

CATE BEAUMAN

EIGHT

YEARS

GONE



# EIGHT YEARS GONE

CATE BEAUMAN

**cb**

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# CATE BEAUMAN

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## Monthly Newsletter

I *love* keeping in touch with my readers. Writing wouldn't be any fun without you!

I share snippets about my life, the writing process, special offers, and the occasional yummy recipe, because playing in the kitchen is just as much fun as telling a good story.

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# ONE

*“Love is so short, forgetting is so long.”  
-Pablo Neruda*

*Wakeview, Pennsylvania  
August*

THUNDER RUMBLED FAR IN THE DISTANCE AS JAGGER DROVE HIS VINTAGE black Stingray down one of the worst blocks in East Wakeview. He kept his speed low, trailing his gaze over gang-tagged dingy buildings and barred windows, searching for his best friend.

The area was sketchy at best in the daylight. In the dark, it tended to be deadly.

“Where are you,” he muttered, taking another left as tension coiled his shoulders tighter.

He knew this place well—had grown up in a two-bedroom shithole three blocks south.

Typically, hookers loitered on the corners, and desperate junkies wandered up and down the streets, looking for their next score. But tonight, it was quiet. *Silent*. And that was never good.

He took his eyes off the road when his phone vibrated on the dashboard. He glanced at it long enough to send Grace’s latest call to his voicemail. Then he selected her brother’s icon on his screen.

“Yeah,” Logan slurred.

“Where are you, man?”

“I don’t know. Just—just get here.”

Jagger clenched his jaw when Logan’s labored breathing filled his ear before the line went dead. “*Damn* it.”

Things had been rough for Logan for a while now. They hadn’t talked much since his latest downward spiral. But when Jagger’s phone rang fifteen minutes ago, there’d been an urgency in his friend’s voice that had told him to get his ass in his car and drive over to the wrong side of town.

Lightning flashed with the next roll of thunder, and that’s when Jagger saw it—Logan’s mangled white Porsche. The right front fender and tire had been obliterated by the impact with the sidewalk.

“Shit.” Jagger sped up the street only to slam on his brakes, then hurry outside into the summer’s oppressive heat and humidity. A sinking feeling settled in his stomach when no one sat in Logan’s driver’s seat. “Logan!”

He spun a slow circle as the glint of blood on the chain-link fence in the nearby lot caught his attention.

“Shit,” he muttered again, making quick work of pushing his way through the hole along the side of the post where someone had helped themselves with a pair of cutters once upon a time. “Logan!”

“Over here.”

Skirting around rusty vehicles, scrap heaps, and the occasional refrigerator, Jagger used the flashlight on his phone to make his way farther into the mess.

If he’d had half a clue that picking Logan up meant he’d most likely need a tetanus shot, he would have worn something other than gym shorts and one of his ratty muscle shirts. “Where?”

“Here.”

Jagger pointed the beam of light toward the faint voice, stopping cold, struggling with a wash of horror as he stared at Logan’s crimson-soaked T-shirt. He’d expected bad, but this was so much worse. “Holy fuck, Logan.”

Logan opened his crystal-blue eyes as he sat propped against an old Ford Bronco, grimacing as he clutched at his side. “Get me out of here.”

Jagger rushed over, studying the trails of sweat dribbling along his pasty skin. Any hints of Logan’s tan were gone.

“Let’s get a look,” he said, fighting to keep his hands steady as he pulled up the shirt, watching blood ooze from a bullet wound in Logan’s stomach.

“You were *shot*?”

“Yeah.”

“What the hell happened?”

Logan let his head rest against the piece-of-junk bumper. “They robbed us.”

“Who?”

“Hell if I know.”

“Where?”

“At Timmy’s.”

“Timmy who?”

“I don’t know. He lives on Seventh Street. Gunfire started, and I took off—got in the car and booked it. I didn’t realize they got me until I started feeling woozy. I ran in here to get away just in case they’re looking for me.”

Jagger fought not to shake his head in judgment. When had things gotten so out of control? This was supposed to have been *his* fate. Not the rich kid’s from the right side of the tracks. “Put pressure back on that.”

Logan closed his eyes again as he pressed his fingers against his stomach. “Get me out of here. I don’t think I can stand.”

Jagger nodded, debating the idea of calling for an ambulance, but the puddle in the dirt told him they didn’t have time to wait. Emergency personnel never responded without a police presence in this neighborhood. “This is going to suck when I lift you up.”

Logan nodded this time but didn’t bother to look at him.

“You need to stay with me—to stay awake,” he said, pulling Logan forward, then hoisting him over his shoulder.

“*Fuck*,” Logan moaned in agony.

Jagger gritted his teeth as he struggled to stand with the extra weight. They were both six-foot. They were both broad and muscular after years on the football fields and taekwondo mats. “Jesus, you’re heavy.”

Logan moaned. “Hurry.”

That was the plan as Jagger started back the way he came, doing his damndest to move without tripping in the dark. He certainly couldn’t use his phone light to guide them now.

For the briefest of seconds, he wished he’d let Grace get in the car when she’d insisted that she was coming too. But he’d convinced her to stay home and get them packed to head back to school. “You’ve gotta knock this shit off, man. At this rate, you’re not going to live to see twenty-one.”

“Don’t start.”

Jagger narrowed his eyes, scrutinizing every step, blowing out long

breaths with his effort to make it around the next scrap heap. “Was my brother with you tonight?”

Even as he asked, he already knew the answer. This entire nightmare began when Logan had gone in search of more pain pills for his bad shoulder. The doctors had said no to another refill when everyone started realizing that Logan had a problem, so Jagger’s big brother had been more than happy to hook him up.

Logan coughed. “This sucks so bad.”

They weren’t changing the subject. “Did Levi get you mixed up in this?”

Logan groaned this time when Jagger stumbled with his next step. “It wasn’t supposed to be a big deal. He said these guys had bought from him before.”

“When is it going to sink in that Levi is nothing but trouble?”

Logan groaned again. “Hurry up, man. I think I’m dying.”

He flared his nostrils with his helpless sense of terror and rage. Logan’s voice was growing weaker. He could feel his friend’s blood running down the back of his leg, soaking his sock in his sneaker. “Don’t talk like that.”

“Tell Grace I’m sorry.”

“*You* tell Grace you’re sorry.” They finally skirted the last car. But his heart sank as he stared at the endless row of chain-link. He’d forgotten about the fence—the skinny hole he’d had to slide through to get inside.

“I’m going to get us out of here. They’re going to fix you up. Then you’re going to get yourself cleaned up and stop with all this bullshit.”

Logan didn’t respond.

Jagger gave him a jostle. “Hey.”

Still nothing.

“Don’t you die on me, man. You’ll break her heart.” Even as Logan’s life hung in the balance, he thought of Grace. It was always Grace.

He set Logan down with little choice, watching as his friend’s head lolled back. “Hey!” he yelled as he gave his clammy cheek a slap.

Logan moaned. “I’m not going... to make it.”

“Yes, you are.” Using fear as his momentum, he charged forward, slamming his powerful body into the metal, bending and widening the space for them to get through. Looking over his shoulder at Logan, he ran at the metal again. “Stay awake.”

Logan said nothing—did nothing.

Jagger rushed back to his friend, touching the barely there pulse in his

neck. “Hang in there. *Please* hang in there.”

Struggling not to panic, he hoisted Logan again, pushing them through the opening. “Hang on. Just hang on,” he panted out in a frantic chant as he fought to open the car door, then get Logan inside.

He didn’t take the time to feel for a pulse again as he scrambled around the fender to get behind the wheel.

His phone vibrated again. Grace. He sent her to voicemail as he peeled out and dialed 911.

“Nine-one-one, what’s your emergency?”

“My friend’s been shot. I’m driving him to Parkland Hospital right now. I’m about three miles out. They need to be waiting for us outside. He’s in bad shape. He’s lost a lot of blood.”

“Where was your friend shot?”

“In the stomach. Lower right side.”

“Can I get your name?”

“Jagger Tennyson. Just tell them to be outside waiting for us. The patient’s name is Logan Evans. His father is Doctor Steven Evans—”

“Sir—”

“Tell them that in the emergency department. Steven Evans. They’ll know who he is. He’s the big-time orthopedic surgeon in Philadelphia. He has privileges at Parkland.”

“Sir—”

He looked at Logan slumped in the seat, his head bobbing with each bump and turn. “Just tell them!”

Because Steve Evans was a big fucking deal—the go-to surgeon for all the pro athletes and even a couple of retired United States presidents. *Everyone* treated the guy like a damn king. They would do everything they could to save his son.

“We’re sending the information to Parkland Hospital right now. They know you’ll be arriving.”

“I don’t know if— I can’t tell if— Logan! Open your eyes, dammit! Open your eyes!”

Nothing.

He shook his head as the bright glow of Parkland’s lights blazed in the distance. “We’re here,” he said into the speaker, skidding into the emergency lane.

Then he dropped his phone as he screeched to a stop, relieved beyond

measure when doctors and several nurses waited.

“Logan Evans. He needs help!” Jagger yelled as he got out. “Help him!”

A nurse and doctor opened Logan’s door and immediately pulled him out, settling him on the stretcher.

Jagger hurried up next to him as they wheeled him inside. “Be okay. For Grace. For me. Please be okay.”

And then Logan disappeared behind heavy wooden doors.

Time ticked by in centuries as Jagger paced, staring down at his blood-covered hands, unable to stop them from shaking. Never in his worst dreams could he *ever* have imagined this.

“Mr. Tennyson? Jagger Tennyson?”

Jagger turned to see a cop staring at him. “Do you know anything about Logan? Did they tell you anything?”

The officer shook his head. “I’ve just spoken to one of the detectives downtown. They’d like me to bring you down to speak with them.”

He knew the drill: the detectives wanted to know what he knew about Logan’s shooting. His brother had been getting into trouble for as long as he could remember. His mother hadn’t been much better. “I need to wait.”

“There’s not a whole lot you can do here.”

“Steve knows?” He shook his head. “Doctor Evans knows? He’s coming?”

The cop nodded. “He’s been contacted in Philadelphia.”

“And Grace? I have to talk to my girlfriend. She’s going to need me.”

And he needed her too—to wrap her up and hold on to her until he could make all of this make sense.

“Doctor Evans asked that an officer go pick her up at their Sheraton Heights residence.”

Jagger nodded this time. “I should wait for her here.”

“We’ll grab you a pair of scrubs so you can clean up. We’ll get you back as soon as we can.”

He opened his mouth to refuse, even when he knew he looked like he’d bathed in blood—his neck and arms, his clothes, legs, and shoes, a dried crimson mess.

But then the doctors and nurses who had been working on Logan pushed back through the wooden doors they’d rushed through several minutes ago. Sorrow and apology radiated in the doctor’s eyes as he walked closer to Jagger.

He knew what that meant too. Logan was gone.

Jagger sat in one of the police department interview rooms, impatiently waiting to be told he could go.

At some point, he'd lost track of time, but as he battled back the relentless nausea wreaking havoc in his belly, he knew for a fact that he'd been sitting in the yellow plastic chair for *hours*.

Technically, he could stand up and walk out. They'd made it clear he wasn't under arrest, but he wanted to be certain the detectives had every detail he could offer them. Whoever had shot Logan was going to pay.

If Levi was lucky, the cops would pick him up before Jagger found him. They'd been close as little boys just trying to survive, but they'd been strangers for years. Logan had been more his brother than Levi ever would be.

He restlessly ran his fingers through his hair as he bobbed his leg up and down. The detectives needed to hurry the hell up because he needed to get to Grace.

His hand moved to rub at his heart as it ached for her—as it ached for them all. She was undoubtedly a wreck. She and Logan were ten and a half months apart—technically not, but practically twins, as Grace often explained it.

Logan and Grace had grown up with everything: wealth, privilege, and insane monthly allowances to go along with the six-bedroom mansion they called home in the exclusive Sheraton Heights subdivision.

But they also had a dead mother in a Philadelphia grave and a selfish bastard for a father who rarely made an appearance in his kids' lives yet expected perfection from them nonetheless. Their best efforts had *never* been good enough—or at least that had been the case for poor Logan.

Grace was artsy and obsessed with her camera—ultra-talented, easygoing, and always the peacemaker between her father and brother.

Logan had been the athlete—the kid with the private former NFL coach and retired Army colonel who'd taught him how to shoot for their high school marksmanship team. There had always been room to be faster, more accurate—to do better.

When Jagger moved into the Evans household the summer before his sophomore year, Steve had expected nothing but the best. And Jagger's natural athleticism had made it easy to deliver. But Logan had never been able to catch a break, even when he had been really damn good.

