wanted to say, and I wasn’t going to leave them unsaid again. She studied me for a second longer, deciding whether to believe me. She gave a small nod and turned toward the door, her mission complete.

“Hey, Landry.”

She paused, glancing back over her shoulder.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

Her smile was small. Knowing. "Don't thank me yet."

The door opened and closed. And just like that, I was alone again. Alone with my thoughts, but they felt heavier than before. I stared at the empty space, Landry's words still hanging in the air.

She's thinking about talking to you.

My pulse stumbled. I exhaled sharply, dragging a hand through my hair. I hated myself for missing the version of us that had existed before everything broke. I reached for my keys before I could talk myself out of it. My hand fisted around them because every good memory came with another one reminding me she'd walked away.

Fifteen years later, I still didn't know why.

What I wouldn't give to go back to a day when we could sit on the pier, talking about futures we were sure we'd share. She'd known me better than anyone. Maybe that was what I yearned for most—not just her, but being known by her. She'd walked away without giving me the chance to fight for us, and somehow I was still standing here wishing for pieces of what we'd lost.

If she wanted to talk . . . so did I. I was ready to hear the truth. Ready to finally ask the questions I'd spent years pretending didn't matter.

And if hearing the answers hurt . . .

Maybe it was time I stopped running from that, too. I glanced at the clock as I locked the center behind me. She'd be off work soon. It had been long enough. Whatever happened next, fifteen years of silence ended tonight.

OceanofPDF.com

Twenty-One



Lane

Hospitals all smelled the same. Sharp and sterile, trying to mask everything underneath but never quite succeeding. Stress, fear, and exhaustion clung to the walls and engulfed me the second the automatic doors slid open. It wasn't my first time here. I planned on a quick stop before helping Jonah. Instead, I stopped just inside the entrance, debating whether this was the right choice. The storm clouds gathering overhead seemed to mirror the mess in my head. I took a breath and forced myself forward.

Then I saw her.

Cali.

She stood near the front desk, just off to the right, dressed in navy scrubs, her hair pulled back in a braid over her shoulder and a stethoscope hanging around her neck. She looked different. More grounded. More certain than the girl I'd known or thought I'd known. Everything else about her was painfully familiar. Her shoulders were squared, but there was tension in them.

I could still turn around. The doors hadn't even finished closing behind me. I could walk out, come back later, pretend I hadn't seen her. Instead, I stayed because I refused to tolerate another day of this awkward avoidance thing we had going. Because history didn't disappear just because you'd spent years refusing to examine it.

She was talking to someone.

A guy stood too close to her, his hospital wristband visible, with what were probably discharge papers folded in his hand. He leaned in as if he had every right to be in her space, and heat climbed the back of my neck. He was a little shorter than me but had obviously spent time in a gym.

Cali angled her body slightly, and her face came into view. Her smile never reached her eyes. I ignored it. The guy said something I couldn't hear, and her expression softened. My throat burned because I'd seen that smile before. Once, I'd been stupid enough to think it belonged to me. The guy laughed, too easily, as if he thought he was already winning. I moved closer again, close enough now that I could hear, but still out of sight.

"—just saying." He grinned, his tone light but insistent. "Feels like I should get a better follow-up than just a pamphlet and a 'take it easy.' You owe me one after stitching me up."

Cali let out a small laugh, the sound easy and unforced. For a second, I saw the girl who used to laugh at my stupid jokes. Once, I'd spent an entire afternoon trying to make her laugh like that.

"Pretty sure not overexerting yourself is solid medical advice."

"Yeah, but what if I need motivation?" he pressed.

My teeth ground together. Cali shifted her weight to one hip, crossing her arms loosely. She smiled again, and this time there was something more deliberate in it.

"Motivation, huh?" she said.

The guy's grin widened. "Yeah."

She stepped slightly closer, just enough to close the space between them by an inch or two. “And what exactly are you proposing?” she asked. There was a lightness in her tone that didn’t sound clinical anymore. It sounded playful. My fingers curled into my palms.

“Dinner,” he said. “Nothing crazy. You, me, somewhere that doesn’t smell like antiseptic.”

Cali laughed again, glancing down briefly before looking back up at him. “Tempting.” The word echoed louder than everything else in the lobby.

“So that’s a yes?” he asked, clearly encouraged.

She didn’t answer right away. Instead, she studied him for a second, her expression unreadable. “Maybe,” she said finally. Maybe. That one word was enough.

“I’ll take maybe,” he said, straightening slightly.

The corners of her mouth lifted again, but this time it didn’t hold as long. “You should probably focus on not landing yourself back in here first,” she said. “Wouldn’t want to ruin your chances before they start.”

He laughed. “So I do have a chance?”

She shrugged, that same subtle tilt to her posture. “I didn’t say that.” She didn’t say no.

The guy leaned in again, lowering his voice in a mock whisper. “Give me your number. I’ll prove I can follow the doctor’s orders.” That should have been the end of it.

She hesitated. “Persistent,” she said.

“Determined,” he corrected.

She huffed out a quiet laugh. Then she reached for his discharge papers. She pulled a pen from her pocket. *No.* She flipped the papers over and started writing.

“There,” she said.

The guy lit up immediately. “Is that your number?”

She smiled.

He grinned. “Guess I’ll have to call and find out.”

“Guess you will,” she replied. That was enough.

The guy stepped back, clearly satisfied. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Take care of yourself,” she said, her tone shifting seamlessly back to professional. He walked out through the automatic doors, already looking down at the paper in his hand.

Cali watched him go. The second he disappeared through the doors, her smile vanished. She exhaled hard and rubbed the back of her neck.

Before I could stop myself, I stepped forward.

“Still doing that, huh?”

Cali froze, turned slowly, seeing me for the first time. When her eyes met mine, recognition flashed across her face, followed quickly by something more guarded.

“Lane,” she said. My name sounded wrong in her mouth.

I crossed my arms, leaning back slightly. “Didn’t take you long.”

Her brow furrowed. “Didn’t take me long to what?”

“To fall back into old habits.”

The confusion on her face was immediate. “I’m sorry—what?”

I let out a quick breath. “Still using that smile to get your way?”

Her expression became guarded. “I was doing my job.”

“Looked like more than that.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said, stepping closer, her eyes fiery.

“I know exactly what I saw.”

“You saw a patient who wouldn’t take no for an answer,” she said, her voice firm.

“And that’s your solution?” I countered. “Play along? Give him your number?”

“I didn’t give him my number.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

Her jaw clenched. “You walked in on one moment and decided you understood everything.”

“Seemed pretty clear to me,” I said.

“Wow,” she breathed. She looked at me like she didn’t recognize me.

I kept going. “You always had a way of making things look one way when they weren’t.”

Emotions flickered across her features before she masked them.

“What exactly is that supposed to mean?” she asked.

We held each other’s gaze.

“It means”—I took one step closer—“I guess I wasn’t the only idiot who believed you.”

The fire left her eyes. Her lips parted. Nothing came out.

“I—” she started.

Cali took a step back. Then another. Like she needed distance. From me. Like being this close to me made it harder to breathe.

An apology caught in my throat. Too late. I'd already said too much. And then she turned and ran. The doors automatically opened as she pushed through them, disappearing into the parking lot.

I stood there for half a second, the weight of what had just happened settling too slowly.

"Did she finally get rid of that creep?" a petite brunette with curls asked, walking past with a clipboard.

I turned.

"She's been trying to get rid of him for at least an hour."

The world narrowed because I had been so wrong. Completely. Every word I'd thrown at her came back. I ran after her because I wasn't letting her walk away again. Not this time. Not without—something. Anything. I rushed through the doors just as she tripped, her movements unsteady.

"Cali—"

Tears tracked down her cheeks. She flinched when I said her name. I'd put that fear in her.

OceanofPDF.com

Twenty-Two



Cali

I had to get out of there. Conflict crawled under my skin and made everything feel too restricted, too loud. The anger in his eyes. The certainty. The judgment. He'd reached for the exact words that cut deepest. Because I'd heard it before. Not about me at first. About my mom. Then eventually about me.

Whore. Slut. Poor thing. She doesn't know better. Just like her mother.

The remarks echoed, sharp and unforgiving. He didn't know. He couldn't. But my body didn't care about the difference. Because they sounded too

much like every person who had decided my worth before they ever bothered to know me. I spent years proving I was useful—to school, to Jace, to Grandpa—because being needed had always seemed safer than being wanted.

None of it mattered, not when people had already decided who I was. The truth had never saved me before. I didn't know why I expected it to now.

My legs kept moving, but I barely registered where I was going until my hip bumped into a truck. I stumbled slightly, catching myself as I reached out, my palm landing against wet metal.

Not mine. Of course it wasn't.

I hadn't been paying attention. Not to the rows, not to the cars, not to anything except getting away from him—from the weight of his words pressing in on me from every direction. I turned, scanning the lot, trying to orient myself. Trying to breathe. Trying to think. My body remembered before my mind did.

Run.

A sharp, wind-driven sheet of rain needled my skin and soaked through my scrubs in seconds. My hair clung to the side of my face, my braid heavy, water dripping down my spine as I pushed forward. My sneakers squished with each footfall as I jogged to my car.

"Cali, wait!" he yelled, his voice muffled by the storm. He was fifteen years too late. I wasn't the teenage girl sleeping on strangers' couches or waking to unfamiliar footsteps outside the bedroom door.

I had Grandpa. I had Jace. People who counted on me.

I couldn't afford another mistake. Loving Lane Massey had never been safe, not because he would hurt me—because he could reach the parts of me no one else could. Needing someone had always been the fastest way to lose them. I wouldn't go back there, not physically or emotionally, for anyone. I believed I had found safety once with Brett. He was steady, predictable, and careful in all the ways that felt like security at the time. And look how that turned out.

The bitter laugh and sob that tried to rise together caught somewhere in my chest and twisted instead. Rain and tears blurred together until I couldn't tell one from the other.

Where—?

There.

My car.

Two rows over, tucked between a truck and a faded minivan. I ran harder, hearing Lane's feet thud on the wet asphalt.

"Dammit, Cali! Stop running from me."

He was yelling now to be heard through the storm. Lightning streaked across the sky. My hand shook so badly the key scraped against the lock twice before I found it. His hand closed around my shoulder and spun me toward him. The momentum carried me into his chest. His expression changed the second he saw my face. His hand dropped like he'd been burned. My rain-soaked scrubs clung to my body, and the warmth of him was the last thing I wanted to crave. Part of me wanted to remember what it felt like to be held by him, but letting him close again scraped against every place I'd worked so hard to protect. One look from him made every wall I'd built feel as fragile as glass. Rain plastered his hair to his forehead, darkened his shirt, and clung to the muscular lines of his shoulders. Rivulets dripped off his five-o'clock shadow. His eyes searched mine, and for one terrifying second, I remembered the way he used to make the world feel safe.

"I'm so sorry," he rasped. I stared at him. Not because I didn't hear the apology—because I needed him to understand that sorry wasn't enough.

"Why do you keep avoiding me?" He gritted out the words as if it were painful.

"Why are you caging me in?" I asked, stepping back until the car stopped me. Lane moved forward instinctively, then caught himself, leaving only inches between us. He gripped the back of his neck.

"Because I'm afraid you'll run." His forest eyes searched mine with the same intensity that used to make me feel seen. Now it only reminded me how much he could still hurt me. He rested his hands on either side of me as his forehead rested a breath away from mine.

"Tell me you don't still feel this," he whispered. "And I'll believe you."

His warm breath skated against my cheek and neck as his lips brushed my ear. My body betrayed me before my pride could stop it, leaning toward him for warmth. I pulled back immediately, like distance could erase the reaction.

"I'm not the quiet, scared girl anymore. I don't need you," I clipped.

"You don't need me, Cali. I know that." His voice dropped. "But don't stand there and tell me you don't feel this."

“Doesn’t seem like you’ve had issues keeping your bed warm at night.” I measured each word. I’d seen the magazines and the red carpet photos. Lane with a beautiful woman on his arm, looking like losing me had never cost him a thing.

“Why do you care? Did you want to be there?” The almost cruelty I’d seen earlier gleamed again.

“Never,” I bit out, and it was true. I would have never had a relationship with Brett if he’d simply been a placeholder. My relationship with Brett was built on the belief that he was a “good man.” Until he wasn’t. He had checked all the boxes. A firefighter who loved his job. A man who took care of his younger half brother. Now, I knew that wasn’t the full story.

For a second, I believed he was finally seeing me. Not the girl who left. Not the girl he’d built a story around. Me. Something changed in his expression.

There was no mistaking the anger behind his next words.

“Jace’s dad . . . Did you screw him and then walk away like none of it mattered? Did you quit on him the same way you quit on us? You always run when things stop being easy, don’t you? You leave before anyone gets the chance to leave you.”

He clenched his jaw and a vein pulsed at his temple. The hurt that rippled through my heart felt like a physical blow. He didn’t know the truth. He couldn’t. He didn’t know how hard I’d fought to save us. He didn’t know why I had to leave Brett. The truth pressed against my teeth, but I forced it back down.

The girl who would’ve fought for him had died a long time ago. I refused to bury myself beside her.

OceanofPDF.com

Twenty-Three



Lane

The fight left her eyes, replaced by something that made my stomach drop. She jerked back as if I'd struck her. She placed both hands against my chest and shoved.

"Get away from me." Her voice was quiet. Somehow, that scared me more.

"If wanting you means having my heart ripped to shreds again . . ." Her voice cracked, but she swallowed it down. "Then let me make this clear. I don't want you. I don't need you. I don't want any kind of relationship with

you again. Physical. Dating. Nothing. Wanting someone has only ever broken me, and I’m tired of being broken.”

Rain dripped from her eyelashes, and one tear disappeared into the water running down her cheek. Somewhere along the way, I had become the villain in her story.

I lifted my hand to wipe away her tear, but her flinch stopped me. I closed my hand and let it fall back to my side. Once, my touch had been the place she ran to. We would sit on her grandpa’s pier, kissing until the stars filled the sky.

“Cali, what happened to us?”

I was lost. The only word for it. The same hollow, helpless feeling I’d carried the day I discovered she was gone. The day my future walked away from me, never knowing she carried every dream I’d ever had.

“You.”

She spat the word out like she was trying to get rid of a bitter taste. I stared at her, unable to comprehend.

“Don’t act surprised, Lane. I meant nothing to you, so why did you think I’d stay?” She grabbed her door, practically shoving me out of the way, and slammed it shut.

I stood there, watching her taillights disappear, unable to understand how we had ended up here. I walked to my truck, willing my heart to keep beating. Slow, steady breaths. But my throat felt like it was closing in around me. I climbed in, soaked to the bone, and gripped the steering wheel. My chest felt bound as I fought to inhale each breath.

How could she think she’d meant nothing to me?

My fingers dug into the steering wheel until my knuckles ached. I counted my breaths the way I’d been taught.

In. Hold. Out.

What had I been thinking, saying the things I did? How could I crave someone so much and still feel like I was drowning every time I got close? I hated that leaving had been so easy for her when losing her had destroyed me. I did all the things I promised, but she wasn’t there with me.

I’d made it to the MLB, and all I wanted was to give her the life we used to dream about—the kind where she never had to wonder if she was safe, where she finally had a place to belong. I sucked in a breath. The person who had made my world feel right was gone, and I still hadn’t figured out how to live without her. I couldn’t save her. I could barely breathe. She

thought she was broken, but I had begun to wonder if I had ever been whole.

The band around my chest loosened as I worked to control my lungs. There was no way she would ever want this version of me—the one who ran and hid when anxiety took over. The one who said cruel things when fear got louder than love.

I had spent my whole life swearing I would never become him.

And standing there, watching the woman I loved look at me like I was someone she needed to escape, I feared I had already become him.

OceanofPDF.com

Twenty-Four



Lane

Lane: I’ve screwed up. Big time.

Soren: What happened?

Lane: I said some things to Cali that I can’t take back.

Jonah: Are you taking your meds?

I stared at his message longer than I should have.

This wasn’t a secret between the three of us, but I hated that my past mistakes with my medication meant this was always the first question when I acted out of character. I’d been taking medication for depression since I was nineteen. Somewhere between my mom leaving, Cali leaving, and coming to terms with the man who raised me, I reached a point where I couldn’t pretend I was fine anymore. I had hated the feeling of dependency, so I’d pop a pill here and there to manage my symptoms, and it only made things worse. Back then, taking medication felt like admitting something was wrong with me. Now I understood that asking for help didn’t make me weak. It made me human. If I needed insulin, antibiotics, or any other medication, I wouldn’t question it. This was no different. It was simply something that helped me show up as the man I wanted to be. It was a part of my life but not the sum, and I was grateful every day that it existed. Lately, I wondered if I needed to make an adjustment due to the anxiety attacks I’d began having since I moved home. I knew they were connected to being back around my father, but I wasn’t going to let him take this place away from me too.

Me: Yeah, but I majorly screwed up. I have to fix this.

Jonah: You coming over later?

Me: Yeah

Jonah: We can talk it out.

My muscles loosened. These men were my brothers. The family I had always needed. They listened. They didn’t make me feel like I was a failure or a mistake. We held each other accountable without making each other feel like shit.

Everyone needed someone like that. Someone who would stand beside you when you were too exhausted to stand on your own. Someone who would reach into the wreckage of your worst choices, grab your hand, and remind you that you were more than the worst thing you’d ever done.

OceanofPDF.com

Twenty-Five



Lane

Money couldn’t fix everything, but it could buy access. A phone call, a connection, an appointment that would take someone else weeks could happen before I even had time to second-guess asking. My call barely rang twice before my doctor picked up; the faint hush of wind and the distant thwack of a club striking a ball drifted through the line. I could picture him without trying: pressed polo, visor, a half-finished game paused mid-swing because I had called.

“Give me a minute,” he’d said, his voice already moving away from the others as the noise became more distant.

I leaned back in the driver’s seat, pressing my thumb into the edge of the steering wheel hard enough to feel it in my wrist.

We talked for a few minutes. I didn’t bother dressing it up. I told him the meds weren’t working, that I felt like I was constantly bracing for something that never came and never left. That it felt like I was wading through water with a weight tied around my ankle, always close enough to see the shore but never reaching it. I couldn’t tell anymore if the anxiety was worse or the constant fear of when it would strike next. My muscles were constantly tense, waiting for the next wave to come.

“Alright,” he said finally. “We’ll switch it. I want you to taper off what you’re on now. Don’t stop cold turkey. I’ll send in the new prescription.” He walked me through it, step by step, as if he were drawing a map I could follow if I just kept my head down. Reduce this; introduce that. Watch out for side effects. Call if anything feels off.

“Anything feels off,” I agreed, staring through the windshield at nothing in particular.

I sat there for a second longer than I needed to after we hung up, my phone still in my hand; the screen had gone dark. I didn’t know if this would be the thing that finally worked or just another attempt I’d look back on later and barely remember. But the thought of doing nothing—of waking up every day with that same tightness in my chest—felt worse.

Outside, Jonah’s truck idled, a low, steady hum before shutting off. A bookshelf was strapped upright in the bed, ropes pulled taut across its sides like it might try to escape if they loosened. I pushed the door open and stepped out, the air hitting my face sharper than I expected.

“You alright?” Jonah asked, already dropping the tailgate with a hollow clang.

“Yeah,” I said, though it came out thinner than I meant. “I just feel like shit.” I reached for the straps, fingers working at the knots.

“I went to talk to Cali,” I went on, keeping my eyes on what I was doing. “Figured maybe we could clear the air. At least be civil.” I let out a quick breath that didn’t quite make it to a laugh. “There was another guy there. I hadn't expected that. And then”—I tugged harder than I needed to, the knot giving suddenly—“everything I’d planned to say disappeared.”

Jonah didn’t say anything, just moved to the other side and started on his end.

“I said some stuff,” I admitted, quieter now. “Didn’t mean most of it.” The strap slipped loose in my hands, falling against the side of the truck. “I think part of me just wanted her to feel the way I felt when she left. You know? Even for a second.” Jonah didn’t flinch or rush to tell me I wasn’t that person. He just let me sit in the truth of it. The last knot came undone, and the tension eased out of the rope all at once. It sagged between us, useless now. We stood there for a beat, neither of us reaching for the shelf yet.

“In the end I made things worse,” I said.

We lifted the custom-made bookshelf together, wood scraping softly against the bed of the truck as we shifted it toward the edge. It was heavier than it looked, forcing us to adjust our grip halfway through.

“Careful,” Jonah muttered, stepping backward so I could shift to where I didn’t trip on the walkway.

“I got it,” I said, adjusting my hold. We maneuvered it until the base touched the porch with a dull thud on the wood. I held on a second longer before letting go, flexing my fingers as the blood rushed back into them.

For a moment, neither of us moved.

“You gonna call her?” Jonah asked finally.

I shook my head, wiping my palms on my jeans. “No. Not today.”

He nodded like he’d expected that. We carried the shelf toward the front door, angling it sideways to fit through the open door. Inside, the air was cooler, dimmer; the smell of leather and books filled the space.

“Here?” I asked as we made it to his library.

“Yeah.” We set it down against the wall, easing it into place until it stood on its own.

Jonah stepped back, surveying it. “You want it anchored?” I asked.

“Later,” he said. “It’s fine for now.”

I walked back outside, needing the air again. The sky had that washed-out look it got in the late afternoon, colors fading into something dull and in-between. I leaned against the side of my truck, the metal still warm from the sun that worked to dry the pop-up storm earlier, and closed my eyes for a second. I’d gone there with something rehearsed, something measured. I wanted us to leave the past where it belonged and find a way to move forward. But the second I saw that man flirting with her, it all slipped. The

sentences unraveled before I could even start them. My plan disappeared like fire devouring a field of dry grass.

I pushed off the truck, dragging a hand down my face as if I could wipe the memory away. It clung anyway, sticking in the corners of my mind.

“Doing that isn’t going to help,” he said.

“Doing what?”

“Replaying it,” he said, stepping around the front of the truck. “Like if you go over it enough times it’s gonna change.”

I didn’t answer. He came to stand a few feet away. “It won’t,” he warned.

“I know but it doesn’t stop it.” I picked at a loose thread on my sleeve.

Jonah nodded slowly, taking that in.

“You switching meds?” he asked after a second, jerking his chin toward my truck.

“Yeah. Doc thinks it might help.”

“And you?”

I hesitated. The truth sat there, heavy and unformed. “I think I don’t have a better idea,” I said finally.

He let out a breath. “Give it a chance.”

We stood there, the space between us filled with the kind of quiet that didn’t need to be fixed. The kind that only existed between people who knew the worst parts of you . . . and stayed anyway.

OceanofPDF.com

Twenty- Six



Cali

“It says California Walton, and it’s paid for,” the disgruntled teenager repeated, sounding like I was the one missing something. I hadn’t ordered lunch, let alone dessert, and only one person still insisted on calling me California.

“I’ll take it if you don’t want it,” Lacy said with a tilt of her head, trying to solve the problem.

“Okay. Thanks,” I said, handing the kid a tip. He held up his hands.

“No, ma’am. No way. I was told to refuse any tips, or I wouldn’t get the grant I was promised.” My eyes widened, and my mouth fell open before Lacy plucked the cupcakes from my hands and sent him on his way. The kid practically sprinted back to his car.

Lacy peeled back the box lid and took an appreciative sniff. “At least he’s got good taste.”

I shot her a look.

“In desserts,” she clarified.

“What is he doing?” I said to no one in particular. This had Lane Massey written all over it. Did he really think a box of cupcakes could erase everything he’d said?

“He’s a man,” Lacy said, as if that explained everything.

I’d filled her in during our downtime. I needed someone to talk to who wasn’t also friends with Lane. Maybe if I trusted her with my mess, she’d finally trust me with hers. There wasn’t any point in sending apology cupcakes. He’d already made himself painfully clear. No matter how good they smelled, they weren’t going to fix what he’d broken. Cupcakes weren’t rewriting history.

OceanofPDF.com

Twenty-Seven



Cali

Tugging my socks off, I tucked them into my sneakers and sank my tired feet into the cool water. Today was a disaster. Everyone and their brother in Kennedy seemed to have strep throat. We'd essentially become the clinic's backup after they ran out of available appointments. Then, in the middle of everything, those stupid cupcakes arrived. It was a pack of four white chocolate–raspberry cupcakes with cream cheese frosting. Only he knew how much I loved those. I wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it all, but tears pricked my eyes. His question haunted me. *What happened to us?*

He shattered my heart. It felt like I'd tried to piece myself back together with Scotch tape, and then Brett happened. Whatever fragile hope I had of ever truly being loved seeped out of me. After watching my mother chase one failed relationship after another for decades, being alone seemed safer. No one who would steal the money you'd worked three jobs to save. No one to tell you what to say or how to feel. No one to hear your most private thoughts and dreams, only to decide you weren't worth it.

Lane was my first everything.

What he didn't know was that he'd been my only. I'd never gotten over him, even when I'd wanted to hate him with every muscle in my body. Anytime Brett had tried to take things further, I'd frozen. Looking back, maybe my subconscious had known I wasn't safe. Maybe that's why I'd never understood my mother. How did she keep handing pieces of herself away without feeling like she'd lost her soul? *Maybe she had.* Was it weird that I was envious of her ability to try again? We'd exchanged calls about twice a year before she died. She'd randomly remember I existed around my birthday and Christmas and call to say she'd put a gift in the mail. The gifts never quite made it. "That damn postal service," she'd always say, but I knew she was just trying to ease the guilt. The difference between us was that I couldn't do this repeatedly. Brett had been my attempt to move on. Instead, he gave me the best thing in my life—Jace—and broke me in ways Scotch tape couldn't fix.

"Care if I join you?" I spun to see Lane stepping onto the pier. His old truck was parked not too far away. I hadn't heard a thing.

I was too tired to storm off, even if everything inside of me wanted to.

"I'd rather you didn't," I answered, but my words weren't as firm as I'd wanted them to be. I was done trying to be civil. He hesitated and ran a hand through his hair. This used to be our place, and it didn't feel right being here together now that we had nothing left of us.

"Okay, I'll leave. I just wanted to stop and tell you how sorry I was." He swallowed, and instantly my nose burned from held-back tears. I turned back toward the pond before he could see what his voice undid inside me. "I've thought about what you said all night. I can't figure out what I did that made you believe I didn't want you. You don't owe me an explanation, but I just don't understand, Cali. I don't know what I could have done to hurt you back then because every future I ever saw included you. Every. Single. One." His voice was raw, and I held my breath against the sob that was

clawing its way up my throat. I caught the nervous twitch of his fingers in my peripheral vision, but all I could feel was that old wound tearing open again.

OceanofPDF.com

Twenty-Eight



Cali

Fifteen years ago

My mom remembered my seventeenth birthday this morning—two days late. Three months ago, she'd been in Tulsa with husband number seven. I think his name was Gelbert. Gilbert? Something like that. I'd stopped bothering to learn their names because between each husband, there were about half a dozen boyfriends and fiancés who never quite made the cut to become a husband. Lucky them. They were all the same: two people using each other until the lies stopped working. She'd adopt their hobby,

and before long, she'd know enough about golf, archery, or wine to convince herself she loved it too. But as soon as their money ran dry, she'd fall out of love with them and find another hobby and another man to fall in love with. The cycle never changed. She didn't get me a gift, but I knew not to expect one. The greatest gift she'd ever given me was dropping me off on my eleventh birthday with my grandparents. Sometimes I'd wonder how two people as hardworking and kind as my grandparents could create someone like her. Then I'd wonder about me. I couldn't solve that one because I didn't really even know the other half of me. Maybe the parts of me worth keeping came from my father, but after meeting him, I highly doubted it. I kicked a loose rock with the toe of my shoe as I made my way across the high school parking lot.

"Oww." A whimper stopped me. I spun toward the sound. The new kid was dragging a little girl toward a car by her arm. Her feet dug into the pavement as she twisted around, searching for help. Her bright blue eyes widened and locked onto mine. I dropped my backpack and ran toward them. I barely knew him, but he had tried to flirt with me a few times, and Lane had made it abundantly clear I was taken.

"Hey, what are you doing?" I yelled as I got closer. The boy twisted toward me and immediately wiped the scowl from his face, replacing it with something that almost looked friendly.

"Oh. Hey, Cali! Just trying to get my sister home," he said breathlessly as he tugged on the little blonde's arm again as if they were playing a game. Her expression told me this wasn't a game.

"Maybe let her walk?" I asked, hoping he'd drop the viselike grip he had around her thin arm.

"She can't walk. It's too far. Right, Sawyer?" he asked, but it was clear that he wasn't looking for an answer.

"Doesn't she normally ride the bus?" I didn't know this kid much, but I knew he always came to school by himself, and the elementary school was only down the block. Her eyes stayed locked on mine.

"Yeah, but I decided to be a good big brother and pick her up today," he said in a flirty tone. I glanced around, but there weren't any adults around, and I was running out of things to say. Every instinct screamed that something was wrong, but what was I supposed to do?

"Well, um, maybe I could drive her home?" I said, scrambling for another excuse. He paused, jutting out his chin.

“I’d be all up for you coming to my house, but I’m not sure if that’s a good idea.” I narrowed my eyes at his remark, but it was kind of a crazy idea. I didn’t know this kid. She didn’t know me. Her eyes held mine like she was afraid looking away would make me disappear.

I squatted down to meet her at eye level.

“My name is California, but most people call me Cali. What grade are you in?” I asked. If I kept them talking, one of the teachers or the coaches would walk this way for their vehicle.

“Second grade,” she answered in a soft voice as she worried her bottom lip.

“Oh, wow! That must mean that you’re learning to read and spell! Reading is the best!” I said as if that were the most interesting thing in the world to be in second grade. Where was an adult?!

“I like to read,” she whispered, like being dragged by the arm while having a conversation was something she’d learned to ignore.

“Me too! Have you read *My Brain is a Wonder* by Jordi Lou yet?” I asked. “It’s a fun book!” I just needed more time. She shook her head.

“You should ask Mrs. Marsh, the librarian, about that one tomorrow! I think you’ll love it!” I said, buying another few seconds.

“Listen, Cali. We gotta get home,” Dawton said as he pulled her arm. There were going to be bruises. She winced.

“You’re hurting her.” I rose to my feet.

“She’s fine,” he said, turning and yanking her closer to the car. I searched the parking lot but there was no one around.

“Are you going to the dance Saturday?” I needed to draw this out. Something wasn’t right. He stopped, and something dark hardened in his eyes. He took a step toward me, crowding my space.

“Why? You need a date?”

My pulse stuttered.

“Uh, no, I was just wondering if you were going?” I scrambled, needing more time.

“Hey, what’s going on here?” Lane asked, his sports duffel slung over his shoulder. Lane’s voice cut through the tension, low but sharp enough to make Dawton’s grip falter for half a second. He didn’t let go.

I turned; relief flooded me so hard my knees almost gave out. Lane was already moving. His duffel slid from his shoulder and thudded against the

pavement. His eyes flicked from me to the girl, then locked on Dawton's hand clamped around her arm.

"What's going on?" he asked again, slower this time.

Dawton's jaw knotted. "None of your business."

Lane stepped closer anyway, placing himself just slightly in front of me, like it wasn't even something he had to think about. "Looks like my business."

Sawyer backed away, her shoes scraping against the asphalt as she tried to lean away from her brother. The movement made Dawton yank her harder. Lane's gaze dropped to her arm. His hands flexed at his sides.

"You're hurting her," Lane said.

"I said she's fine," Dawton snapped, his voice rising now, cracking at the edges. "Mind your own—"

"Let her go." It wasn't loud. That was the scary part. For a split second, everything went still. Even the wind seemed to hold its breath.

Dawton laughed, but it came out thin and wrong. "Or what?"

Lane didn't answer. He stepped forward and reached his palm out for Sawyer's free hand, gentle, careful. "Hey," he said, softer now, like he was talking to a scared animal. "You can come and stand over here."

Sawyer didn't hesitate.

She leaned toward Lane—

Dawton lost all control, unleashing slurs so vile directed at me; they ripped through my chest and left me struggling to breathe.

And that's when Dawton swung.

It happened in a blur. Lane stepped between us just as the fist slammed into his jaw. The dull crack of the impact made my stomach drop as his head snapped sideways and he staggered backward.

"Lane!" I shouted, the sound ripping out of me. Sawyer screamed.

Lane recovered almost instantly. He wiped at his lip with the back of his hand, eyes dark now, something controlled snapping loose. He stepped back in and drove his shoulder into Dawton's chest, forcing him away from Sawyer.

"Get back!" Lane barked, grabbing Dawton's shirt and pushing him hard.

Dawton staggered but didn't fall. He came back swinging wild, his fist glancing off Lane's cheek this time. Lane ducked the next strike and drove one square into Dawton's ribs. The air whooshed out of him.

“Stop it! Stop!” I screamed as I pulled Sawyer back, her small body trembling against mine. The two of them crashed into the side of the car, metal rattling. Lane shoved him again, harder, and this time Dawton lost his footing, hitting the ground with a grunt.

For a second, it looked like it might end there. It didn’t.

Dawton scrambled up, his face twisted with rage, and lunged. They collided again. Fists flew. Shoes scraped. Their breaths came in sharp, angry bursts.

Then—

A siren.

All of us froze for just a fraction of a second before red and blue lights spilled across the parking lot.

“Hey! Break it up!” a voice shouted. Lane stepped back first, hands lifting slightly, chest heaving. Dawton didn’t. He took one more swing—wild, pointless—and missed as an officer grabbed him from behind, wrenching his arms back.

“Knock it off!” another officer snapped, moving in on Lane.

“I didn’t—” Lane started, but he didn’t get to finish. His arms were pulled behind him too.

“Both of you,” the officer said, already securing handcuffs into place.

“Wait!” I stepped forward, my voice shaking. “He didn’t start it—he was helping—”

“Step back,” the officer barked, not even looking at me.

Sawyer clung desperately to me, her face buried against my side. Lane looked at me over his shoulder as they led him toward the cruiser. There was blood on his lip, already swelling, but his expression wasn’t angry anymore.

“Are you okay, baby?” he said, breathless but steady. My throat burned with unshed tears. I nodded, even though I wasn’t sure that was true.

Dawton was still struggling, cursing loudly as another officer forced him into the back of a second car. The doors slammed almost in unison. And just like that, the parking lot fell quiet again—except for Sawyer’s soft, shaky breathing and the fading echo of sirens as everything spun completely out of control.



The police station felt too bright, like the lights were trying to find every lie but couldn’t quite manage it. My mother had taught me to be wary of police stations. I hovered around the corner, my shoulder pressed against the wall, peeking out despite knowing I shouldn’t.

I could see Lane.

He sat hunched forward, elbows on his knees, a smear of dried blood on his cheek. His hands looked worse—red, split, and swollen. He’d gotten hurt. This was bad; a college scout was coming to watch him play next week. The front doors opened, and I didn’t need to see who it was to know.

“Unbelievable.” His dad’s voice carried, sharp and controlled. I shrank back a little, but not enough to lose sight of Lane.

“That’s my son,” he said at the desk, already pulling out his wallet like this was just another inconvenience to pay away. Lane didn’t look up right away. When he did, it was quick—guarded.

Bryant walked toward him, slow and deliberate. “What did I tell you?” he said. “What did I say would happen if you started getting distracted?”

Lane shifted, sitting up straighter. “I wasn’t—”

“Don’t.” Bryant cut him off with a flick of his hand. “Don’t lie to me.”

I pressed my lips together, my fingers curling into the edge of the wall.

“He swung first,” Lane said quietly.

Bryant let out a short laugh. “And you couldn’t walk away.”

“He had a kid—”

“I don’t care what he had,” Bryant snapped, his voice dropping again but somehow getting sharper. “You think that matters?”

“Or was it her?” Bryant asked as if he were spitting a bad taste out of his mouth. Everything in me went still because Lane didn’t answer right away,

but he didn’t have to. Bryant nodded as if he’d just confirmed something. “Of course it was.”

My stomach twisted.

“She didn’t do anything,” Lane said, quieter.

“Oh, please,” Bryant replied. “Girls like that always do something.” *Girls like that.*

“You don’t know anything about her,” Lane said.

“I know enough,” Bryant shot back. “I know where she comes from.”

My breath caught. Heat flooded my face before cold chased it away.

“And I know her type,” he went on. “Mother runs through men like water, and the daughter—what, you think she’s different?” Each word left a bruise.

Lane stood up so fast the chair scraped loudly. “Don’t talk about her like that.” For a second—only a second—something like hope flickered in my chest.

Bryant didn’t back down. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about.”

Lane’s shoulders were tense, his hands clenched. “You don’t get to say that.”

“I can say whatever the hell I want,” Bryant said. Then, colder, quieter, “She’s just some white trash trailer park slut.”

Lane didn’t say anything, but his hand flexed. My throat closed.

“You’re throwing everything away over a girl whose mother is a whore and whose future looks the same. Maybe I should pay a visit to that little patch of dirt they call a farm.” The word echoed in my head, loud and ugly. *Whore*. I flinched like he’d said it right to my face.

Lane didn’t speak, and the silence stretched just long enough it was painful.

“She’s not—” he started, and my heart jumped. I held my breath.

“This isn’t about her,” Lane said finally.

“The hell it is,” Bryant said.

“It’s not,” Lane snapped, then lowered his voice, like he was forcing it under control. “She doesn’t mean anything. You’re right. She’s just someone to pass the time with. She doesn’t mean anything.”

My fingers went numb against the wall. Everything inside me went still, as though the world itself had forgotten how to breathe.

“She’s just some slut from school,” he added. “That’s it.”

I clamped a trembling hand over my mouth to quiet the sob that was working its way up my throat. I waited, staring at him. Waiting for him to take it back. To say my name. To look over and spot me. Anything.

Bryant nodded once. “Good.” *Good.* That was it.

That was all it took. I knew Lane said his dad was a lot, but watching Bryant’s approval made something inside me fracture. Had he been using me all along? Had last weekend meant nothing to him? Had I given him the only part of myself I’d saved . . . for nothing? Were we over because he’d gotten what he wanted? Mom always said men were only after one thing. I stepped back before they could see me, my shoulder bumping the wall harder than I meant it to. The sound cracked through the hallway, but no one called out.

No one came to save me.

I turned and walked down the hallway, then sped up when tears blurred my vision. I pushed through the doors and into the night air, but it didn’t help. The night air couldn’t fill my lungs.

She doesn’t mean anything.

The words echoed until they drowned out everything else. I reached my car but my hands were shaking so badly I could barely get the key in. I sat there for a second, clutching the steering wheel, staring through the windshield.

I didn’t tell my grandparents where I was going. I didn’t tell anyone. I just drove. I refused to peek in the rearview mirror. I’d call Grandma and Grandpa once I figured out where I was going. As far as I was concerned, Lane Massey had gotten exactly what he wanted from me.

OceanofPDF.com

Twenty-Nine



Cali

I let out a slow breath and squeezed my eyes shut, letting the cold that snaked over my body keep me anchored.

"You don't get to say that," I whispered. The words surprised me. They came out steady, but there was something underneath them that trembled anyway. Lane didn't move closer, but I could feel him there, just behind me. Waiting.

"I don't get to say what?" he asked. The confusion in his voice almost made me believe him.

“That you don’t know what you did.” I swallowed and forced myself to keep my voice even. “You don’t get to stand there and act like it was nothing.”

“I’m not saying it was nothing,” he blurted. “I’m saying I don’t understand what I did. If I had known, I would have fixed it. I would have done anything to fix it.”

A bitter laugh slipped out before I could stop it. I shook my head, staring out at the ripples on the water.

“That’s the problem,” I said. “You think it was something you could have just fixed.”

“It was us,” he said, his voice strained. “Of course I would have fixed it.”

I turned then, and that was a mistake. Because he looked exactly the same as he had at seventeen, those eyes . . . they were the same. Locked on me like I was still something he was trying to hold on to, like I was someone he cared about.

“You didn’t see me,” I said. If I didn’t know better, I would think he was really confused.

“See what?” he asked.

My hands gripped the rough wood of the pier beneath me to ground me as the memory clawed its way to the surface. The bright lights. The echo of his father’s voice. The way everything inside me had gone still.

“I was there,” I said.

His brows pulled together. “Where?”

“At the station.” My voice dropped. “The night you got arrested.”

The color drained from his face so fast it was almost jarring. “You . . . what?” he said.

“I came to make sure you were okay,” I said, my fingers curling against my knees. “I stood around the corner because I didn’t want to get you into more trouble. I thought I was doing the right thing and that you’d want to see me.” His mouth opened, but no words came out.

“I heard everything, Lane.” Silence fell between us, heavy and suffocating.

“You didn’t,” he said finally, but there was no conviction in it. Just . . . hope. Desperate, fragile hope.

“I did.” My throat burned now, but I pushed through it. “I heard your dad. I heard what he said about my mom.” My voice wavered on the word, but I steadied it. “But mostly I just heard you.”

Lane took a step forward. “Cali—”

“No.” I shook my head hard, holding a hand up. “Don’t.” He stopped as if I’d physically pushed him.

“You said I didn’t mean anything,” I continued. “You said I was just someone to pass the time with.” I let out a shaky breath. “After I gave you everything.”

His face crumpled in a way I had never seen before. “No,” he said, his voice breaking. “No, that’s not—”

“That’s exactly what you said.”

“I didn’t mean it,” he rushed out. “I swear to you, I didn’t mean a single word of that.”

“It didn’t sound like you were struggling to say it.”

“I was trying to survive him.” Lane rushed, then immediately softened. “Cali . . . you don’t understand what he was like. If I pushed back, if I—” He dragged both hands through his hair, pacing like he couldn’t stand still. “He would have made your life a living hell like he made mine. I thought if I shut it down, if I made it seem like you didn’t matter, he would leave you alone.”

I stared at him, trying to process what he’d said. I knew he didn’t always see eye to eye with his dad, but there was a panic to his voice I hadn’t heard before.

“You thought saying I meant nothing would help me?” I asked.

“Yes. I thought if he believed that, he wouldn’t come after you. He wouldn’t drag you into it.” His voice cracked. “I wanted to make him stop seeing you as a threat.”

A hollow sound wheezed from my chest. “So you just . . . what? Sacrificed me?”

“No.” He stepped closer again, slower this time, like approaching something fragile. “I wanted to protect you.”

“Well, you weren’t,” I said, my voice cracking despite my best effort. “You broke me.”

He physically flinched at the sting of the words.

“I waited,” I went on, the words spilling now that they’d started. “I stood there thinking . . . maybe he’ll fix it. Maybe he’ll say it was a mistake. Maybe he’ll say he was wrong.” My vision blurred, but I didn’t look away. “You didn’t, Lane. You agreed with him.”

“I didn’t agree,” he said, shaking his head. “I just—”

“You said it,” I cut in. “And then you let him say ‘good’ like it was a good thing that I meant nothing to you.”

His shoulders collapsed, like something inside him had finally given out.

“I was seventeen,” he breathed. “I was scared. I thought I was doing the right thing.”

Scared?

“I was seventeen too,” I said. “And I drove out of town that night because I believed the only person I had ever trusted thought I was just someone to pass the time with.”

His eyes snapped back to mine. “You left because of that?”

“Yes.” The word hung there. Raw. Final.

He let out a breath that sounded like it hurt. “I looked for you,” he said. “I drove every road between here and your grandparents’ place. You were just . . . gone. No note. No explanation. I thought you stopped loving me and you’d left like she did.”

His mom.

I shook my head slowly. “I never stopped loving you. That was the problem.” The admission sat between us, fragile and dangerous. Lane’s eyes softened, something hopeful flickering there, but I shut it down before it could take root.

“That doesn’t mean anything now,” I said sharply. It was like watching a door slam in real time.

“Cali . . .” he whispered.

“No,” I said again, firmer this time. “You don’t get to take that and turn it into something it’s not.”

“I’m not trying to twist it,” he said. “I just—if you never stopped—then maybe we—”

“We’re not doing that,” I cut in, my voice sharper now. “There is no ‘we.’”

He went still.

“I meant what I said yesterday,” I continued. “I’m not interested in a relationship. Not with you. Not with anyone.”

“That’s because of me,” he said.

“That’s because of a lot of things,” I replied. “You were just the first.”

He winced.

“I built a life after you,” I said. “It’s not perfect. It’s messy and hard, and sometimes I feel like I’m barely holding it together, but it’s mine. And I’m

not risking that again.”

“I’m not asking you to risk it,” he said. “I’m asking you to let me try to make it right.”

“You can’t make that right. You can’t take back all the years.”

“I can try,” he insisted. “I know I can’t undo what I did. But I’ll spend every day proving I’m not that person anymore.”

My heartbeat faltered at the desperation in his voice. It would have been so easy to fold. To let myself believe him. I forced myself to shake my head.

“That’s not love,” I said. “That’s guilt.”

“It’s not guilt,” he said, stepping closer again, his voice rough. “I have felt this for you every day since the day you left. Every day. You don’t just get over something like that, not when it was real. We were real, Cali.”

I looked away, back to the water, because I couldn’t hold his gaze and stay steady. “Real doesn’t always mean safe,” I said.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, softer now. “I know that’s not enough. I know it doesn’t fix anything. But I am. I am so damn sorry, Cali.”

I believed him, and that was the worst part. I believed every word, every crack in his voice, every unsteady breath. And it still didn’t change anything.

“I can’t do this again,” I said, barely above a whisper. “I can’t give someone the power to break me like that.”

“I wouldn’t,” he said immediately.

“You already did.” Maybe I sounded like the worst kind of person, but I was barely holding things together as it was, and the idea of risking my heart felt like rubbing sand into a fresh wound. That left him with nothing to say, and I almost felt bad for how sincere he seemed. Maybe he was a good person now. Maybe he really had changed. But that didn’t erase what happened, and it didn’t mean I owed him another chance.

For a long moment, neither of us spoke. The water lapped gently against the dock, the only sound filling the space between us.

“I don’t expect you to forgive me,” he said finally. “Not right away. Maybe never. But I’m not going anywhere.”

I let out a slow breath because I hadn’t expected that.

“That’s your choice,” I said. “But it doesn’t change mine.”

He nodded, even though it clearly cost him. “Can I at least . . .” He hesitated. “Can I at least be in your life? Even if it’s not like that?”

I closed my eyes for a second, weighing what it already cost me to have him in my life. “That depends,” I said, “on whether you can actually respect what I’m asking for.”

“I can,” he agreed. “Whatever you need.”

I turned to study him one more time.

“Then you need to understand this isn’t a waiting game,” I said. “You don’t get to hang around hoping I’ll change my mind. If you stay, it’s as someone who expects nothing from me because that’s exactly what you’ll get.” The words found their mark, and I could see it.

But he swallowed and then nodded anyway. “Okay,” he said, his eyes searching mine. I studied him for a second, searching for any sign that he didn’t mean it. All I saw was someone who looked like he would agree to anything if it meant he didn’t have to let me go again. That scared me more than anything.

I pulled my feet from the water and reached for my shoes.

“I should go,” I said.

“Yeah,” he answered quietly.

I stood, brushing my hands off on my jeans, and turned toward the end of the pier.

A small bouquet rested on the weathered boards. My breath caught. I hadn’t noticed them before, but I knew those flowers. He used to leave wild daisies for me when we were teenagers—little bouquets tucked where he knew I’d find them, as if they were some secret only the two of us understood. For a second, I just stared at them.

Then I stepped over them.

I walked past him without touching him. I sensed his eyes on me the entire time, but I didn’t look back.

OceanofPDF.com

Thirty



Lane

Lane: I saw Cali

Soren: Is that bad?

Lane: She heard what I said at the station.

Soren: All of it?

Lane: Yeah

Jonah: Damn

Lane: She thought I meant it

Soren: Did you tell her the truth?

Lane: Yeah. Didn’t change anything. I never told her then or now how bad things were with Bryant. She doesn’t understand and I’m not telling her just to make her feel sorry for me.

Jonah: Now what?

Lane: She wants nothing. No relationship

Soren: You gonna respect that?

Lane: Yeah. I just want to be there for her.

Jonah: That’s the only shot you’ve got.

Lane: I know

Jonah: Does she know everything you did?

Lane: No.

Jonah: Lane.

Lane: And I don’t plan on telling her.

Jonah: Maybe reconsider that.

Lane: No

I turned off my screen, but the question stayed. The ball smacked into my palm harder than I expected, and I laughed as eight-year-old Marcus threw his arms up like he’d just won the World Series.

“That was solid,” I said, shaking out my hand dramatically.

“You said throw it hard,” he shot back, already backing up like he was ready for another round.

“I said throw it,” I corrected, pointing at him. “That was you trying to take me out.”

He grinned, completely unrepentant. “You caught it.”

“Barely.” I lobbed it back, softer this time, and he caught it against his chest with a small grunt. The late-afternoon sun stretched long across the park, warm but soft, the kind that made it easy to lose track of time.

“Alright,” I said, clapping once. “You’ve got five more minutes before you’re back inside finishing math.”

He groaned like I had personally betrayed him. “I hate fractions.”

“You’ll get it,” I said. I smiled and tossed the ball again. We kept going for a few more throws, the rhythm easy, until I tucked the ball under my arm and nodded toward the building.

“Inside.” I messed up his hair, and he immediately slapped a hand over it.

“Hey! I was trying to look cool,” Marcus complained.

“You were never going to pull that off,” I said.

He grinned. “Good thing I look better next to you.”

Marcus muttered something about “evil fractions” as the door closed behind him and he disappeared into the hum of voices. I followed. The Hope Center hummed around me—quiet conversations, pencils scratching, kids groaning about completing homework.

I took a few steps in, scanning out of habit, but halted when I got to her. Cali stood just inside the doorway, her hand wrapped around the strap of her bag like she hadn’t fully decided to stay. She was still wearing her scrubs, her hair pulled back but loosening at the edges from a long day. She looked tired. One hand drummed against her thigh. Everything else about her looked ready to run. Something in me pulled taut. Every instinct told me to close the distance between us. I stayed where I was. She’d asked for space. For once, I was going to give it to her. I walked over slowly, leaving enough distance between us that she didn’t have to step back.

“Hey,” I said.

Her head lifted, eyes finding mine. Surprise crossed her face, then caution replaced it.

“Hey,” she replied. Anxiety returned in the restless movement of her hands.

“What brings you here?” I asked.

Her fingers adjusted on her bag strap. “I heard this place needs volunteers.”

I nodded. “Yeah. It does.”

“I don’t have a lot of time,” she said. “But I could do an hour or two a week. Help with homework or something.” She looked around uncertainly.

“That’d be great,” I said. “They’re always looking for people.”

The word slipped out before I could stop it. *They*. Not *we*. Her gaze swept across the room. Kids bent over worksheets. Someone reading quietly in the

corner. A volunteer crouched beside a chair, explaining something with the sunny patience only a retired teacher could muster.

“It’s . . . really nice,” she said.

I tracked her gaze. “Yeah.”

She shifted her weight. “Is there someone I should talk to?”

“Yeah, you can talk to Sawyer,” I said, gesturing toward her office. Her attention snapped back to me, concern slipping through before she could hide it.

“She’s here?” she asked, straightening her scrub top.

“Yeah.”

Cali swallowed. “I wanted to check on her after the other day.”

I nodded. “She’s mentioned you.”

“She has?” she asked incredulously.

“Yeah.” I smiled despite myself. “She talks about you like you’re some kind of superwoman.”

Cali blinked, like she'd forgotten she was allowed to matter to people she’d only just met. The tension eased from her shoulders.

“Oh. Okay,” she said.

“I can get her,” I offered. She hesitated and then nodded. I walked toward the conference room. Sawyer sat at the end of a table, her workbook open with lists that nearly filled the page, pencil resting between her fingers.

“Hey,” I said.

She looked up. “Hey.”

“Someone’s here to see you about volunteering.”

She straightened. “Who?”

“Cali.” Panic flickered across her face before she smoothed it away.

“Okay,” she said.

“You good?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yeah.”

I stepped back as she stood, and we walked back into the main room together. The moment Cali saw her, her entire posture shifted, and I could see the anxious fidgeting again.

“Hi,” Cali said gently.

“Hi,” Sawyer replied. They stood there for a second, and then Sawyer nervously breathed out.

“Promise I won’t freak again, if you want to follow me?” Sawyer asked, a tentative smile tugged at her mouth.

OceanofPDF.com

Thirty-One



Cali

I almost laughed. The honesty of it caught me off guard in the best way. Vulnerability still threaded through Sawyer's voice, but this time it rested on something steadier, like she'd finally found solid ground.

I nodded, offering a small reassuring smile. "I'd like that."

She nodded, leading me toward the smaller room Lane had just come out of. Sawyer pushed the door open and stepped inside. I followed, letting it close gently behind me. The noise of the main room softened immediately, and she moved to the end of the table, where a calendar and notebook still

sat open, then turned to face me. For a second, neither of us spoke, simply taking each other in.

Up close, I could see the tiny freckles that dotted her nose. The same freckles she'd had as a kid.

"I'm really glad you came," she said. The sincerity in her voice sank in.

"I didn't realize you'd be here, but I'm glad you are." I rubbed my palms together. "I wanted to apologize for the other day."

Her brows pulled together slightly. "You don't—"

"I do," I cut in gently. "At the gym . . . I didn't know. I didn't realize what was happening, and I should have handled it better."

The memory came back sharper than I wanted it to. The way her breathing had changed. The way her eyes had lost focus, like she wasn't seeing what was actually in front of her anymore. At the time, I had automatically moved into clinical mode of assessing the situation. But there had been a moment where I hesitated, trying to understand what I was seeing instead of responding immediately. That moment mattered because I hadn't fully understood that seeing me had been the cause.

Sawyer shook her head. "Cali, it's not your fault."

"I contributed," I said. "Even if I didn't mean to."

She studied me for a second, sighed softly and leaned back against her chair.

"It wasn't just you," she said. "The gym's . . . a lot sometimes. Noise, people, movement. I thought I could handle it that day. I was wrong."

I nodded slowly. "CPTSD?"

Her eyes flicked up to mine, surprised.

"Yeah."

Complex PTSD wasn't just about one traumatic event. It reshaped the nervous system until danger could exist long after the threat was gone. I'd treated patients through panic attacks before, but this had been different. Because this time, I'd been the trigger.

"I should have recognized it faster," I added.

She shrugged one shoulder. "There was no way for either of us to know we'd run into someone from so long ago."

"True," I said.

Her lips twitched faintly. "It has been a little while."

I let out a small breath, some of the tension in my chest easing.

“I’m sorry,” I said again, quieter this time. “For the gym. And for the other day. Believe it or not, it was the moment that reinforced my choice to become a nurse practitioner.”

Her posture relaxed, just slightly. “You’re a nurse practitioner?”

“Yeah. At the hospital,” I said. “Mostly ER coverage and some outpatient follow-ups.”

“That explains a lot,” she murmured.

“Like what?”

“You didn’t panic,” she said. “Even when I did.”

I gave a small humorless smile. “Doesn’t mean I did everything right.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” she agreed. “But you stayed.”

The words caught somewhere inside me. I glanced down at the workbook on the table, pages filled with lists.

“You work here every day?” I asked.

Sawyer followed my gaze, nodded. “Yeah.”

“Volunteering?”

“No, I’m the director. Making sure things run smoothly and people get the assistance they need.” She tapped the edge of a stack of papers on the table. “Lists help.”

“I can see that.”

She smiled a little at that, then looked back up at me. “This place helps more than just the kids,” she said.

“How so?” I asked. Sawyer tucked one hand in her pocket.

“It gives structure,” she said. “Predictability. We offer family therapy, parenting classes, and job coaching. You know what to expect when you walk in. There’s always something that needs to be done, but it’s . . . manageable.”

I nodded, listening.

“And it’s not just busy work,” she continued. “It matters. You can actually see it helping someone in real time. A kid understanding something they didn’t before. Someone feeling a little less alone for a couple hours.”

Her voice softened slightly. “It gives your brain something else to hold on to. Sometimes volunteering gives hope too.”

That made sense in a way that went beyond theory. We’d talked about grounding techniques and regulation strategies in medicine. This was something different. Purpose woven into routine.

“And the volunteers here,” she added, glancing toward the door. “They are the best people around.”

“I noticed that. I saw a flyer on the bulletin board at the hospital, and it seemed like this was a really special place,” I said. Lane fit that description too.

She nodded. “It’s not about fixing anyone. It’s just about showing up consistently.”

There was weight behind that statement. Consistency mattered. More than most people realized. During a brief lull in the conversation something occurred to me.

“I actually know someone who might benefit from something like this,” I said. Lacy immediately came to mind, but I kept that to myself for now.

Her brows lifted slightly. “Yeah?”

“My son—Jace,” I said. “He’s been in and out of therapy for a while. I adopted him through a kinship placement four years ago. We’ve been trying to find something that helps outside of that environment. Something . . . less clinical. Would there be an opportunity for him to volunteer as well?”

Sawyer’s expression softened with interest. “How old is he?”

“Fourteen.” She nodded slowly. “That could work. He could join in a group session and be an encouragement to the others there.”

“I didn’t even think about it until now,” I admitted. “I didn’t realize places like this existed locally.”

Sawyer smiled faintly. “It’s relatively new, but we’re incredibly lucky to have something like this in such a rural area. This wouldn’t be possible without the foundation that pays for it.”

I hesitated, then added, “You mentioned structure and predictability. That’s something he struggles with. Not the structure itself—but trusting it.”

“That makes sense,” she said. “Trust takes time.”

I nodded. “It always does.”

“What kind of therapy is he in if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Mostly trauma-informed,” I said. “Some cognitive behavioral work. We’ve been discussing adding group sessions, but . . .” I trailed off.

“But that environment can be overwhelming, and finding the right group is crucial," she finished.

“Exactly.”

Sawyer tapped her fingers lightly against the table, thinking.

“Well,” she said slowly, glancing at her calendar, “I think this might be a really good fit. My friend Talia volunteers Thursday afternoons and leads a session for teens. The Thursday group currently has five teens. I think he might be a great addition.”

“That’s worth a shot,” I said. “He’d be much more likely to join in if he felt like he was there for someone else.”

Sawyer nodded, a little amused. “That might actually help. Whatever it takes.”

“I’ll talk to him,” I agreed. “He does better when he’s not walking into something completely unknown, but if I give him too much time to think about it, sometimes he gets overwhelmed.”

“Then this might be a good middle step,” she said. “Not exactly therapy—but still supportive.” For the first time, the path forward felt obvious.

“I think I’ll bring him by,” I said. “Just to see how he responds.”

Sawyer nodded. “No pressure. That’s the whole point here.”

I smiled at that. “No pressure,” I echoed.

“I’m really glad you came today,” Sawyer said again. This time, I believed her fully.

“I am too. How can I help? I could do a couple hours on Thursdays during Jace’s session if that’s helpful,” I said.

Volunteering had been my reason for coming, but now . . . now it felt like something more. I glanced toward the door, where the muffled sounds of the main room filtered in: kids learning and people helping—a steady rhythm of something quietly meaningful.

“We would love to have you come on Thursday. I’ll set you up with another volunteer to learn the ropes, then we’ll decide the best placement for you.”

I straightened slightly, adjusting the strap of my bag on my shoulder. I hesitated, then added, “Is this Thursday too soon? Maybe bring Jace?”

“That would be great. Let me collect your email, and I’ll send over some forms we’ll need,” she said.

“Okay,” I said, feeling something warm settle in my chest.

We exchanged emails, and just like that, Thursday held something to look forward to. We moved toward the door together, and as I stepped back out into the main room, the hum felt alive and purposeful. I caught a glimpse of Lane across the room, talking to one of the kids, completely at ease in a way I hadn’t seen before. For a second, our eyes met, but I looked away

first—not out of discomfort, but because he wasn’t what mattered in that moment.

For once, my thoughts went somewhere other than the past. Sawyer was okay. A place like this existed. Jace might have found something he needed. And for the first time in a long while, there was something on my calendar I wasn’t dreading or simply getting through.

Every Thursday, I’d spend a few hours showing up, helping, and building something instead of simply surviving it, because I wanted to.

OceanofPDF.com

Thirty-Two



Cali

Not telling Jace where we were going until we reached the parking lot wasn't an oversight—it was self-preservation. Give him too much time, and he'd either retreat behind silence or bury everything beneath jokes until neither of us remembered why we'd come.

"Where are we?" he asked, squinting out the window.

The Hope Center stood at the end of the parking lot. A few cars were parked out front along with a row of bikes leaned against the bike rack. The door was propped open like it was expecting people.

“It’s a community center.”

He glanced at me. “That’s . . . vague.”

I huffed a quiet laugh. “It’s a place that offers counseling, tutoring, and support services. Landry mentioned it.” Only half the truth. The rest lodged beneath my ribs. Lane volunteered here too. The paperwork was already submitted, and somehow I’d resisted writing *Can I volunteer anytime Lane Massey isn’t?* across every page. Just barely. We were adults. Living in the same town meant learning to coexist, whether I liked it or not.

Jace’s gaze drifted back to the building. “Why are we here?”

“Because you’ve had a lot thrown at you lately. I don’t want you carrying it alone, and I thought maybe we could do something good for someone else while we’re here.”

He didn’t answer right away. His jaw worked once, twice, like he was deciding how much to push back.

“I’m fine,” he said finally.

My chin dipped. “I know you are. But *fine* doesn’t mean you don’t get support.” Somewhere inside, laughter drifted through the open doorway.

The sound tugged loose the memory of the night before—Jace crying out, me racing to his room, finding him tangled in sweat-damp sheets, breathing hard after another nightmare. He never talked about them, but they seemed to come more often now. His shoulders loosened a fraction. His gaze moved from the windows to the bikes, then the people drifting through the open door before settling on the security camera above the entrance.

“You coming in with me, Doc?” he asked.

“You bet,” I said. “I’m not dropping you off and running. Promise.” A quiet snort escaped him before he reached for the door handle.