Jagger scrubbed at his face. He should have done more. He should have seen Logan heading down the wrong path sooner. Now there was nothing he could do to make any of this better.

The door opened, and the short, balding man he'd been talking to walked in. "Mr. Tennyson, I think we have everything we need. You can go."

Jagger stood in the scrubs he'd changed into after he insisted on driving himself over to the station in his blood-soaked car. "Did you get him? Did you get my brother?"

Detective Morrison nodded. "They just picked him up."

"What's he saying?"

"Not much."

"Levi knows everything you need to close this case—who robbed him. It's his fault Logan's dead."

"We'll take care of this, Jagger."

He nodded, understanding that the detective was urging him to let the police do their job—to not take matters into his own hands.

Long ago, he'd promised Master Isaac he would stay off the streets and out of trouble in exchange for free taekwondo lessons, but currently, street justice wasn't out of the question. "Sure."

Detective Morrison held out his hand. "Thank you again, Jagger. I'm sorry for your loss."

He returned the handshake. "Thank you."

Stepping into the hallway, Jagger paused when he spotted Steve Evans talking to an officer down by one of the vending machines. Jagger started the man's way, never seeing him look so disheveled. "Steve."

Steve's head whipped in his direction, blinking puffy, bloodshot eyes. "I've been waiting for you."

"I'm sorry." Jagger blinked back tears as he cleared the emotion suddenly clogging his throat. "I'm so sorry I didn't get him to the hospital in time."

Steve said nothing as Jagger stopped in front of him.

Jagger looked over Steve's shoulder. "Is Grace—"

"You stay away from her."

Jagger blinked his surprise at the venom in Steve's voice.

Then Steve yanked him up by the V of his scrubs. “This is all your fault, you little bastard. My boy’s lying in the morgue because I was stupid enough to bring white trash like you into my home.”

Jagger swallowed hard, absorbing the insult. “Steve—”

Steve’s pointer finger was now in Jagger’s face as he gritted out each word through his perfect veneers. “Don’t you say my name. Don’t you speak my daughter’s. You will never, *ever* be good enough for her. The best thing you can do is walk away—get the hell out of her life because I swear to *God*, I’ll cut her off if I ever see you looking in her direction again.”

Jagger swallowed again because there was nothing that Steve had said that wasn’t true. He’d turned his grades around and graduated with honors. He’d taken the football and marksmanship teams to state three times. He was heading back to Syracuse University for his third year of college, but underneath it all, he would always be a Tennyson from East Wakeview.

“Grace’s spring internship with *National Geographic*,” Steve continued. “I’ll make it go away, Jagger. Her semester in Sydney will disappear.”

Jagger clenched his jaw as he stared at the man, knowing he would do exactly that—knowing that Steve getting what he wanted was more important than the fact that he would be hurting his daughter. “She’s worked her ass off —”

“That’s right. She has. No one knows that better than you.”

Jagger shook his head because he wasn’t going anywhere. “We’ll find a way.”

Steve laughed bitterly. “You’re going to pay for her downtown Sydney apartment? Her food? Her plane fare? And what about her tuition for Syracuse?”

Jagger clenched his jaw as he looked down, studying the scarred tile floor because he’d barely had enough to cover his car insurance this month after his car broke down.

“One phone call, and it’s gone. All of it will go away. You and that family of yours stay away from what’s mine. Do we understand each other?”

Jagger steamed out a quiet breath. “Yeah.”

“Bea’s bringing Grace down here to answer some questions. You’ll do her the biggest favor of her life and be long gone by then. Long gone, Jagger.”

Nodding again, Jagger pulled himself free of Steve’s grip, then headed for the door and the parking lot.

Getting in his car, he picked up the cell phone he'd long forgotten about, seeing that Grace had called over twenty times.

"Fuck," he whispered, hearing the agony in his voice as he rested his forehead against the steering wheel, wanting nothing more than to call her—to tell Steve to go fuck himself and take Grace away from here.

But then he looked at his seat covered in her brother's blood—his fault that he didn't save him. His fault that he'd ever mentioned Levi's drug connections and numerous brushes with the law to Grace and Logan one summer night while they sat around the pool talking.

"*Fuck*," he muttered again, searching through his contacts, selecting the number on his screen, and listening to it ring.

"Hello?"

"Colonel Hinders, this is Jagger Tennyson."

"Jagger." The man cleared the sleep out of his voice. "What a surprise. What can I do for you?"

"I'm sorry to call so late."

"You know I'm always happy to hear from you."

Exhaling a long breath, he shook his head, not wanting to do this. But maybe this *was* best for Grace. They'd planned to finish school, then travel the world together while she took her pictures.

But they couldn't do that forever.

What if his dreams of eventually opening his own dojang didn't work out? Was he going to let Grace support him?

She was gorgeous, funny, talented, ambitious, and sweet. She could have anyone—do anything. The last thing he ever wanted to be was a burden—to hold her back. "Is that offer still open? Can you help me get into that special military program?"

Jagger pressed his lips firmly together, one hundred percent certain that the man on the other end of the phone was smiling.

The colonel had relentlessly recruited him, assuring him that his speed on the football field, dead-eye accuracy as a marksman, and the excellent brain in his head would be an asset to the United States military. 'You've got something—a sort of grit we rarely see,' the guy had told him repeatedly.

"Definitely. We can get the paperwork started—"

Jagger fisted his hand as he felt everything he'd ever wanted slipping away. "It has to be now. I need to be able to get in right away."

"Are you in some sort of trouble?"

“Logan. He’s—he died. He’s dead.” Maybe if he said it a million more times, it would start to sink in. Maybe he would feel something other than numb.

“*What?*”

“Tonight. Just a few hours ago. He got shot.”

“What the hell—”

“Levi’s mixed up in it. Steve said... I can’t stay here anymore. I can’t be in Wakeview.”

“Come stay with Sue and me here in Maryland. I’ll text you my address. Then I’ll start making some phone calls as soon as we hang up. This is your destiny, son. I knew it the first time I talked to you—was certain of it the day I saw you fire that gun.”

Right about now, he didn’t give two shits about his destiny. Nothing much mattered at this point. “I’ll start heading your way.”

Ending the call, he started the engine as his phone rang again.

He stared at Grace’s beautiful face smiling at him. Turning it over, he put the Stingray in reverse, then accelerated, leaving behind the life he’d fought so hard to create.

# Two

*New York, New York*

Eight years later

JAGGER HEADED DOWN JFK INTERNATIONAL'S TERMINAL FOUR WITH HIS duffel bag slung over his shoulder and his phone at his ear.

After thirty-six hours in and out of the sky, it felt good to be stateside. It had been *years* since he'd walked on American soil, and his current conversation with his newly former boss was ruining the moment.

"They asked specifically for you and whatever team you want to put together. Top dollar."

"Forget it."

"We're talking twenty thousand a day. I can probably get you more."

Jagger didn't give a damn about the money. He'd made plenty of that over the past couple of years.

When he retired from "The Unit," he was immediately hired as a personal security expert for the ultra-elite Gray Corp.

He'd quickly learned that the higher the payout on a private contracting job, the more dangerous the assignment. The fresh wound where a bullet had grazed his left tricep still stung after the latest shit show he'd barely escaped in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

"I'm not interested. My last client was a pain in the ass, and *nothing* about that copper mine was on the up and up."

He glanced around at the numerous people walking past him, saying nothing more because it was never wise to talk about the work they did in the field. In fact, it was prohibited.

“It’s not our job to worry about what’s on the up and up. He paid, and you guys got him out of there alive.”

In a hail of bullets and return gunfire. Jagger shook his head. “I’m done.”

“Guys like you are never done. When you get bored being an average Joe, give me a call.”

“Don’t count on it.” Ready to be finished with Jason Gray and private contracting in general, he cut their conversation short as he stepped outside into the chaos of the airport’s pickup lane.

He stared at dozens of yellow cabs and Uber vehicles in line, picking up or dropping off their fares, and immediately realized he’d long forgotten how to be an average Joe.

For the first time in eight years, he had no plan, no mission, no objective to relentlessly keep him busy. When he’d decided to come home, he’d taken the first available flight—Anywhere, USA.

He raised his hand, then got in one of the cabs. Instantly, he grew weary—exhausted as he let it sink in that he was here to stay. “Take me to a hotel.”

The cabbie eyed him with hostile disgust in the rearview mirror. “Which one?”

He shrugged. “A nice one. You pick.”

The cabbie shrugged this time. “You got it, buddy.”

Jagger stared out at the skyscrapers and endless sea of cars as the cab made its way downtown, knowing he needed to sleep. After that, he had no idea what he’d do with himself. But a comfy bed and a decent nap were a good place to start.

# THREE

GRACE WANDERED AROUND CENTRAL PARK, FOREVER SEARCHING FOR HER next perfect shot. She grinned when she found it—a sweet toddler playing with his puppy in one of the green spaces just off the path.

“Oh, my *goodness*, they’re adorable. Do you mind if I take their picture?” she asked the woman who sat on a blanket close by.

“No, go ahead.”

Grace crouched in her fitted red tank and jeans shorts combination as she adjusted the focus on her lens, then pressed the shutter button several times, making certain she stayed far enough away so as not to distract the little boy and his dog while they played with their blue-striped ball.

The candid shot was the magic shot—the only kind she liked to take. “How do you handle all of this sweetness?”

The woman chuckled. “I spoil them rotten.”

“That must be easy to do,” she said as she checked her work on the digital screen, then showed the boy’s mom. “I freelance for *Travel*. I’d like to send you copies and a release to sign if we decide to use the pictures in the magazine.”

The woman studied her for a moment.

Grace sent her another warm smile, knowing she was being scrutinized as she often was. And that’s why she’d worn her past-shoulder-length hair in a ponytail and had chosen her white Keds with no socks when she left her hotel room this morning.

The friendly, casual, *harmless* blonde who unobtrusively took her pictures. Most people responded favorably.

The woman nodded. “Okay.”

Her grin was back. “Great. I’ll just need an email address.”

“Sure.”

Grace spoke the woman’s information into her camera, smiled as she waved, then moved on, soaking up every blissful second of her last afternoon in the city.

Mother Nature had granted her three amazing days on her early-September getaway, gifting her sunny skies and high-seventy-degree temperatures—and she’d taken advantage. She intended to do more of the same—or at least until she packed up her SUV and headed home in a couple of hours.

Her gaze wandered to the maple trees as she marveled at the quiet. One of the world’s largest cities surrounded her, but it was currently impossible to tell.

Choosing a new direction, she wandered closer to The Great Lawn and Turtle Pond, stopping by the edge of the clearing to take it all in while people lazed around on blankets or played in the grass.

This was life—the different slices of humanity she treasured. And somehow, the park had a way of dulling everyone’s urban edges.

The group of men playing hacky sack caught her attention. Suit jackets had been tossed aside and starched long sleeves rolled halfway up masculine arms.

Grace settled her camera in place, snapping numerous shots, laughing when one of the men fell to the ground in his attempt to keep the game going. “Great effort,” she called.

“Thanks.” The guy waved as he smiled.

She stepped in the group’s direction—to show them her work and ask their permission to use the images she’d captured. But she stopped when the man wearing a navy-blue muscle shirt and white athletic shorts ran past her on the pavement twenty yards in the distance.

Her pulse stuttered as she stared. There was something about how he moved—the familiar cadence of his efficient jogging.

Without thinking, she lifted her camera, searching for him with her lens, zooming in when she found him.

He was broad and fit—powerfully so as he swung strong arms with each stride. His hair was a shorter, darker blond, and he had a deeper tan, but he reminded her so much of...

He bumped into a runner, slowing to turn his body as he spoke an

apology she couldn't hear.

"Jagger," she shuddered out, dropping her camera to dangle before she protected it against her chest when she took off at a walk-jog.

She picked up her pace to a full-out run, terrified she would lose him as he disappeared down one of the paths that led into the trees.

This wasn't the first time she'd been sure she spotted him in a crowd, but today was different. The man several steps ahead *was* Jagger Tennyson.

So many emotions ravaged her system as the memories she'd tried hard to forget came rushing back.