“Good,” he muttered, pushing the door open. “Because I’d find you.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” I bumped his shoulder with mine. “Who else is going to keep you fed?”



The inside of The Hope Center was exactly as I remembered—warm and welcoming.

“Hey,” a voice called.

Stiffening, I turned toward the voice, already recognizing it. Lane stood near the far wall, one shoulder braced against a doorframe like it was second nature. Jeans, a fitted T-shirt, arms casually crossed as if he had all the time in the world. His bright green eyes caught mine. Jace followed my line of sight and froze.

“That’s—” he started.

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “Coach.”

He pushed off the wall and crossed the room slowly, his gaze never leaving mine.

“California,” he said when he stopped a few feet away, and I rolled my eyes. His gaze flicked to Jace and softened briefly. Then back to me.

“Massey,” I returned.

Jace looked between us like he was watching a tennis match and hadn’t been told the rules.

“You didn’t say you volunteered here this much,” I said, narrowing my eyes.

“Just giving back when I can.” He smirked. What game were we playing? I was just as lost as Jace.

“Okay. Well, I need to meet with my trainer, and I believe Jace’s activity starts in about ten minutes,” I said, looking around for someone waiting for me.

“Jace, you’ll meet in there,” Lane said as he gestured toward an open door in the corner. “And, Cali, you’re with me.” I wanted to choke the smugness from his very face, but I wasn’t sure if I could fit my hands

around his neck. Jace gave me a quick closed-lip smile and shuffled toward the room.

“There wasn’t a professional adult available to train me?” I asked, skimming the room with my narrowed gaze. “Perhaps that grandma at the far table is available?”

Lane stepped closer, lowering his voice. “I’m not sure what a ‘professional adult’ is, but I can assure you, Cali, I’m an adult.” My cheeks warmed.

“I meant someone that acted like an adult. Not someone that was a pretend adult.”

“Pretend adult?” He couldn’t hold back his grin. What was I even saying?

“You know, someone that has the heart of a volunteer. Someone wise. Someone older,” I reasoned, as if any of that made any sense.

Basically anyone who wasn’t him.

“Ahhh. Well, I am exactly a week older than you, so I believe that means I qualify, California.”

“Don’t call me that!”

“But it’s your name.” He knew I hated it.

“Okay. LANGFORD.” When the going gets tough, sometimes you’ve gotta pull out the big guns. He caught my arm and hauled me toward the back of the building like I was threatening national security.

“Sssshhhhhh. Someone could hear you!”

I cackled, hoping they had. He pushed me into a small room that was most likely a utility closet, judging by the cleaning supplies lining the shelves. At least he had the decency to flick on the light so we weren’t standing here in the dark like two psychos.

“I want a real trainer.” I huffed, crossing my arms.

“I am a real trainer.” He crossed his arms, mirroring my pose.

“Prove it.” I squinted my eyes.

“Ummm. Let’s see. I’ve volunteered here a few times a week since it opened.” My brows shot up. I’d assumed this was a publicity thing, but if he’d been volunteering regularly, maybe he did have the “heart of a volunteer,” whatever that was.

“Okay. Fine, but that’s all this is.” I huffed again.

“No one said it was anything but a trainer training a trainee.” I knew him too well to miss the lie.

“So this is the utility closet?” I asked with a raised brow as if this were part of the tour.

“Yes, Ms. Walton.” He opened the door and then proceeded to show me every nook and cranny of the building to the point that I visualized choking him at least a dozen more times. The tour ended in the same boardroom where I had met with Sawyer.

Lane grabbed a folder, took a seat, and flipped it open like he’d done this many times before.

“Sawyer made some recommendations based on the forms you completed, but ultimately where you volunteer is your choice. It says here high school math tutor, first aid training, or assisting with self-defense classes at the gym. Do any of those sound of interest to you?” He looked up, pen poised above the folder. I shook my head, trying to clear the distraction.

“None of them?” His brows were drawn in confusion.

“Uh, yeah, the first aid class sounds like a good fit. I’ve done several similar classes in Austin.” A shadow passed over his face, but it was gone so quickly perhaps I had imagined it. We talked through the details and decided the class would begin in two weeks, meeting for one hour every Thursday for four weeks. He took notes and said that Sawyer would create a sign-up flyer with all of the information.

"Okay," he said, glancing at his phone. “I believe that covers everything. Do you have any questions for me?” He flipped through the folder with practiced ease, making notes in the margins without hesitating. I’d never seen this version of him.

“You seem different,” I said after a minute.

“People change, Cali.” His gaze lingered on my face. Long enough that I wondered what he saw. We had both changed, and I wondered at all the ways he had. Did he still love the same gross fruity cereal he had in high school? Was he still contemplating a tattoo design? He’d always wanted one but wanted to make sure it really meant something special. My phone rattled on the table, interrupting my thoughts. I glanced at it to make sure it wasn’t for Grandpa or Jace, and I froze as I read the words.

PAST DUE NOTICE

My stomach dropped so hard it felt like I’d missed a step going downstairs. I knew the subject line and the sender because I’d seen it weekly since we’d left. I knew exactly what it was before I even opened it.

His loan. Mine now. The balance stared back at me in cold black numbers. Past due.

Payment required immediately.

I sucked in a breath.

“What is it?” Lane’s voice cut through the fog as I gripped my phone. I blinked at the screen.

“What?”

“You just went pale.”

I locked the screen instantly, but it was too late.

His eyes had already caught enough. Concern flickered across his face.

“It’s nothing.”

One dark blond eyebrow lifted. “Cali.”

“It’s handled.” His jaw clenched; that stubborn little muscle near the corner always gave him away. Some things never changed.

“Is it?”

I shoved the phone into my pocket, tucking it away from his prying eyes. “Yes.”

He leaned back in his chair with that familiar patience that used to pry every thought out of me. “You look like you’re about to throw up.” His eyes tracked across my face.

“Thank you. That’s exactly what every woman wants to hear.” I rolled my eyes for effect.

His mouth twitched at the corner. He’d gotten me into trouble with that twitch in school. Once I started giggling, I could never keep it quiet. Ms. Walder hated when she felt like students weren’t paying attention to her.

“You're welcome.”

Lane had been woven into nearly every good memory I owned. He taught me to swim. He was my first kiss. My first dance. He was there for me the night I met my father and learned I hadn’t been the secret daughter I’d imagined—I was simply unwanted. Lane had held me on the pier while my tears soaked his shirt, and somewhere along the way I’d started believing he’d be the exception. He wasn’t. The silence stretched until my phone vibrated again.

Like the universe was determined to expose every last secret. Lane’s eyes flicked down toward my pocket, then back up.

“Cali.” Why did my name have to sound like that in his mouth, making me want to lean in?

“No.” I wasn’t going there. This was my problem, and I’d fix it.

“I haven’t asked anything.” He didn't have to. I already knew.

“You were about to.” I narrowed my eyes because he knew I was right.

A slow smile tugged at his mouth. “You still do that.”

“Do what?” I squinted.

“Answer questions before I ask them.”

I groaned, dropping my head back. “Please don’t start psychoanalyzing me.” More memories of him trying to get me to talk about my feelings surfaced.

“I’m not.”

“Liar.”

“Okay, maybe a little.” His lips tugged in a smile again.

I pointed at him. “See?”

His smile widened, and tiny crinkles formed at the corner of his eyes. It disappeared just as suddenly. The shift happened so quickly it caught me off guard. His gaze glanced toward my pocket again, then came back to my eyes, steady and serious. It was the same look he’d always given me whenever something was wrong.

“If you need help—”

“No.” I crossed my arms across my chest to create distance. The answer came so fast I practically tripped over it.

His jaw ticked. I hated that look, but he didn’t look away.

“I didn’t say money.” Something crossed his face that I couldn’t quite name.

Heat climbed my neck. My stupidity had led me here, and that was more humiliating than having a bill that needed to be paid right away.

“I don’t need help.”

“Okay.” He nodded.

“Lane,” I warned.

“Okay.”

I narrowed my eyes.

“Why do I feel like you’re arguing with me?” I asked with a huff.

“I’m not.” He closed the folder on the table and leaned closer.

“You are.”

“I’m literally agreeing with you.” The man was impossible. We both knew he was only agreeing for now. I glared as he just stared back, completely calm, unbothered, and infuriatingly attractive. My traitorous

brain supplied one unhelpful observation. *He was still ridiculously attractive.* My pocket vibrated again. This time I grabbed it before I could stop myself. An email preview expanded.

Failure to remit payment may result in further collection action . . .

My heart hammered against my ribs. Brett's face flashed through my mind—the promises, the apologies, the pills, the emptied accounts. Years spent cleaning up disasters that had never been mine. He thought he'd used me. Maybe he had. But I got Jace. I'd never regret that.

I closed my eyes briefly for just one second, but it was one second too long. Because when I opened them, Lane was watching me with an expression I hadn't seen since high school. Not pity but something worse, something softer that looked a lot like care.

"Cali." I hated how gently he said my name, like it still mattered. Like I still mattered. The feeling pressed somewhere behind my ribs, far too close to my heart.

"I said it's handled." The words came out sharper than I intended, but I wasn't going to budge.

He nodded once. "Okay."

There it was again—that damn refusal to fight. Some irrational part of me wanted him to argue, to push, to give me something to push against, but instead he simply sat there waiting like a well-adjusted adult. Giving me room, giving me space. The way you did when someone was scared. Somehow, that irritated me even more.

"I don't need rescuing." The harsh tone of my words scraped against my skin.

His eyes widened slightly. Something almost amused crossed his face.

"Cali."

"What?" I clipped.

"I wasn't trying to rescue you."

The embarrassment arrived instantly and most likely was crawling from my chest to my neck to my face. The curse of being a redhead. Of course he wasn't. I'd started an argument all by myself. He blew out a slow breath.

"I was going to offer to help you find resources if something was going on." My face was surely scarlet at this point.

"Oh." I looked away because the wall had suddenly become fascinating. Wonderful. Fantastic. Just perfect. What was worse than him trying to offer money to make all my problems go away? Was it him offering *resources* to

fix said problems? I wanted the floor to swallow me whole. *Just take me now.*

A low chuckle escaped him, and my head snapped back to him.

“Are you laughing at me?” I asked, squinting my eyes.

“No.” Clearly lying.

“You are.”

“I’m really trying not to.” He rolled his lips together to try and hold back a smile.

“Lane.” That only made it worse. His shoulders hitched.

I pointed at him again. “You are the worst!”

His laugh slipped free. For one reckless second I was seventeen again, sitting in the cab of his truck after a football game, sharing a milkshake and promises whispered into the dark. I looked away first. How were you supposed to turn someone who’d once been your whole world into an acquaintance?

My phone screen lit up.

Helen calling

Relief flooded through me because at this point I’d accept any interruption I could to take my mind away from its current thoughts.

“Sorry. I need to get this.”

Lane’s expression changed instantly, and the teasing disappeared, replaced with concern. I answered before the second ring.

“Helen?” She usually sent a text if it was just to let me know about something or keep me in the loop. There was noise on the other end—voices and movement. My pulse kicked up.

“Cali.” Helen sounded breathless. “Don’t panic,” she said. Which was an excellent way to ensure immediate panic. I shot to my feet as Lane mirrored my movement. “What happened?”

“Your grandfather wandered off when I was in the bathroom. One minute he was watching reruns of *The Price is Right*, and the next I couldn’t find him.”

Every muscle in my body locked. “What? How long has it been?”

“We found him,” Helen said quickly. “He’s okay. It just scared me a little, and he has a small cut on his foot because he was barefoot. But I cleaned it up, and he should be good. I just wanted to let you know what happened.”

I worked to catch my breath as Helen filled the silence.

“We found him walking toward town. He’s safe now.” But was this the beginning of something else I’d have to watch for? I pressed a hand against the table as the weight of everything felt heavy on my shoulders.

Across the table, Lane went perfectly still. Ready. Just like he’d always been whenever my world cracked apart. For the first time since coming back to Kennedy, I wasn’t afraid of seeing him. I was afraid of needing him.

OceanofPDF.com

Thirty-Three



Lane

I slipped my phone out of my pocket and called Jonah. He wasn't exactly a fan of helping in this way, but once he knew what was going on, I could get him on board.

"Yeah." For as long as I'd known him, this had been his standard answer.

"Hello to you too, my little ray of sunshine!" I exclaimed, because he loved my ribbing even if he acted like he didn't. Jonah was one of those people who was genuinely good, even if he preferred pretending he was

made of stone most of the time. I quickly talked him through everything I'd seen before asking for the one thing I knew he'd hesitate to do.

"Can you do some hacking for me and see what you can figure out?" Was this invasive and intrusive and even slightly illegal? Perhaps.

"I don't hack, you moron. I just know how to use the internet." He huffed.

"Well, can you 'use the internet' and find out what is going on with Cali's finances?"

"Uh, no. I don't look good in orange."

"I bet there are some women in Kennedy that would highly disagree with that, you sexy beast. But for real. I need to know why collectors are harassing her and how I can help." I added just a little pleading to my voice.

"Uhhh. Fine, but you owe me. I'll send you a link." That "link" would probably cost me hundreds of dollars and be some kind of first-edition or special-edition tome for his library.

"My Amex is ready!" As if his own black Amex wasn't sitting in his wallet.

"Fine. I'll send you what I find." Click. Two minutes later, a link to a book that looked dusty and old appeared on my phone with a price tag of $483. I paid for the overnight shipping too. At this point, Jonah should probably name his library after me for all the favors I'd called in over the years and for my contributions to fill each of his shelves.



Four hours later, I got a phone call back that Jonah had printed off some stuff for me and I needed to swing by his house for it. My truck rumbled to a stop as I parked. Jonah was already outside, sitting on the steps with a manila envelope at his side, sipping on a glass of iced tea. He nodded for me to take a seat.

“What’d you find?” I asked. Jonah looked out over the rolling hills of his property.

“Lane, I think you should talk to Cali. I’m not sure how I feel about handing this over.” Jonah turned to me, and the raw honesty in his dark eyes stopped me.

“What is it?” I asked, because I’d never seen Jonah like this.

“Sometimes there’s more to the story than what’s on paper. All I’m asking is that if you choose to open that envelope, you take everything with a grain of salt and trust the Cali that you used to know.”

The jokester part of me disappeared. Jonah didn’t speak like that unless something mattered. In my head, this was simple. A bill she’d missed while juggling motherhood and taking care of her grandpa. Something my bank account wouldn’t even notice. But one look at Jonah’s face told me there was more. Told me that if I opened that envelope, there was no going back, and for the first time, the intrusiveness of the information gnawed at me. Jonah was right. I just needed to talk to Cali, and back then I would have, but there was no way Cali would tell me what was going on in her private life. How could I help if I didn’t even know what the problem was?

“Okay. I’ll think about it,” I promised. We talked for another twenty minutes before I drove away. The manila envelope sat beside me, untouched.

OceanofPDF.com

Thirty-Four



Cali

"Where's Jimmy?" I asked as I closed the front door. Today had been slower than normal, which made it seem ten times longer. I dropped my purse and water bottle on the table by the door.

"He's asleep in the chair," Jace whispered. He was buried under a stack of school books while making notecards for his upcoming history test. I rounded the entryway to see Grandpa with his head leaned back in the recliner, mouth slightly agape.

"He's been really grumpy. So I'm kinda glad he's out," Jace remarked.

That was unusual. Grandpa had his moments, but for Jace to say that, it had to be beyond the typical. I glanced at my phone. 6:12. If I didn't wake him up soon, he wouldn't sleep tonight. I tucked my phone back in my scrubs and laid my hand on his shoulder.

"Hey, Jimmy." I gently patted his shoulder. "It's time to wake up." His eyes flashed open for just a second before the back of his hand connected with my face.

"What the hell!" he bellowed, moving to stand as I instinctively raised my palm to my face. It throbbed from the unexpected impact, and a trickle of blood ran down it. I couldn't tell if the blood was coming from my forehead, brow, or cheek. It was impossible to tell because everything hurt.

Jace sprang from the couch. "No!"

"I'm okay. I'm okay." I reached for him because I knew he'd panic. Grandpa staggered to his feet, huffing the whole time.

"Can't a man get a decent nap in this place?!" His eyes were livid, and I knew instantly something was wrong. He reached the remote and heaved it in our direction. I grabbed Jace and shoved him into the hallway.

"Call 911 and tell them that someone is having a medical emergency and they are combative and we need some help getting them to the hospital. I'll watch him." I spit out the directions as I peeked back at Grandpa to see what he was grabbing next. Jace immediately began calling as his eyes filled with worry.

"Be careful, Cal," he said before they answered.

"Always," I answered as I shoved him farther away and turned to watch Grandpa. He had a rolled-up newspaper as he staggered my way. At least I had the benefit of being able to move faster.

"I'll tan your hide." He came toward me, and I dodged toward the kitchen, one hand swiping a paper towel to stop the blood from dripping down my chin. If my head hadn't been throbbing, it would have almost been comical because my grandpa had never once tanned my hide, though he had threatened many a time to hang me by my toes as a kid.

"The ambulance is on the way," Jace called as he peeked around the doorway.

Grandpa lumbered toward me, and I opened the back door, leaving it open for him to follow.

"Get back here!" he called. I darted around the side of the house, and he followed with his rolled-up newspaper until we got to his toys. I was hoping

they’d be a distraction until we could figure out what was happening, although I already had my suspicions.

“Don’t mess with my tractors!” he called before dropping to the ground to move the one I’d nudged with my foot. Jace rounded the side of the house from the front as emergency lights lit up the sky. It took three officers and a crew of paramedics to get him strapped into the gurney, but within thirty minutes we were headed to the hospital. Jace and I followed the ambulance in my car.

“What’s going on?” Jace asked as we turned out of the driveway.

“I’m not one hundred percent sure, but the best thing to do right now is to run some tests to better understand,” I said as I drove with one hand and pulled the paper towel away from my face. The blood had stopped.

“You’re probably gonna have a shiner,” Jace said as he looked at my face, and I had no doubt. I was lucky that my eye socket didn’t feel fractured.

“We’ll get Grandpa settled, then I’ll get it looked at,” I said, because of the worry in his eyes. Then, by way of explanation, “Head wounds always bleed dramatically.” Jace saw the downplay for what it was and didn’t respond.

OceanofPDF.com

Thirty-Five



Cali

Two days later, it was my first day volunteering at The Hope Center. Grandpa was finally coming home tomorrow. Helen insisted she'd handle getting everything ready for him, which left me with no excuses to skip my volunteer shift. Helen had spent the morning transforming Grandpa's house into a recovery ward, stocking the refrigerator, organizing his medications, and repeating—more than once—that he was not allowed to "test his limits" just because he felt better.

By the time I finished my first volunteer shift at The Hope Center that evening, my coffee had gone cold twice, and I'd forgotten where I'd set my keys at least three times. Apparently, adding one more responsibility to my already overflowing plate was easier than admitting I was running on fumes. Between Grandpa's hospital stay, work, and making sure everyone else was okay, I'd convinced myself I was the one person who didn't need checking on.

Sawyer waited until the side conversations tapered off before clapping her hands once to get everyone's attention. She thanked us for volunteering and reminded us that The Hope Center only worked because people were willing to give their time. She went over a few reminders for next week's first aid lesson, encouraged us to think of real-life scenarios we'd like to practice, answered a handful of questions, then smiled and waved us toward the door.

"Thank you all so much," she said. "Drive safe, and I'll see you next Thursday."

The scrape of folding chairs echoed across the room as everyone gathered purses, jackets, and half-finished cups of coffee. Conversations drifted toward the parking lot, the late-evening sun spilling through the front windows in long ribbons of gold. I lingered long enough to thank Sawyer before slipping outside, grateful for the cool breeze after a day spent inside.

"Cali."

I froze.

Apparently the universe had decided I hadn't dealt with enough this week. I turned to find Lane making his way across the parking lot, keys swinging lazily from one finger. A backward baseball cap bearing Kennedy High School's mustang logo couldn't quite tame the sandy-blond waves peeking out beneath it, while the setting sun caught the stubble along his jaw.

"I thought volunteers were supposed to stay longer than an hour," he teased.

"I've been here for two."

"Mm-hmm."

"What?"

"I was making sure you weren't slacking."

I gave an exaggerated eye roll.

His grin lingered as he drew closer, but the second he stepped into the beam from the security lights, something changed. His eyes moved over my face slowly. They paused at the discoloration on my cheek, flicked back to my eyes like he was replaying the last few seconds and trying to figure out how he'd missed it. My stomach dropped. I fished through my purse for my keys, suddenly fascinated by the zipper. Anything to avoid looking up and seeing that familiar look in his eyes—the one that always made me feel like I could finally put something down.

The playful expression disappeared. "What happened?"

I stood frozen in place.

He closed the distance between us, his gaze fixed on my face. "Your face. You covered most of it." His voice had gone strangely quiet.

Instinctively, my hand flew to my cheek. His fingers curled so firmly around his keys the metal bit into his palm. He didn't seem to notice. A muscle feathered along his jaw. Every trace of humor vanished. His chest rose once before he spoke.

"Who did this to you?"

My heart slammed against my ribs. There it was. The question I knew was coming the second his eyes fixed on me. I could already hear the edge in his voice—the one that appeared whenever someone he loved was hurting. The one that made him step between me and the world before I could decide if I wanted him there.

I knew exactly what came next—the need to fix everything, the need to protect, the part of Lane I had spent years convincing myself I didn't miss.

It was that protective instinct that made my first reaction to reach for him and my second reaction to remind me why I shouldn't.

He lifted the other hand, hesitated—as if asking permission without saying the words—then brushed his thumb, featherlight, beneath my eye. His hand dropped as if in slow motion.

"It looks worse than it is. It was an accident."

His stare didn't waver. "Who?"

"Lane . . ."

His hands flexed at his sides before he forced them to be still. His voice dropped lower. "Who?"

"It's not what you're thinking."

"Then tell me what I'm supposed to be thinking."

The words cracked between us. I looked toward The Hope Center instead of at him. Sawyer was still inside stacking chairs. A volunteer loaded boxes into her SUV.

Anywhere but him. Because looking at Lane when he was angry was easy; looking at him when he was hurting was something I didn't know how to survive.

"It was Grandpa."

For a second, the anger on his face had nowhere to go. He closed his eyes for one long second.

"He had a UTI." I rushed on before he could say anything. "He got confused and was combative, but that was caused by the infection. He's coming home tomorrow from the hospital."

The tension in his shoulders shifted, but it didn't disappear. Like he understood the reason, but his instincts hadn't caught up yet.

"And you stayed there with him?"

I frowned. "Of course I did."

A muscle jumped along his jaw. "Cali—"

"He's my grandfather."

"I know that." His voice softened, but his expression didn't. "I know you'd never walk away from him."

A beat passed.

"I just hate that you think being strong means you have to carry everything alone." The words echoed somewhere deeper than I wanted them to.

"He thought I was someone else."

His jaw clenched again; his gaze never left the evidence of what happened.

"He didn't mean to," I repeated.

"I know. But it doesn't change the fact that somebody hurt you."

Neither of us spoke. The wind stirred the oak trees lining the edge of the parking lot, scattering a handful of brittle leaves across the asphalt between us.

Lane rubbed the back of his neck. "Does it still hurt?"

My fingers brushed the fading bruise. "Only if I forget it's there."

I'd spent the last two days avoiding mirrors because every time I caught my reflection, I recalled that moment all over again. Grandpa's confusion. The flash of fear in his eyes. The split second when I realized he wasn't

seeing me—he was seeing someone else. Makeup had been my attempt to make everything feel normal. A little concealer. A little denial. A way to convince everyone else that I was fine, even if I wasn't quite there yet.

The parking lot was almost empty now. The voices from inside The Hope Center faded as the last volunteers left. For a second, it felt like we were the only two people left in the world.

"I don't think I'll be able to forget seeing you hurt and knowing I wasn't there." My pulse quickened.

Because anger I could handle. Anger was easy. Anger gave me something to fight against. It reminded me why I had kept my distance, why I had built walls high enough that even I sometimes forgot what was on the other side. But this? This quiet regret in his eyes was harder. Lane wasn't trying to make me feel guilty for not calling him. He wasn't demanding to know why I hadn't leaned on him. He wasn't trying to rewrite what happened or pretend he could have prevented it.

He was just standing there, wishing he could have been there.

And somehow that hurt more. I looked away, focusing on the empty parking spaces around us, the cracked pavement beneath my shoes, anything that wasn't him. Because the most dangerous thing about Lane had never been the way he made me feel safe. It was the way, standing there in the middle of an empty parking lot, I caught myself wondering if maybe I'd been wrong to believe I could never trust him again.

OceanofPDF.com

Thirty-Six



Lane

By the time my truck turned into Cali's driveway the following evening, I had spent the better part of twenty-four hours convincing myself that showing up at her house with a duffel bag was a perfectly reasonable thing to do.

It was not.

Common sense should've sent me back to the truck.

The porch light cast a warm glow across the front steps, and through the living room window I could see shadows of movement inside. I grabbed my

duffel bag as I climbed out of my truck.

The bruise beneath her eye had followed me into every hour of the night. Every time sleep finally threatened to come, her face flashed behind my eyelids. She'd stood in that parking lot insisting she was fine while looking like she hadn't had anyone take care of her in years. She wasn't doing this by herself anymore.

Halfway up the steps, I nearly turned around because what I was planning to do bordered on insane. Too late now. My knuckles rapped against the door before common sense caught up.

A few seconds later, the door opened, and Cali stood frozen. She wore an oversized sweatshirt and leggings, her hair pulled into a loose ponytail. She looked like she'd spent the day taking care of everyone but herself, completely unaware that, to me, she was still the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

"Oh no."

A grin tugged at my mouth because even after all this time, she still knew me.

"Oh yes."

"Lane."

I stepped inside before she could gather enough momentum to shut the door in my face.

The house smelled faintly of coffee and lemons. A television played softly in the family room.

"How's Jimmy?" I asked. She closed the door with exaggerated care that somehow felt more threatening than slamming it.

"He fell asleep twenty minutes ago after watching *Wheel of Fortune*."

I nodded as my eyes skated over the house. The stack of unopened mail was gone. Jimmy's reading glasses rested beside the recliner. A vase of fresh daisies sat beside the television. The same wild daisies I'd once left for her dozens of times, wrapped in twine, at the end of the pier.

"Good."

"What are you doing here?"

The bruising had changed overnight, spreading across her cheekbone in shades of purple and green. My stomach turned. I wasn't angry at her grandfather but at the situation. At the impossible weight she'd decided was hers to carry. At the stubborn certainty that she had to carry it alone. I dropped the duffel bag on the floor.

“I’m staying.”

Her mouth fell open. She blinked once.

“Not a chance.”

“Yes.”

“You can’t just move into my house.”

“I’m not moving in.” I pointed toward the worn couch that I was already slightly dreading sleeping on. “I’m temporarily occupying a small section of your living room.”

Her hands planted on her hips. She looked one glare away from grabbing a frying pan. I wanted to kiss the stubbornness right out of her.

“Lane, leave.”

I shook my head slowly, like it couldn’t be helped.

“No.”

“You do not live here.”

“Nope.”

“You were not invited.”

“Also true.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You are impossible.”

“I’ve been called worse.”

“I am serious.”

“So am I. Buckle up, buttercup. I’m here to stay.”

The humor faded from her expression.

“Lane.”

I forced myself to stay focused because the exhaustion in her eyes was exactly why I couldn’t back down.

“You take care of everyone but yourself. He put both of you in the emergency room. Today he came home from the hospital, and I am staying for a few days just to make sure things are better.”

Her features set. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“I agree.”

“Then leave.”

“Not happening.”

She stared at me. I held my ground. Finally, she threw her hands into the air. “What is wrong with you?”

“Currently? Nothing.”

Her eyes flashed and I bit back a laugh. Her hand found her hip again. The warning in her voice deepened. She took two steps toward me and

pointed toward the front door.

“You are leaving.”

She moved to block me, but I stepped around her and picked up my duffel bag. For one brief moment, triumph lit her face. I stepped deeper into the living room and dropped the bag beside the couch. The sound that came out of her was somewhere between a groan and a growl. I bit back a smirk.

“I hate you.”

The lie lay between us. Her fingers twisted together before disappearing beneath crossed arms. Her gaze snagged on the bruise reflected in the hallway mirror. She looked ready to collapse in exhaustion.

“You don’t.”

Something vulnerable flickered across her face before she immediately buried it, and the room suddenly felt smaller and quieter. I took a slow step closer.

“I am sleeping on the couch,” I said. “You are going to bed. If your grandfather needs help during the night, I’ll handle it.”

Her throat moved as she swallowed. The stubborn refusal was still there in her eyes, but it was beginning to lose ground to fatigue.

“I can take care of him,” she protested.

“I know you can.”

Somewhere down the hall, the refrigerator hummed. She held my gaze, waiting.

“Then why are you here?” The question came out softer than everything else.

Because I love— The words slammed into the back of my teeth. Not yet.

A strand of hair had escaped her ponytail. My fingers moved before my brain approved the decision. The silk of it slid across my knuckles. She went perfectly still as I brushed the loose strand of hair behind her ear. Her breath caught. Mine nearly did too. My thumb lingered against her temple for half a heartbeat.

“Because somebody should be taking care of you for a change.”

She just looked at me. Those blue eyes that I saw in my dreams held mine for one long second before she stepped back and shook her head. Her shoulders sagged first. She scrubbed both hands over her face.

“Fine. You’re sleeping on the couch.”

The knot between my shoulder blades loosened for the first time since pulling into the driveway.

“I know.”

“And if you snore, I'm throwing you out.”

A laugh escaped me. “There she is.”

The corner of her mouth twitched before she caught it. She pointed toward the hallway.

“Bathroom is the second door on the left.”

“Thanks, California.”

“Push your luck, and you’ll be sleeping on the porch.”

She disappeared down the hallway, and despite the threat, I found myself grinning like a fool. The duffel still sat beside the couch where I’d dropped it. She could’ve dragged it back to the porch. Instead, she’d shown me where the bathroom was. Tonight, that was enough.

OceanofPDF.com

Thirty-Seven



Lane

The next morning, I was halfway up a ladder replacing a worn section of siding near the corner of the house when the screen door creaked open behind me. Every repaired board made the place look a little more like someone believed it was worth fixing.

I did not need to look down to know it was Cali. I had become embarrassingly good at recognizing the sound of her footsteps in the short time I'd been here.

"Lane."

The warning in her voice pulled a grin from me. After securing the piece of siding, I glanced down. She stood at the base of the ladder with a mug of coffee cradled between both palms. The morning sun caught loose strands of her hair and made them look ablaze, and the fading bruise beneath her eye was losing a little of its color.

“What’s up?”

Her gaze climbed the ladder until it found me. I recognized that look. It was the same one she’d been giving me since we were teenagers and I’d offered to help with something.

“You know,” she said, “if you fall off that thing, I can’t afford to replace you.”

A laugh escaped. “Replace me?”

She nodded seriously. I groaned. Here we go.

“Your shoulder is probably worth more than my car.”

Almost anything was worth more than that clunker, but I kept that to myself.

“My shoulder isn’t worth anything.”