*Top 40 music played on the stereo when Grace heard the familiar rap of knuckles on her doorframe. She looked up from the equation on her page, smiling at the wall, already knowing it was eight o'clock as she glanced at her bedside clock—Jagger's usual time for walking down the hall with his books and the laptop her father had bought for him hooked in his arm.*

*He'd moved into the house in late July—when football practice had officially kicked off at Sheraton Prep.*

*When she'd returned to Wakeview after spending the summer in Preston Valley with Aunt Maggie, the guy from the crappy part of town had been bringing his boxes inside.*

*By mid-September, Dad had called from the Philly condo he lived in more than he did the mansion, asking her to help Jagger with his studies. Quarter-term grades had been emailed out to all parents and guardians, and Jagger's were less than amazing.*

*"Are you up for a study buddy?"*

*She casually shrugged as she glanced over her shoulder, ignoring the flutters in her stomach when he sent her one of his slightly crooked grins. "Sure."*

*"Great." Like always, he walked in, big, broad, and hot, bringing his freshly showered scent with him as he pulled out the chair she'd left at the side of her desk for him.*

*His dark-blond hair was damp, and he wore one of the sweatpants and muscle shirt combinations he typically changed into once he got home.*

*She sent him a friendly smile, pretending that she didn't notice the hints of five o'clock stubble along his strong jaw or the way his shirt accentuated his excellent biceps and shoulders. "How was practice?"*

He nodded. "Good. We're ready for Friday night."

"Good." She focused on the next quadratic equation she needed to solve. Mr. Wright had said there would be several on tomorrow's exam.

Jagger sighed as he opened his laptop, then tipped back in his chair, locking his hands behind his head. "You wouldn't happen to want to write a four-page English paper, would you?"

She began assigning her values to the quadratic formula. "I already wrote a four-page English paper, so I don't know why I would want to write another one. Plus, we've already established that I'm not doing your homework."

He shrugged. "If you never ask, the answer's always no."

"Well, in this case, you shouldn't bother because it's never going to happen."

He sent her another one of his yummy grins.

She held his dark-blue gaze, forever trying to figure him out. He never had a whole lot to say. And he always played it cool—like he didn't give a crap about much of anything.

But over the last nine weeks, she'd caught on to the fact that he was smarter than he let on. Today she'd gotten proof when she snuck a peek at the letter she'd found crumpled in the kitchen trash.

It had been a two-page explanation of the results of the standardized test he'd taken at the public school he attended his freshman year. He'd scored off the charts—in the nation's top one percent. Pennsylvania's governor had sent a personalized letter of congratulations to keep up the great work.

Looking down at her notebook, she got back to work, clenching her jaw when she realized she'd solved the problem wrong. Again. "Damn it." She tossed her pencil down. "Why can't I get this one right?"

Jagger dropped his chair back to the carpet, leaning closer. "What's up?"

"I don't know. This is the third time I've solved this one wrong. I get a different answer every time."

He frowned as he studied her work. "You're forgetting to solve for zero first." He pointed out her error on the page. "You've assigned your values for A, B, and C, but you need to make this a negative seven before you do anything else."

It was her turn to frown as she worked the problem out the way he'd explained. And she got the right answer.

*“See? There you go. Solve for zero first. It’s a game changer.”*

*She stared at him. “You nodded off during the entire class. I watched your chin hit your chest several times.”*

*“Mr. Wright’s boring.”*

*Her frown returned. “You’re smart. Why do you spend so much time pretending you’re not?”*

*He jerked his shoulders, tipping back in his chair again. “Because then people start expecting stuff.”*

*She swallowed her annoyance as she stood, heading for the door. Over the last few weeks, he’d shown her little glimpses of a different version of himself—the guy whose eyes lit up whenever he talked about taekwondo or cracked an excellently witty joke.*

*That Jagger was irresistible and distracting. That Jagger made her want to forget about her camera for a while and get lost in him—something that had never happened before. But this guy wasn’t worth her time. “I’m done for now.”*

*His chair rested on all four legs again. “Where are you going?”*

*She didn’t bother sparing him a look. “I need a break.”*

*“Grace, come back.”*

*She kept walking.*

*“Gracie.”*

*She stopped in her tracks, more than a little surprised when he used her long-forgotten nickname. She turned to face him. “Why did you call me that?”*

*He shrugged his shoulders again. “I don’t know. I guess you look like a Gracie.”*

*She tucked her hair behind her ear, loving how her name sounded rolling off his tongue. “No one’s called me that since my mom died.”*

*“It has a nice ring. Gracie Evans.” He cleared his throat as he picked up her pencil, holding it out to her. “Will you study with me?”*

*She moved to her seat, staring into his eyes as she sat down. “Dumb’s disappointing, Jagger.”*

*He smiled as he gave his attention to the laptop. “I’ll have to keep that in mind.”*

Grace snapped to the present when Jagger gained more speed as he moved

down another path deeper into the heart of the park.

“Slow down,” she pleaded to his back when he skirted the next road.

She rounded the sharp curve and blinked when he was gone.

“No.” Slowing, she settled her hands on her waist as she caught her breath, turning a slow circle, then began to pick up her pace again, trying to figure out where he could have gone.

Then she gasped, trying to scream and fight herself loose when someone yanked her into the forest, tightly gripping her back against the front of their body.

“Why are you following me?” he panted out next to her ear.

She closed her eyes, standing rigid as his hand covered her mouth. He felt different—harder and more muscular—but he sounded exactly the same. It had been eight years, but she would have known his voice anywhere. “Let me go,” she said against his palm.

He relaxed his hold.

Turning, she stared into harsh blue eyes and a gorgeous face disguised by two or three weeks of a scruffy beard. How many times had she imagined...? But this was real. Jagger was right here. “Jagger—”

“What do you want?”

She blinked her surprise at his biting tone while she continued to hold his gaze—as he looked at her as if he had no idea who she was.

“It’s Grace. Your Gracie,” she trailed off in a whisper as she grew perilously close to tears.

She’d hoped for a moment like this for so long. But in the numerous scenarios of the chance encounters she’d dreamed up, their seeing each other again never played out like this.

“What do you want?” he repeated.

“I don’t—” She had no idea what to say—how to talk to this cold stranger.

She tore her eyes away from his, glancing toward his sweat-soaked muscle shirt. Taking a step closer, she yanked the damp cloth covering his left pec to the side, staring at the block of puckered scarring where her name had once been.

He yanked the shirt back in place. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I’m sorry. I thought you were someone else.”

With a last look, she stepped away. Turning for the pavement, she hurried back in the direction she came, trying to find a way to live with the fact that

when the man she loved kissed her goodbye for a quick trip across town nearly a decade ago, what he'd meant was goodbye forever.

Jagger lay in the center of his California King, boxer-clad and restless, staring at the ceiling while rain battered against the windows at The Ritz. He'd been awake for hours, replaying his run-in with Grace at the park.

When he'd stepped out the door at his temporary home, the goal had been a little early-afternoon exercise after two solid days of sleep.

He'd been itchy to move a body that was well used to the grueling workouts he'd paced himself through for nearly a decade. His plan had been a swift six-mile sprint, then a shower and some lunch. *Nothing* could have prepared him for the rest.

She'd smelled amazing—had felt even better pressed up against him. Her slim, five-foot-six frame had always lined up just right with his.

She was still gorgeous. The roundness of youth had left her face, creating stunning results with slightly sharper cheekbones. Her creamy, flawless skin, Cupid's bow lips, and small dainty nose had always been a pleasure to stare at. But her eyes—the shocking crystal blue accentuated by darker rings—had been his ultimate fascination.

Grace had had his attention from the beginning—from the first second she'd walked into her big-ass house to introduce herself after her summer away at her aunt's.

But when her dad had insisted that they start studying together, he'd been forced to fight his attraction to her for months.

*Jagger rolled his Stingray to a stop behind Grace's brand-new Audi A6. Her hazard lights flashed in the dark, alerting any vehicles passing by on the quiet backroad that she'd pulled off to the side.*

*Grace got out of her driver's seat as he stepped out of his. She looked as pretty as always in her white cashmere hat and bulky pale-blue jacket as she tossed him a quick wave. "Thanks for coming. I tried Logan first, but he didn't pick up."*

*He shrugged as he adjusted his coat collar in defense of the winter wind.*

*“I was heading home anyway.”*

*She moved toward the hood. “Something’s wrong with the engine. It started doing this shaky thing before it died on me.”*

*He frowned because she’d just gotten the thing a couple of months ago. She’d turned sixteen in July, but her dad had made her wait until Christmas to surprise her with the car.*

*He’d had his license for over a year—long before he moved into the Evans’ mansion. He missed taking Grace places now that she had wheels of her own. “A shaky thing?”*

*She shrugged. “I don’t know how else to describe it.”*

*“Did you run out of gas?”*

*She glared at him. “No, I didn’t run out of gas. It has nothing to do with the gas.”*

*Opening her door, he got in behind the wheel, breathing in Grace’s subtly sexy shampoo, giving the key a turn. Nothing happened—just a clicking sound.*

*Grace got in the passenger seat. “It’s freezing out here.”*

*“I think it’s your alternator. We’re going to need a tow truck.”*

*She sighed as she let her head fall back against her seat. “Great.”*

*“They’ll get you a loaner for a couple of days, or you can catch a ride with Logan or me.”*

*Grace closed her eyes. “Lucky me.”*

*He stared at her in the glow of his headlights. “It’s not a crisis.”*

*She opened her eyes, sitting up again. “It is to me. Not everyone has the luxury of shrugging their shoulders at the world.”*

*He raised his brow in surprise. Grace was usually fun and easygoing. “What’s crawled up your ass?”*

*She shrugged. “Just a long day.” She looked at him again. “You don’t have to stick around. I can wait for the tow truck.”*

*He tried the key again. Nothing. “I’m not leaving you here by yourself.”*

*She jerked her shoulders a second time. “I’m sure if I try Logan, I’ll get him this time. I bet you have a date or something.”*

*“Nope. No date.”*

*She fiddled with her nails. “That’s something new.”*

*He restlessly scratched at his head because he had no idea what to do or say.*

*“This is probably a good time for me to tell you that I can’t tutor you*

anymore.”

Now he frowned. He looked forward to studying with Grace. It was the best part of his day. “Why?”

“Because we both know you don’t need a tutor. Plus, I have too much yearbook stuff going on, and you’re busy doing whatever it is that you do.”

All of this was coming out of left field. But he hadn’t seen her much over the past couple of days. Not since the pep rally.

Grace had been laughing and having a good time—taking her pictures for the yearbook. Then she’d disappeared after Katie Weiss sidled up next to him in the bleachers and pressed a hell of a kiss against his lips. “I haven’t seen you since we all sat together in the gym.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Are you jealous or something?”

She huffed out a laugh. “Jealous of what?”

“Of Katie.”

Her sassy laugh was back. “Hardly. She’s about as dumb as they come. And it doesn’t matter anyway. It’s not exactly like you’re into girls like me.”

“And who are girls like you?”

She jerked her shoulders. “Intelligent. Ambitious. Going somewhere in life. We have high standards. You’d actually have to work to get into my pants.”

He grinned. “Girls like you are out of my league.”

She frowned. “Only because you don’t see us.”

If only she knew. “I see you. Trust me.”

She sat up straight in her seat, holding his gaze. “Are you and Katie dating?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Then kiss me.”

He blinked, taken aback, trying to figure out if she was joking. He couldn’t tell, so he laughed. “You’re Logan’s little sister.”

She scrambled out of her side of the car, slamming the door.

He got out as she moved past the hood. “Grace—”

She whirled. “I’m not Logan’s little anything. The last time I checked, we were all sophomores. You guys are only a few months older than me. But just forget it.”

He picked up his pace to walk next to her. “I don’t—I’m not what you want. Guys like me are no good. I’m not good enough for you.”

*She stopped. "Why do you continually sell yourself short?"*

*"I'm a white trash kid who can catch a football and run fast. Apparently, I happen to be an accurate marksman, too, which is a surprise to me."*

*"You're great at a lot of things. You can be whatever you want to be."*

*He shook his head, even when he was starting to believe it. Grace's unyielding faith in him was beginning to rub off. "I live with you so I can play sports—the Evan's family charity case."*

*She shook her head. "That's not true."*

*"It's one hundred percent true."*

*"You're more. My dad wanted to help you because he cares about you."*

*He huffed out an incredulous chuckle. "Your dad wanted to help me because he likes to win. I win games, Grace. I put points on the board. If Logan's private coach hadn't seen us tossing the ball around after taekwondo practice, we wouldn't be having this conversation. I wouldn't even be here."*

*She opened her mouth, then closed it. "Okay, yes. That's entirely accurate."*

*He looked to the sky and laughed again—at the ridiculousness of it all.*

*She grinned. "I'm sorry he's so awful."*

*He shrugged because he liked that Steve spent most of his time in Philly with Logan and Gracie's bitch of a stepmother. It was cool that he, Grace, and Logan mostly had the mansion to themselves. "We have a housekeeper who washes my clothes and cooks for me. Overall, it's a pretty sweet deal."*

*She laughed. "Bea's the best."*

*He nodded. "Yes, she is."*

*Grace chuckled and then cringed before she sighed. "I'm sorry, Jagger. You came out here to help me, and I made things really awkward."*

*"All's forgiven." He held her gaze in the headlights. She was so damn pretty—and she was into him, which was pretty cool, too. "For what it's worth, I've thought about kissing you. I've thought about it way more than I should."*

*Saying nothing more, she closed the distance between them and gained her tiptoes, brushing her lips against his.*

*He let his eyes close, absorbing the softness of her mouth when she came back again. This was everything he knew he couldn't have.*

*"Grace," he murmured, stepping back. "We can't."*

*Nodding, she turned toward their cars.*

*How was it possible that something so simple could feel so right? He snagged her hand before he let himself think—before she could walk away, knowing in his depths that he would regret it if she did. “Gracie, wait.”*

*She turned back.*

*He stepped closer, sliding his knuckles along her soft cheek, the white puffs of his breath mingling with hers.*

*She swallowed. “What—”*

*“I can’t let you go,” he whispered, bringing his mouth to hers.*

*He kept his pace gentle and slow, sensing her innocence—something he hadn’t been for a long time. When she made a small sound in her throat and sagged against him, he teased her lips open, touching his tongue to hers, taking her deeper with skillful strokes.*

*She gave him more, meeting his easy demands as she wrapped her arms around him.*

*“Gracie,” he mumbled as he pulled her closer, knowing for the first time what it meant to be home.*

“*Fuck,*” he muttered as he scrubbed his hands over his face, reeling from his memories. What was it about her that made him *ache*?

There was no one he loved more—no one he’d tried harder for. There’d never been anyone as important as Grace.

He’d taken his time with her, never pushing, always letting her lead. Grace had been the one to sneak into his bed and fall asleep in his arms night after night.

He’d been gentle when she’d eagerly given him her virginity late that summer on a blanket by the lake. She was the only woman he’d shared his dreams with—the only woman he’d ever wanted.

He’d never been able to get enough of her. More often than not, he was afraid he never would. That’s why he’d stayed far away.

He’d let his career consume him—“The Unit” and top secret CIA missions for the Special Activities Division, then private contracting—anything to distract him from his thoughts of the sweet, blue-eyed blonde who’d turned him into a man.

When he left her that long ago night, he’d known he would never see her again. He’d walked away for her own good. But today, she’d knocked him flat on his ass.

He hadn't known what to do when he pulled her into the woods other than to be cruel. He'd needed her to walk away this time because if she had reached for his hand, he damn well knew he wouldn't have been able to.

He settled on his side, staring at the drops rolling down the window. Maybe calling Jason Gray was exactly what he needed to do. Perhaps he just didn't have it in him to be an average Joe.

## FOUR

GRACE SPOTTED HER OPPORTUNITY FOR ESCAPE AND TOOK IT, HURRYING DOWN the hallway toward the restaurant's exit.

She pushed through the back door, shutting out the happy noise of a hundred wedding guests dancing. She was always up for celebrating her friends' big moments. But not tonight.

Sighing, she walked farther into the dark, leaning her arms against the metal railing in the parking lot, letting her shoulders relax as she stared up at the bright half-moon in the starlit sky.

For the first time in hours, she didn't have to fake a smile and pretend that all was well. Because it wasn't.

It had been two days since she'd left Manhattan—since she'd seen Jagger. For the last forty-eight hours, she'd forced herself to move through her schedule and get on with her life—the way Jagger so easily had.

She couldn't stop thinking about the way he'd looked at her. He'd been so harsh—so *awful*. It was as if the years they'd spent together had meant nothing.

Her sigh returned as she touched her hand to her heart, remembering the marred skin on his chest.

*Grace nibbled her lip as she held Jagger's hand, watching as the tattoo artist used his machine to start tracing the looping A stenciled on Jagger's left pec.*

*When Jagger had asked her to write her name on a piece of paper, she'd had no idea he had any intention of turning it into a tattoo. "Does it hurt?"*

*Jagger shook his head as he lay on the table, staring at her. "It's not too bad."*

*"And you really want to do this?"*

*He raised his brow as the artist moved on to make the C. "I'd say it's a little late for that."*

*She laughed as he grinned. "It's my name, Jagger."*

*"Not yet, but close."*

*Her smile was back. "It's so permanent."*

*"That's true. But you're the only woman who'll ever own my heart, so I think we're safe."*

*She felt her eyes go soft as she brought his hand to her mouth, kissing his knuckles. "I love you."*

*He winked. "I love you, too. Happy eighteenth, Gracie. I hope we've made this into a birthday you'll remember."*

*Pretty flowers and a nice dinner at her favorite restaurant, followed by the sweetest of gestures. She kissed his skin again. "Always."*

Shaking her head, she closed her eyes, wishing so *desperately* she could forget.

Jagger had walked away. Then he'd erased her. He'd loved her until he didn't. One minute she'd had everything. Then she'd had nothing.

The restaurant door opened, bringing the sounds of music and laughter as Ben O'Brien stepped outside. The noise disappeared again when he shut the door. "I was starting to think you'd left."

Grace sent her friend a small smile. "I wanted some fresh air."

Ben made a sound in his throat as he wandered over to lean on the railing next to her. He was tall and handsome—successful, too. Preston Valley's favorite chiropractor. But better than that, he was kind and easy to talk to.

"Tony and Camille know how to throw a party."

She tried her best to tuck away her unhappy thoughts. "That they do. *Several* people will be sorry in the morning."

Ben chuckled. "That's for sure." His smile faded as he held her gaze. "You look beautiful tonight."

She'd gone with the strapless floral print maxi dress she found in the city. She'd also taken the time to curl the ends of her hair and carefully cover the dark circles under her eyes. "Thank you."

“You look sad, too. You have since you got back from New York.”

She shrugged because she didn’t have the energy to deny it. “Manhattan wasn’t what I’d hoped it would be.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

She made her lips curve. “I guess that’s life sometimes.”

“I guess so.” He cleared his throat as he gave her shoulder a gentle bump. “You know, I was going to try the new restaurant on Main Street tomorrow night. If you want, I can make the reservation for two.”

She stared at him—friendly brown eyes, dark-brown hair, his olive complexion darker after the summer. The complete opposite of Jagger. “Okay.”

He blinked as he raised his brow. “*Okay?*”

She grinned. “You act so surprised that I would want to have dinner with you.”

“That’s because I’ve been subtly asking you out for over a year now.”

And she’d gently shot him down every time. There’d only ever been one man for her. She’d only ever *let* there be one man for her. But after New York, she knew she couldn’t put her life on hold any longer. She’d been waiting for someone—hoping for something that had long since been over. “Right about now, I don’t know why that is.”

“I say better late than never. What time would you like to eat?”

“How about seven?”

“Seven it is.” He glanced at his watch. “But right now, it’s almost eleven. I’m heading out. If you’re leaving, too, I can walk you to your car.”

She was exhausted. Sleep hadn’t come easily last night or the one before that. As much as she enjoyed Ben’s company, she wanted to be alone. “You go ahead. I need to thank Tony and Camille, but I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

“I’ll pick you up at a quarter to seven?”

She nodded. “I’ll be ready.”

“Have a good night, Grace.”

“You, too.” She waited until Ben got into his spiffy BMW, tossing him a smile and a wave before he settled in. Then he left, and she stared up at the moon again.

Why did she feel so guilty? Why did she feel so *sad*? She closed her eyes as a tear trailed down her cheek.

This was the right thing to do. It was time to move on. “Goodbye,” she

whispered, then walked back inside, finally ready to leave the past in the past.

Jagger cut across Milton Avenue with the bag of mixed nuts and a bottle of Gatorade he'd grabbed at the gas station—his only options for a shitty-ass dinner because everything else was closed.

He glanced toward the town center's fountain lit up like glory in the dark, still trying to figure out what he was doing in Preston Valley as he walked the quiet streets back to his hotel.

Yesterday, he'd checked out of The Ritz, rented a car, then drove the four hours to Hagerstown, Maryland, to pick up his Stingray.

Long ago, Colonel Hinders had backed it into one of the extra spaces in his four-car garage and kept it running. Jagger could only be thankful that the vehicle had been thoroughly cleaned, erasing the horrors of the worst night of his life.

He'd shipped out for Operation X the morning after Logan's death. There'd been no time to think past the contracts he'd signed, enlisting him into the Army's secret fast-track program to make him one of the United States military's best of the best.

Eight years ago, his goal had been to start over with an entirely different life. This morning, he'd intended to do the same when he got in his car and headed west—until he found himself swearing and flipping a U-ey just miles from Columbus, Ohio.

Before he could change his mind, he'd gunned the engine, starting back toward Aunt Maggie's place in Preston Valley, Pennsylvania.

How many happy summer days had he, Logan, and Grace spent helping Aunt Mags at her florist shop in the beautiful, upscale town? He'd always felt comfortable and at home in the community of about thirty-five thousand.

He couldn't stop *thinking* about Grace—how she'd called herself “your Gracie” as they stared at each other in shock. It had been *years*, yet he was like a moth to a fucking flame when it came to Grace Evans.

He needed to find her—to see for himself that she'd gotten everything she'd dreamed of.

Tomorrow he would sweet-talk Aunt Mags into telling him where he could find the woman who wouldn't stop *haunting* him. He'd drive or fly to

wherever she was in the world, check on her from a distance, and then he would go.

He headed down Second Street, thinking of the camera Grace had cradled around her neck while they both caught their breath off the wooded path. The Canon had been a much fancier version of the one he remembered from their college days.

He smiled because he loved the idea of her taking her pictures.

The quick blast of music and laughter caught his attention as he picked up his pace. Looking to his left, he stopped midstep, doing a double take, when he spotted the pretty blonde in the sexy little dress.

“What the hell,” he muttered, staring at the moonlight playing over Grace’s glossy tresses and smooth skin as she walked farther away from the restaurant.

He felt himself frowning as he moved into the shadows, watching as she leaned against the metal railing in the parking lot to stare up at the stars.

He knew that look—the sorrow clouding her big blue eyes. Nothing brought him to his knees the way Grace did when she was sad.

He clenched his jaw, fighting the urge to go to her—to do whatever he could to make her smile.

Then the door opened again, and a tall, dark-haired man stepped outside, walking over to Grace’s side.

Jagger fisted his hands, listening to their exchange, trying his best to pretend that he didn’t hate the shit out of Grace making a date with the guy who made her grin.

Eventually, the man got into his BMW and drove off.

Jagger scrutinized Grace’s face while a tear trailed down her cheek as she stared at the moon again.

He shook his head because this wasn’t how things were supposed to be. Grace wasn’t supposed to be here in Pennsylvania. She wasn’t supposed to be crying alone in the dark.

He waited for her to walk back inside before he headed the last two blocks to his room, tossing his dinner on the small table as he quickly grabbed his laptop off the king-size bed.

It was possible Grace was simply in town for the wedding she’d been attending, but her conversation with the man in the parking lot and the sinking feeling in his gut told him that wasn’t the case.

Within seconds he called up the website he was looking for, staring at the

pretty landing page—the interior of Aunt Maggie’s shop that had seen numerous upgrades.

*Simplicity Florist and Gifts. Where Simple Is Stunning.*

Wasting no time, he clicked on the *Meet Our Staff* page, swearing as he studied Grace grinning as she stood arm in arm with Aunt Maggie and Asa, Maggie’s longtime partner—a six-foot-four tank of a black man who had always been incredibly kind.

Asa had been a jack-of-all-trades for as long as Jagger had been in the picture, helping with the morning and afternoon deliveries on top of running his own successful accounting firm a couple of blocks from the store.

“Family owned and operated,” Jagger absently muttered as he read about the shop that had been open for over forty years. He stopped when he got to the next picture of Grace as a child while she stood outside the store with her mother, aunt, and Asa.

He scrolled some more, noting headshots for two more employees Jagger had never met before: Jen and Brandon.

He stopped again on Grace’s stunning face, reading *Master Designer and Business Manager* below her name.

Muttering another curse, Jagger clicked the button that encouraged him to follow Simplicity on Instagram.

Immediately he recognized Grace’s work as he studied gorgeous shots of artfully displayed bouquets, beautifully decorated wedding venues, and fun candids from the store.

Rubbing at the back of his neck, he shook his head. Nothing about this was *right*. This was never, ever something Grace had talked about wanting.