“That seems unlikely, and it doesn’t change the fact that you’re expensive.” She took a sip of coffee as she worried the rim of her mug with her thumb. Warmth spread through me.

“Cali baby, it’s almost like you’re worried about me,” I said, giving her a wink.

She harrumphed. I’d bet money she was rolling her eyes. She tipped her mug toward the ladder.

“One slip and suddenly I have a six-foot-three former professional athlete folded into the back of an ambulance.”

“Maybe I’ll be lucky and need mouth-to-mouth.” I smirked as pink spread beneath her freckles.

“I think you’re forgetting that your body is a valuable community asset.”

I nearly missed the nail I was driving.

“My what?”

“The town would be devastated.”

“Because I’m such a beloved citizen?” I asked.

“Nope.” The smile she was fighting finally broke free. “Because every woman over forty would need grief counseling.”

I barked out a laugh.

“You’re enjoying this way too much.”

“A little.”

That answer stole my next comeback. For a second, I just looked at her. The teasing remained, softened by something that hadn’t been there a few days ago.

“You’re staring,” she said.

I braced a hand against the side of the house.

“So are you.”

Her cheeks flushed even darker as she rolled her eyes. “I was making sure you didn’t fall.”

“Sure you were.”

“I was,” she protested.

“You sound concerned.”

“I am concerned.”

The words came out before she could stop them. For a moment neither of us spoke. The breeze swept through the trees scattering autumn leaves on the wind. Somewhere inside, the television murmured while Jace worked through an English assignment beside his grandpa. Then she seemed to realize what she’d admitted and immediately crossed her arms.

“Strictly for financial liability reasons.”

A smile tugged at my mouth. “ Naturally.”

She narrowed her eyes, and my smile only widened. The look she gave me should have been intimidating. Instead, it made me want to climb down the ladder and pull her into my arms, which was exactly why I stayed where I was.

“You are impossible,” she muttered.

“So I’ve heard. Several times. Usually from you.”

The hammer found its rhythm again as I finished securing the siding, acutely aware of her lingering in the yard below. Neither of us seemed particularly eager to end the conversation. The fact that she didn’t find a reason to disappear inside made my heart race. She remained where she was, sipping her coffee and watching me work, like she hadn’t quite decided whether she should leave or stay. The fact that she stayed mattered more than anything she’d said all morning.

“There,” I said some ten minutes later after I drove the final nail into place and inspected my work.

“Good.”

The ladder creaked beneath my weight as I climbed down. She watched me all the way down. The closer I got, the harder it became for her to hide the worry. By the time my boots touched the grass, her shoulders visibly relaxed. I stepped away from the ladder.

“You were worried.”

“I was calculating depreciation.”

I laughed, and despite herself, her smile slipped free.

Hell, I liked that smile. Far too much. I’d spent years convinced that smile belonged to someone else now. Seeing it aimed at me only made me ache for more. I took a few steps toward her before stopping. I was close enough now to see the tiny freckles scattered across her nose. Close enough to catch the floral scent of her shampoo. Close enough to forget why stopping had seemed like a good idea.

“You know,” I said quietly, “for somebody who keeps telling me to leave, you spend an awful lot of time worrying about me.”

Her breath caught. For one long second, neither of us moved. She lifted her chin.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Lane.”

I smiled. The blush creeping into her cheeks suggested otherwise. And for once, she chose not to argue when she knew she was losing.

OceanofPDF.com

Thirty-Eight



Cali

I knew exactly two things. The first was that the electric bill had been due today. The second was that there was absolutely no way it should have shown a zero balance. I refreshed the page twice. Then a third time. The amount stubbornly remained the same.

Paid in Full.

My pulse kicked up. I knew precisely what had happened—or rather, who.

“Oh no.”

Grandpa looked up from his crossword puzzle. “What?”

I was already marching toward the front door. “I’ve gotta go commit a felony.”

The screen door slapped shut behind me. I crossed the yard with considerably less grace than dignity probably required. The rhythmic sound of power tools guided me around the wraparound porch. Of course he was fixing something else. Lane was crouched beside the porch railing, sleeves pushed up his forearms, a cordless drill resting beside him. Sawdust clung to his jeans.

His head lifted when he heard me coming. One glance at my face and his mouth twitched. That alone was enough to confirm my suspicions.

“You.”

He smiled like he’d been caught. “Cali.”

I jabbed a finger directly into the center of his muscular chest. “Did you pay my electric bill?”

His gaze dropped to my finger before lazily trailing back to my face.

“No hello before you start putting your hands on my body?”

Heat warmed my cheeks because he loved throwing me off-kilter. I snatched back my hand. “Lane.”

The smile never left. It was infuriating.

“I take it you’ve been checking your accounts.”

A groan escaped. “Apparently you did.”

Nosy. As. Hell.

“It was getting shut off.”

“Not if I paid it today, and that is not the point.”

“It kind of is.”

My finger found him again. The muscle beneath it was entirely too solid.

“Lane.”

“California.”

“Stop doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“Saying my name like you’re innocent.”

The laugh that escaped him did absolutely terrible things to my nervous system.

“You look cute when you’re mad.”

My mouth fell open. I jabbed his chest harder. His warm hand wrapped around my wrist before I could do it again, and the contact sent a spark all

the way to my shoulders.

My breath caught. His smile faded slightly, and the air shifted. Neither of us moved. The drill sat forgotten on the porch. The afternoon breeze stirred the leaves overhead.

Suddenly I was aware of everything—his fingers around my wrist, the space between us, the way his gaze dipped briefly to my mouth. Heat bloomed beneath my skin.

“Lane.” My voice came out softer than I intended.

His jaw flexed. “You needed help,” he said simply.

“I didn’t ask for help.”

“I know.”

It shouldn't have sounded that gentle. I tugged against his grip to remind myself I was still annoyed.

Supposedly.

“You can’t just pay my bills.”

“Seems like I already did.” The corner of his mouth lifted.

I made a frustrated sound, and his eyes gleamed with amusement—which only made everything worse. “You’re unbelievable.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

I stepped closer without meaning to, and he noticed. Of course he noticed. Lane always noticed everything about me. The realization registered at exactly the same moment his gaze dropped to my lips again.

The world narrowed, just a little, as his thumb grazed the inside of my wrist. Every sensible thought disappeared. Neither of us spoke. For one heart-stopping second, it seemed as though he were going to kiss me. Part of me wanted him to. That thought alone sent me shoving at his chest, not hard, just enough to shatter the fragile moment between us.

“You had no right.”

Frustration flashed across his face, his other hand found my waist and turned us both before I could retreat.

My back met the side of the house with a soft thud, knocking the breath from my lungs. Lane planted one hand beside my shoulder, close enough to make my pulse jump. Not trapping me. Not touching me.

Just a breath away.

Close enough that I could smell soap and sawdust and whatever impossible thing made him smell like home. Every nerve in my body lit up.

“You want to know why I paid it?”

“Because you’re a menace.”

A laugh rumbled in his chest.

“Because I can.”

He said it like the answer was obvious.

I opened my mouth.

His voice softened. “Cali, I made more money before I was thirty than either of us could spend in three lifetimes.”

I glared harder. “That doesn’t make it okay.”

“It makes the electric bill insignificant.” He shrugged.

“It matters to me.”

His expression softened, which somehow felt far more dangerous than the teasing. “I know it does.”

The words sank in quietly, which made me irrationally emotional. I hated that.

“I don’t need you rescuing me.”

His eyes searched mine, and for a moment, neither of us spoke. The air shifted between us, and his eyes made me forget how to fight. Slowly, he leaned closer, not enough to kiss me, but close enough that I forgot how to breathe. My pulse thundered in my ears.

“You’re going to drive me crazy.”

His gravelly whisper sank deep into my stomach as his warm breath skimmed my neck. He drew back slightly to study my reaction.

I stared at him.

His eyes lingered on my mouth before drifting lower. The brush of his lips against the side of my neck was featherlight. Barely there. Gone almost before it happened. Whatever I’d been about to say vanished. Completely. His lips hovered near my ear again.

“You’ll just have to get over it, baby."

Good thing the house was already holding me up. Lane stepped back as if he hadn’t just completely short-circuited my brain and sent my heart pounding against my ribs. The smugness threatening his expression made me want to strangle him.

Or kiss him. Neither option seemed particularly safe.

“You—”

I couldn’t even form a sentence.

His grin widened. The jerk. Heat flooded my face. I turned so fast I tripped over my own feet. Behind me, his laughter followed me across the

yard. Grandpa looked up from the living room window with entirely too much interest as I rushed past. I made it through the front door and shut it firmly behind me. I leaned against it and pressed both palms to my burning cheeks. My fingers found the spot he'd kissed before I could stop them. It still tingled. And somewhere outside, Lane continued working on the porch railing as though he hadn't just completely ruined my ability to think.

OceanofPDF.com

Thirty-Nine



Lane

The first thing that struck me when I stepped through the back door was the exhaustion she was trying to hide. Not the kind of tired that came from a long day of physical labor, the kind that settled into someone's shoulders after hours of carrying other people's emergencies.

Her hair was pulled back messily in a bun, a few auburn strands escaping around her face. She had changed out of her scrubs, but the faint scent of antiseptic still clung to her. The bruise beneath her eye had faded, but the strain she carried hadn't. She stood at the kitchen counter assembling tacos

like feeding everyone after a twelve-hour ER shift was just another item on her to-do list.

“You know,” I said, setting the work gloves I’d carried in onto the counter, “most people would consider sitting down after working all day.”

She glanced over her shoulder at me. “Most people don’t have a teenage son who eats like he’s preparing for hibernation.”

From the table, Jace looked up. “Hey, I heard that!”

“You were supposed to.” She winked.

He grinned and reached for another taco shell. I shook my head and helped carry the makings for tacos to the table after washing my hands. Each day since I’d begun sleeping on Cali’s couch, I’d found another excuse to pick up a tool. A loose board that let rain sneak into the barn. A broken hinge that squeaked every time the door opened. A porch step that had softened with age just enough that I couldn’t leave it alone.

The truth was simpler. Fixing things gave me something to do besides admit I looked forward to waking up on a lumpy couch I’d only meant to sleep on temporarily. The thought should have scared me more than it did.

Cali set a bowl of cheese on the table as she sat and caught me looking.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I said.

Her eyes narrowed. “That’s usually when you’re about to say something irritating.”

“I was thinking you should let someone else cook after working all day.”

She crossed her arms. “Are you volunteering?”

“Sure.”

“That confident, huh?” She tipped her head to the side, assessing.

“I make a mean omelet.”

A laugh slipped out before she could stop it. That sound still caught me off guard. I’d spent years wondering if I’d ever hear it again. Now I found myself saying whatever stupid thing came to mind just to hear it again.

Grandpa Jimmy looked up from his crossword puzzle. “Lane fixed the fence today.”

Cali looked at me. “You fixed the fence?”

“And the gate,” I said.

“And?” Jace nudged.

I shrugged. “The chicken coop.”

Her eyebrows lifted.

Jace shook his head. “Doc, I think Coach is allergic to relaxing.”

“I am not.”

“You fixed the fence because it annoyed you.”

“It was leaning.”

“Exactly. Normal people ignore leaning fences.”

I pointed my taco at him. “You’re lucky you’re good at football.”

Cali smiled and shook her head. Jimmy reached for a taco shell, paused halfway there, and stared at his hand like it had betrayed him. Cali quietly slid the plate closer. She didn’t sigh. Didn’t correct him. Didn’t make him feel like he was something she had to manage. She just helped.

“There you go, Jimmy,” she said as she placed another taco on his plate.

“Thank you, sweetheart.”

The ease between them stirred something deep inside me. The way Cali cared for people without making a show of it. The way Jace teased her because he knew she’d always answer. The way Jimmy forgot things but never forgot kindness.

I’d spent most of my adult life surrounded by people. Teammates. Coaches. Strangers who knew my name.

But this was different. It wasn’t loud or showy. This was the thing I’d spent years looking for without knowing how to name it or even really realizing that I was searching for something.

“You’re staring again,” Cali murmured, low enough that Jace wouldn’t hear.

I leaned back in my chair and let myself look. I didn’t stop until a blush crept across her cheeks.

“So, my English assignment,” Jace started.

Cali turned toward him. “You are doing it tonight.”

“I know.”

“Actually completing it?”

“Yes.”

“No waiting until midnight.”

“That happened once.”

“Three times.”

“Okay, maybe three. You’re welcome, by the way,” Jace said with a grin. “I know you’d miss my personality if I went to bed earlier.”

“That’s one word for it,” she laughed.

The conversation moved on. I'd spent years surrounded by noise, success and fame. I never realized the thing I wanted would sound like a kid complaining about homework and an old man repeating a fishing story and nobody caring that they'd heard it before.

And me sitting here like I belonged.

When dinner ended, Jace pushed away from the table. "I'm going to work on my English assignment."

Cali raised a fist in triumph. "That's what I like to hear."

Jace rolled his eyes before grabbing his plate and placing it in the sink. A few seconds later, he disappeared.

Jimmy pushed his chair back. "My shows are on."

"Which ones?" she asked.

He nodded toward the living room. "I'll know 'em when I see 'em." He shuffled away.

Cali began gathering the dishes, and I reached for the cup she was carrying.

"I'll help. You worked all day."

"So did you."

I looked down at my denim, covered in dirt and sawdust. "Not the same."

"No, yours probably involved less screaming."

"Maybe."

That earned another small smile.

I picked up the utensils. "You should go get a shower or, better yet, a bath."

She glanced over. "Are you telling me I smell?"

"No."

"You hesitated."

"I was choosing my words."

"Smart."

"I was going to say you look exhausted."

Her expression softened. For a second, neither of us moved. Then she busied herself with another dish.

"You should shower too."

I looked down. "Because I smell?"

"Because you look like you've wrestled in the dirt."

"I'll shower after you stop pretending you aren't exhausted," I said as I took the plates from her hands.

Her mouth fell open as I strode away toward the kitchen. Jace upstairs. Jimmy in the living room. Cali right there. And me, standing right in the middle of it. Like this was somewhere I was supposed to be. Like someone would actually notice if I wasn't there. Like somehow, without realizing it, I'd stopped thinking of this place as somewhere I was just staying. And the scariest part was that I didn't want to leave.

OceanofPDF.com

Forty



Cali

The sound of the shower sent my thoughts somewhere they had absolutely no business going. The pipes rattled softly inside the walls. And despite being a grown woman with an aging grandfather, a teenage son, a mountain of bills, and roughly a thousand real problems, all I could think about was the fact that Lane was currently shirtless down the hall.

Annoying. Entirely annoying. Him and his stupid muscles.

A sip of tea did nothing to settle my thoughts. The bath had been heavenly, and I sank further into the couch as Grandpa finished up the TV

shows he liked to watch each evening. The living room glowed with the soft blue light of the television where Grandpa sat in his recliner yelling answers at *Jeopardy!* before the contestants.

“I knew that one,” he announced.

“You always know them.”

“Darn right.”

The familiar exchange chased away some of the restlessness under my skin. The crisis had passed, and everything should have felt normal again. Instead, there was a handsome complication sleeping on my couch. A thump interrupted my thoughts.

Grandpa’s foot had caught the edge of Lane’s duffel bag, and it tipped sideways beside the couch. Something rolled across the hardwood floor. My stomach lurched.

A single orange prescription bottle rested beneath the coffee table.

My mind flashed to the first time I discovered Brett’s pills. For a moment I was frozen as I simply stared at it. I set down my mug with trembling hands and reached for it before Grandpa noticed. The label faced upward, and my chest contracted. I recognized the prescription immediately. Anxiety medication. The prescription had been filled recently.

He wouldn’t want me to see it. He moved through the world with broad shoulders and easy confidence. He stepped into every room looking like he was the life of the party. Like nothing could touch him. Emotion scorched my throat. Maybe because I knew better than most how convincing appearances could be.

I was reaching to slide the bottle back into the side pocket of his duffel when a shadow fell across the floor. Lane stood at the end of the hallway. His hair was damp from the shower. A gray T-shirt stretched across his chest.

For a second, neither of us moved. His gaze dropped immediately to the prescription bottle in my hand. Something unknown shuttered behind his eyes. I stood slowly.

“I wasn’t snooping.”

“I know.” His voice came out quieter than usual.

I held out the bottle.

“Grandpa accidentally knocked your bag over.” He took it from me. For a moment he just looked at the label. His thumb traced the edge of the bottle.

Grandpa shouted another answer at the television, oblivious to both of us as long as one of his TV shows was on. Neither of us looked away.

Finally, Lane exhaled. “I figured you’d find out eventually.”

Something about the resignation in his voice hurt. I sat back down and folded my arms around myself at the chill in the air. He followed my lead and sat.

“When?”

His eyes lifted. A muscle flexed in his jaw. He knew exactly what I was asking.

“About six months after you left.”

The room tilted.

I swallowed. “Lane . . .”

His gaze dropped to the bottle again. “I drove around until sunrise because I couldn’t make myself go home. I wasn’t sleeping. I couldn’t focus on sports. I couldn’t focus on anything. That was the first time I finally admitted to myself that something was wrong—that I’d needed help for years. That was when I finally reached out and started getting the help I needed.”

My chest ached like it was cracking in half. The television continued playing in the background. The audience laughed at something. The sound felt impossibly far away. Lane gave a small shrug.

“I thought it’d get better.” His eyes found mine. “It didn’t.”

Fifteen years I had spent convincing myself that what happened only mattered to me. That I was the one who carried it. The one who broke. The one who never fully recovered. The pain in his eyes dismantled that lie.

“You should hate me,” I whispered.

A faint smile touched his mouth.

“I tried, but there’s nothing about you I could hate.”

The tears burned unexpectedly. I blinked them back. He looked away first. Toward the television. Toward Grandpa. Anywhere but me. And that hurt too.

“I still take it,” he said.

“I see that.”

He nodded. “No point pretending otherwise.”

I looked down at the bottle still in his hand, then back at him.

“No matter what has happened between us, I’m so proud of you for acknowledging that you needed help and taking the steps to get it.” He

deserved to know someone saw him.

His throat worked. “Nobody’s ever said that to me.”

The prescription bottle blurred. Because he’d been carrying this alone while I’d never known, and somehow, even after all the years, the damage between us was still unfolding. My eyes stung. My fingers twisted together until the knuckles hurt.

“I can’t do this.”

His expression grew guarded. I hated that he immediately understood what I meant.

“Cali.”

“You should go home.”

The words scraped their way out. His shoulders dropped slightly.

“We weren’t talking about that.”

“Weren’t we?”

The question hung between us. His silence answered it. I looked away, anywhere except the man beside me.

“My mom spent her whole life chasing love.” The words came quietly. “Every few months there was somebody new. Somebody she swore was different, special, ‘the one.’”

A bitter smile tugged at my mouth. “Somebody she couldn’t live without.”

Lane stayed silent.

“I watched her build her life, her personality, her hobbies around men who were only after one thing.” My throat constricted. “I watched what happened when they split.” The memories rose uninvited. Promises. Fights. Packed suitcases. Moving. Tears. Starting over. Again and again and again.

“I’ve spent most of my life trying not to become her.” The confession hung in the air—raw and ugly. “I think somewhere along the way I stopped believing any of it was supposed to work.”

“Cali.” His gaze never left my face.

I shook my head. “No.” The single word came out stronger. Safer.

“I don’t think I’m good at love. You’re wasting your time with whatever it is you’re doing here.”

His eyes softened. I looked down.

“You love your son.”

My heart missed a beat because Jace meant the world to me.

“You loved your grandma, and now your grandpa.” Each word was carefully spoken, like he was building something fragile between us.

“You love people better than anyone I’ve ever known.”

The tears I’d been fighting finally gathered. I pressed my lips together because he was wrong. Or maybe because some awful part of me wanted him to be right.

“What if it isn’t enough?”

His face shuttered, but the hurt that flickered there undid me. Because we both knew I wasn’t talking about my family anymore. I was talking about us. For a long moment he simply sat there as I watched a myriad of emotions cross his features.

Slowly, he looked down at the prescription bottle in his hand. His shoulders folded inward. When he finally spoke, his voice was almost gentle.

“I know.”

The words stole the air from my lungs. No argument. No persuasion. No promises. Just quiet acknowledgment. And somehow that hurt more than if he’d fought me. Because for once since he’d shown up with that stupid duffel bag, Lane stopped trying to convince me.

He sat there, turning the prescription bottle over in his hands. Neither of us knew what to do with the vulnerability we’d shared. But he never picked up his duffel. Later, long after Grandpa had fallen asleep, the couch creaked beneath Lane’s weight as he made himself comfortable for the night anyway. He stayed. And for the first time, the certainty I’d clung to for fifteen years no longer felt quite so certain.

OceanofPDF.com

Forty-One



Cali

The next morning, a manila envelope sat on the kitchen counter beside the coffee pot. Plain, no return address, simply my name written across the front in Lane's careful block letters.

For a second, I didn't touch it. The house was quiet except for the low hum of the refrigerator and Grandpa shuffling around as he played with his toy tractors outside. Jace had already left for school, and I wasn't scheduled to work today. Lane had already been up for hours. I could tell from the faint

sounds of tools outside and the occasional creak of the porch boards beneath his weight.

My phone vibrated on the counter. I glanced at it automatically, expecting Jace or a reminder notification, but the preview on the screen made my stomach drop.

> **Unknown Number:** You think you can just ignore me? You still owe me.

Cold crawled through my fingers. Brett had found another way to reach me.

“Don’t open the envelope yet.” Lane’s voice came from behind me.

I turned. He stood in the doorway, coffee mug in hand, baseball cap flipped around backward. His eyes were already on my phone. Not my face. My phone.

“Tell me what’s wrong.”

I hesitated for half a second too long.

His gaze sharpened immediately. “Who is that?”

“It’s nothing.” I picked it up without thinking. The phone vibrated again in my hand like it had a pulse.

> **Unknown Number:** Answer me. We need to talk. Don’t make this harder than it has to be.

Lane saw the screen light up. His jaw flexed once.

“That’s not ‘nothing,’ Cali. Your face is pale.”

I set the mug down harder than I meant to.

“It’s handled.”

His eyes lifted to mine. “Is it?” He stepped forward, only inches away. His gaze dropped to the screen, and whatever softness had been there vanished.

“Why is someone threatening you?” His voice dropped lower.

I swallowed. The envelope might as well have vanished. My fingers tightened around my phone.

“He’s . . . someone I used to know.”

Lane’s expression didn’t change, but something behind his eyes did.

Recognition without answers. That was worse. The phone vibrated again. I turned it face down too fast. Too late. Lane had already seen enough. A beat passed. He exhaled slowly through his nose.

“Cali,” he said carefully, “why is someone you used to know texting you like that?”

There wasn’t a version of the truth that didn’t make this worse. Lane set his mug down on the counter. All humor and teasing gone. My thumb hovered over the screen, but I didn’t unlock it.

“Cali.”

I looked at him. He didn’t look away.

“Who is that?” he asked again.

The phone vibrated once more. I didn’t pick it up.

“I’ll handle it,” I said quietly.

Lane’s gaze dropped briefly to the counter, to the envelope, back to me.

“No.” The word knocked something loose. Then he added, softer but sharper in a different way, “You’re going to tell me what this is before it goes any further.”

The silence that followed suggested something was already breaking, and every reason to hide didn’t seem to matter anymore.

Finally, I whispered, “He wants money.” The phone stayed face down between us, silent for the first time since he walked in.

Lane didn’t move. “From you?”

A humorless laugh slipped out of me. “From whoever he can squeeze it out of.”

That earned me a flicker of understanding in his eyes. “I’m guessing it didn’t start that way.”

Every muscle in my body tensed because talking about Brett made me feel on edge. “No.” The word came out smaller than I meant it to.

Lane didn’t push, he simply waited, and somehow that patience made it worse. I let out a slow breath.

“He was a firefighter,” I said finally. “Said he’d hit a rough patch because he found out that he had to raise his brother.” I swallowed. “I believed him.”

Lane’s gaze never left my face. “And then?”

My hands moved without permission, fingers picking at nothing on the counter.

“The emergencies changed, but the pattern never did. A rent payment here. A medical bill there. Groceries. His brother needing something he couldn’t provide,” I said.

“His brother?” He asked.

I nodded once. “Jace was a kid. Almost ten. He didn’t have anyone stable. Brett said he didn’t have help to take care of him and that the system would split them up.” My voice strained.

“So I had him placed with me because Brett worked long shifts. Which is almost funny now, considering I was working more hours. The difference was, I made time.”

The kitchen went still. Even Grandpa’s distant noise was far away now. Lane’s jaw flexed once.

“You moved him in?” It wasn’t a question.

I nodded again. “Yes, they called it a kinship placement since we were casually dating, I guess.”

The words sat between us like something fragile and ugly at the same time.

“He made it sound temporary,” I rushed to explain, like that excused anything. “Just until he got stable. Just until he got things figured out. Just until—”

My voice broke slightly, and I stopped. Lane didn’t interrupt or move; he simply stayed there, letting me finish. I forced myself to continue.

“He started covering more things up,” I said. “Because there was always another reason. Always another emergency.”

A bitter laugh slipped out before I could stop it.

“And then I realized I was the emergency fund.” The words tasted like ash.

When Lane finally spoke, his voice was lower. “Is there a restraining order?”

My eyes flicked toward the phone before returning to him. I nodded.

“And he’s violating it?” he asked.

“Multiple times.”

“Have you reported it?”

“No.”

That earned me a sharper look.

“I know,” I said quickly. “I know I need to.”

My pulse jumped in my throat.

“But it’s just not that simple. Jace is his brother, Lane. Brett manipulated me into adopting him, but that’s where he screwed up because Jace is the best thing that has ever happened to me. I wouldn’t trade being his mom for anything. I’m scared that somehow he’ll take Jace away from me even though I know he couldn’t. But that doesn’t make the fear just disappear.”

Lane’s expression didn’t change, but something in his eyes softened. Then it hardened again—not at me, but at what I’d been carrying.

“Baby, can I hold you?” His calloused hands opened, but he didn’t move until I stepped forward. For once, I didn’t have to be the strongest person in the room. His arms closed around me, and every muscle I’d been holding

tight finally gave a little. I breathed in cedar and fresh air, something steady and familiar in a moment that was anything but. I rested my cheek against the solid warmth of his chest.

"We'll figure this out."

I pulled in a trembling breath. He held me until I wondered how long we'd stood there. A shaky breath left me as I pulled away and wiped at the moisture in my eyes.

He reached for the envelope and held it there between us.

"You're going to tell me everything, and then I'm going to tell you something," he said quietly, like it was already decided.

I hesitated. He didn't look away.

"And then we'll figure out how far this has gone, and we'll make sure it stops."

My stomach twisted. "That's not your responsibility."

He didn't look away. "Cali, let me make sure you're safe. Please."

A beat passed. It was like he needed this more than I did. He spoke more softly, the words almost a vow:

"You're done handling this alone."

Something in my chest cracked again. This time I didn't argue. Because part of me had been waiting a long time to hear those words. Even if I still didn't know how to trust it.

OceanofPDF.com

Forty-Two



Lane

Brett had been finding new ways to reach her for months. Different numbers. Different excuses. Different ways to make her feel like ignoring him wasn’t an option. The odds of him showing up on her doorstep were low. But low didn’t mean impossible. And it definitely didn’t mean harmless. I’d spent years regretting every moment I hadn’t been there for her. I wasn’t going to stand here and watch Brett make her feel powerless.

I called a former teammate who had dealt with something similar with a crazy ex-girlfriend. Thirty minutes later, I had a security consultation

scheduled, an attorney recommendation, and the first steps toward stopping Brett from reaching her whenever he wanted.

I told myself I was helping. I also knew I needed to make sure I didn't start making decisions for her. I handed her the envelope and hoped like hell it wasn't a mistake. She hesitated over reaching for it, like it might bite. Cali had been standing without moving, her phone finally silent in her hand, her other arm wrapped snug around her middle as if she were holding herself together on instinct alone. The air between us still felt charged from everything she had told me, like the house hadn't quite caught up to the conversation.

"Open it," I said quietly.

Her eyes flicked to mine. That hesitation told me everything I needed to know about how much she already suspected it would hurt.

"I haven't opened it," I added. That made her still completely. Her gaze sharpened slightly, searching my face.

"You didn't open it?" she asked.

"No."

Her brows furrowed. "Why would you give me something you haven't even looked at?"

I didn't have an answer for that. The truth was, whatever was inside that envelope belonged to her. I had already carried it long enough like I had the right to. I decided I wasn't going to stand by and watch someone I loved hurt.

"Because it's yours," I said. "And I had no right to decide what happened with it."

Her fingers finally tore through the seal. The sound of paper tearing in a quiet kitchen felt too loud. She pulled the contents out slowly, as if her hands had suddenly forgotten how to work. At first it was just paperwork. Neat stacks. Official headers. The kind of documents that always looked harmless until you actually read them. The color drained from her cheeks.

"I didn't . . ." she started, then stopped. Her fingers firmly gripped the papers.

I stayed where I was, letting her decide what she needed to do next. Her finger traced over a page and froze.

"This is . . ." Her voice cracked slightly. She cleared her throat and tried again. "These are more bills."

I wasn’t surprised by the possibility. Not after everything she had told me. But seeing the evidence in her shaking hands made it real. She looked back down, flipping pages now with less control, faster, like if she got through all of it quickly enough it might rearrange itself into something less real. The more she read, the more her face changed and her shoulders went rigid.

“No,” she whispered. I knew that tone. That was denial trying to outrun reality. Her eyes scanned the page again, and whatever she found there made her stop mid-sentence. Her face went pale. I pushed off the counter a little, only enough to close the distance without crowding her.

“What is it?” I said.

She didn’t answer right away. When she finally spoke, her voice was barely there.

“He’s forged my signature. Dozens of times.”

The words hung in the air, she looked up at me like she needed confirmation she wasn’t losing her grip on reality.

“He used my name,” she said, panic breaking through the edges of her control. “He used my information.”

My stomach dropped. Brett hadn’t only taken advantage of her kindness. He had attached her name to a life she never agreed to carry. She forced herself to keep reading, like she couldn’t stop now that she’d started. Like stopping would mean admitting it was real. The papers at the bottom of the stack turned out to be adoption papers.

For Jace.

She stopped moving. Even the silence seemed to change, growing heavier around us. She swallowed once before speaking, but her voice betrayed her, breaking despite every effort to keep it steady.

“I adopted him,” she said, like she was reminding herself of something she already knew but didn’t want attached to this stack of paper. “That was legal. That was real. Right?”

Her fingers tightened. She was looking at proof that the circumstances surrounding how she became Jace’s mother had been manipulated from the beginning. I stepped closer, slowly enough that she could have stopped me if she wanted.

“It’s going to be okay. No one is going to take Jace from you,” I said because no matter what I would make sure it was. Her gaze dropped back to the papers, and her expression shifted again as anger finally broke through the shock.

“My worst fear is losing Jace, but I don’t think there’s any way Brett could have manipulated that because everything was done through an attorney I hired. He’s been doing this for years, even before we were dating. I was only a mark for a conman,” she whispered. It was a realization she didn’t like having, but you could see everything she was processing playing across her face.