Tomorrow they were going to have a conversation. The plan had been to check on Grace, then get on with his life. But now, they would have to see.

## FIVE

GRACE TYPED THE FINAL DETAILS INTO HER CLIENT NOTES, THEN SMILED AT Christy as they sat at one of Brew's window tables, Preston Valley's super charming and always bustling coffee shop.

Ancient brick walls accented scarred wooden tables that were constantly occupied by patrons eager for a cup of excellent coffee and one of the shop's delicious baked goods.

"I have some great ideas for Saturday."

Christy nibbled her nail. "The pink roses shouldn't be a problem, right? You know, too cliché with the whole 'it's a girl' thing?"

Grace shook her head. "Roses are classic. And I was planning to make the white hydrangeas the focal flower. The roses will add a touch of elegance. Plus, we'll have several other filler flowers that will round out the look—yellows and pale purples."

Christy nodded as she sipped her espresso. "I know you and Maggie know what you're doing. I just want everything to be perfect. They've been trying for this baby for so long."

Grace smiled as she touched her friend's hand. She'd known Christy and her sister for as long as she could remember. The three of them had played together whenever Mom had brought her and Logan up to visit with Aunt Maggie in the town where Mom and Maggie had grown up—something they'd done regularly until the drunk driver ended her mother's life one April night when she'd been thirteen.

"That's why we'll make sure Gabby's day is everything you both want it to be."

Christy squeezed her fingers. "What time should I pick up the

arrangements?”

“I’ll deliver.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

But Grace saw the hopeful relief in Christy’s hazel eyes. “I want to. You have your hands full. Let me take this off your plate.”

Christy closed her eyes as she exhaled. “Have I mentioned that you’re the best?”

Grace grinned. “You have, but I don’t mind hearing it regularly.” She laughed as Christy did, returning her friend’s hug. “Don’t worry about a thing. I’ll have the arrangements to your place with plenty of time to spare.”

“Thank you so much.”

“Of course.”

Christy winced as she glanced at her watch. “I hate to cut this short, but I have to get over to the bank, then the grocery store. It’s my turn to bring snacks to Brennan’s Cub Scouts meeting this afternoon, and he said he wants homemade rice crispy treats.”

Grace batted her long lashes. “Mom life.”

Christy stood. “Exactly.”

Grace also gained her feet, wearing a silky cream cowl camisole and gray tailored ankle pants. “Text me if you have any concerns. Otherwise, I’ll see you at nine thirty on Saturday.”

Christy shouldered her purse, freeing her long black hair trapped by the strap. “I want details about your date. You better be texting me about that.”

“You know I will.” Grace hugged Christy again before her friend left. She’d told Christy about the latest development with Ben, but said nothing to anyone about seeing Jagger. What was the point?

“Okay,” she said as she set her bag on her chair, then closed her laptop, setting the computer in its designated compartment as she ran through her mental checklist.

She needed to get over to the shop and get orders filled. New photos had to be taken for Instagram. Then she needed to contact their supplier...

Her thoughts vanished as she glanced across the street.

The hand she’d lifted to slide her hair behind her ear fell to her side as she stared at Jagger leaning against the Stingray’s driver’s side door as he sat parallel parked in one of the metered parking spots.

He wore a navy-blue tank top and khaki cargo shorts. Dark sunglasses covered his eyes as he crossed powerful arms at his chest. His beard was still

there—three more days of unkempt scruff. Gorgeous and dangerous.

“Oh, God,” she shuddered out, barely remembering to grab her laptop bag before she walked to the door and stepped outside, moving down the sidewalk instead of crossing the street to talk to the man who was supposed to be anywhere but there.

She glanced over her shoulder, muttering a curse when she realized he was right behind her.

With his next step, he fell into pace beside her.

She hesitated, then moved faster, wishing like crazy that she hadn't left her Sorento at the shop. What was she supposed to do? What was she supposed to *say*? Because this wasn't supposed to be happening. “What are you doing here, Jagger?”

“What are *you* doing here?”

She stopped in her tracks, clutching the strap of her bag as she faced him. “I live here. I work here.”

“What about photography? What about your pictures?”

She huffed out a laugh at his out-of-left-field question. Since when did he give a damn about her career path? Since when did he care about her at all? “Go away, Jagger.”

She hurried up the one step to her aunt's flower shop, shutting the door before he could follow. “We're closed,” she said, staring into his aviator lenses through the panel of glass, twisting the lock into place with trembling fingers.

She closed her eyes, then opened them, blinking when she realized he was gone.

“Why is this *happening*?” she whispered, resting her back against the doorframe as she pressed a hand to her jittery stomach.

She peeked over her shoulder again, relieved that he was still gone.

“Is that you, honey?” Aunt Maggie called from the back.

Grace slid clammy palms over her pants, smoothing herself out. “Um, yup. I'll be right there.”

“Good. We've got some pretty ones back here today. The dahlias are— Oh my word!”

“What?” Grace pushed off the door, hustling toward the back as the surprise in Aunt Maggie's voice registered. “What's wrong?”

Grace clenched her jaw when she stopped in the doorway, having forgotten that Jagger knew his way around the place. The alleyway door was

always open for delivery and flower processing in the morning. He'd helped with the flowers numerous times during their summer vacations.

Aunt Maggie laughed as she stood from her stool to wrap Jagger up in a hug. "What on earth are you doing here, kiddo?"

Jagger returned her embrace, holding Grace's stare over Aunt Maggie's head while his glasses rested on his hair. "I was driving through, so I thought I'd stop by."

Aunt Maggie eased back. "You're all grown up."

He smiled, but not one of his sexy crooked grins. It was more of an obligatory curving of his lips. There was an edge to him—a wary harshness. "I am."

"Are you sticking around for a while?"

He jerked his shoulders as he looked at Grace again. "I'm not sure."

"Well, I'm going to head down the street for a cup of tea before I get to work on the morning orders." Aunt Maggie hobbled a couple of steps back to her stool. "I'm a little unsteady today."

Jagger's brow creased as he reached out his hand to steady her. "Did you hurt yourself?"

Aunt Maggie ruefully smiled. "Not quite. It's the damn MS."

His frown returned. "Oh."

Grace stepped farther into the room. "I can go get your tea."

Aunt Maggie snatched up her cane. "Don't baby me, Grace. I'm more than capable of taking care of myself."

Grace smiled at her aunt. "Sorry."

Aunt Maggie winked. "You'll hold down the fort for a little while?"

Grace nodded, hating that she and Jagger were about to be left alone. "I'll get started on the orders."

"Okay, honey." She headed toward the back door, then stopped, looking at Jagger. "I'll see you around, handsome."

Jagger's lips curved again. "See you, Aunt Mags."

"Don't you head out of town again without saying goodbye."

He shook his head. "I won't."

"I mean it."

He crossed his finger over his heart. "I promise."

Aunt Maggie chuckled as she stopped to navigate the three back steps.

Grace held her breath, fighting the urge to hurry over and help. But she knew Aunt Maggie would only get pissed. "I need to get to that ramp," she

said mostly to herself, adding finding someone to build a ramp for the back entrance to her to-do list as she glanced at Jagger again.

The silence stretched out between them as the refrigeration unit hummed to life.

“Aunt Mags has multiple sclerosis?”

“She was diagnosed six months after Logan died.” She turned, heading into the main shop toward the computer, hoping he would take that as a hint to walk back outside.

He followed her.

She ignored him, glancing at the number of overnight orders that had come in, then hit the print button for the invoices.

“Grace.”

Sidestepping him, she moved to the back, grabbing the first six vases she would need off one of the supply shelves. “You made yourself perfectly clear in the park the other day, so why are you here?”

He followed her again, setting her up with more vases on the worktable. “Because this isn’t the way it’s supposed to be.”

She settled an apron in place as she moved to get the flower food next. “What does that mean?”

“You were supposed to travel the world. You were supposed to take your pictures.”

She stopped mid-reach as her anger grew—when it felt like he was judging the way she lived her life. “I take my pictures. I also take care of myself and the only person who’s never let me down.”

He swallowed as they eyed each other.

She huffed out a breath, refusing to feel guilty for hitting below the belt. What she’d said was the absolute truth. Since her mother’s death, Aunt Maggie was the only person she’d always been able to depend on. Plus, Asa, too. “I don’t have time for this. I have a million orders to fill.”

“So, I’ll help.”

“No.”

“Then I’ll come back later.”

She moved to the large sink, turning on the faucet to fill a bucket. “I’m busy all day.”

He snatched a copy of the orders from the backroom printer, clearly remembering the daily process of the job. “Can we talk tonight?”

“No.” She snapped off the water, hefting the bucket. “I have a date—”

She turned, smacking into his solid chest, sloshing water onto the floor.

He grabbed her, steadying her with rough palms on her naked arms. "Let me take that."

She took a step back as she breathed in the scent of his soap, pretending she wasn't entirely aware of what his touch did to her. "I've got it."

He continued to stand in her way, holding her gaze.

She stared into his eyes, unable to read him. Eight years ago, she would have looked at him and known exactly what he was thinking. Today, he was a stranger. "You're scruffy," she heard herself say, annoyed that she sounded so breathless.

He scratched at his beard. "I'm due for a trim."

"I have to get to work."

"When can we talk?"

She shrugged as she shook her head. "Is there really anything we need to say?"

He moved to the table, writing down a number. "If your schedule opens up, give me a call." He headed out the way he'd come.

She hesitated as she glanced from the paper to the door, wanting to tell him to come back, terrified that he would vanish from her life again. But it would be better if that's exactly what he did. She couldn't go through all of this a second time.

Jagger settled his sunglasses in place as he stepped out of the shop's short alleyway. He passed Simplicity's storefront as Grace opened the big glass doors in anticipation of the day's patrons.

She paused with her hand on the Open sign as their eyes met. Then she turned away, heading farther into the shop.

"Damn," he muttered as he kept his pace steady on his walk down the pretty tree-lined stretch of Main Street, barely paying attention to the fall flowers decorating window boxes or the fact that a few of the stores along the block had changed hands since the last time he'd been there.

He exhaled a long frustrated breath because the last twenty minutes had gone far worse than he'd expected. Cornering Grace had been a bit of a dick move, but he hadn't known what else to do, especially after she'd locked him

out.

This entire situation was boggy ground. Everything about the present was new territory.

Clenching his jaw, he flared his nostrils, remembering how Grace had looked at him while he followed her around the store—hostility and poorly guarded vulnerability. That was new, too, and he didn't like it.

He'd watched her. When he pulled up at an empty spot by the coffee shop, he hadn't realized she would be sitting by the window with Christy.

Initially, he'd planned to walk over to Maggie's place and find Grace there, but he'd stared across the street instead, studying how easily Grace talked and laughed with her longtime best friend.

It was a shame when that had changed. He'd known the exact moment when she spotted him—when her eyes had grown huge with shock and her shoulders stiff with tension.

"Damn," he said again because things used to be so *easy* between them. He and Grace had spent long stretches of each day together for the better part of five years.

Occasionally, they had argued or pissed each other off, but they'd never been able to stay mad at each other for long. Laughter and fun had always followed apologies and hugs—or a hell of a bout of sweaty makeup sex.

Clearly, those days were over. But he rubbed at the back of his neck because even as he thought it, he knew it wasn't that simple. He'd seen the flash of desire in her eyes—had heard the breathiness in her voice after he'd touched her. Time had passed—years—but there was still something between them.

They needed to have a conversation, even if Grace wasn't necessarily excited about the idea.

*Is there really anything we need to say?*

He shook his head as her last words to him stung. There was plenty to talk about because Grace had her hands full. When he'd left her behind, her life was supposed to have been better for it. She was supposed to have capitalized on her opportunities and made her dreams come true.

Obviously, that never happened because working full-time in Aunt Maggie's shop had never entered the original equation.

But Logan was never supposed to have hurt his shoulder in the last tackle of their senior year game. He was never supposed to have gotten hooked on pills and died. Jagger was never supposed to have walked away from the love

of his life so he could spend the next eight years overseas.

He stopped at the end of the block, crossing over to the next at the crosswalk, letting his shoulders relax when he spotted the dojang he'd spent countless hours in over the long-ago summers.

Master Todd had eagerly accepted him as a student and part-time instructor whenever he'd spent time in Preston Valley between football camps.

Pulling open the door, he stepped inside, breathing in the odd mixture of sweat, mat cleaner, and crayons. The smell was familiar and immediately comforting.

“Hello?”

Jagger smiled at the deep voice coming from the office. That was familiar too.

Seconds later, Todd hobbled into the main room with a clunky gray boot on his right foot. His brown eyes grew wide as he grinned. “Jagger Tennyson. What the hell?”

Jagger's smile widened as he studied Todd's tough body and salt-and-pepper hair. This place was the next best thing to home—the next best thing to Grace. Closing the distance between them so Todd wouldn't have to walk, Jagger extended his hand.

“Fuck that, man. Give me a hug.”

Jagger wrapped his mid-fortysomething teacher up in a hug, slapping his back as Todd slapped his. “It's been a long time.”

Todd eased back. “Look at you, Muscle Man. Where the hell have you been?”

Jagger sighed. “Nowhere and everywhere.” He shrugged. “Overseas.”

“Doing the military thing.”

“I'm retired now.”

Todd nodded. “It's great to have you standing here.”

It felt good to be standing there. Jagger looked at Todd's foot. “What happened?”

Todd huffed out a laugh. “I snapped my Achilles doing a spinning hook kick. I'm about six weeks post-surgery.”

“That sucks, man.”

“Getting old sucks. This whole thing has made teaching pretty tricky, especially now that my assistant's back at college part-time.”

“I bet.”

Todd crossed his arms. “So, what’s up? What brings you back to Preston Valley?”

Jagger looked to the ceiling as he shook his head. “Right about now, I couldn’t tell you.”

Todd sent him a knowing smile. “From the sounds of that, I probably don’t need to tell you she’s down at the shop with Maggie.”

He nodded as he sighed. “Yeah, I figured that out.”

Todd smiled again. “Have you got yourself hooked up with a job?”

“I’m currently exploring my options.” And there wasn’t much that seemed appealing, which scared the shit out of him as he thought of Jason Gray’s prediction that he would be calling him back. He didn’t want to fall into the private contracting trap that so many former soldiers found themselves in.

“If you’re looking for something to do, I could use a hand around here.”

Jagger perked up. Being in Preston Valley was the first thing that had felt right in a long damn time. The idea of teaching there with Todd was even better.

“I wouldn’t be able to pay you much. The numbers are holding steady, but they could be better.”

“I don’t need you to pay me.”

“I wouldn’t feel right about that. I’m not asking you to volunteer. I need someone who can be here for the Tuesday/Thursday black belt classes and the kids’ Monday/Wednesday morning classes. I was thinking about starting a women’s self-defense class, but that’s been on hold. Mark helps when he can, but having you here would be a huge relief.”

He didn’t need Todd’s money. And he wasn’t sure who would be doing the other a bigger favor. He needed this—the place where he’d once loved to be. People who treated him like family. “Does Ruby still make that pot roast?” His mouth watered just thinking of Todd’s wife’s excellent cooking.

“You bet she does. She’s running a blog now with all of her recipes.”

“No kidding?”

Todd nodded. “It’s popular.”

“I don’t doubt it. Maybe Ruby can hook me up with a meal every now and then, and we’ll call it square.”

Todd started back toward the office. “We’ve still got the room over the garage if you’re looking for a place to stay—the efficiency apartment.”

Jagger followed. “You’ve got yourself a deal.”

Todd headed for the filing cabinet, pulling out several forms. “Fill this stuff out, and I’ll happily get you on board ASAP.”

“Sure—” Jagger paused as he looked at the picture frames on his desk. Todd’s family had expanded from two to four. “You’re a dad?”

Todd smiled. “Andy’s two and Spencer’s three months.”

Jagger grinned. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks. It’s a wild ride over at our house these days. I wanted your name on the dotted line before you figured that out.”

Jagger studied the picture again. Pretty Ruby with her red hair was nearly a decade younger than her husband. But they’d always fit. “I did private contracting for two years, so I know all about wild.”

Todd laughed. “Trust me. You haven’t seen anything yet.”

Jagger sat down to fill out his papers, looking forward to a big slice of normal. He wanted to help Todd. He wanted to help Grace, too. He wasn’t sure how or if she would let him, but he needed to try to do something.

Grace let the wind blow through her hair as Ben took a left off Main onto Summer Street. He slowed moments later, pulling his BMW behind her SUV in her driveway.

He looked her way in the shadows of her outdoor lights, sending her a smile as he killed the engine. “I believe this is your stop.”

She smiled back, even as her stomach jittered with nerves. They’d had a nice dinner—good conversation and plenty of laughs. He’d even taken her over to his office for a treatment when she’d randomly mentioned that her back had been out of whack. But now their date was over. “It is.”

He unfastened his safety belt. “I’ll walk you to your door.”

“Great,” she said, flashing him another quick grin. But it wasn’t great because she didn’t know how to do this—deal with the after-dinner expectations.

She’d dated one man in her life. There’d been no hesitations with Jagger. She’d *wanted* from the beginning. Whatever he’d been willing to give her—to show her—she’d been eager to experience.

But she’d been mostly a kid at that point. Confident. Fearless. The world had been her oyster.

Times had changed.

Stalling as she unbuckled her seat belt and grabbed her purse, she inhaled a steadying breath, stepping out when Ben opened her door. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

The crickets sang their songs as she and Ben started up the short path to her single-story, three-bedroom home.

She’d bought the fixer-upper three years ago, painstakingly making the cozy place her own. She’d renovated each room with brand-new windows and flooring, paint, and personal touches. But her pride and joy was the corner yard she’d brought back to life with lush grass and pretty flower beds.

Ben stopped in front of her door as she did. “Thanks for checking out the new restaurant with me. Sushi instead of a taco shop wasn’t a bad idea.”

She squeezed her purse strap in her hand. “The food and company were great.”

He smiled. “Maybe we can do it again.”

She wanted to want to. Ben was sweet and kind; most importantly, he wasn’t Jagger. “I would like that.”

“Are you up for a date to the bonfire this coming weekend?”

She swallowed. “I’d love to go.”

He narrowed his eyes a little, studying her. “Then why am I sensing a but?”

She shook her head. “There’s no but. I just need to take things slow.” She evaded his eyes as she looked down. “Things are— My past is complicated.”

He nodded. “The guy who’s back in town. The one with the vintage Corvette.”

Grace frowned as her gaze whipped up to his. She was still getting used to the idea that Jagger was here, so how did Ben know about it?

“This isn’t a big place, Grace. Word gets around, especially when you’re the chiropractor. People tell me all kinds of things while I’m adjusting them.” He shrugged. “It’s a thing.”

She smiled. “I thought that happened to hairstylists and bartenders.”

He shrugged again. “It happens to chiropractors, too.”

She laughed as her nerves settled. Inviting Ben into her life was going to be a good thing. “I had no idea.”

“It’s the absolute truth.”

She cleared her throat. “So, what are people telling you about the guy with the Corvette while you pop them back into place?”

“That you two had a thing.”

She nodded. “We had a thing for a long time.”

“Is that going to be a problem for us?”

She adamantly shook her head, needing to believe that was true. “We had a thing for a long time, but that was a long time ago.”

He sent her another small smile as they both grew quiet. “I guess this is where things tend to get awkward: how to end the date.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I thought it was just me.”

He laughed. “Is a kiss on the cheek too forward?”

She shook her head. “No, that’s okay.”

He leaned down, pressing a kiss to her skin before he eased slightly back. Touching her jaw, he studied her lips as he held her gaze.

She let her eyes close as he moved in, responding to the gentle warmth of his mouth against hers. He was different—the feel of his lips and his taste. Even when Jagger had been tender, there had been a boldness—a *heat*—to their embraces.

Abruptly, she pulled back as her thoughts wandered to a cold Pennsylvania night when her car had broken down and everything had changed.

Ben took another step away. “I’m sorry, Grace.”

She smiled. “It’s okay.”

He shook his head. “You said slow. That wasn’t slow.”

“I didn’t stop you.” She touched his arm. “Thank you for a lovely night—for a lovely kiss.”

He nodded. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Good night.”

He held up his hand in a wave as he started toward his car.

She unlocked her door, letting herself inside as Ben settled behind the wheel. Waving again, she smiled before she shut the door, resting her forehead against the doorframe as she huffed out an irritated breath. “Way to go, Grace.”

Sighing, she shook her head. Why hadn’t she let herself enjoy the stupid kiss? Why was Jagger constantly on her mind? Even during dinner, she’d caught herself looking out the window by their booth, half expecting to see him staring at her as he leaned against his car.

She’d waited for him for *eight years*. Why did he have to come back now when she finally saw her chance to move on?

## SIX

GRACE GLANCED AT HER WATCH AS SHE UNLOCKED SIMPLICITY'S FRONT DOOR. Locking herself back inside, she headed for the counter to drop off her purse and the thermal cup holding her chai tea.

Hesitating with the light shawl she'd paired with boots, snug dark blue jeans, and another one of her favorite cami-type tops, she kept it in place, remembering that her back and shoulders looked like hell.

"Okay. Let's do this," she muttered, heading toward the back.

There were eight hundred things to accomplish today, which meant getting to the store an hour earlier than usual.

The arrangements for tomorrow's country club luncheon needed to be processed and then arranged on top of the everyday orders.

She took two steps then stopped, frowning when she realized Aunt Maggie hadn't turned on her usual Top 40 tunes, and whatever work was getting done was happening at a much faster pace than Maggie could move with her cane.

"*Brandon*," Grace said, grinning her relief as she started walking again, thrilled that their part-time morning help was back. "I'm so glad you're *here*. I thought a.m. football still had two more—"

She froze in the doorway, her cheery mood vanishing when Jagger hefted two heavy buckets of purple cosmos.

He tossed her a nod as he moved to the walk-in fridge. "Hey."

She shook her head as she stared.

He'd gotten a haircut. The barber had gone tight around the sides and back, keeping the top slightly longer. And he'd shaven away his beard, leaving behind the irresistible shadowy scruff she'd skimmed her fingers over

hundreds of times before.

She snapped back to attention, ignoring the flexing and bunching of his awesome arms as he wore a plain white T-shirt and black athletic shorts. So much sexiness and power. “What are you doing?”

“Aunt Mags asked me to help with the flowers this morning. She has Rotary.”

Grace headed toward the dozen buckets that still needed to be put away. “She hasn’t been to Rotary in months.”

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

“We don’t need help.”

He tossed her a you’re-full-of-shit look before he got back to work.

Hefting two buckets of Celosia, she followed him to the fridge, breathing in the scent of his soap and shaving cream. “I appreciate what you’re doing, but I can handle this. That’s why I’m here early.”

He set the buckets down, facing her when she stepped inside the chilly space. Seconds later, the door closed behind them.

This was really happening. Jagger was standing in the refrigerator with her, smelling amazing and looking even better.

“Aunt Mags asked if I could give her a hand until Brandon gets back.”

Grace felt her eyes go wide. “But that’s two more weeks.”

He nodded. “That’s what she mentioned.”

“But when are you leaving Preston Valley?” The ultimate question she needed an answer to. She needed to know the exact moment he planned to walk away again.

He shrugged. “I’m helping Todd while he’s injured, so it’s hard to say.”

Surely this was a bad joke. When she’d talked to Ruby a couple of days ago, Todd’s wife had mentioned that a full recovery could take *months*. “I don’t—I can’t— Aunt Maggie should have talked to me about this arrangement first.”

He brushed past her in the tight space, his hard chest sliding against her arm. “That’s between the two of you.”

She dropped the buckets with a hard plop, following him again. “Jagger.”

He stopped.

“I really can handle this. I’ve been handling it for a long time.”

“Well, I’m here now.” He picked up another two buckets of Dianthus and left.

She swallowed, closing her eyes as he walked back into the fridge. This

wasn't going to work. She needed him to *leave*—the shop and Preston Valley.

But she already knew he wouldn't go if he'd given Todd and Aunt Maggie his word, so she headed for the front of the shop, waking up the computer to figure out what she needed to do for the orders that had come in since closing.

Printing out the invoices, she squared her shoulders, then returned to the processing room, ready to do what she could to make the best of a super crappy situation.

When Aunt Maggie got back from her Rotary meeting, they were going to talk.

Jagger brought the last few buckets of flowers to the fridge while Grace dealt with Simplicity's first customers of the day.

"If you wait here, I'll get your arrangement, Mr. Torelli."

"Sure."

Grace headed Jagger's way, looking damn good—stylish and subtly sexy. She'd pulled some of her hair back in a barrette, leaving her spectacular face unframed.

Grace had always known how to wear a pair of jeans. Her long, slender legs in snug denim were magic. And her tight little ass... Christ, he missed giving it a good squeeze.

"I need to get in there," she said to him, keeping her voice cool as their eyes met.

He opened the door to the fridge, letting her step inside before him, breathing in the scents of her perfume and shampoo mixing with hundreds of flowers.