I nodded because I realized the same thing. The corner of the document folded beneath her fingers. Her thumb rubbed over the edge of the paper until it bent.

“I thought I was helping him,” she said, almost to herself.

“I know,” I answered.

She gave a short humorless laugh that didn’t sound like her at all.

“How did I miss all of this?”

“You saw Jace,” I said. “You saw a kid who needed someone to choose him.”

Her lips parted, but no words came, at least not at first. “But what did I not see?”

That question lingered between us because there wasn’t a gentle answer for it.

“That he was using the best thing about you against you: your heart.” The words rested between us like something finally set down after being carried too long.

Cali’s breathing changed. Shallow now. Unsteady. She looked down at the papers again, but I could tell she wasn’t reading anymore. She was trying not to fall apart in front of me.

“I should’ve stopped it,” she whispered.

“No,” I said immediately.

That got her attention again. Her eyes lifted.

“You don’t get to do that,” I added, softer but firm. “You don’t get to turn this into something you could’ve prevented.”

Her jaw trembled slightly. I hated that I noticed.

“You were raising a kid,” I said. “You were in school. You were working. You were doing everything you could with what you had.”

Her grip loosened, but her eyes were still glassy.

“I should’ve seen it.” The words came out barely above a whisper, like saying them louder would make them true.

“Cali,” I said, “he was never going to make it obvious.” That did it. Something in her broke loose behind her eyes, but she still didn’t let the tears fall. Not yet. She looked down at the envelope still in her hand. Her voice was barely steady when she spoke.

“What happens now?”

I didn’t pretend I had a clean answer. But I didn’t leave her standing in it alone either. “Now,” I said, “we make sure he doesn’t get another chance to ever do this to you again.”

Her breath shook once. “How did you get this?”

I swallowed. I was going to tell the truth even if it made her hate me. I had to be honest if there was ever a chance to repair the damage between us.

“After you came back, I was angry. I didn’t know where to put that anger, and instead of dealing with it, I did something I’m not proud of. I had someone look into your life.”

Her features grew taut, but she didn’t look angry yet. That almost made it worse. Anger would have been easier. This was her trying to understand how many people had made decisions about her life without her; this was something worse—hurt.

“I got the envelope a few weeks ago. I never opened it.” I swallowed, forcing myself to meet her eyes. “Because even then, I knew I’d already crossed a line. I couldn’t justify crossing another by opening something that wasn’t mine.”

My grip wrapped around the edge of the counter. “But now I wish I’d known what he was doing so I could stop it before he could hurt you again.”

Cali stepped back, and suddenly the space between us felt wider than the entire room. “It’s not your job to protect me.” Her voice was resigned this time, and the hurt underneath came through. Everything else I had planned to say never made it out of my mouth.

“Lane. I need you to leave.”

I pressed my lips together and nodded, knowing this was coming. She needed space.

I grabbed my duffel bag from the couch. Every instinct told me to stay. To explain. To remind her that everything I had done came from loving her. But that was the problem. Love didn’t make me the exception to her boundaries. She’d asked me to leave, and loving her meant listening.

“I’m here when you’re ready.” The words felt useless the second they left my mouth.

I walked out, leaving her with the truth she deserved and the space I should have given her from the beginning. The door closed behind me. I wasn’t sure she would ever open it again.

OceanofPDF.com

Forty-Three



Cali

The door clicked shut behind Lane, and I stood there staring at it with the papers still clutched in my hand. The house felt unnaturally quiet. I looked down at the papers and carried them to the kitchen table, where I dropped them in a scattered heap across the wood. Bills. Accounts. Signatures that looked like mine until I looked closer. I pulled out a chair and sat, picked up the first page again, tracing the signature with my index finger. It looked like mine. Almost. It had the same looping C, the same sharp line through the length of my last name. But I hadn’t signed it.

I moved through the documents one by one, forcing myself to read every page, even when my stomach twisted. Brett had opened accounts I knew nothing about. He had attached my name to bills I had never seen. He had taken information I had trusted him with and scattered it across a life I had never agreed to live. When I reached the adoption papers, I stopped. Jace's name sat there in black ink, and I pressed my palm against the page as if I could separate it from everything else. I remembered meeting him when he was ten, a guarded little boy who watched everything and trusted almost nothing. I remembered how carefully I had stepped into his life, how long it took before he let me close enough to see the kid underneath all that suspicion. I hadn't been there for his first steps or his first words. I hadn't known him his whole life. But I had chosen him when I met him, and he had eventually chosen me back. Brett could forge my signature and manipulate paperwork and rack up thousands of dollars of credit card debt, but he couldn't rewrite that. He couldn't take away what Jace and I had built together by turning the beginning of our story into something ugly. In his eyes all I'd ever been was a long con.

I shoved the papers aside and reached for my phone. Lane's name was still near the top of my recent calls, and for one stupid second, my thumb hovered over it. I could call him and demand an explanation. I could tell him exactly how angry I was, how violated I felt knowing he had hired someone to dig through my life without asking me. I could ask him why he thought he had the right. Instead, I locked the screen and set the phone face down. He had crossed a line, and understanding why he had crossed it didn't erase the fact that he had. If I was going to take my life back, I couldn't start by letting someone else make the decisions for me.

I turned the phone over again and opened the text Lane had sent me earlier with the attorney's information. Even seeing his name attached to the recommendation made something inside me knot, but I stared at the number until I finally pressed call. A man answered after the fourth ring, and when I introduced myself, he confirmed that Lane had mentioned my situation. I almost hung up, but I took a breath and told him everything. I explained the bills, the forged signatures, the accounts I didn't recognize, and the adoption documents. I told him about Brett and how long this had been happening. Explaining it all to a stranger made the situation sound even more impossible, but he didn't interrupt or question me. He listened, then asked me to gather every document I had, photograph each page, preserve the originals, and make a list of every account or agency Brett might have accessed.

I grabbed a notebook from the counter and began making a list of every bank, credit reporting agencies, and any other places I hadn't thought about in years. He gave me instructions, and I wrote until my hand cramped. When the call ended, I stared at the page for a long moment. I still didn't know what the next week would look like or how much damage Brett had done, but at least I had a place to start. I made the first call, then the second. The third took nearly forty minutes, but when I finally hung up, I had a fraud claim number written across the top of my notebook. It wasn't justice, and it wasn't closure, but it was something I had done for myself. No one had made the call for me. No one had decided what I needed. I had.

I spent the rest of the afternoon gathering everything I could find. I pulled old bank statements from a filing cabinet, searched through emails, printed documents, and made folders for anything that connected Brett to my name. The work steadied me. It gave me something to focus on besides the anger twisting beneath my ribs and the memory of Lane standing in my kitchen, admitting what he had done. By the time I carried a stack of papers into the home office to make another copy, I was exhausted enough that I almost missed the prescription bottle sitting near the edge of the counter.

I stopped and stared at it. This bottle wasn't supposed to be sitting there. I looked toward the hallway and remembered Lane grabbing his duffel bag when he left. He must have left it on the counter after taking it last night. I turned it over in my hand before setting it beside the papers. For a moment, I considered leaving it there and letting him come back for it himself. But I imagined him realizing hours from now that it was missing and searching through his bag again and again. Despite everything, I couldn't bring myself to make something he needed into a punishment.

I opened our text thread and stared at the blank screen for longer than I should have.

> **Me:** Your medication was on the kitchen counter. I'll put it in a bag on the porch for you.

I read the message twice before sending it. His name appeared beneath the text, and I watched the screen for a few seconds, half expecting an immediate response. Nothing came. He was probably volunteering at The Hope Center. I tucked it into a grocery bag and headed for the porch, then stopped abruptly halfway there as realization settled in.

Lane wasn't trying to control me; he was scared, and I could see that now. Fifteen years had taught him what it felt like to lose me, and somewhere

along the way, that fear had blurred the line between protecting me and taking control of a situation he couldn’t stand to watch unfold. I understood that. Maybe more than I wanted to.

But understanding him didn’t mean excusing him. He could love me and still hurt me. He could have good intentions and still make the wrong choice. I could believe that he had been trying to protect me while still telling him that he had no right to decide for me. Those truths didn’t cancel each other out.

Deep down, I also had to acknowledge that finding that prescription bottle had triggered me. Brett had taken opioids like candy. Seeing Lane’s medication had stirred up something old and ugly in me. But Lane wasn’t Brett. He had asked for help. Brett never had.

We needed to talk, but that conversation could wait. I had enough to deal with today. I picked up my phone, found the next number on the list, and pressed call. When someone answered, I took a breath and said, “Hi. I need to report fraudulent activity under my name.” My voice shook, but I kept talking. This time, I wasn’t waiting for someone else to fix it. I wasn’t handing my life over to someone who promised to protect me. I was taking it back, one call at a time.

OceanofPDF.com

Forty-Four



Lane

I scrubbed the back of my thumb across my forehead, wiping away the last of the sweat from practice, and pushed through the door of Ronnie's Diner. Two days after Cali asked me to leave, and I still walked around in the fog. She needed space. Knowing that didn't make the distance hurt any less.

Ronnie wiped his hands on the apron stretched over his barrel chest and dropped a menu in front of me—the same one I'd been pretending to read

since high school, back when I still thought the world would end if I didn't know what came next.

"Well, what'll it be?" He flipped a cup onto a saucer and filled it with coffee without me asking.

I glanced down at the menu even though I could've recited it from memory. "Cheeseburger, home-cut fries, and a chocolate milkshake."

Tina, one of Ronnie's longtime waitresses, bustled through the kitchen doors carrying two plates and balancing a third on her forearm. A burst of laughter cut through the diner noise. I knew that sound before I even turned around.

Cali, Jimmy, and Jace sat in a booth near the back.

Jace looked fresh off the field, his hair damp with sweat. Cali had her head thrown back, laughing at something Jimmy had said. Tina lingered a second beside the table, grinning, before she headed off.

My gaze caught on Cali and stayed there. She laughed with her whole face, eyes crinkling at the corners until the entire booth seemed brighter. I wanted the empty space beside her. Wanted to be the reason she smiled like that. Wanted to belong in the life unfolding ten feet away.

She'd simply nodded, like it wasn't something that changed how she saw me.

What tore me up was her believing she'd somehow caused it—that she'd been the reason I'd needed the prescription in the first place. She wasn't, not even close. She had always had a way of making people feel seen. Even now, watching from across the diner, I wanted to be the person she looked for first. Bryant taught me what happened when people needed help and never got it. I wasn't going to pretend I was above asking for it.

Bryant had left fingerprints all over my life, and sometimes I wondered if I'd ever scrub them clean.

Jace lifted a milkshake piled high with whipped cream and sprinkles and tapped it against Cali's. Jimmy laughed and raised his own to join them. Something twisted in my chest. My body wanted to move before my courage caught up. What if she didn't want me there? What if sitting beside her only reminded her why she'd asked me to leave?

The ache was always the same—wondering what it would feel like if she wanted to be there as much as I did. A lump lodged in my throat. Because I desperately wanted Cali Walton.

More than that, I wanted her to want me. To know there hadn’t been a day I hadn’t missed her—not one day she hadn’t been woven into every version of the future I’d imagined.

How was I supposed to make her believe that? That what I felt for her could last forever if she’d just give it a chance?

A plate appeared on the counter in front of me. The sound pulled me back. Ronnie caught my eye. For a second, I wondered if he’d seen more than I wanted anyone to see. Ronnie jerked his chin toward the booth. “Quit starin’ at her and go sit down.”

I looked over again before I stood. The worst she could do was tell me no. Part of me knew she still cared. The other part was still that lonely kid who wanted someone to choose him first. To stay. I grabbed my plate and milkshake, slid off the stool, and headed for the booth.

“Hey, Coach!” Jace called.

I dipped my chin. “Hey, bud. Can I sit here?”

Cali held my gaze for a beat before nodding, and I slid in beside her. Cali’s breath caught, barely noticeable, but I heard it. The tiny reaction shouldn’t have mattered after everything that happened, but it did. I was careful not to crowd her, but our thighs brushed anyway. Neither of us moved. I didn’t let myself read more into it.

“Jace, you're doing a great job out there.”

“Thanks, Coach.” He took another sip of his milkshake. “I didn’t think I’d like football this much, but I think I might like it more than soccer.”

I tossed a fry into my mouth. “That’s kind of how football and baseball were for me. I loved both, but baseball got me first.”

“You could’ve gone pro in football too?”

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “Had a few scouts come watch, but baseball won.”

I took a sip of my milkshake. I could feel Cali’s eyes on me. I wanted to tell her about every year she’d missed, every piece of me she’d never gotten to know—but only if she wanted to hear it.

“Are you gonna use the small tractor on the grass again?” Jimmy asked as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

My eyes shot to him, but there was no way he was going to stop. I’d been around him enough when Cali was gone that I understood some of the patterns of his behavior.

I groaned. Before Greene took over the mowing, I’d been doing it myself. Since they’d moved in, I’d stayed away. One more secret she didn’t know.

Because of course Jimmy would remember that now.

“Mow the grass?” I asked carefully, hoping he’d forget.

“Yeah. With that big green mower. Are you gonna buy me lunch too?” I wanted to kick him under the table but figured giving a senior citizen the old shin treatment was probably frowned upon.

“No, Jimmy. No lunch today.”

“Maybe another day?”

His eyes were so hopeful I couldn’t deny him.

“Maybe.”

I came over here to sit next to Cali. Instead, I was dodging land mines. Jimmy had two settings: forgetting everything or remembering exactly the thing I hoped he wouldn’t.

“I really loved that barbecue chicken you brought me last time,” Jimmy said.

I closed my eyes. *Shut up, Jimmy.*

“It was better than that casserole you made.”

My pulse kicked up all over again. Cali was putting the pieces together. I could feel it in the weight of her stare. Jimmy was about to spill every secret I’d managed to keep. That was exactly why I’d stayed away from the house as much as I could, but Cali's safety had been on the line. The fewer opportunities Jimmy had to talk, the safer I was.

“So you need help making casseroles?” Cali asked, smirking. She tossed a fry into her mouth.

“Sure, California. You offering private lessons?”

A blush climbed her neck, and despite everything, something inside me loosened because there she was. Jimmy spoke again. “Do you need me to sign any more papers?” Jimmy asked absentmindedly.

The table went silent. Even the sounds of the diner seemed to fade—the jukebox, the plates, the conversations around us. Jimmy kept drizzling ketchup over his fries like he hadn’t detonated a bomb.

My stomach dropped.

There was no taking that back. No changing the subject. Sooner or later I’d have to tell her everything. How long I’d been helping. How long I’d tried to help Jimmy even through the moments when he’d get confused and wouldn’t let me inside to help with housekeeping. How long I’d been watching out for her. How much I cared. And she’d probably hate it.

But maybe—

Just maybe—

She'd finally understand. Understand that I'd never forgotten the seventeen-year-old girl who'd stolen my heart. That she'd never stopped being the love of my life.

"Papers?" Cali asked quietly. I knew there was no pretending anymore.

"I'll answer whatever you want to ask," I said. "When you're ready."

And there it was—the conversation I'd been avoiding for years. I swallowed against the tightness in my throat. It wasn't happening here. Not in the middle of Ronnie's Diner. When she was ready, I'd tell her everything. Every secret. Every mistake. Every reason. As long as there was breath in my lungs, I'd keep showing up for Cali Walton. Not to save her. Just to make sure she never had to wonder if someone would stay.

OceanofPDF.com

Forty-Five



Lane

I knew I'd find her here. She'd texted me twenty minutes ago, saying she was ready to talk. The water lapped against the shore in a gentle motion as a breeze rippled through the leaves of the trees. Cali had both feet in the water as she sat on the edge of the pier. She swished them back and forth. Everything I'd hidden for fifteen years ended tonight. There was no way to explain it all without sounding completely unhinged. I tucked the photos I'd been holding back into the visor, then traced my thumb across the smooth leather of the steering wheel. There was no point in delaying. Before either

of us fell asleep tonight, she was going to know everything—things I should have told her a long time ago.

The pier creaked as I walked toward her, taking a seat not too far away. The sky was only minutes from sunset, and every inch of skin her sundress left bare glowed golden in the fading light. It was one of those rare days in autumn that felt like summer, but that was Kansas weather for you. Like the old timers that gathered at Ronnie's Diner for their morning coffee always joked, "If you don't like the weather, just wait a minute. It'll change."

"So I assume that the envelope was missing a few things that you needed to share?" she said, not mad but more resigned, like her heart was too fragile after all the things we'd shared over the last few days.

"Just—promise you'll let me finish," I said. The words came out more desperate than I wanted.

She swished her feet through the water and looked back at me.

"I'm not going anywhere," she said. She wasn't leaving. She just might not be staying with me. A deep breath did nothing. My palms slid down my thighs anyway, chasing a heartbeat that refused to slow.

"Cali, I've been taking care of you . . . and your grandparents."

The words echoed between us.

"How?"

There wasn't a simple answer.

"The scholarship foundation that paid for your college is ours. Jonah, Soren, and I founded it years ago. We fund scholarships, The Hope Center, and a dozen other programs."

Her mouth parted, but no words came out. I plunged on.

"I had to buy your grandparents' farm."

The confession left my chest in a rush. The intensity in her eyes sharpened.

"What?"

It wasn't much more than a breath.

"Things had gotten upside down when they tried to help your mom the last time, and with the medical bills from your grandma and the decline of Jimmy's health, they had to mortgage the farm to stay afloat. I came over the night before the bank auction and talked to your grandpa. I bought the farm before the auction, with the agreement that it would always be his home. I couldn't stand to see the place you loved broken up into little pieces and resold."

Her hand flew to her mouth. Tears brimmed. She blinked once, twice, as if her brain couldn’t keep up with what she’d heard. I knew Bryant was going to buy it at the auction, and I couldn’t let him have that piece of her. Jonah helped me set up a land trust with his real estate connections so that Bryant would remain in the dark.

“Your grandpa gave me the truck in thanks.” I tossed a thumb over my shoulder. “And I made sure he had enough to eat even if it wasn’t homemade.” I huffed out a laugh. I’d burned enough meals over the years that Jimmy never let me forget it. “A man who worked his entire life feeding other people shouldn’t have to choose between medicine or food.”

I stared out over the pond until a quiet sniff reached me. I turned toward her and held my arms open, letting her make the choice. She came willingly, and I gathered her in my arms as the first sob broke free. Her tears soaked through to my skin, and I pulled her between my thighs as she clutched onto my shirt.

“Baby, you’re breaking my heart.”

The soft scent of her shampoo filled my nose as I hugged her body closer to mine. I didn’t know what I expected, but this wasn’t it. Her fingers twisted in the front of my shirt. She wasn’t pulling away or asking questions; she simply let me hold her. For the first time since I’d found her, she allowed someone else to carry the weight.

OceanofPDF.com

Forty-Six



Cali

I cried harder than I had in years—not because of one thing, but because every impossible weight I'd carried had finally found somewhere to land. For so long, life had felt like a series of battles I barely survived. One crisis after another. Mom. Grandma's health. Grandpa's health. Brett. Bills. Moving. Every time I managed to get my head above water, another wave crashed over me. And somehow, Lane had been carrying pieces of my life I didn't even know were falling apart. I gripped the front of his shirt and buried my face against his chest.

“You bought the farm?” I whispered.

His hand moved slowly up and down my back. “Yeah.”

“You paid for my college?”

“Part of it.”

A watery laugh escaped me. “Part of it?”

“You did the hard part, baby.”

I shook my head. “You should’ve told me.”

His heart raced beneath my cheek. “I know, but I was worried that you wouldn’t let me.”

The honesty in those words made something ache inside me. I pulled back enough to look at him. The sunset painted everything gold and orange, and for a moment I saw the boy I’d fallen in love with at seventeen. Except life had carved new lines into his face, made him steadier, stronger. His eyes searched mine, waiting for a verdict. The realization stole my breath. Lane, who had always seemed larger than life to me, looked like he was preparing for me to walk away.

“I don’t know what to say,” I said softly.

Pain flickered across his features. “You don’t have to say anything.”

The water lapped quietly beneath the dock. A bird called somewhere across the pond. “Why?” The word came out softer than I expected. Why had he carried all of this alone?

He looked away and studied the water. “Because every time I thought about showing up, you looked happy.”

My brow furrowed. “What?”

“You were building a life.” His voice was rough. “You were getting through school. Making friends. Becoming who you wanted to be.”

His jaw worked. “And I was the guy who wasn’t worth staying for.”

My pulse stumbled because I heard the truth underneath the words: He believed every one.

“That’s not true. You don't get to decide that for me.”

“I wasn’t deciding for you.”

“Then what were you doing?”

His laugh held no humor. “Being a coward, mostly.”

I stared at him. He rubbed a hand over his face.

“I kept telling myself I’d tell you next year. Then after graduation. Then after your first job.” His eyes met mine again. “And after enough years

passed, I didn't know how to explain any of it without sounding completely insane. So I did the only thing I knew how to do—I stayed away."

A tiny smile tugged at my mouth despite everything. "That ship may have sailed."

His lips twitched. "Yeah. Probably."

Fifteen years of missed chances sat on the pier beside us. I looked out across the water, letting each piece settle. The scholarship. The farm. The Hope Center. The meals. The truck. All the invisible ways he'd been there without letting me see him.

"Lane?"

"Yeah, baby?" The endearment still did reckless things to my heart.

I swallowed. "Is that everything?"

The question hung between us. Immediately, something changed in his expression. My stomach dropped. Because suddenly I knew. There was more. A lot more. And whatever it was, it was the thing he'd been most afraid to tell me. Lane looked toward the horizon, the last rays of sunlight catching in his eyes. He took a slow breath.

"No," he said quietly.

My heart skipped a beat.

"That's just the beginning." He reached for my hand and laced our fingers together. The words changed something between us. A few days ago, hearing that there was more would have terrified me. Now, sitting between Lane's legs with his arms around me, I realized something that scared me even more. I looked down at our joined hands. His fingers were rougher than I remembered, but they still fit mine perfectly. Like they always had.

"Can I ask you something?"

His thumb brushed across my knuckles. "You can ask me anything."

I turned enough to look at him. The fear was still there in his eyes—the fear that I would decide all of this was too much. My heart squeezed painfully. Because after everything he'd confessed, he still didn't understand that he wasn't the only one who had spent all these years holding on.

"Lane."

"Yeah, baby?"

I took a deep breath. "What if we stopped talking about the past for a minute?"

Confusion flickered across his face. "What do you mean?"

I swallowed hard.

“I mean . . .” My voice wavered. “What if we talked about now?”

His entire body went still. I could practically feel his pulse jump beneath my fingertips.

“Cali . . .”

“What if,” I continued before I could lose my nerve, “instead of worrying about what happened when we were seventeen, we figured out what happens when we’re thirty-two?”

His eyes widened. For a moment, he simply stared at me, like he was afraid the words would disappear if he moved.

“I spent years convincing myself I could hate you.” His jaw clenched. “But I never once stopped loving you.”

My heart hammered against my ribs. The confession hung between us. I brushed my thumb along his jaw, letting the truth settle between us. “Maybe we both believed stories that weren’t true.”

His brows pulled together.

“I convinced myself you were better off without me,” I whispered. “And you thought I left because you weren’t worth staying for.”

His expression softened.

“Maybe we were both wrong.”

His fingers held mine, but he didn’t look away.

“I don’t know what tomorrow looks like,” I rushed on. “And honestly, I’m still processing half of what you’ve told me.”

A surprised laugh escaped him. “Fair.”

“But I do know this.” I reached up and cupped his jaw. His eyes immediately closed for a brief second, and he leaned into my touch like he’d been starved for it.

“I know that every time life got hard, somehow it was still you.”

When his eyes opened again, they were suspiciously bright.

“It was always you, Lane.”

His throat worked. Neither of us spoke for several seconds. The sun slipped lower across the horizon as the pond shimmered gold. For the first time since he’d found me here, hope began to replace the ache inside my chest.

I smiled through tears, because suddenly the future didn’t feel like something waiting to blindside me.

“What if we stopped pretending we’re strangers?”

His expression became almost unbearably vulnerable.

A tear slipped down my cheek. “What I’m trying to say is, what if we stopped running from this?”

For one long moment, he simply stared at me. Then he shook his head once in disbelief. “Cali . . .” The sound of my name seemed to break him apart. His hands framed my face, careful, like he couldn’t quite believe I was real.

“Baby,” he whispered, forehead falling against mine, “I’ve been waiting fifteen years for you to ask me that.”

A sob-laugh escaped me. His smile broke wide.

“So yes?”

He pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Hell yes.” And for the first time in a very long time, the future didn’t scare me. It felt like I was finally coming home.

OceanofPDF.com

Forty-Seven



Cali

Have you ever had that feeling like you were being watched? Not the creepy kind where you don't know who's staring at you. No. I knew exactly whose eavesdropping little eyeballs were tracking my every move across the yard. I glanced toward the farmhouse. Sure enough, Grandpa and Jace were plastered against the living room window like two raccoons caught raiding a trash can. And judging by the way they ducked out of sight with all the subtlety of two teenagers caught breaking curfew, they'd been there a while.

Wonderful. I kept my expression neutral as I trudged inside. The second the door shut behind me, both heads snapped toward me with wide eyes. Subtle. Very subtle. I made it all the way to the kitchen before they magically appeared beside me, because apparently privacy was no longer a thing. Grandpa was at the table, while Jace leaned against the counter, attempting the world's weakest version of casual. This boy wasn't winning any Oscars. Both wore the same guilty-but-nosy-as-hell expression.

"Cali girl," Grandpa exclaimed. "Are you neckin' with that boy?"

Heat raced up my neck and straight onto my face. At the exact same moment, Jace coughed. The two of us were apparently choking for completely different reasons.

I froze. Because for a second, he wasn't Jimmy. He was my grandpa, the same grandpa who would've asked me that same embarrassing question back then.

"Ew." Jace pointed at him. "First of all, nobody says neckin' anymore."

Grandpa shrugged. "Worked fine in my day."

"Your day also involved black-and-white television," Jace remarked.

I snorted as I grabbed a loaf of bread and began making a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich.

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about." I said finally.

"Now, honey," Grandpa said, completely ignoring me, "if your grandma was here, she'd be telling you to make sure you're using protection."

I dropped the butter knife, heat blazing across my face. Across the room, Jace coughed so hard he had to brace himself against the counter.

"Grandpa!"

"What?" He looked confused. "It's good advice."

"Nothing happened!" I protested, sounding exactly like the teenager they both clearly thought I was.

"A likely story."

"It was a forehead kiss!"

The room went silent. Grandpa blinked. Jace blinked. Then Jace let out the most disappointed sigh I'd ever heard. "A forehead kiss?"

"Yes." The way they both reacted made me wonder if they needed glasses.

"Dang." Grandpa shook his head.

"In my day, if a girl let you hold her hand by the pond, you were practically engaged."

“Please stop talking.”

“Just trying to help.”

“You’re not helping.”

“So . . .” Jace said as he straightened.

I lifted a brow.

“How is this going to benefit me?”

I stared at him, waiting for the punch line.

“What?”

He pointed toward the pond. “Coach.”

“Oh, no.”

“Now that you’re with Coach, what kind of perks can I expect?” The corner of his mouth pulled into a smug little smirk.

“You are getting zero perks.”

“Guaranteed starting position?”

“No.”

“Unlimited Gatorade?”

“Jace.”

“Just seeing what’s available.” He squinted like he was negotiating a billion-dollar contract.

I grabbed my sandwich and pointed at both of them. “Okay. Here’s the deal.”

They waited.

“We are going to date.”

Grandpa slapped the table. “Woo-hoo! That’s my girl!”

Jace dropped his face into his hands. “Ugh.”

Grandpa pointed at him. “See? I told you.”

“You literally bet me twenty dollars,” Jace countered. They’d been making bets?

“And I won,” Grandpa said with a flourish.

“This is going to be so embarrassing.” Jace melted into a puddle and slid onto a bar stool.

I bit into my sandwich, trying and failing to hide my smile. “You’ll survive.”

Jace groaned. “Everybody at school is going to find out Doc is dating Coach.”

Grandpa grinned. “Just wait till they get married.”

“GRANDPA!”

OceanofPDF.com

Forty-Eight



Lane

I should've known better than to think I'd get through the night without the entire town knowing. My phone was vibrating on my bedside table like it was auditioning for a pop song.

Buzzz. Buzzz. Buzzz.

It refused to quit. I reached over, grabbed it, and found a string of messages taking over the group chat.

Landry: Ohhhhh. I heard some fun news!

Sawyer: Do tell!

Landry: That a certain Lane Massey has been caught “neckin’” with a certain Cali Walton. Lane, care to share any details with the class?

Soren: *GIF of person dramatically fanning himself from the heat.*

Jonah: Who says neckin’ anymore?

Sawyer: Cowboy, you’re so hot when you use GIF humor. **kissy face**

Soren: *GIF of man sending an exaggerated wink.*

Jonah leaves chat.
Landry adds Jonah back to chat.

Jonah: Please, for the love of all things, let me leave this circus.

Landry: Nope, bro. You’re stuck with us for life!

Sawyer: *GIF of people swaying in a group singing a song with their arms over each other’s shoulders.*

Jonah changes group name to *three eyeroll emojis*.
Landry changes group name to Besties4lyfe.

Soren: Congrats, dude! Glad she didn’t freak when she found out everything you’ve done.

Sawyer: Yeah, that was actually really sweet.

Landry: I knew you were down bad, but man . . . this is an entirely different level of commitment.

Jonah: If I say congrats, can I leave? Congrats.

Jonah leaves chat.
Landry adds Jonah back to chat.

Jonah: *GIF of man being held hostage.*

Lane: Thanks, guys. And for the record, nobody says neckin' anymore except apparently senior citizens and now all of you.

OceanofPDF.com

Forty-Nine



Cali

The ER had finally reached that rare lull between chaos and complete disaster, the kind of quiet that never lasted long but gave everyone just enough time to remember they were tired. I was restocking supplies when I spotted Lacy at the nurses' station finishing up charting. She looked exhausted despite the smile that was always quick to create dimples in her cheeks and brighten her whole face. Not the exhaustion that came from a long shift. This was deeper. The kind that burrowed deep beneath the skin and dulled the light behind someone's eyes. The bruise near her wrist was

gone, but my mind still caught on it every time she reached for something. I couldn't stop seeing the way she flinched whenever her phone chimed or how her entire expression changed after certain patients left.

I grabbed two cups of coffee from the break room and slid one across the counter toward her—two sugars and enough cream that it barely qualified as coffee anymore. "You look like you could use this."

A tired smile crossed her face. "You're my favorite person today."

"I'll take it."

She wrapped both hands around the cup and took a sip. For a moment, the two of us let the quiet exist between us. I decided to risk it. My thumb tapped against my coffee cup before I spoke. I'd learned the hard way there were no perfect words for moments like this. But I knew what it felt like when someone noticed and chose to show they cared.

"Have you ever heard of The Hope Center?"

Lacy glanced over. "The building by the library?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Sure. Everybody's heard of it."

I leaned against the counter. "They've started offering free self-defense classes."

One eyebrow lifted. "Self-defense?"

"Yep."

"They teach you how to punch people?"

A laugh slipped out. "Probably. I haven't taken one, but I was thinking about it."

"Huh." She took another sip of coffee, her eyes fixed on the cup while I watched interest flicker across her face.

"Apparently they're really good." I traced my thumb along the edge of my coffee cup. "If you ever wanted to go . . . I'd go with you."

Lacy immediately narrowed her eyes. A small smile tugged at her mouth.

"You're transparent, you know that?"

"I've been told." The smile disappeared almost as quickly as it appeared. I lowered my gaze to my coffee, giving her the space to decide whether she wanted to keep talking. "You don't have to tell me anything."

Her shoulders relaxed slightly. "I know."

Lacy stared into her cup. The quiet stretched long enough for the noise of the ER to fill the space between us—the beeping monitors, the rolling carts, the distant voices.

“He’s not always bad.”

The words were so quiet they almost disappeared. My chest constricted. I hated that sentence. Not because I was judging her. Because I’d heard versions of it before. The careful explanations. The reasons made for the person hurting them were rooted in the good moments, the moments they held onto with the hope that, someday, things would get better.

“It doesn’t happen all the time,” she continued. Lacy immediately shook her head.

“See? This is why I don’t talk about it.” She laughed bitterly. “You made that face.”

“What face?”

“The face that says you’re worried about me.”

I looked away because she wasn’t wrong. Between everything else happening in my life, somehow there was still room to worry about Lacy.

“I am worried about you.”

Neither of us spoke for a moment. The monitor behind us beeped softly. A phone rang somewhere down the hall. Someone laughed near the nurses’ station. Normal hospital sounds. A normal day carrying a conversation that felt anything but normal.

Lacy stared down at the coffee between her hands. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.” The honesty in her voice broke something inside me.

“You don’t have to figure everything out today.”

Her eyes lifted. “They make it sound easy.”

“Who?”

“People.”

I knew exactly who she meant, the people who said *just leave.* As if leaving was simple like fear, finances, history, and hope didn’t twist together until walking away felt impossible. As if loving someone who hurt you wasn’t confusing or that starting over wasn’t absolutely terrifying. As if the unknown wasn’t sometimes more frightening than the demons you’d learned to live with.

“I know,” I said softly.

Her throat worked. “But it isn’t easy.” The words came out barely above a whisper.

“No, it’s not.”

Tears gathered in her eyes before she blinked them away. “No, it really isn’t.”

My hand covered hers, squeezing gently. “You deserve better, Lacy.”

The words hung between us as she worked to gather herself.

“You deserve to feel safe.”

She swallowed. “I know.”

“You deserve to go home without wondering what version of him is waiting there.”

A shaky breath left her. “Cali . . .”

“You do.”

She closed her eyes briefly. When they opened again, they looked suspiciously bright. For a second, I expected the walls to go back up. Expected her to change the subject, laugh it off, or disappear behind the mask she wore so well.

Instead, she nodded once. “I’ll think about it.”

Relief and worry tangled together in my chest. “I’ll take that.”

A small smile appeared. The overhead speaker crackled to life, and both of us looked up—the lull was officially over. Lacy stood and picked up her laptop as I grabbed mine. Before she hurried away, she paused.

“Thanks for the coffee.”

“Anytime.”

Her smile was small but genuine as she headed down the hallway. And for the rest of my shift, four words followed me through every room, every call light, every chart.

I’ll think about it.

Sometimes the first step wasn’t walking away. Sometimes it was finally admitting you wanted to.

OceanofPDF.com

Fifty



Lane

“Alright, that’s all for today,” I called, jotting a few final notes onto my clipboard. The team grabbed their water bottles and filtered toward the locker rooms.

“Coach.” Jace headed my way, and I lowered the clipboard. We both knew this conversation had been coming. Cali and I hadn’t managed more than texts since the night at the pier, buried beneath responsibilities, but I’d planned to stop by her place tonight with dinner.

“Yeah, Jace?”

“Can I talk to you?” He looked uncertain, though the boldness only teenagers seemed to possess still lingered beneath it.

“Sure. Want to sit?” I nodded toward the bleachers. We sat a couple of feet apart, both staring across the field.

“Are you serious about Doc?” He leaned forward. Though I didn’t know every piece of his story, I knew enough to understand change hadn’t often been kind to him.

“I am.” I glanced at him. “Is that okay with you?” He turned fully toward me. My forearms rested on my thighs as I waited.

“She’s a good person.”

That was all he said.

“Yeah.” A smile tugged at the corner of my mouth. “She is.”

“If something happens between you . . . will I still be in her family?”

His voice barely wavered, but the vulnerability beneath it was written all over his face. I dropped a hand on his shoulder.

“Jace, nothing could make you stop being part of Cali’s family. She’d go to the ends of the earth for you.” No doubt lived in those words. “And I know you don’t know me that well, but I’d never do anything that would cost you her.”

There was more to say—that I’d fight for her, for all of them—but we’d only agreed to date two days ago. This wasn’t the time for promises he had no reason to believe yet. Afterward, I’d text Cali so she could reassure him herself.

He nodded once.

“Okay.” His expression softened. “Make sure you treat her good.”

His eyes met mine. Something warm expanded in my chest. This kid loved fiercely, and I knew that even though blood didn’t tie him and Cali together this was a direct result of her impact on him. I rose and held out my hand. Jace looked at it for a second before standing and shaking it.

“I will.” The words came easily because somewhere deep down, another promise echoed just as clearly.

I always will.

OceanofPDF.com

Fifty-One



Cali

The smile already tugged at my lips as the front door swung open. Lane stood there balancing two pizzas and a large salad kit from the local pizza place. Freshly showered, he wore gray athletic pants and a white T-shirt that somehow looked impossibly soft.

"Hey, baby."

Heat rushed straight to my face.

"Bruh, you gotta save that stuff for when me and Ol' Jim ain't around," Jace protested. Lane glanced past me as if only then noticing Jace and

Grandpa sitting in the kitchen. Color crept into his cheeks before he stepped inside, toed off his shoes, and crossed toward the kitchen in nothing but his socks. Apparently, ankles were attractive now. Who knew?

“My name is Jimmy,” Grandpa corrected.

“That’s right, my man,” Jace replied, draping an arm across Grandpa’s shoulders like they’d known each other for years.

Lane circled the island, setting out the pizzas before pulling the salad kit from the bag. I slipped in beside him, reaching for plates and forks like we’d been doing this together forever. Jace and Grandpa claimed barstools at the counter, ready to supervise rather than help.

“Looks like you two have this routine down,” Grandpa observed.

My cheeks warmed.

“He brought food. That makes him my favorite,” Grandpa announced.

Jace slapped his chest as if he were mortally wounded.

“My dude, where is your loyalty?!” Jace said in mock outrage.

“You don’t know how to play with toy tractors. He does,” Grandpa replied.

My gaze slid to Lane. Of course. He’d played with the miniature farm with Grandpa. The sting behind my eyes caught me off guard.

“See?” Lane said. “Finally, somebody appreciates me.”

“I appreciate you.” The words were out before I could catch them.

The kitchen went dead quiet, like someone had unplugged the whole room.

Jace made a gagging noise. Grandpa looked far too amused. Lane’s eyes found mine, and for one suspended heartbeat, the rest of the kitchen faded away. His smile softened.

“I appreciate you too,” he said quietly.

My stomach promptly forgot how to behave.

“Okay,” Jace announced, clapping his hands together. “That’s enough. If this keeps up, we’re gonna have to leave the room!”

Grandpa nodded with exaggerated seriousness. “He has a point.”

Laughter bounced around the kitchen as plates made their way across the counter and Lane served pizza. Soon the room filled with overlapping conversations, playful jabs, and the inevitable debate over who deserved the last slice of meat lovers. For the first time in what felt like forever, no one was waiting for the next hard thing. I wanted to breathe the moment in and keep it. Lane reached for the salad tongs, his shoulder brushing mine.

Neither of us moved away. Another smile slipped free. Maybe Jace was right. Maybe I should save some of that for when nobody else was around. Judging by the look Lane gave me, though, he didn’t seem to mind one bit. And I wasn’t sure I could’ve stopped smiling even if I’d tried.

OceanofPDF.com

Fifty-Two



Cali

An hour later, Grandpa had headed to bed, claiming he needed his beauty sleep. Jace slumped down in an overstuffed chair, completely absorbed in a handheld game console that looked like it belonged in a museum exhibit.

"Isn't that thing older than you?" Lane asked.

Jace didn't even glance up. "First of all, rude. Second, this is a classic."

"I think that came out when I was a kid," Lane said.

"Must be an antique then," Jace quipped.

Ignoring the two of them, I collapsed into the middle of the couch while Lane took one of the ends. The movie menu glowed on the television as we debated what to watch. We agreed on an adventure movie with a side of romance to keep everyone happy. Despite the easy banter we'd shared all evening, I still felt oddly self-conscious about the change in our relationship. Everything between us had shifted—better, softer—and it was still new enough that I noticed every little thing.

Lane must have noticed my fidgeting. Without a word, he reached down and snagged my feet, lifting them into his lap. I grinned and sank deeper into the cushions, resting my head against a pile of pillows.

"Comfortable?" he asked, his green eyes glinting with amusement.

"Very." His hand gently held my feet, his thumb tracing slow circles along the arch. Relief melted through me. I'd been on my feet all day, and the pressure he applied was exactly right.

My eyes fluttered shut. "Yes," I breathed.

A chuckle rumbled from Lane's chest. "Long day?"

"You have no idea."

His thumb continued its slow path along the sole of my foot, working out knots I hadn't even realized were there. Across the room, Jace lowered his game to peer over the top of it.

"Are we really doing foot massages during movie night?"

"Mind your business," I said without opening my eyes.

"I'm trying, but your boyfriend is out here giving spa treatments."

The word *boyfriend* sent a warm flutter through my stomach. Lane's hand paused for half a second before continuing.

I opened one eye. "Go back to your game."

"This is better than my game," Jace quipped.

Lane laughed under his breath, and eventually Jace returned his attention to the tiny screen, muttering something about being surrounded by weird people.

The movie finally started, but I barely paid attention. Lane's hand rested lightly against my ankle now, brushing quiet patterns against my skin while he watched the screen. The gesture was simple, absent-minded even, yet more intimate than any grand romantic moment.

Partway through the movie I scooted closer until my shoulder rested against his side. Lane glanced down, smiled, and wrapped an arm around me.

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

His smile was soft as turned back toward the movie, his arm never leaving me. I did the same, unable to stop the smile tugging at my lips. Jace stood, stretched, and said good night as he trudged up the stairs half asleep.

Lane's phone pinged. Without reading it, he set the phone on the coffee table and turned back to the movie. His thumb idly traced circles across my shoulder. Those simple movements were enough to jump-start my heart.

When the movie ended, Lane clicked off the TV. We sat together in the darkness for several minutes before I finally worked up the courage to speak.

"Does this feel awkward to you?" I asked. "Well, maybe awkward isn't the right word. It's more like . . . we know things about each other that nobody else knows, but there are simple things I don't know the answer to."

Lane turned toward me. I lifted my head from where it had been resting against his chest. He reached up and tucked a lock of hair behind my ear.

"What do you want to know?" he asked. I tilted my head because there were thousands of things I'd wondered about over the years.

"Why do you drive that old truck when you can drive anything you want?"

"First of all, I hope Janet didn't hear you," he whisper-shouted, as if his truck could somehow overhear us talking about her. "And secondly . . ." He paused, searching my face like he was deciding whether to say it aloud.

"A beautiful girl let me have her first kiss in that truck." I ducked my head, smiling as I remembered that exact moment in vivid detail.

"She did?" I asked, biting my bottom lip as I looked back up at him.

"Sure did. She drove me wild." The tip of his tongue brushed his lower lip.

"How'd she do that?" I asked, noticing his gaze flick down to my mouth.

"She had these eyes the color of robin's eggs, and hair that looked like red flames. Smart as all get out with science . . . and her legs. Let me tell you about those legs—"

His finger slid from my knee to my thigh, and whatever he'd been about to say disappeared. I clapped a hand over his mouth, but I hadn't accounted for the feel of his lips against my palm. Still watching me, he pressed a kiss there. I dropped my hand, suddenly unsure what I'd been trying to accomplish.

He cradled my hand in both of his, then lifted one finger and kissed the tip. Then the next. And the next. Slowly. Deliberately. Every touch carried a quiet reverence that stole the air from my lungs. How had I ever doubted that this man loved me? His phone pinged again, interrupting the moment. Lane flicked an annoyed look at it but continued to ignore it.

His phone pinged a third time. His jaw flexed almost imperceptibly. Almost.

“You can take care of whatever you need to,” I said quietly. “Seriously. If someone is texting this late, it’s probably important.”

“Nah, it’s nothing,” he said. Whatever warmth had lived on his face all evening vanished. The screen lit up. I didn’t mean to look. I really didn’t. But when the phone was sitting right there in front of us, the words caught my attention before I could stop them.

Bryant: Heard you were back with that whore?

My stomach dropped. For a second, I wasn’t sure I’d actually read it correctly, but there was no way you could miss a word like that. The warmth from a few moments ago vanished so quickly it left me unsteady.

Lane saw where I was looking.

“Cali?”

I looked away.

“Who is that?” My tone was stiff.

The softness in his eyes disappeared as he clenched his jaw.

“Don’t worry about it.” The words cut between us with the finality of a slammed door.

Don’t worry about it. Yeah, that was not going to happen.

I nodded, even though my chest suddenly felt constricted.

“Right.”

Lane reached for my hand. “No, that’s not what I meant.” I let him hold it, but I didn’t lean into him as I had been.

“Then what did you mean?”

He sighed and looked down at our hands.

“It’s Bryant.” I’d always thought it was strange that Lane called his father Bryant instead of Dad. In our small Midwestern town, where everyone called their parents Mom or Dad and families showed up for one another, it had always seemed oddly formal. Looking back, the signs had been everywhere. The way Lane’s shoulders always tensed when his phone lit up with Bryant’s name. The way he’d gone quiet after certain calls. The way he’d apologized for things that had never been his fault. I’d seen all of it. I just hadn’t known what I was looking at. Every time I’d asked to meet Bryant, he was suddenly away or too busy. Lane always steered me somewhere else. I’d never questioned it then. Now every memory flashed like a warning light.

I swallowed. “Your dad?”

He nodded.

“Your dad doesn’t like me?”

His thumb grazed the back of my hand.

“No.” The answer came so fast it almost startled me. “No, Cali. This isn’t about you.”

I gave a small humorless laugh. “I mean . . . he literally just called me a whore.”

His face hardened.

“He doesn’t get to talk about you like that.” The anger in his voice stole my next breath. Not anger *at* me. *For* me. But somehow that made the confusion worse.

“How long has he felt that way?”

Lane looked away. And that pause hurt.

“Lane.”

He rubbed a hand over his face. “Since before.”

“Before what?”

“Before we ended things.”

I froze. I’d spent years replaying our story without realizing someone else had been standing just outside it all along. I knew Bryant was angry that night, but I didn’t realize that this was more than reckless words.

“Why?”

“Because you became important to me. At first, he blamed you for distracting me.” Lane’s voice hardened. “Then he started saying you were changing me.” His voice sounded defeated.

A knot formed in my stomach. “Changing you how?”

“Making me selfish. Making me distant. Making me forget where I came from.”

I stared at him. “But I wasn’t making you do any of that.”

“I know.” His eyes met mine. “But trying to explain Bryant in a logical way is almost impossible. He thinks he should always come first. His plans. His opinions. His needs. When I started choosing you sometimes, he saw it as me choosing you over him. Bryant doesn’t believe I should have to choose him. He believes I shouldn’t have a choice.”

I stared down at my light pink toenails, unable to find words.

The knot in my stomach grew. “I don’t know what to say, but I feel like I should’ve known.”

He looked back at me. “Why?”

“Because I thought I knew everything about you.” The words came out softer than I intended. “And apparently there’s this huge part of your life where someone hates me, and I didn’t even know.”

Lane moved closer. “Cali—”

“No, I’m not mad.” I shook my head. “I just . . . I just need a minute.”

He nodded once and loosened his grip on my hand instead of letting go.

“What do you mean?”

I looked down at our hands. “You and I are trying this again. We’re figuring out what we are. And tonight felt easy. It felt like maybe we were getting it right.”

My voice cracked slightly.

“But then your dad texts something like that, and suddenly I’m wondering if I’m walking into something I don’t understand.”

Lane’s expression softened.

“Hey.” He lifted my chin gently until I looked at him. “You’re not walking into anything alone.”

I searched his face. “Is he why you said those things?”

His silence answered before he did. Every cruel word from that night suddenly sounded less like Lane . . . and more like an echo.

My heart sank. “Lane.” I blinked quickly as he nodded, trying to hold back the emotion building behind my eyes.

“I didn’t know,” I whispered.

“I know.” His thumb brushed over my knuckles. “That’s the problem. I didn’t let you know.”

The phone lit up again. Neither of us looked at it.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” he said.

I nodded. “I’m sorry you’ve had to deal with it,” I said.

Something in his face broke a little. “I don’t want you to feel sorry for me.”

“I’m not.” I squeezed his hand. “I’m just realizing you’ve been carrying things too.” For a long moment, neither of us spoke. Slowly Lane leaned forward and pressed his forehead against mine.

“I don’t care what he thinks.”

My heart hurt at the certainty in his voice.

“But I do,” I whispered.

His eyes opened. “Why?”

“Because he’s your dad.” For a moment, something flickered across his face—not anger, not hurt exactly, but the kind of pain that comes from wanting someone to understand a wound they’ve never seen.

“And you’re you,” he said.

The simplicity of it made my chest ache. I wanted to believe him. I wanted to believe in us. But a tiny piece of doubt had slipped between us, quiet and

unwelcome, and neither of us looked at the phone on the coffee table again.

OceanofPDF.com

Fifty-Three



Lane

My fist slammed into the heavy bag. The resulting muffled thud ricocheted off the walls and drowned out the memories that kept trying to creep in.

Again.

And again.

“What’d that bag do to you?” Jonah’s voice came from behind me.

I didn’t answer. Didn’t bother turning around. He knew better. We were wired the same way. Sometimes the bag untangled the mess in our heads

before words ever could. The hum of fluorescent lights and the faint pulse of someone's music bled through from the cardio room.

Jonah leaned against the squat rack, arms crossed. He waited. That was the thing about him; he never rushed meaningless words. Knew exactly when to push and when to wait.

"What?" I asked.

One eyebrow lifted.

"You don't get here before sunrise and try to beat up a heavy bag unless something happened that you need to process."

A slow breath. The gloves rested against the worn leather. The lie rose automatically. Swallow it. Say it was nothing. Say practice was stressful. Say anything except the truth. That had always been easier.

Keep it small. Keep it quiet. Pretend it didn't hurt.

Back then, there was always another fire to put out. Looking after Jonah and Landry. Then came the shell shock of losing Abel—Soren's brother. There had never seemed to be room to casually mention that Bryant Massey became a different man once the front door closed. No one got to see that side of Bryant Massey except for my mom and me, but she was gone now. She'd had enough of his shit and left. Sometimes the question still surfaced: Why hadn't she taken me? But I knew the answer. Bryant would've hunted her down—not because he couldn't bear to lose me, but because he couldn't stand losing something he believed belonged to him.

A possession.

A trophy.

Another achievement displayed for the world, while no one had any idea how far he was from being the father everyone thought he was.

I never blamed Jonah or Soren for missing it. Their own lives had been splintering apart, yet they'd still managed to become brothers in every way that mattered. They'd quieted the darkest parts of my adolescence without even realizing it. The rest of the world saw the golden boy in expensive cleats and championship photos. Everyone thought they wanted to be me. They didn't know I'd spent years wishing I could be anyone else.

"Cali saw a text."

Jonah just looked at me. "What text?"

A swallow scraped down my throat. "One from Bryant."

His eyes squinted.

“He called her . . .” The word stuck somewhere behind my teeth. “. . . something.”

Understanding flashed over his features almost instantly. His jaw clenched. If there was one thing Jonah had always been incapable of ignoring, it was someone hurting a woman. I’d watched him protect Landry his whole life. The silence weighed heavier than the noise of the gym.

“Is she okay?”

Not yet. But she would be. I rubbed the back of my neck.

“Shaken.”

The word sat heavy between us.

“But . . .” I let out a slow breath. “She stayed.” And somehow, that meant more than if she’d told me everything was okay.

Jonah nodded once.

“I told her the truth.”

He studied me for a long second. “Everything?”

A humorless laugh slipped out. “No.” My gaze dropped to the floor. “Not everything.”

Hell, Jonah and Soren still didn’t know all of it. They weren’t blind—they’d watched depression hollow me out piece by piece—but they’d never pushed. They’d simply stayed close and waited until I was ready to hand them the parts I’d kept hidden.

“You’re cutting him off?” It wasn't really a question. Just a conclusion.

I nodded. “Yeah, it’s time.”

Jonah searched my face. “You okay?”

The question caught somewhere under my ribs. Maybe this was what family was supposed to feel like—not blood, but people who noticed when something changed. People who stayed.

The heavy bag still swung between us, slowing with every pass. Above it, the metal clip caught my reflection, distorted enough that I barely recognized myself. The kid who’d spent years chasing approval. The man who’d convinced himself one more win, one more achievement, one more sacrifice might finally earn the words he’d spent his whole life waiting to hear.

“I should’ve done it years ago.”

Jonah didn’t argue. Didn’t tell me to think it over or leave the door cracked. He just nodded.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” I expected him to have more to say.

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “You’ve spent years trying to fix something you never broke.”

The words found a place in me that I’d been avoiding for years.

“He’s your dad, Lane. That doesn’t mean he gets unlimited chances to hurt you.”

That was the part that made it complicated. Because Bryant was still my father. Every report card, every championship, every milestone had been met with another critique, another reason I could’ve done better. Even as a little kid, I’d handed over every accomplishment like an offering, hoping this one might finally be enough.

It never was.

Jonah stood. “You need backup?”

I looked up. The question was so completely Jonah that I almost smiled. “What are you going to do?”

He shrugged. “Depends.”

“On?”

“How much trouble he gives you.” At that, he smirked. “I could also just stand there and look intimidating.”

That earned a quiet laugh. “I don’t think that’s necessary.”

Jonah narrowed his eyes. “Are you sure?”

I reached for my keys on the bench. “Yeah.” I shook my head, breathing out a laugh. “This is mine. I’ll take care of it.”

Jonah’s expression softened. “Lane.”

I looked over.

“You’ve got people in your corner.” He tapped his chest. “Sor would be here before you finished the sentence. And Landry . . .” He laughed. “We both know she’d probably throw the first punch.”

A real laugh escaped this time.

“I need to do this.”

Because Jonah was right. People had been standing in my corner for years, even while I insisted on fighting alone, threw myself in front of them without thinking twice, and let Bryant convince me I wasn’t worth defending. I was done believing that lie. Jonah headed for the exit, and I fell into step behind him.

“And Lane?”

I glanced over.

“If he says something stupid . . .”

I waited.

Jonah grinned. “Call me after. I’ll still be available to look intimidating.”

I shook my head, laughing under my breath. I glanced back at the heavy bag. It still swayed, each pass a little shorter than the last.

Eventually, it would stop.

For once since last night, my chest didn’t feel like it was carrying the weight of the world. Not because anything had been fixed. Not because it didn’t still hurt. But because I finally understood something I’d been too stubborn . . . too afraid to see before. I hadn’t been carrying it alone.

OceanofPDF.com

Fifty-Four



Lane

Tonight was Bryant’s appointed family dinner night. The kind where he expected me to show up, sit at his table, and play the role of the adoring son. I’d use the opportunity to tell him this would be the last dinner. The last obligation. The last time I sat at his table and pretended we were something we weren’t.

I expected him to get loud, but he hadn’t raised a hand to me since he started having to look up to me. Bryant had always preyed on anything he thought couldn’t fight back. I no longer fit that description.

I was grateful for the medication keeping the panic from swallowing me whole. I wasn't scared of Bryant—not exactly—but standing in his presence still dragged me backward. Back to every moment he'd found a way to make me feel small. Back to the times I'd curled inside the closet, knees pressed to my chest, wishing the door would open into somewhere else. Somewhere far away. Somewhere like the magical worlds inside those books Jonah always loved.

Julia opened the door wearing a dress that looked like it belonged in a 1950s kitchen-appliance advertisement, but I guessed she was just playing her part.

"Lane." She offered the word like a greeting as she shut the door behind me. "I made filet mignon and roasted vegetables with a bourbon glaze. I hope you're hungry."

"Sounds good." Julia wasn't the enemy. She was simply another person who had been caught in the web Bryant had built. We walked toward the dining room, and the quiet stretched as I waited for him to announce himself.

"There's my son." Bryant's voice carried too loudly through the house. I already knew what waited on the other side of the room. The smell reached me before he did—bourbon and something sharp underneath it. My shoulders tensed because there was no part of me that wanted to belong to him.

"It sure is, dear. Would you like water?" Julia moved toward him, her voice careful and practiced and demure. Her eyes flicked toward mine. She knew he'd had too much.

His heavy arm wrapped around her waist, his gold pinky ring catching the light. She smiled self-consciously at the action.

"I'll take another drink." His glazed eyes found mine. "Get one for my son here."

"I'm not drinking."

Julia tried to carefully extricate herself from Bryant's grasp, but his arm tightened around her waist.

His eyes stayed locked on me. "Still too good for your old man?"

There it was, the familiar twist. The hook designed to make me feel like I was the problem. I looked at him, really looked at him. I didn't see the man I'd spent my childhood trying to impress, but the man I'd learned to

appease to keep myself safe. A man that would do anything to maintain control.

“No,” I said calmly. “I’m just not interested.”

His mouth pulled into a humorless smile. “Always with the attitude.”

Julia looked between us. “Bryant—”

“No.”

My voice stopped both of them. I reached into my pocket, my fingers closing around my keys. This was why I was here: to end this game we were playing.

“I’m not staying for dinner.”

Bryant blinked slowly.

“What?”

I swallowed. “I came to tell you something.”

A laugh escaped him. “You came all the way over here for a dramatic announcement?”

I ignored the comment because that was how it always was with him. He turned everything into a performance until the other person forgot why they were talking. My fingers gripped my keys until the edges dug into my palm.

“I’m done.”

The room went quiet. Julia’s expression faltered as Bryant stared at me.

“Done with what?”

I held his gaze.

“With this.” I motioned around the room.

“The dinners. The pretending. The phone calls. The expectation that I show up and act like everything is normal when it’s never been anything close to normal.”

His expression hardened. “You’re my son.”

I nodded once. “I am.”

“Then act like it.”

The boy who used to measure his worth by Bryant’s approval would have looked away. Would have apologized. Would have searched his face for permission to exist. That version of me was gone.

“I have spent my whole life trying to be enough for you.” The truth sat between us.

“And I’m tired.” The words felt strange leaving my mouth. Not because they weren’t true. Because they were the truth I’d spent years avoiding.

“I’m not doing this anymore.”

For a moment, he just stared. Then Bryant laughed like he couldn't believe I had the nerve.

"You think you're better than me now?"

I shook my head because I'd heard him say the same thing to my mom when she walked out the door.

"No." I paused.

"I think I'm just done letting you make me feel like it's okay to treat people this way."

A flash of something dark crossed across his face.

"You'll come around."

I looked at him. "No, I won't."

Julia's eyes widened slightly.

Bryant pushed himself up, stumbling slightly as he moved closer.

"You're making a mistake."

"Maybe." I nodded. "But it's my mistake to make." I turned toward the door.

"Lane."

His voice carried a warning. I looked back.

"What?"

He stared at me for a long moment. Then he smiled. That smile. The one that used to make my stomach drop because it always came before punishment.

"You really think you can just walk away from me?"

My heart raced, but I didn't let him see it.

"I already have." I opened the door. The cool evening breeze drifted across my face, and for a second, I felt lighter, like I could finally breathe.

"Don't walk away from me, boy."

I kept moving until I reached the porch steps.

"I don't want you calling me or texting me. And keep her name out of your damn mouth," I said, leaving no room for misunderstanding.

He was standing in the doorway, and for a split second, something almost human crossed his face. Like maybe he'd screwed up, but then it disappeared.

"I always knew you'd betray me the same way she did."

My fists ached with how tightly I clenched them, and I turned to walk away. I'd said what I needed to, and it was time to leave. Nothing good would come from staying.

“Don’t!”

Julia’s voice cracked in warning.

Then everything happened too fast. A shift in the doorway. The scrape of something heavy against the floor.

A flash of movement.

The baseball bat came into view a heartbeat too late.

A high-pitched ringing swallowed everything except the sickening sound of impact. Pain exploded across the side of my head. The world tilted or maybe I did.

“Bryant!” Julia’s voice pierced the haze.

I stumbled.

My hand reached toward the pain.

Something warm coated my fingers.

I looked down.

Blood.

I tried to focus. Tried to stay upright.

Bryant was staring at me. The bat slipped from his hand as the color drained from his face as he realized what he’d done.

“No.” The word barely left him before his knees gave out. He collapsed to the floor. That was the last thing I saw clearly.

“Lane?”

Julia’s voice sounded miles away.

My knees buckled beneath me, slamming me to the ground.

Then she was beside me.

“Oh. Lane.”

I tried to answer. I tried to tell her I was okay, that I was still here. But my body had stopped listening.

“I’m calling 911,” she cried, her voice shaking.

The porch light blurred above me.

My vision narrowed, and I thought about Cali.

About the way she looked at me last night and the way she had said she wanted to give us another chance. I needed to call her. I needed to hear her voice.

The darkness crept in.

“Stay with me, Lane,” Julia whispered.

Her hands shook as she pressed something against the side of my head.

“Please stay awake.”

I tried. I really did. But everything faded.
The last thing I heard was Julia crying into the phone.
“Please hurry! There’s blood everywhere.”
And then there was nothing.

OceanofPDF.com

Fifty-Five



Cali

Lacy nodded as she balanced the phone between her shoulder and ear, scribbling notes across a sheet of paper. Short confirmations escaped her as her pen moved faster.

Her ice-blue eyes found mine.

Twice.

Three times.

Each quick glance carried more concern than the last. A chill crawled over my skin. She ended the call, immediately grabbed the phone again, and

dialed another number.

“Dr. Wrosch, this is Nurse Lacy in the ER. We need you to report immediately.”

My fingers went cold. That was the thing about trauma. Before your brain processed the details, your body recognized danger.

This was usually the call I made. Lacy had watched me walk into chaos with steady hands more times than I could count. The fact that she was making the call for me meant something was different.

Multiple victims.

A mass casualty.

Or—

My stomach twisted.

Someone I loved.

The room shifted beneath the weight of what I already knew. My grip tightened around the edge of the counter. I had worked trauma in Austin. I knew the signs—the urgency in her voice, the decision she made before anyone else knew what was coming. My heart already knew which possibility it was.