She grabbed the pretty arrangement of sunny fall blooms and turned, stopping short of smacking into him.

Long ago, he would have pulled her against him for a quick kiss. They would have grinned at each other while he playfully cupped her breasts or she teased him with a brush of her hand against his package.

Now, she cleared her throat while she stood stiff. "Excuse me."

He stepped out of her way, letting her walk back out. Apparently, today

was going to go about as well as yesterday.

When Aunt Mags had tracked him down at Todd and Ruby's last night, asking for his help, he'd foolishly thought that his time at the shop might give him and Grace a chance to talk. So far, she'd done everything possible to avoid him.

He walked back out of the fridge, looking toward the half dozen boxes of various colored roses that needed to be unboxed, dethorned, and set in water to rehydrate.

He'd told Maggie he would haul buckets for her, but maybe if he went after the roses, Grace would be forced to stand in the same room with him while she created the numerous orders that needed to be filled.

By his estimation, she'd done everything she could out front, waiting for him to finish up. Eventually, she would have to come back here.

He moved to the table, grabbing the first box of coral-colored blooms. Pulling at the cardboard, he frowned when he spotted the mold on one of the petals.

"Uh-oh." He winced, already feeling sorry for the supplier who would get an earful from a pissed-off Maggie Wilson. If there was anything he knew about Aunt Mags, it was how serious she was about the quality of her flowers.

He picked up the stem, bringing it out front as Grace smiled and waved to her customer.

"Tell Mrs. Torelli we hope she feels better."

"I sure will. These should help. Thanks again, Grace."

Grace's smile disappeared as she faced him. "What's wrong?"

"These are no good."

She took the bloom from him, twisting it in her fingers as the familiar little line formed between her brow as she frowned. "I'll take care of it."

"Okay." He turned to go back to the table.

She grabbed hold of his arm. "Don't tell Aunt Maggie."

He turned to face her again as she dropped her hand.

"The stress isn't good for her MS. It causes flare-ups. She's had more than a few lately, and it's taking her longer to recover each time."

He nodded, seeing the distress in her eyes. Not only was Grace running the store, she was also going out of her way to manage Maggie's emotions. "What else can I be doing to help you?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

“Grace, I’m here—”

She shook her head more adamantly. “Eventually, you’ll be gone.”

He opened his mouth to respond as they both looked toward the door when the guy Grace had made a date with walked in.

She glanced at Jagger, then smiled as she walked the man’s way. “Hi.”

The guy smiled back. “Hi, yourself.”

Jagger turned to leave. He wanted to be anywhere but there, but he stopped when he spotted the patch of nasty marks marring Grace’s skin as the shawl slid off her right shoulder.

“What’s that?” he demanded, quickly closing the distance between them. “What the fuck is this?” He yanked the cloth to the floor, tracking his gaze down the angry purple and red bruising that disappeared beneath Grace’s shirt.

Alarm filled her eyes. “Jagger—”

Rage consumed his heart as he looked at the man gaping at him. “Did you do this?”

“Yes—”

That was all the guy could say before Jagger grabbed him by the throat and walked him backward, slamming him into the wall where several vases fell off the shelves to shatter on polished hardwood. “You son of a bitch—”

“Jagger, stop it!” Grace pulled on his arm. “Ben didn’t hurt me! It’s from the gua sha!”

He slightly loosened his grip as he held Ben’s shocked stare. “What the hell’s gua sha?”

Ben swallowed. “Uh, it’s a technique for releasing muscle tension.” His Adam’s apple bobbed again. “The tool I use can break small capillaries under the skin. It’s a common side effect. I gave Grace a treatment last night on our date.”

Jagger stepped back, letting Ben go.

Grace hurried between him and Ben, gripping Ben’s arm. “Are you okay?”

Ben nodded as he took a step away from Grace to smooth his button-down. “I’m fine.”

“I’m so, so sorry.”

Jagger didn’t share the same apologetic sentiments as he headed for the back. He imagined Ben wouldn’t forget anytime soon that he better treat Grace right.

“Why don’t we talk later?” Ben said as Jagger went on the hunt for a broom in the small storage closet.

Moments later, he knew Grace stood behind him as he closed the door. He turned to face her, watching her clutching her arms in a white-knuckle grip as she crossed them. Some of the color had left her face, and her fantastic blue eyes were huge.

He’d frightened her. It had been a long time since he’d lost his cool like that. He was too well trained as a martial artist and as a United States military killing machine to go off half-cocked. But this was Grace.

“Jagger...” Her hand moved to her forehead. “That was... I don’t... You can’t *do* stuff like that.”

“It looks like he beat the hell out of you.”

“I know.” Her voice gentled as she adjusted the shawl on her shoulders again. “But Ben would never hurt me. He’s a chiropractor. He does gua sha treatments for many of his patients.”

He didn’t give two shits about who Ben was or what he did. “I’ll clean up the mess.”

She took the broom. “I’ll clean up. You should go.”

“Grace—”

She shook her head. “Please just go.”

He nodded, wanting to pull her against him—to hold her close and apologize for scaring her. But he grabbed his wallet and the keys he’d left on one of the shelves, pulling a couple hundred dollars free. “Let me know if this doesn’t cover the damages.”

She didn’t move to take it.

He set it on the table as he left, regretting that for just a second, it had felt like they might be getting somewhere before Ben walked into the shop.

## SEVEN

GRACE HURRIED INTO SIMPLICITY—HER TYPICAL PACE AS SHE TRIED TO KEEP up with her life. Between editing the pictures she'd taken for *Travel's* New York City Edition, taking almost-daily client meetings for next year's wedding and event season, plus trying to keep up with the shop's needs, time was short. Jen helped for a couple of hours every afternoon, but another part-time helper was under strong consideration.

Shoving her purse under the counter, Grace walked to the back, where she blinked at Aunt Maggie.

Nearly all the table arrangements for tomorrow's baby shower were lined up on the workspace as Aunt Maggie continued working on the remaining few. "Aren't you speedy today?"

Aunt Maggie grinned as she sat on her favorite stool, looking pretty in a pink sweater and jeans with her black hair tied back with a piece of white ribbon.

Grace was taller and blond like her mom had been, whereas Aunt Maggie was a couple of inches shorter and darker-haired, but all three shared the same Wilson family traits: crystal-blue eyes and small, dainty noses.

Sometimes it was hard to believe that if her mom had still been alive, she would have been nearly sixty—Aunt Maggie's newly minted age that they'd celebrated with a big birthday bash late last month.

Aunt Maggie fiddled with one of the flower's petals. "These are coming together so nicely. You picked out a great combination of flowers. I think Christy and Gabby will be pleased."

Grace sidled up next to her aunt, wrapping her arms around her shoulders in a hug as she kissed her cheek. "They're beautiful. As always."

Aunt Maggie wrapped an arm around Grace's waist for a quick embrace. "Thank you, honey."

Grace moved to her aunt's opposite side, picking up some of the green filler, placing it in the next vase to create a similar look to the ones Aunt Maggie had already made. "I'm surprised you started with the table arrangements before the main centerpiece. That's not your usual process."

"The centerpiece is already in the fridge."

Grace blinked at her aunt again as she smiled. "What time did you get here this morning?"

"Asa and I got back from the warehouse with the flowers at our usual time. Jagger had everything put away within twenty minutes. He helped me clean up the stems and did the dethorning while I worked on the centerpiece. He put it in the fridge before he left."

Grace slid a pretty white hydrangea into the arrangement, adding height to the look as they moved their conversation into uncomfortable territory. Over the last week, it had felt like Aunt Maggie brought up Jagger every chance she could get. "Oh."

"Did you check out the ramp?"

She stopped again. "What ramp?"

Aunt Maggie gestured to the alleyway door. "Take a look."

Walking over to the door, Grace pushed it open to the chilly morning air. Huffing out a surprised laugh, she stared at safety treads on wide planks and two sturdy railings. "This is *amazing*."

"It sure makes getting in here a heck of a lot easier. If I need that walker the doctor keeps trying to push on me, I won't have any trouble getting inside."

Grace laughed again, thrilled she could cross another worry off her list as she stepped onto the first couple of thick boards. "It's really pretty—stained and everything. When did Asa have time to do this?"

"He didn't. Jagger did."

Her smile dimmed. "Oh."

"He said he used Todd's tools and the empty space in the garage," Aunt Maggie continued. "When Asa and I pulled up this morning, Jagger was securing it in place. He made it long so the pitch would be gradual. My tired bones appreciate it."

Closing the door, Grace returned to the table, picking up the next hydrangea to add balance to what she'd started. "That was nice of him."

“He’s been so helpful. He’s taken a lot of the burden off both of us.”

Jagger had turned into Aunt Maggie’s lifesaver. If Grace chose to admit it, he’d been hers too.

Brandon, their high school helper, always did a nice job, but Jagger’s fast pace and efficiency were unmatched. Things in the processing room had never run smoother—or at least not for some time.

On Monday, she’d confessed to Jagger that Maggie’s stress was making her MS worse. In a mere few days, he’d made several of their problems disappear. “Yes, he has.”

“He’s a good one.”

Grace cleared her throat as she wiggled the next hydrangea into place, well aware that Aunt Maggie had always had a soft spot for Jagger. “Are there any updates on Todd’s heel? Has Jagger mentioned how long he’s staying?”

“No, he hasn’t.” Aunt Maggie adjusted herself on the stool. “He doesn’t say a whole lot of anything. He comes in here, works his butt off, then heads out for one of his morning runs before he works his butt off at Todd’s.”

Grace reached for a pink rose in one of the buckets, trimmed the stem, fit it in its place, then picked up another, wanting to drop the subject of Jagger Tennyson altogether.

“Have you two talked?” Aunt Maggie wanted to know.

Grace jabbed the next flower among the others. “No.”

Several seconds passed in silence while they both did their job.

“Are you going to punish him forever, Grace?”

Her gaze whipped to meet Aunt Maggie’s in surprise. “I’m not punishing him.”

“Are you sure about that?”

She wandered over to the supply shelf to grab a different pair of shears when she found the ones she was working with to be suddenly dull. “I don’t know why he’s here.”

“Why do you think he’s here?”

She put down a perfectly good pair to grab another, growing increasingly annoyed. Her goal had never been to punish Jagger. It was only to protect herself. “I don’t want to have this conversation.”

“Grace—”

She whirled. “He *left* me. He just left.”

Aunt Maggie’s eyes filled with sympathy. “I know he did, honey. I know

he broke your heart. But that boy *loved* you. He would have walked through fire for you.”

“If he loved me so much, then why did he go?”

“You know why. Your father didn’t give him much of a choice.”

She adamantly shook her head. “There’s always a choice, and he didn’t choose me.”

Setting the shears back in the pile, Grace headed for the front of the store. “Since you have the arrangements under control, I’m going to run a few errands—get that deposit to the bank.” But she slowed when Aunt Maggie started speaking again.

“I know he hurt you, honey. But have you taken a good look at him? He’s harder than he used to be. Jagger certainly has an edge, but I think there’s a strong possibility that he’s hurting too.”

She looked over her shoulder at her aunt—the woman who was currently forcing her to talk and think about things she’d rather leave buried. But ultimately, she knew Aunt Maggie meant well.

When everything had fallen apart, Aunt Maggie and Asa had been the ones to help her pick up all the pieces. “I’ll be back in a little while. Call if you need anything.”

Aunt Maggie nodded. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

Grace slowed in front of the bank, then eased her way into a parallel parking space when she realized that the miserly few spots in the parking lot were full. Friday mornings were always busy downtown.

Eager to focus on her to-do list and forget about her conversation with Aunt Maggie, she snagged her cell phone from the console and her purse off the seat.

But she paused with her hand on the door handle when she spotted Jagger through the large windows in Todd’s dojang across the street.

Jagger looked amazing—perfectly right—wearing his black-and-white dobok with the black belt wrapped around his waist.

Currently, he sat on the blue and red floor mats while five preschool-aged children sat in front of him. Todd did the same with another small group not too far away.

The children followed Jagger's lead as he showed them different striking motions at a super slow speed. Occasionally, Jagger reached over to correct one of the children's forms.

Abruptly, Jagger and the kids stood, then dropped down into push-ups. Sweet little faces beamed as Jagger clearly made it into some sort of game as he effortlessly pushed himself up and down five times.

Within seconds, both groups of children stood in rows, taking the same stance Jagger did. He moved them into the next exercise, kicking his leg high, then balancing with one leg in the air.

Grace chuckled when several little ones did their best to follow along but lost their balance and fell. She full-out laughed when Jagger showed them a spin kick in slow motion. This time, all the children ended up on the floor when they tried to copy.