She hung up and crossed the room toward me.

“Cali.” Her hands wrapped around my shoulders, grounding me.

“Just tell me,” I pleaded.

“Lane has a head injury.” The world narrowed to those five words.

A breath caught somewhere in my chest. Lane.

“The EMTs heard you were dating and called ahead because they knew you were on shift,” Lacy explained quietly, watching my face. Things like this only happened in a small town, and I was grateful they had the foresight to call.

“I’ve got this,” I said. The words came out steadier than I felt.

Outside, sirens cut off as the ambulance turned into the bay. My feet moved before my fear could catch up. I would do everything in my power to be the Nurse Practitioner I needed to be, then I’d hand things off to Dr. Wrosch so I could be the girlfriend that was barely holding herself together.

The ambulance doors flew open.

“Thirty-two-year-old male,” one of the EMTs called as they rolled the gurney inside. “Blunt force trauma to the head from assault. Loss of consciousness at the scene. Regained consciousness briefly during transport. GCS thirteen on scene, now twelve and trending down.

Laceration to the left temporal region. Blood pressure eighty-seven over fifty-six. Heart rate one-ten.”

Assault.

I had treated broken bones. I had closed wounds. I had stopped bleeding. But I had no idea how to fix the fact that someone had looked at Lane and decided he deserved to be hurt. That was the part I couldn’t process.

My mind searched for answers before I wanted it to.

Who? Why? And then one name surfaced—the one Lane had spent years trying to escape. I pushed it away. Not because I believed it wasn’t possible. Because I was terrified that it was.

A different emotion followed close behind the fear. Something hotter. Sharper. Something I knew exactly how to name.

Anger.

Because whoever had done this hadn’t just hurt Lane. They had hurt someone who spent his entire life trying not to hurt anyone else.

The words became background noise, and training took over.

“Trauma room two,” I called. The team moved instantly. The wheels rattled against the floor as the team rushed him through the doors.

My stomach dropped when he came into view. Every clinical instinct inside me collided with something far more human. Lane’s eyes were closed. His hands rested at his sides, the same hands that had held mine like I was something worth protecting. Blood matted the hair above his right ear and streaked down the side of his neck. The oxygen mask obscured part of his face, but it didn’t hide how unnaturally pale he was. For one terrifying second, everything froze. Lane. The man who convinced everyone he needed nothing while quietly carrying everything. The man who had kissed every one of my fingers less than twenty-four hours ago.

“Vitals?” I asked.

My voice stayed steady while every instinct in me screamed.

“Eighty-eight pulse ox on arrival but improving with oxygen.”

“Get him on the monitor,” I directed. The room exploded into motion. Electrodes. IV access. Blood draws. Questions. Machines. I stepped to the head of the bed, desperate to hear his voice.

“Lane?” His brow twitched. A tiny movement but enough to remind my lungs how to work.

I swallowed.

The doors opened as Dr. Wrosch burst into the room, still buttoning her coat.

Her eyes found me first, then moved to Lane, assessing the situation immediately.

“I’ve got him,” she said with firm confidence.

I nodded, but I didn’t move. My feet stayed planted beside the bed even after my brain told them to step away.

“Reactive pupils,” I reported automatically. “Loss of consciousness at the scene.”

Dr. Wrosch studied me for a moment.

“Good work, Cali. I’ll take it from here.” Her warm brown eyes reassured me that she had handled cases like this, and I knew Lane was in good hands. She wasn’t just speaking as a physician. She was speaking as someone who knew what it felt like to love someone on the other side of the bed.

The composure I’d built inside the trauma bay slipped the second I no longer had a job to do. I moved toward the corner of the room. Far enough away not to interfere, but close enough to see his chest rise and fall. A nurse began cleaning the blood from his face so that Dr. Wrosch could get a better look at the damage. The sight almost undid me. Blood wasn’t new. I had seen more of it than most people saw in a lifetime. I knew how to separate the wound from the person attached to it. Except this time, I couldn’t.

Because it was his, and that changed everything.

Lacy appeared beside me, a steady presence who didn’t need me to explain how scared I was. She should’ve already been gone because her shift was over, but she was the kind of person who didn’t abandon you in the storm. She handed me a cup of water. My hands were trembling too hard to drink it, but I attempted to before she took the cup and set it to the side.

A few minutes later, they wheeled Lane toward Radiology to get a CT. As the gurney passed, his eyes cracked open, heavy, confused, and searching until they landed on me.

“Cali?” My name sounded like a lifeline in the darkness. Even injured and confused, his first instinct wasn’t fear. It was finding me. The words were rough and slurred. And every piece of control I had left was shattered.

I moved immediately to his side and wrapped his calloused hand in both of mine. His fingers weakly squeezed mine.

“I’m here.”

His gaze struggled to focus, but his brows drew together in concern.

“You okay?”

A wet, broken laugh escaped me before I could stop it. Of course he asked that. He was the one on a gurney, and he was asking if I was okay. I squeezed his hand.

“I’m okay as long as you’re okay,” I said.

A tiny smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, his eyes drifted shut again. The transporter began rolling him toward imaging, and I let go slowly. Like if I held on hard enough, none of this would be happening.

Dr. Wrosch paused beside me, her gray curls framing her face.

“The fact that he’s waking up and responding is encouraging.”

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

“We’ll know more after the scan.”

I swallowed and nodded again.

She squeezed my shoulder before following. The doors swung shut behind them, and suddenly, the ER felt impossibly quiet.

Someone had done this to him. The thought didn’t make sense. Lane was careful and strong. He was the person everyone else called when things fell apart. The adrenaline that had carried me through the last twenty minutes began to drain away, leaving only the fear I had been holding back.

Lacy stepped beside me and pulled me into a brief hug.

“You did good,” she said. I looked down the hallway where they’d taken him and pressed my shaking hands together.

“I just need him to be okay.” My voice cracked, and I quieted the sob waiting beneath it, threatening to break free.

For the first time all night, nobody had a response.

OceanofPDF.com

Fifty-Six



Cali

The waiting was the worst part. In medicine, the unknown, could end in relief or ruin. All that mattered was getting to him. I sat outside the imaging suite, because the last thing the team needed was a distracted Nurse Practitioner hovering over them. Lane needed their full attention—not mine.

One of the plush vinyl chairs creaked beneath me. A Styrofoam cup of coffee cooled between my palms while my gaze fixed on a spot on the floor

that refused to come into focus, no matter how many times I blinked back tears.

Every time the doors opened, my head snapped up. Every time they closed again without Lane, my stomach sank a little further.

The elevator dinged, followed by heavy footsteps echoing down the hallway. Jonah and Soren rounded the corner, moving fast—not quite running, but close enough that neither of them had bothered to hide their panic. Both of them looked like they'd left wherever they were the second they got the call.

Jonah spotted me first. His face hardened. "Where is he?" The question came out rough.

"CT scan."

Soren scrubbed a hand over his face. "What happened?"

My mouth opened, then closed. Suddenly, I realized there wasn't an answer to give. Not really. I knew the injury. I knew the vitals—blunt force trauma, head injury, loss of consciousness. Those details were easy. Facts always were.

But the story behind them was the one thing I couldn't piece together. The EMTs had only said it happened at his dad's house. The sheriff's department had cleared the roads for the ambulance. Everything else was missing.

"I don't know." I lifted a hand before dropping it, realizing there was so much I didn't know. The words felt inadequate the second they left my mouth.

Jonah frowned. "What do you mean you don't know?"

Confusion etched itself across his face, and I couldn't blame him.

"The EMTs said they responded to his dad's house." It was all I had. The look that passed between them was instant. Silent and terrifying.

Soren's jaw clenched so hard a muscle jumped beneath his five-o'clock shadow. Jonah's dark eyes fell to the floor. He breathed out a string of quiet curses, as if pieces of a puzzle had just fallen into place.

Neither of them seemed surprised. My stomach twisted. They knew something.

Before the question could leave my mouth, a woman appeared at the end of the hallway. Honey-blonde hair spilled from a loose clip, strands clinging to tear-streaked cheeks. Mascara had smeared beneath her eyes. She wore a vintage floral dress that looked oddly formal for a hospital. Pink heels

clicked frantically against the tile as she hurried toward us. The second Jonah saw her, he stiffened. Soren muttered something indiscernible under his breath.

"Oh, thank goodness!" She hurried toward us. "Is he okay?"

Instinct had me on my feet before conscious thought caught up.

"Are you family?" Even as the question left my mouth, certainty wavered. The woman stopped in front of us. Her eyes found mine.

"Yes . . . no." The answer came too fast to make sense. She swallowed. "I . . ." Her voice broke. "I was there."

Everything inside me locked into place. "You were there?"

Who was she?

She nodded rapidly. "I called 911."

Jonah exhaled. "Julia."

The woman looked at him; the pain on her face deepened. Julia. Bryant's wife. The woman Lane had mentioned in passing exactly once and never elaborated on. She looked young enough to be Bryant's daughter and also like she hadn't stopped crying since it happened.

"How is he?" she whispered. My gaze drifted toward the imaging doors.

"We won't know until the scan comes back."

Her hand flew to her mouth as a strangled sound escaped her. "Oh no."

Jonah caught her elbow before her knees gave out. The gesture surprised me. I'd never seen Jonah voluntarily touch anyone. I mean, I'm sure he did, but I wasn't sure I'd ever witnessed it.

That familiarity tugged at my attention. Julia looked close to our age, but I couldn't remember if she'd gone to school with us.

Julia looked between Jonah and Soren before her gaze found me. Recognition flashed across her face.

"Cali?"

I blinked.

A sad smile pulled at her lips. "Lane talked about you," she continued.

My lungs felt like someone had squeezed them.

"He loves you. He's loved you for a very long time." The words struck like a blow, stealing the air from my lungs. Julia's eyes dropped immediately, as though she'd revealed something that had never been hers to share, like she couldn't bear to witness the hope that flickered across my face.

The room fell quiet until Soren spoke. "What happened?"

Julia’s shoulders folded inward. Tears welled again, spilling over before she could stop them. “He told Bryant he was done.”

Jonah cursed again under his breath.

“He said he didn’t want contact anymore.” Her voice shook. “He was so confident. So calm.” She emphasized each word, as if making sure we understood exactly who Lane had been in those final moments before the assault.

“He wasn’t yelling.”

Jonah’s expression darkened. “He never does,” Jonah said, folding his arms across his chest, muscles shifting under ink.

A tear slid down her cheek. “He was walking away.”

My stomach dropped.

“He was already outside trying to leave.”

The hallway seemed to lose all its warmth.

She pressed trembling fingers against her lips. “And Bryant . . .”

The rest caught in her throat; for several seconds she couldn’t continue.

“He grabbed a baseball bat,” she whispered.

The blood drained from my face. Beside me, Soren went perfectly still, every muscle in his body locked. Jonah closed his eyes. Like some part of him had expected this all along.

“He hit him.” She whispered it like she was still processing it but knew it to be true. The words echoed, and nobody moved. Nobody breathed.

I understood it even more then, as clearly as I could see the people standing next to me. Lane as a little boy, growing up inside that house. With that man.

The picture came into crystal clear focus. The anxiety, the depression, the carefulness. The constant expectation of disappointment. The way he apologized for things that weren’t his fault. The way his entire body had tensed reading that text from Bryant. The hesitation every time his father came up. A lifetime of surviving someone volatile.

Not just *difficult* as I had believed, but dangerous. Was this why his mother left? Or had she been simply trying to survive?

Either way, she’d left Lane behind.

The thought hollowed out my chest.

And then I had left.

I put a hand against the wall to hold myself up. If I’d understood . . . really understood . . . I never would have walked away.

Julia wiped at her eyes.

“The police arrested him,” she finally said. “He was passed out drunk when they got there.”

Jonah muttered another curse.

My legs gave out, and the chair caught me before the floor could. Exhaustion seeped into my bones as pieces of the past snapped together one after another. All the years, and it never crossed my mind that Lane wasn’t safe.

Bryant had always seemed arrogant. Demanding. A businessman accustomed to getting his own way. Never in a million years had I imagined he was capable of swinging a baseball bat to hurt his own son.

If this was what he did as an adult . . .

What had Lane survived as a child?

Julia lowered herself into the seat across from me. For several moments nobody spoke.

Then quietly, Soren asked, “Did he hurt you?” There wasn’t a doubt in my mind that neither Soren nor Jonah intended to let Julia leave this hospital without making sure she was safe.

Julia looked up, confused. Then understanding flickered across her face.

“No.” The answer came too quickly.

Jonah noticed too. His thumb dragged slowly beneath his lower lip while his jaw worked. Each of us internally considered the same question.

Julia laughed. A tiny broken sound. “I always hated that.” She stared at the floor. “The way he could make people afraid without touching them.”

Her voice cracked. “The way he made me afraid.” And then she said something that made the entire hallway seem like it stopped breathing. “I should've left years ago.”

Jonah’s eyes narrowed.

Julia laughed again. This time it sounded even more hollow.

“Actually . . .” She swallowed. “I almost did.”

Something shifted in the air.

Soren leaned forward. “What do you mean?”

Julia stared down at her hands, then toward the imaging doors as though searching for the courage to keep going.

“Lane told me—not in so many words—that Bryant asked me out because he’d found out we were dating. I didn’t realize until afterward that trying to take what belonged to Lane was some kind of game to him.”

My brain lagged behind the words. The hallway fell completely silent.

I blinked. “What?”

Julia’s face flushed with shame.

“We went on a few dates first.” She gave a small wistful smile. “But he was still completely hung up on you, so I always knew it wasn’t going to last.” Her voice softened. “He was young. Sweet.” The smile deepened for the briefest second. “He made me laugh.” Then it disappeared. “Bryant met me through Lane.”

“He what?” The question came out barely louder than a whisper.

Julia closed her eyes; for a second she looked physically ill.

“Bryant began calling.”

Jonah snorted in disgust.

“Then he’d show up when Lane wasn’t around.”

Nausea curled through my stomach. The truth unfolded one horrifying layer at a time, like something rotten finally exposed to sunlight.

“He pursued you?” I asked.

Julia laughed bitterly. “‘Pursued’ makes it sound romantic.” Her eyes filled again. “I broke up with Lane because I thought it would stop.”

My heart ached for both of them. For the young version of Lane. The one who had probably blamed himself. The one who always blamed himself.

“It didn’t.” Her voice cracked. “It just got more confusing.”

Nobody moved.

“Then eventually . . .” She looked down. “I gave up because I believed he loved me.”

That wasn’t romance; it wasn't love. It was manipulation wrapped in attention. Control disguised as devotion. And suddenly, the man Lane had spent his life trying to escape came into devastating focus.

He wasn’t a difficult father or a toxic parent. He was a man who treated people like possessions, reducing women, children, anyone weaker than him to something he could claim, take, and control. The text message, the slur, the contempt, the cruelty came rushing back. For the first time, my anger wasn’t for Lane. It was mine.

Every head turned as the imaging doors opened. A transporter rolled Lane’s gurney into the hallway. Bandaged. Pale. Alive. The breath left my lungs.

Lane’s eyes fluttered open, and his gaze found me first. Then Jonah, Soren, and Julia. A weak smile curved his lips.

“Well.” His voice was hoarse. “I might have a little goose egg.”

The sound that came out of me was half laugh, half sob. My feet were moving before my mind caught up. Behind me, Julia began to cry again in relief.

OceanofPDF.com

Fifty-Seven



Cali

The room was quiet except for the familiar hospital sounds I'd learned to ignore. The steady beep of the monitor beside Lane's bed. The occasional announcement over the intercom. The distant rattle of wheels rolling across polished floors. But compared to the chaos of the last few hours, it felt almost silent.

The CT was clear, so Dr. Wrosch had diagnosed him with a severe concussion because there was no evidence of a skull fracture. The laceration had been stitched. Bruises were already blooming across his skin, but there

was no intracranial bleed. No surgery or life-threatening complications. Just observation and rest.

A wave of relief moved through me because those injuries would heal.

Jonah and Soren had finally gone home after extracting multiple promises from Lane that he would answer his phone. He was groggy from the pain medication, but his expression softened as he saw his friends who were closer than brothers. His shoulders finally loosened, as though he trusted them to stand watch. Soren had been on the phone with the sheriff's department as he left, making sure Bryant was still being held and hadn't somehow talked his way out of the charges. It seemed unlikely, especially with Julia witnessing everything firsthand, but none of us were willing to gamble on unlikely anymore. Julia had left too, tearful and relieved. Grief hollowed her expression. She was devastated that her husband had tried to kill Lane.

The entire night blurred together like a nightmare that refused to release its grip. I curled into the uncomfortable chair beside Lane's bed, one leg tucked beneath me, a magazine resting open in my lap. A nurse had dimmed the overhead lights. I'd called Helen and checked on Jace, filling them both in. Lane had texted another coach at the high school to let him know he would be unavailable for football practice for at least the next week.

Lane was awake now, quiet and exhausted as he sorted through everything that had happened. Every few minutes, my gaze drifted from the magazine back to him. The bandage wrapped around his head. The steady rise and fall of his chest.

Just making sure he was still there.

"You know," Lane said quietly, "you're being weird."

My eyes snapped away from the bandage.

His mouth twitched. "You're staring at me."

"I am not."

"You absolutely are."

An eye roll earned the smallest smile from him. Then he winced.

"Don't do that."

"What?"

"Make me smile." His fingers lifted toward the stitches near his temple. Despite everything, a laugh slipped free. For one brief moment, life stitched itself back together. Lane watched me, his gaze lingering long enough to

make heat creep into my cheeks, and suddenly, the wrinkled scrubs hanging on my body felt painfully noticeable.

“Cali.”

The way he said my name wrapped around my heart and squeezed.

The magazine slid onto the chair beside me. Neither of us had believed I’d been reading it anyway. For a moment, we just looked at each other, and the rest of the world seemed to fade away.

His eyes searched mine like he was committing every detail to memory. Then his hand reached toward me, our fingers lacing together. His hand was warm and solid in mine.

“I’m sorry I scared you.”

A hard swallow did nothing to stop the sting burning behind my eyes. My gaze dropped to our joined hands, and for a long moment, neither of us spoke.

“I thought I was going to lose you . . .” The words slipped out before they could be stopped. “When I’d just gotten you back.”

His grip flexed.

“I saw you come through those doors and . . .” My voice cracked. “I forgot how to breathe.”

“Baby.”

A shaky laugh escaped. “I’m supposed to be the calm medical professional.”

“You’re allowed to be scared.”

That cracked something wide open inside me.

The room blurred. Looking away felt safer than letting him watch the tears gather. A calloused finger gently brushed beneath my chin. Lane carefully guided my face back toward his until his eyes found mine.

A faint smile touched his mouth before giving way to something honest. Vulnerable. The kind of expression that never would’ve existed on his face a year ago. He’d stood up to the biggest monster of his life. Nothing about that was small.

“I kept thinking about you.” His voice barely rose above a whisper. “When everything happened.” Our fingers knotted together. Lane swallowed. “The last thing I remember before everything went black”—he paused—“was reaching for my phone. I just wanted you.”

The tears finally escaped.

His thumb slowly brushed across my knuckles. “I kept thinking about last night.”

A watery laugh slipped free. “That’s incredibly inconvenient timing.”

“It really was.” A smile tugged at his mouth, then disappeared.

“All I could think about was that we’d finally found our way back to each other.”

Emotion flooded my chest and it almost hurt to breathe. Carefully, I eased onto the edge of the bed beside him. Lane scooted over to make room. His hand lifted, cupping my cheek with impossible tenderness. There wasn’t any hesitation. Something stronger than gravity pulled me toward him.

His lips met mine carefully, gently, before it turned into something that felt like desperation, urgency, and relief. Our kiss felt like coming home. My fingertips brushed the rough stubble along his jaw, carefully avoiding the bandage. His fingers flexed gently against my waist, like he needed the reassurance that I was really there. The kiss deepened for only a moment before we both pulled back.

Our foreheads touched. We breathed the same air, neither of us opening our eyes.

“I love you.” The words escaped before fear could stop them. Lane went perfectly still as his forehead pressed more firmly against mine. When our eyes met again, his were already shining.

“Cali.” His voice cracked, and the sound unraveled something inside me. Once, Lane would’ve buried every vulnerable part of himself beneath a joke. Anything to keep people from seeing where he hurt. Not anymore. Now he let me see it, trusted me with it.

“I love you more.”

“I should’ve said it sooner.” A quiet laugh escaped.

“Me too.” His smile returned, soft and entirely him. “Guess getting hit with a baseball bat gave me some perspective.”

A groan slipped out just as he laughed. He reached for his head.

“Lane,” I scolded.

“What?”

“You cannot use a traumatic injury as a romantic gesture.”

His grin widened. Then he immediately winced again. “Still hurts.”

I laughed despite myself and leaned forward to kiss him again, simply because I could. He was here. I was here. We loved each other. For tonight, that was enough.

OceanofPDF.com

Fifty-Eight



Lane

I hated being fussed over, which would've been fine if everyone in my life hadn't apparently decided I needed exactly that.

"Slow down," Cali said

"I'm walking."

"You have a severe concussion."

"My feet are fine! I think you just like bossing me around."

My eyes slid to Cali. She looked back. Completely serious. The corner of my mouth twitched before a laugh escaped. Instant regret followed as pain

throbbed through the side of my head.

“See?” she said.

“Ugh.”

Jace snorted from my other side. “Doc’s been like this all morning.”

“Traitor.”

“Just saying.”

A shake of my head proved spectacularly stupid. The world pitched sideways for a second, and Cali’s hand immediately wrapped around my arm.

“Lane.”

“I’m fine.”

“Uh-huh.”

A sigh escaped. I wasn’t winning this, not with Cali—especially when she was worried.

The automatic hospital doors slid open, and sunlight spilled across my face. My eyes protested immediately. For the first time in almost twenty-four hours, hospital walls disappeared behind me. Fresh air filled my lungs instead of antiseptic. Kissing the pavement crossed my mind. Instead, all my concentration went toward reaching the truck without collapsing and proving everyone right.

Janet, my antique Ford, sat exactly where Soren and his foreman, Travis, had parked it. Normally those keys would’ve been in my pocket. Today, they belonged to Cali, who’d confiscated them and had absolutely zero interest in negotiating.

Apparently surviving a head injury didn’t earn driving privileges.

“Need a hand?” Jace asked casually.

“Nope.”

I took two more steps. The asphalt moved beneath my feet. Jace caught my elbow before my pride crashed into the pavement.

“Gotcha.”

A groan slipped out.

He grinned. “Doc said not to let you face-plant in the parking lot.”

“Doc talks too much.”

“I thought you enjoyed my bedside manner,” Cali shot back.

The comeback died before it reached my mouth. The parking lot stopped me cold. Not the cars—people. Dozens of teenage boys.

My football team.

For one disorienting second, the concussion seemed like the only reasonable explanation. Then the signs came into focus.

COACH MASSEY—TOUGHER THAN A BASEBALL BAT

GET WELL, COACH

WE NEED YOU TO WIN!

NO DYING BEFORE SEASON'S DONE

Tyler. That one practically had his name written across it.

The entire group erupted when they spotted me.

"COACH!"

"Look, he's alive!"

"I told you he was too stubborn to die!"

"Coach, you look terrible!"

"Thanks, Carson!"

Laughter rolled through the crowd.

My feet stayed rooted to the pavement.

The signs. The ridiculous grins. Half of them should've been sitting in class instead of standing in a hospital parking lot on a school morning. They'd shown up anyway. For me. My heart seemed to forget its rhythm.

Beside me, Cali smiled like she'd been waiting for this.

"You knew about this?"

Her smile widened. "I might've received several texts."

The accusation moved to Jace. He betrayed her without hesitation.

"It was Doc's idea to tell them you were getting released."

"What the heck," Cali huffed.

She reached over to swat his shoulder, but he ducked away with an entirely too-proud grin.

The boys drifted toward us. Some tried to play it cool. Others looked exhausted, like sleep hadn't happened. One or two shoved their hands into their pockets, suddenly unsure what to do now that I was standing in front of them. Kids who drove each other crazy, forgot homework, and made spectacularly terrible decisions.

My kids.

"Coach." Adam stepped forward first. His voice cracked, just slightly. "You scared us."

The parking lot fell quiet. Somehow those three words shook me harder than all of the noise had.

"I'm sorry."

Adam nodded, holding the moment just long enough before ruining it.

“You still have to watch game film next week.”

The entire team burst out laughing.

“Just making sure you don’t get soft,” Adam added.

“It’s just a concussion. I'll be back before you know it.”

A cheer rose from the crowd, and several boys broke into applause.

My hand dragged down my face. Cali laughed. The traitor.

The sound pulled my attention toward her. Morning sunlight caught in her hair, setting the loose strands aglow. She smiled—healthy, happy, safe—and gratitude crashed over me so hard it nearly stole the breath from my lungs.

Less than twenty-four hours earlier, blood had soaked my father’s porch.

Now dozens of teenage boys had skipped school to stand in a hospital parking lot because they wanted to make sure their coach came home.

The juxtaposition of both moments was impossible to put into words.

One of the younger players stepped forward, clutching a handmade poster. The letters leaned in every direction, black marker bleeding through the paper.

GET BETTER COACH. WE LOVE YOU.

The parking lot quieted again. My gaze lingered on the sign before lifting to the kid holding it, then drifting across the rest of the team.

Something clenched painfully in my chest. For years, I’d searched for something I’d never found in the place I’d wanted it most, and suddenly, I understood what it was: belonging. Family. And I had one. Not the kind you were born into, but the kind you built and the kind that chose you.

A throat cleared. Mine.

“You guys are idiots.”

The team erupted with cheers echoing across the parking lot. Several boys punched the air. Tyler cupped his hands around his mouth. “HE LOVES US!”

I pointed at him. “Especially you.”

The boys laughed even harder. Before another step could send the ground tilting, Jace slipped an arm around my back to steady me. The movement didn’t escape anyone’s notice.

“Oooooh.”

“Look at Jace helping Coach.”

“That’s adorable.”

Jace groaned.

“Someone snap a pic for Father’s Day!”

The entire parking lot exploded with laughter.

A cough barely disguised my own.

Cali covered her face. “Absolutely not,” she muttered.

“Doc’s blushing!”

“Oh, he’s definitely becoming your stepdad.”

“Adam Wege,” Cali warned.

The kid immediately pointed at me. “Coach, she used my full name. I’m in danger.”

The team completely lost it. Absolute fruit loops, every last one of them. By the time we reached the truck, my palm slid across the robin’s-egg blue paint.

The old Ford had carried me through heartbreak, championships, funerals, and more late-night drives than I could count. Somehow seeing it waiting for me felt like proof that the world was still where I’d left it.

“You gonna stare at it all day?” Cali asked.

“Maybe.”

“Get in the truck, Massey.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Jace barked out a laugh.

I shot him a look. Still smiling, Jace helped ease me into the passenger seat. The boys were still yelling and waving signs. Still making complete fools of themselves.

As Cali climbed behind the wheel and the old Ford rumbled to life, my gaze drifted back one last time. For years, every ounce of energy had gone toward earning love from someone who’d never been capable of giving it. All along, the people who mattered had already been here.

My friends. This team. Jace. Cali.

Family had never been waiting inside Bryant’s house. It was standing in a hospital parking lot, holding crooked signs and making terrible jokes.

OceanofPDF.com

Fifty-Nine



Cali

The boys cheered as I pulled out of the hospital parking lot. Lane waved once through the open window. A terrible decision. The gesture only fueled them, and their shouting followed us down the street until the sound finally faded behind us. I shook my head, smiling.

Beside me, Lane sank deeper into the passenger seat. His discharge instructions sat folded in the center console. His prescriptions were in a paper pharmacy bag at his feet. The pain medication he'd taken twenty

minutes earlier was doing exactly what it was supposed to do. Lane was completely loopy—not sleepy loopy. Talkative loopy.

I glanced over. His head rested against the seat back, sunglasses covering his eyes. One hand lay relaxed on his thigh. For several quiet minutes, he simply watched the world pass through the windshield.

Then—

"You love me."

I nearly swerved. My eyes shot to him. "What?"

A smile spread across his face. "You love me."

I laughed. "Yes."

His smile somehow widened. Like I'd just handed him the greatest piece of information he'd ever received.

"That's nice."

I bit the inside of my cheek. The medication was working overtime.

"That's nice?" I repeated.

"Mm-hmm."

He nodded thoughtfully, pointing toward the windshield.

"Sky's blue."

"Excellent observation."

"Truck's blue too."

"Also true."

His head turned toward me, completely serious.

"Your eyes are blue."

I blinked. "What?"

"The color." His finger waved vaguely toward the hood.

"The truck. Custom color."

I looked ahead. Then back at him. Then ahead again.

"I'm sorry. Are you saying your truck is the color of my eyes?"

"Yep." The answer came instantly, like there was no other possible explanation. Heat crept into my cheeks.

"Lane."

"What?"

"When did you paint the truck?"

His head lolled toward me. "Yearsss ago."

I almost missed the next turn. "Years ago?"

"Yep."

My stomach fluttered, and I hated how much I loved that he had no idea what he'd just revealed.

"You're drugged," I reminded him.

"You drugged me." His eyes widened behind the sunglasses.

I burst out laughing.

"It's s'okay. I like being drugged by you." The ridiculousness of the sentence had heat creeping up my cheeks, but I couldn't stop smiling.

The truck rumbled beneath us as we passed familiar storefronts and quiet streets lined with trees that had mostly lost their leaves. For a few minutes, the only sounds were the engine, the tires against pavement, and the steady rhythm of his breathing.

Then—

"You were pretty."

I glanced over. He stared straight ahead, as though the words had slipped out without him realizing he'd said them.

"Were?"

His brow furrowed like he was trying to find the right word. "Are."

I grinned. "Better."

"You were pretty in high school too."

My fingers flexed around the steering wheel.

"You've mentioned that."

"Thought you were the prettiest girl I'd ever seen."

A soft laugh escaped. "Oh, really?"

"Mm-hmm." His head bobbed once. Matter-of-fact. "I was fourteen."

I couldn't stop smiling. "Fourteen?"

"Maybe fifteen."

I glanced at him. The medication had loosened the careful control he usually carried. The jokes were still there, but now everything underneath them slipped through too.

"You know what else?"

"What else?" I already knew I was going to regret asking. His head turned toward me. The sunglasses hid his eyes, but I still felt the weight of his attention.

"I liked your laugh."

My chest squeezed. "Lane . . ."

"You still do it."

I swallowed.

He smiled. “Same laugh.” For a moment, the words stole every response I had. The road blurred slightly. I blinked and refocused.

Lane sighed dramatically. “You’re really pretty.”

I laughed. “There it is.”

“There what is?”

“The drugs.”

“No.” He shook his head, immediately wincing.

“No, you’re always pretty.” He drew out the last word. I reached across the center console and squeezed his hand. His fingers immediately curled around mine, like they remembered exactly where they belonged. The simple gesture softened his expression.

We drove like that for miles, his hand wrapped around mine. Sunlight spilled through the windows, warming the cab, until his thumb slowed against my knuckles and he finally drifted to sleep. And as I drove us home in a truck painted the exact color of my eyes—apparently—I realized there was nowhere else I wanted to be.

OceanofPDF.com

Sixty



Lane

Cali had barely let me sink into the couch before she tucked a blanket over my legs, pressed a bottle of water into my hand, and placed my medication on the coffee table like she was preparing for anything. Every time my head dipped too low, her eyes flicked up from whatever she was doing, checking on me without trying to make it obvious. Apparently having a concussion meant I lost basic human rights.

"I can take my own medicine."

"You forgot your phone in the refrigerator fifteen minutes ago."

I gave her my best offended look.

“That’s not related.”

“It absolutely is related.”

Jace had claimed my recliner like he paid the mortgage, one ankle resting over his knee and a bag of chips balanced on his stomach. “It was in the vegetable drawer,” he said around a mouthful of chips.

“I see how it is.”

A knock came a second before the front door opened without waiting for an invitation. Soren strolled in first, carrying enough take-out containers to feed a small army. Sawyer followed behind him with grocery bags hooked over both arms, her long hair braided over one shoulder, concern etched across her face. Landry came next with flowers tucked against her sweater, because apparently surviving a concussion meant I now deserved a bouquet. Hope, perched on her mom’s hip, was already trying to steal them with a chubby little hand. Jonah stepped inside last, hands shoved into his jacket pockets, jaw locked tight enough that I knew he wasn’t here just for dinner.

“Lane,” Sawyer said, dragging out my name the second she saw me.

“Good to see you too.”

“You look terrible. Are you okay?” Concern softened every line of Sawyer’s face, and had it been anyone else, I would have blown them off.

“I will be.”

Landry crossed to me immediately and wrapped me in a careful hug. The kind of hug you gave someone when words weren’t enough. “You scared us.” My heart missed a beat, the same way it had in the hospital parking lot. Everyone kept saying those words, and every time they did, they struck a little harder.

“I’m okay.”

She stepped back. Her eyes shined. “Don’t ever scare us like that again.”

I nodded, because I didn’t trust myself to answer.

The group quickly took over the living room. Food appeared on every available surface until the coffee table disappeared beneath containers, bags, and enough leftovers to feed the neighborhood. Nobody had coordinated it. Everyone had brought exactly what someone else hadn’t thought of. Maybe that’s what family looked like. Nobody asked what was needed. They just filled the gaps.

I eased into the corner of the couch while everyone talked around me. Conversation flowed around me without asking anything in return. Nobody

expected me to entertain them or reassure them. They were just . . . here. I'd spent years believing love had to be earned. They strode through my front door like love had never come with conditions.

Jonah barely spoke as his eyes drifted toward the framed photo on the bookshelf. The two of us were seventeen, covered in mud after a football game, helmets tucked under our arms, grinning like we thought we had the whole world figured out. We hadn't even come close. But through every mistake, every bad decision, every season where we didn't know what the hell we were doing, Jonah had still been there.

Eventually, the conversations splintered into smaller ones.

Cali disappeared down the hallway to grab a quick shower. Sawyer and Landry went into the kitchen to check on the soup they were warming up. Soren followed because apparently ten feet away from Sawyer was more than he could handle. Jace wandered outside to make a phone call.

Jonah stared at the floor, forearms braced against his thighs, jaw clenched. His thumb brushed over his knuckles—the same nervous habit he'd had since we were teenagers. Jonah only folded into himself like that when he was carrying something he didn't know how to say out loud.

"You alright?"

Jonah opened his mouth, closed it, dragged both hands down his face.

"I should've been there." The words came out like he'd been holding them inside all day.

"Jonah . . ."

His thumb found his knuckles again. "I knew you were cutting him off. I knew something could happen."

"No." It came out sharper than I intended. Jonah studied me for a long moment. I didn't back down.

"Nobody knew he'd go that far."

A muscle jumped in his jaw. "He threatened you."

I nodded. "My whole life." Everything went still. There was nothing left to hide.

Jonah stared at me, already trying to make it his fault. I'd spent years carrying blame because it was easier than admitting how little control I'd ever had. I wasn't about to let him carry something that belonged to Bryant.

"You don't get to do that."

His brow furrowed. "Do what?"

"Take responsibility for something that isn't yours."

He blew out a slow breath. I kept going.

“You couldn’t have known.”

“Maybe.”

“No.” I waited until he looked back. “You couldn’t.”

Jonah exhaled slowly, long and tired.

“Hey,” I said.

He straightened a little.

“We don’t get to rewrite the past and pretend we would’ve known things we couldn’t know.”

Jonah let out a short laugh. The tension in his shoulders eased. I’d take that as a win. He shook his head.

“You know I would’ve been there.”

“I know.” Years of showing up for each other stretched between us—the kind built less on words and more on being there, again and again, until *brothers* was the only word that fit.

“You didn’t have to do this alone.”

Words caught in my throat. The landscape painting across the room suddenly became fascinating. Because accepting that someone would have shown up for me was somehow harder than surviving the night itself. But sitting there surrounded by take-out containers, grocery bags, and people who kept showing up whether I asked them to or not . . . I couldn’t pretend I was alone anymore. Maybe I never had been. I just hadn’t known how to see it.

“I know that too.”

Jonah nodded once.

Cali returned with damp hair and one of my old sweatshirts hanging off her shoulder. Without saying a word, she crossed the room, made sure my water was within reach, and laced her hand through mine before settling beside me. Jonah glanced at her, then at me. The smallest smile tugged at the corner of his mouth before he looked toward the kitchen, like he’d finally seen something he’d been hoping for.

The back door opened. Jace’s voice carried in from the kitchen. “Why is there enough food in this house to survive a natural disaster?”

Landry immediately answered. “Because men with concussions don’t cook.”

“That’s not a real rule.”

“It is today.”

Jace’s laughter echoed from the kitchen. Sawyer teased Soren about what qualified as a soup container. Landry bounced Hope on her hip while the flowers sat on the kitchen counter.

“You’re stuck with us, you know,” Landry said.

I laughed. “Yeah.”

I’d never thought those words could make me feel safe, but they did. It sounded like the safest place I’d ever been.

OceanofPDF.com

Sixty-One



Cali

By nine o’clock, Lane had decided being concussed meant he was entitled to exactly zero adult supervision—except mine.

“You’re staying.”

I glanced up from fluffing the blankets on his couch. “On your couch.”

He gave me a look that said he had already decided the argument was over.

“No.”

“You need rest.”

“Exactly.”

I waited for him to realize how ridiculous he sounded. The bandage at his temple should have made him look less attractive; instead, he looked unfairly handsome and entirely too pleased with himself.

“I’m sleeping here.”

“The couch is uncomfortable.”

“It is literally your couch.”

“Exactly. I know how uncomfortable it is.”

From the entryway, Jace called out that he was tired of listening to adults argue and was heading back to the farm on Lane’s ATV. Smart kid.

“Cali.” The way he said my name should have come with a warning label.

Arms crossed, I shook my head. “No.”

“Please.”

I blinked.

“You’re weaponizing your concussion.”

“I am not.”

“You absolutely are.”

For exactly three seconds, he looked offended. Then the corner of his mouth lifted. “Maybe a little.”

The laugh slipped out before I could stop it. A mistake. His grin widened immediately.

“There it is.”

“What?”

“Your smile.”

I pressed my lips together, fighting a smile. “Stop being charming.”

“Sorry, baby. I think that would be impossible.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but his dramatic sigh made him wince.

“See?”

“Still worth it.” Lane pushed himself carefully off the couch, moving slower than he wanted me to notice. His balance still wasn’t completely steady, and I watched his hand brush the wall for support before he disappeared down the hallway, pretending I hadn’t noticed.

“I think I need medical assistance,” he called over his shoulder. I rolled my eyes and followed like he knew I would.

His room looked exactly like Lane—organized where it mattered, chaotic everywhere else. The bed was made except for the corner where he

obviously threw the blanket back every morning. Books crowded the nightstand. His boots sat by the door like he could leave at any second. A framed picture from his high school football days sat crooked on the dresser. Somehow, even the mess felt intentional.

By the time I was done surveying the room, he had already lowered himself onto the mattress and patted the space beside him. A dangerous move.

"Come here."

"No."

"I might need assistance."

I narrowed my eyes.

"With what?"

He gave that exaggerated consideration.

"Various medical needs."

I shook my head, unable to stop the smile tugging at my mouth.

"You realize you are the worst patient I've ever met."

"You say that like handsome, injured men are a common medical occurrence."

"You're a dork."

The softer smile appeared—the one that always found a way through every defense I had.

"I'll just sleep better if you're here." The smile faded from his face. What remained was the man underneath it—the one who was finally admitting he needed someone.

The last forty-eight hours had scared both of us more than either one of us wanted to admit. The thought of losing someone who had become home before either of us realized it. My eyes traced the bruising along his face, the stitches, the exhaustion hiding behind every joke. Lane let everyone believe he was stronger than he felt. With me, he finally stopped pretending.

"I don't want to be alone tonight." The teasing disappeared so completely it almost startled me. Lane Massey could joke through anything. Pain. Fear. Disappointment. But not this.

Because after Bryant, after everything had been dragged into the light, silence left too much room for memories. And the truth was, the thought of sleeping alone didn't sound much better to me. I wanted to rest my hand on his chest so I could reassure myself that he was breathing.

A slow breath left my chest. "You better stay on your side."

His whole face brightened as if I had just given him the best news of his life.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I mean it.”

“I have never meant anything more.”

I snorted and gave him a look.

He lasted exactly three seconds before the grin broke through. The room filled with the kind of quiet laughter that only existed when two people knew each other too well.

I shuffled around the bed, and Lane immediately moved over—farther than necessary, making room like he was afraid I might change my mind.

The mattress dipped beneath my weight. I reached over and adjusted the edge of the blanket where it had slipped from his shoulder. The movement was automatic. Familiar. Like some part of me already knew how to take care of him.

For a second, neither of us moved. Then his arm slid carefully around my waist. Slowly. Deliberately. Giving me every chance to pull away. I didn’t. His body relaxed against mine, like he had been carrying tension in every muscle and finally remembered he could let it go. My head rested against his chest, listening to the steady rhythm beneath my ear.

His fingers traced slow circles along my back, absent-minded and familiar. After a moment his fingers went still against my back.

“Cali?”

“Yeah?”

He hesitated, like he was deciding whether to say something or let it stay buried.

“I took care of it.”

My eyebrows pulled together. “What?”

“Brett.” The name changed something in the room. “He doesn’t get to keep taking pieces of your life.”

My heartbeat faltered because some part of me had gotten used to waiting for the next thing.

“Lane . . .”

“I mean it.” His voice stayed quiet, but there was something steady underneath it. “He doesn’t get another chance to walk back into your life. He doesn’t get to take any more from you.”

He swallowed.

“The restraining order violations are documented. You’re not facing him alone anymore.”

His thumb brushed over my side as I remembered how to breathe.

“I don’t know how to thank you for giving me something I forgot I was allowed to have.”

“What?”

“Peace.”

For once, neither of us needed to explain anything.

“You know,” he murmured.

“Hmm?”

“I love you.”

My smile pressed against his shirt.

“I love you more.”

His arm wrapped snugly around me. A few seconds passed before he spoke again; his voice slipped through the dark.

“I spent so long thinking the best parts of my life were already behind me,” he whispered. “Then you walked back into it. I don’t know how I got lucky enough that you’re still here.”

Something inside my chest cracked open. Lane swallowed. Tears blurred my vision before I could stop them. His thumb brushed beneath my eye, catching one before it fell.

“Hey.”

A shaky laugh escaped. “Don’t make me cry.”

“Doctor’s orders?”

“Absolutely.”

A sleepy smile tugged at his mouth. “Bossy.”

“You’re welcome.”

His eyes finally closed.

I waited a few seconds before whispering, “You’re on my side of the bed.”

“I believe there’s been a misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding?”

“Yes. My side appears to have expanded.”

I stared at him. “That is not how sides work.”

He breathed out a laugh too tired to say more.

But tonight, in the quiet of his room, surrounded by the little pieces of his life—the books he had dog-eared, the boots he kicked off by the door, the

faint scent of laundry detergent and cedar that somehow felt like him—we simply stayed. Together. His fingers found mine beneath the blanket, even after sleep pulled him under. I held on. Not because I was afraid he would disappear. Because I finally believed he wouldn’t.

OceanofPDF.com

Sixty-Two



Lane

The front door clicked shut behind the detectives, and Cali released a long breath. They'd spent the last two hours interviewing me. Through it all, Cali had stayed by my side, as I recounted everything that had happened at Bryant's house two days earlier. Bryant would probably spend the rest of his life behind bars. Julia had already given her statement, and the state had charged him with attempted murder before I'd even spoken to detectives. My statement filled in the last of the blanks. Between our testimony, Bryant's own security footage, and the financial crimes uncovered during

the investigation, there wasn't much left for him to deny. For the first time in years, my muscles didn't feel like they were braced for the next blow. Maybe this was what justice felt like.

"You okay?" Cali asked softly. She stepped between my knees where I sat on the couch, one hand threaded gently into my hair. Her fingers combed through the strands while her thumb traced a slow, comforting path across my temple. I leaned into her touch, pressing my cheek against her palm as I closed my eyes for a moment. When I looked up again, her bright blue eyes were searching mine with quiet reassurance.

"Yeah, I think it's finally settling in that I don't have to pretend that it was ever a functioning family. I've never lived without the anxiety of him popping up and somehow trying to control or ruin all of the good things in my life. I just—" I cut off as I struggled to find the words. One of Cali's hands braced on my shoulder. Her touch stayed steady, never asking me to rush through what I couldn't explain.

"It's going to take time to process, but I want you to know that I'm here. Your friends are here. You're not alone."

"Yo, you got any chips in here?" We jerked apart at Jace's words. He was holding a half-eaten snack cake in his hand.

"Jace," Cali called in warning.

"There are some in the pantry on the second shelf," I said, smiling as I reached to squeeze Cali's hand.

"Score!" Jace spun around and was off.

"I'm sorry," Cali said in apology for Jace's familiarity.

"No way. I love that he feels comfortable here. You two come together. I wouldn't have it any other way," I said. Her lips parted, but nothing came out.

"I know he may never think of me as more than his coach, but Cali, I love you, and he's a great kid." The sound of something dropping made us both turn toward the kitchen in unison.

"No worries. I'll clean it up!" Jace called out.

I rose, pressed a kiss to Cali's forehead, and squeezed her hand. "I'll help. You go take a break on the pier." I crossed to the kitchen, and Jace stood halfway in the pantry with ketchup splattered across his shirt.

"I'm really sorry, man. I don't know what happened," Jace admitted as he mopped up his shirt with paper towels, but his eyes were a little too bright. I pulled a couple of wet wipes from the cabinet and handed them to him.

“No worries, accidents happen,” I said as I helped wipe down the splatters on the pantry door.

“You’re not mad?” He asked as if he hadn’t expected that response. He wasn’t looking at the pantry. He wasn’t looking at the stain. He was looking at me.

“No way. I know it wasn’t intentional, and even if it was, I wouldn’t be mad. I’d mostly want to know how you managed to lose a fight with a ketchup bottle.”

“Are you gonna marry Cali?”

I froze. His hazel eyes searched mine with an intensity that told me this question mattered.

“I’d marry her tomorrow if she’d say yes, but we’re taking this one step at a time,” I said, because we’d talked some, and I knew she needed time even if I wanted to make things official yesterday. I tossed the wipe I’d been using, and Jace was staring at the floor as if he was deep in thought, and whispered in a voice that felt much smaller than he physically was.

“What will happen with me?” His gaze met mine and I squeezed his shoulder.

No kid should ever have to wonder if he had a place to call home.

“You will be right here. Always. This is your home too.” His face crumpled for half a second before he fought it back. He leaned into my side without saying another word. His shoulders finally loosened.

Something about him looked different now; he looked like a kid instead of someone waiting for the ground to disappear beneath him. My biological father had never shown me what it meant to be a dad, but I knew whatever came next, I’d figure it out. Because nobody was ever going to make him question whether he belonged again. This was what family felt like.

OceanofPDF.com

Sixty-Three



Cali

I wandered down to the pier Lane had built to replicate the one we'd spent countless summer nights on as teenagers. When Lane searched to buy property in our hometown, he told me finding land with a pond had been his top priority. Building the pier was the first thing he did after. The pond was still, the breeze just strong enough to ripple the water and chill my skin. I kicked off my shoes and lowered myself onto the pier, letting my feet dangle in the cool water. It was getting almost too late in the season for this. The weight of Lane's words still sat heavy in my chest. Years ago, I had

only seen the hurt. I hadn’t stopped long enough to look at the fear behind his choices or the love that had driven them. Part of me wondered what would have happened if I had. Would we have gotten married, had babies? Had the whole picket fence dream? The thought disappeared as quickly as it came.

Because we wouldn’t have had Jace.

I never would have fully understood how much Lane loved me. Sometimes time only revealed what refused to die. Local farmers burned their pastures for weed control, and days later, sometimes those remaining hidden embers could reignite into something stronger and wilder than before. Maybe that was us. We hadn’t been the people we needed to be back then. We’d loved each other fiercely, but we hadn’t known how to love without fear, without pride, without carrying every wound from our past into the present. We could let those experiences grow compassion or feed resentment. The choice we made would shape the rest of our lives.

When I headed back toward the house, Lane’s truck caught my eye. The vibrant blue paint gleamed.

My eyes.

Emotion caught in my throat. He had been carrying pieces of me all along. Before I could second-guess myself, I opened the driver’s door and slid behind the wheel.

The restoration was stunning. Soft custom leather covered the seats and steering wheel, smooth beneath my fingertips. The headliner was upholstered in a burnt orange–and–navy plaid fabric, classic and unmistakably Lane. Kennedy mustang colors. Every detail carried a piece of him. Something tucked beneath the driver’s visor caught my attention. I reached up and eased it down. Two Polaroids fell into my palm.

My breath caught.

They were pictures of us the summer before I left. In one, my head was thrown back in laughter while Lane looked at me instead of the camera. In the other, I was kissing his cheek, his grin so wide it nearly split his face. The white borders were softened and frayed, the corners bent from years of being handled. He’d kept them with him. For how long? I turned them over. In Lane’s neat, blocky handwriting were six simple words.

California, the love of my life.

My fingers traced the words with reverence as if I were touching something sacred. He’d never meant for me to find them. This wasn’t a

declaration meant for me or anyone else. There was no audience, no expectation of recognition. It was something he'd held onto because simply loving me had always been part of who he was. We'd loved each other with the kind of wholehearted abandon that years couldn't erase. Holding the Polaroids against my chest, an idea took shape. If I was going to do this right, I couldn't do it alone.

OceanofPDF.com

Sixty-Four



Cali

“You look like a model!” Landry said, her excitement obvious as she fluffed my hair one last time. Sawyer’s eyes were glassy as she stood wrapped in Soren’s arms. The stadium thrummed with the kind of energy only Friday night football could create. We were deep into the fourth quarter, and the marching band blared from the home stands while kids chased each other beneath the bleachers. Parents bundled in school colors balanced hot chocolate and popcorn as they huddled in their seats.

I stood just out of sight, fingers curled around the hem of my jersey.

“Lane’s not gonna know what hit him,” Soren teased.

Across the back, stitched in bold white letters, was one word.

MASSEY

A nervous laugh escaped me. “I might throw up.”

“You won't,” Grandpa teased, patting my shoulder before adjusting the collar of my jersey like I was still the little girl who used to run around his farm. “Besides, I paid good money for this front-row seat. You owe me a show.”

Beside him, Jonah bounced baby Hope against his chest in a carrier. She stared up at the stadium lights before grabbing one of Jonah’s hoodie strings with determined little fingers.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

I took one long breath. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

Across the field, Lane commanded the sideline with the easy confidence that always made me smile. Every few steps, he clapped a player on the shoulder, adjusted another player’s helmets, or shouted encouragement as the final seconds disappeared from the clock.

The clock ran out.

Game over. The Mustangs had won! The crowd erupted in cheers.

Players poured onto the field, helmets flying into the air as Lane laughed and slapped the backs of anyone close enough to reach.

The announcer’s voice echoed through the speakers. “Great game! Before everyone heads home tonight, we’d like Coach Massey to stay on the field.”

Lane glanced toward the press box, then toward the athletic director, brows furrowed and then he saw me.

Landry nudged me. “You got this!”

For a second, he didn’t move. It was as if the entire stadium disappeared and he was back in every moment we’d ever shared. Confusion melted into complete disbelief.

I sprinted onto the field wearing his last name across my back, not because I had to, but because after all these years, I wanted him to know exactly where I belonged. With him. Always.

A murmur rolled through the stands. Then, section by section, people stood. The players who had graduated years ago stood beside current students. Parents who had watched him coach their kids wiped away tears. People Lane had encouraged, defended, and believed in over the years filled the stands, carrying reminders that every quiet thing he had done mattered.

Countless signs lifted in the air.

WE LOVE COACH MASSEY.

THANK YOU, COACH.

THE BEST COACH EVER!

THE ONE WHERE COACH FINALLY GETS HIS GIRL

Lane slowly turned, taking in every face, every sign, every person who had shown up to remind him how much he mattered. His eyes glistened.

I smiled through my own tears.

"This . . ." he whispered when I finally reached him. "You did all this?"

"I had a little help, but you deserve to know how many people love you."

His gaze moved through the stands. Grandpa waved proudly, like this entire thing had been his idea. Soren and Jace gave him a thumbs-up. Jonah lifted Hope's tiny hand toward the field, making her wave at Lane. She had no idea what she was cheering for, but she grinned anyway, surrounded by people who already loved her.

Lane laughed softly, shaking his head. "I don't deserve this."

"You deserve every bit of it."

For a moment, the chaos of the stadium faded as Lane stepped forward and pulled me into his arms. The cheers disappeared. The noise faded until all I could feel was him. His hands cradled my face as if I was something precious.

"I love you," he whispered against my forehead.

"I love you more."

He pressed his forehead against mine, and I closed my eyes, finally understanding that the love I'd believed I'd lost had been waiting for me all along. When he did kiss me, it left both of us completely breathless. The crowd roared in cheers around us and I knew, with a certainty that sank deep in my bones, that coming home had been the best thing I'd ever done.

Wrapped in the warmth of the moment, I glanced across the field toward the people who had made this possible.

That was when I noticed Landry.

The smile she usually carried vanished from her face so quickly my stomach dropped. One moment she was watching Lane and me with tears in her eyes, and the next, she stood completely still, staring across the field like she had forgotten there was anyone else around her.

I followed her gaze.

A man stood alone near the visitors' fence, untouched by the celebration happening around him. He wasn't watching the players or the crowd. He wasn't paying attention to the signs or the cheers echoing through the stadium.

He was only watching Landry.

Whatever she saw stole the color from her face as her hand rose slowly to cover her mouth.

"No . . ." she mouthed. She stepped backward, then again, as if distance was the only thing keeping her upright. Before anyone could ask what was wrong, she turned and disappeared beneath the bleachers.

The man didn't move. He didn't follow her or call after her. He only watched where she had gone, like he was still trying to convince himself she had really been there. My eyes dropped to the Carhartt jacket stretched across his shoulders. The embroidered logo over his chest was familiar.

Soren's ranch.

The confusion only deepened.

I had no idea who he was or what had just happened between them.

But I knew one thing.

Landry knew him.

OceanofPDF.com

Epilogue



Lane

Four Years Later

The principal took his place at the microphone as a sea of navy blue gowns stretched across the football field. The same field where I'd spent countless Friday nights coaching, encouraging, and watching kids discover they were capable of more than they ever believed.

"Next, we'd like to recognize . . . Jace Massey." I never thought hearing my last name over a loudspeaker could bring me to tears. Yet here I was. The name echoed through the stadium.

Beside me, Cali reached for my hand as I blinked away tears.

“There he is,” she whispered.

My throat narrowed as I nodded. “There he is.”

Jace crossed the stage with the confidence he’d fought hard to find over the last four years. It was hard to believe this was the same kid who had once stood in my pantry, afraid to ask if he still had a place. Now he strode across that field knowing exactly where he belonged.

In front of me was the young man he’d become. Tall. Steady. Kind. The kind of young man who held doors open without thinking, rushed to his little sister’s side when she scraped her knee, and never left the house without telling his mom he loved her.

The kind of young man any father would be proud to call his son.

My son.

Three years earlier, I’d watched a judge sign the papers that simply confirmed what my heart had known from the moment Jace came into my life.

Jace had grinned at me across the courtroom and said, “Guess we’re both Masseys now.”

I’d cried harder than Cali, although I still denied it.

Lyla scooted herself higher on my shoulders, her tiny hands gripping my hair as she pointed toward the stage.

“Daddy?”

“Yeah, honey?”

“Dat’s bruther!”

I smiled. “It sure is.”

She clapped so hard her hands echoed against the applause around us. “Go, bruther!”

Several parents turned and smiled. Even from halfway across the football field, he found us. His face split into the biggest grin I’d ever seen. He lifted his diploma in our direction.

Lyla squealed. “He waved at me!”

“He did.”

She bounced on my shoulders. “’Cause I his sissy.”

“You are.”

“The best one.”

“The only one,” Cali said, laughing.

Lyla considered that. “I still da best.”

I couldn’t argue with that logic.

The graduates moved their tassels from one side to the other as applause thundered through the stadium. I watched my son laughing with his friends. Fatherhood had never been about biology. It was sitting beside him at the kitchen table while he struggled through homework. It was fishing trips where we caught more memories than fish. It was teaching him to drive while pretending I wasn’t terrified. It was the ordinary moments that somehow became the ones I treasured most. It was watching him become exactly the kind of man the world needed more of.

Jace jogged across the field after the ceremony ended. Before I could say a word, he wrapped me in a hug, his graduation gown crinkling between us.

“You made it,” I said.

“We made it.”

I smiled. He stepped back.

“Proud doesn't even begin to cover it, but I’m so proud of you.”

His smile softened.

“I’m glad you’re my dad.” The words carried the same weight they had the first time he’d called me that.

I pulled him into another hug. “I’m the lucky one, son.”

Over his shoulder, I caught Cali watching us. Her eyes glistened. Mine probably did too.

Lyla tugged on Jace’s graduation gown. “Bruther?”

He crouched immediately. “Yeah?”

“I grad-u-ate next?”

He smiled. “In about fifteen years.”

She gasped dramatically. “Dat’s forever.”

We all laughed.

Cali’s fingers threaded through mine, and I realized I wasn’t holding on because I was afraid she’d leave. I was holding on because, every day, she chose to stay. There was a time I would have sworn a life like this wasn’t meant for me. Instead, I’d been given more than I ever knew to hope for. A wife who made my heart race. A son who carried my name and taught me what it meant to be a dad. A daughter who believed I could fix anything with a hug. This was the life I’d spent years longing for, and somehow it had turned out even better than I imagined. Not because it had been easy, but because every hard moment had led us here.

Surrounded by the people who had become my home, I knew one thing with absolute certainty. We would always choose each other. We would always fight for each other. Because family was never about where we came from. It was about who chose to stay.

OceanofPDF.com

Acknowledgements

Mr. Abitz: There really aren't words to describe what it feels like to spend every day with your best friend and the love of your life. Through the good days, the hard days, and everything in between, I know I'll always have your strong arms to come home to when life feels like too much. Thank you for being my person, my soft place to land, and my greatest love. I'd choose you in every lifetime. Forever and always, I love you.

My Children: My greatest hope is that each of you knows just how loved you are. I honestly don't know how I got so lucky to have the three best kids in the world, but I know I hit the jackpot with you three. I'm so incredibly grateful that I get to be your mom.

Stacy: Here's to more voice messages that somehow turn into full-length podcasts, inside jokes that make absolutely no sense to anyone else, and laughing until we can't breathe. Thanks for keeping me sane through this crazy journey, bestie. I'm so lucky to have you in my corner. Love ya bunches!

Katie: Look at us, just casually crushing motherhood while raising these absolutely feral children.

Lia: I'm so thankful for your friendship and encouragement through all these years. No matter how much time passes, we always pick right back up like we were never apart. My life is better because you're in it.

Alicia: Thank you for all of your insight, your grammar ninja skills, and, most of all, your friendship. I'm so grateful for you!

Lisa: None of this would be possible without you. Thank you for always being there and for being such an incredible support. I truly appreciate you!

Hannah Grace: Thanks for always sharing your thoughts and medical knowledge. I really appreciate your insight and time!

Taylor: My sincerest apologies for the length of time it took to complete the second book. I shall try to write the third as though I'm being chased by a bear who is desperately seeking his next meal. Thank you for all the support, girl! I appreciate you more than you know. ;)

Booksta Fam: There will never be enough words to say how grateful I am for your support and encouragement. I feel truly honored to know each of you, and I'm so thankful for the kindness and support you've given me along the way.

My Library Friends and Co-Workers: When you surround yourself with people who love to read, you're never short on insightful conversations, thoughtful moments, or hilarious stories. My life is richer because of the readers in it, and I'm so grateful for every conversation, recommendation, and story we've shared.

My Alpha/Beta Readers: Jayden, Hannah Grace, Chloe, Molly, and Jenah, you're the bomb.com.

My Parents: It's a tough job being the best child, especially when there's so much competition, but I shall endeavor to inspire the others. ;)

My siblings, nieces, nephews, brother-in-laws, sister-in-laws, mother-in-law: I love you, and I mean it.

George Strait The Cat: Your grumpy face is truly one of my favorite things in life.

Jesus: Without You, I am nothing.

OceanofPDF.com

About The Author

Born and raised in Mississippi, Jordan Abitz is an Amazon Bestselling author whose debut small-town romance, The Magic of Light, was selected as a 2026 Kansas Notable Book. Her Southern roots, love of community, and belief in the power of hope and healing shine through every story she writes. Under the name Jordan Abitz, she crafts heartfelt contemporary romances filled with found family, emotional depth, and happily-ever-afters.

Writing as Jordi Lou, Jordan also creates picture books that explore themes of mental health, foster care, adoption, and kindness. A former foster mom who welcomed twenty-eight children into her home and an adoptive mom of three, she draws from real-life experiences to create stories that help children feel seen, understood, and empowered.

Jordan lives with her husband and three children on their third-generation family farm in the Flint Hills of rural Kansas, where small-town life continues to inspire her work. When she’s not writing, she enjoys exploring antique shops, wandering library stacks, advocating for children in foster care, and raising awareness about childhood trauma. She shares her farm with barn cats named after country music legends, including her favorite, Dolly Parton.

Whether writing romance or children's literature, Jordan’s mission remains the same: to tell stories that inspire courage, compassion, connection, and hope.

OceanofPDF.com

Let's Connect!









[*OceanofPDF.com*](OceanofPDF.com)

Thank you!

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this book! If you enjoyed it, I'd be incredibly grateful if you would consider leaving a review. Reviews and word-of-mouth recommendations mean so much to indie authors like me. Every review helps this book find its way into the hands of more readers. Thank you for reading, reviewing, and supporting indie authors. It means more than you know!

OceanofPDF.com