He clapped for all of them as they gained their feet before they imitated his bow—the ending of the class.

“Look how much they love you,” she whispered as she smiled sadly when the kids crowded around him for high fives. This was what he'd always wanted—his own dojang where he could teach and share his passion for the martial arts.

Jagger's endless talents had always boggled her mind. There wasn't much he couldn't do.

Taekwondo and the Olympics hadn't been out of the question. Neither had football nor the NFL. And Colonel Hinders had always talked up the military due to Jagger's remarkable marksmanship skills and excellent brain.

But Jagger hadn't been interested in any of that. He'd always shaken his head at the offers from interested parties, forever reminding everyone that he planned to travel the world with his girl.

She sighed, resting her head against the seat because that had never happened.

*Grace barely paid attention as she drove closer to the mansion in the dark. It was well after two a.m. as she blew through one of the stoplights close to Sheraton Height's grand stone entrance.*

*She'd been on the road for hours. For almost two days, she'd mostly been awake, fueling herself with coffee and a desperate sense of hope.*

*But that was gone now.*

*Blinking dry eyes as she traveled through the neighborhood she'd lived in for years, she forced herself to navigate the sharp curve in the road when it was tempting to accelerate, take her hands off the wheel, and see what fate had in store as she careened off the hill that overlooked downtown.*

*A keening moan escaped her throat when she held the wheel tighter, knowing that ending her life wasn't the answer. She'd already come to understand what death felt like—an empty abyss of nothingness where time stood still.*

*She took a right on the next road, needing to cry—to scream away the overwhelming, desperate grief—but there were no more tears left to fall.*

*It was still sinking in that she'd lost Logan. Now, Jagger was gone, too.*

*Finally, she slowed, pulling around the mansion's circular driveway, wanting nothing more than to ram the front end of her car into her father's precious Jaguar.*

*She hated that she was here at the house—that she'd had to return to Wakeview at all. This wasn't her home without her brother and her boyfriend.*

*She noted the lights on inside—the homey warmth—as she shivered, finding that she'd been cold ever since the police officers showed up at the door many long hours ago.*

*The front door opened, and Dad rushed outside as Grace got out of the Audi she no longer wanted.*

*“My God, Grace,” Dad said, wearing jeans and a wrinkled button-down. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen his handsome face unshaven. “Where have you been? I've been worried sick.”*

*Brushing past him, moving up the walkway into the massive entryway, Grace ignored her stepmother as she hurried upstairs.*

*Dad grabbed hold of her arm as she reached the bedroom doorway. “Grace—”*

*She yanked away as she turned, realizing that there were indeed more tears she had yet to cry as they flowed down her cheeks. “Get him back! Make him come back!”*

*He dropped his hand, shaking his head. “I can't. The colonel said he signed a contract. He's gone.”*

*The rush of pain from hearing the truth of her new reality nearly brought her to her knees. “Go away!”*

*But Dad stayed put.*

*Rushing around her room, she shoved her clothes and camera equipment into whatever bags she could find in her closet.*

*For a moment, she paused when she caught sight of herself in her dresser mirror: wrinkled clothes—the same outfit she'd been wearing since last night; pale, drawn skin; haunted, red-rimmed eyes she barely recognized as her own, and messy, tangled hair mostly falling from her ponytail.*

*“Grace—”*

*“No!” Not interested in listening to anything that her father had to say, she elbowed past him, moving into Jagger's room, breathing him in as she plucked up the things that she knew he loved best, tossing them into the bags along with her stuff.*

*She picked up a picture frame of their smiling faces and lost it all over again with the next wave of despair. “God, Dad. How could you do this to me?”*

*He crossed his arms. “He's never been good enough for you.”*

*“He was good enough when he won you your games.”*

*“Eventually, you'll move on—”*

*“You go to hell!” she screamed, rushing across the room, barely stopping herself from balling up her fists and punching him.*

*He hadn't given her a choice in the matter. He'd decided her life for her when he'd never had the right.*

*When her father had confessed to her that he'd demanded that Jagger leave—that he'd threatened to cut her off and ruin her internship, she'd been frantic to find him.*

*She'd spent what was left of the night searching for him everywhere she could think of, eventually remembering her father's friendship with Colonel Henders and the colonel's obsessive interest in Jagger's remarkable abilities.*

*After ransacking Dad's home office late in the morning, she'd found the colonel's address. Within minutes, she'd raced out the door, heading to Hagerstown, Maryland, eager to convince the love of her life to come home.*

*When she arrived four hours later, she'd nearly wept with relief when she spotted Jagger's car in the colonel's driveway. She'd given a hopeful knock on the front door, certain that everything would be okay if she and Jagger could talk.*

*When the colonel told her that Jagger had left earlier that morning, she'd refused to believe him, pushing past the man, calling for Jagger as she moved from room to room, certain that he had to be there.*

When she found Jagger's cell phone and one of the sweatshirts he kept in the trunk of his car folded in half on the guest bed, she'd grabbed them both and headed back toward Pennsylvania in a hazy trance, unsure of how she'd go on.

"Grace," Dad tried again.

Her breath heaved in and out as she attempted to step around him. "Get out of my way."

Dad refused to move.

She clenched her teeth, finding herself on the slippery edge of shattering entirely. "I swear to God I'll jump out the damn window before I'll let you keep me here."

Dad stepped aside.

Without a last look, she ran down the stairs and outside, with Dad following her to her car.

"Where are you going?"

"To Aunt Maggie's."

"That's a three-hour drive. You've barely slept. You're half-wild, Grace."

She was more than half-wild. She'd never felt as unglued as she did right now. Without warning, everything about her life had imploded. Nothing was the same as it had been twenty-four hours ago.

Yesterday, she and Jagger were packing for college, laughing, and making love. Yesterday, Logan had been alive. "Since when do you care?"

"I'm your father."

This time she struck out as she whirled around, cracking him on the cheek with her palm, watching him recoil and press his hand to his face. "How dare you! You've hardly been around. You forgot what that word meant shortly after Mom died."

"Grace—"

"What happened to Logan isn't Jagger's fault," she continued, eager to hurt him as much as he had her. "It's yours. He's dead because of you! He was never, ever good enough for you! You always pushed and pushed and pushed! It's hardly a wonder he turned to the pills!"

Tears tracked down his cheeks. "I did the best I could."

"You did the best you could for you. It's always been about you. Logan's blood is on your hands, and I will never forgive you!"

She put her bulging bags in the trunk. "Don't call me. Ever. Don't talk to

*me at Logan's funeral. You're as dead to me as he is."*

*She got in the car and turned over the engine, now floaty with an exhaustion that threatened to swallow her whole. Peeling out of the driveway, she headed to the closest thing she had left to salvation.*

Grace blinked when a car honked in the distance, startling her from her memories. Sniffling, she glanced around at the hustle and bustle of the busy downtown, realizing that tears were streaming down her cheeks.

Dashing them away, she shook her head, taking several steady breaths. Wiping her cheeks dry once more, she peeked in the rearview mirror to make sure she still looked put together.

When all appeared well, she got out, purposely avoiding another look at the dojang.

The past was gone. This was all she needed to worry about now—the present. She never had to go back. Her life was her choice. Only hers. She never had to put herself in a position to feel that type of loss and heartache again.

# EIGHT

JAGGER WEAVED HIS WAY THROUGH THE CROWDS ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF TOWN, making his way toward the massive firepit in the center of the field.

He'd walked through this clearing several times before—every year when he, Grace, Logan, and whoever Logan was dating at the time would drive up to Preston Valley for the annual fall bonfire.

He hadn't planned to come tonight, but Ruby and Todd had convinced him to stop by for a little while.

Figuring it couldn't hurt to check off another box in the average Joe category, he'd changed out of his shorts and pulled on a pair of jeans.

At the last minute, he'd zipped a light jacket over his T-shirt, then added a ballcap, anticipating the cooling temperatures as the sun faded closer to the horizon in the cloudless blue sky.

He glanced around, listening to the live band covering popular songs from several musical genres, breathing in the scent of the fire and food from the dozens of food trucks lined up on the shortly cut grass. Everything was as it had always been—or sort of.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd done anything normal like this. Over the last several years, his life had revolved around covert and clandestine operations.

More often than not, he'd spent his time behind enemy lines. If he'd wandered about at a public event, a Unit or CIA mission had undoubtedly been involved. The objective had always been gathering intelligence and not fucking it up by getting himself captured or killed in the process.

"Excuse me," he murmured as he bumped into a couple walking by.

Instinct had him looking left. And there was Grace, crouching down with

her camera to capture two kids in a red wagon, making a mess as they ate their pink cotton candy.

She laughed when one of the parents said something to her before she snapped another shot.

Damn, she was a beauty.

She'd plunked a black beanie on her head, leaving all that long, glorious blond hair to flow freely. The snug denim and simple black cardigan she'd chosen accentuated everything that was spectacular about Grace.

Then she looked up, and their eyes met. Her smile faded as she stood, but she held up her hand in a quick wave.

Surprised that she'd acknowledged him at all, he waved back. When she started walking his way, he moved in her direction, meeting her halfway.

"Hi," she said, letting the camera hang around her neck by the strap as she let it go.

"Hey."

"I didn't realize you were coming."

Christ, he could stare into those big blue eyes for days. "It was pretty last minute."

Her lips curved slightly as she glanced around. "Um, it's a nice night for this."

He nodded, hating that things were so awkward between them. Long ago, they would have held hands and walked around together, sampling food and talking about whatever. Eventually, they would have snuggled up on a blanket and enjoyed the fire. "It is."

"I haven't seen you since... It's been a few days," she quickly corrected herself.

What they both knew she'd been too polite to say was that she hadn't seen him since he nearly beat the shit out of her buddy.

He'd kept his distance, making certain he'd finished with whatever Aunt Mags had needed done before Grace arrived at work. They still needed to talk, but crowding her wasn't the answer. He wanted her to come to him when she was ready.

"You've been helping Aunt Maggie a lot," Grace continued. Then she shook her head. "You've been helping us both. Thank you."

He nodded. "Aunt Mags has always been good to me. I want to return the favor."

"The ramp is great—really beautiful."

He shrugged because he wasn't looking for Grace's gratitude. "She needs it."

"Yes, she does."

"I was happy to do it."

She cleared her throat and opened her mouth to say something more when they both spotted Ben. Grace smiled and waved at her date far more comfortably than she had at Jagger.

Ben looked from Grace to Jagger and back before raising his hand.

"I should go," she said.

He wanted to snag her hand and ask her to stay with him. But he let her go. "Yeah."

"Have fun tonight."

He nodded, watching Grace walk over to Ben and grin as he hooked his arm around her shoulders. He yearned to turn away but forced himself to stare at the truth as Ben and Grace met up with Christy and Christy's husband, Mike.

The small group laughed as they talked, standing in a circle—friends in the town they all lived in.

Grace moved closer to the man she was dating as Ben's fingers intimately caressed her arm.

She was happy. Her life had turned out differently than the dreams they'd woven together so long ago.

Grace took her pictures as more of a hobby than a profession. She helped her aunt run the florist shop on Main Street instead of traveling the world. But that didn't mean that this wasn't exactly what she wanted.

He'd walked away, leaving the woman he loved on the worst night of their lives, and she'd moved on.

He shouldn't have come—or he shouldn't have stayed. He didn't belong in Preston Valley.

He'd wanted to help her—to try to make things right. Maybe somewhere deep down, he'd let himself hope that they might find their way back to one another after he'd realized that she wasn't married.

But it was time to go.

Looking at Grace again, knowing that this would be how he would remember her—rosy cheeks and bold blue eyes on a mid-September night, he turned away, heading for the car.

He needed to pick up his things, then swing by Maggie's for a quick

goodbye.

“We’ve saved you a spot by the fire,” Christy tossed over her shoulder as she and Mike headed closer to their blankets.

“Thanks,” Grace said, smiling at Ben as their friends walked away.

“Should we head over?” Ben asked, looking casual and handsome in jeans and a red plaid button-down covering his white T-shirt.

Grace glanced toward the sunset—toward the treasured golden hour when the light did magical things to a picture. “Uh, I want to get a few more shots before I lose the light.”

Ben nodded. “I’ll grab us a couple of hot chocolates. Maybe we can meet back here in twenty minutes?”

She smiled again. “That sounds perfect.”

Ben headed toward the long lines at the trucks as Grace turned, glancing toward where she’d left Jagger.

He was gone.

Her gaze tracked through the crowds as she searched for him. Finally, she spotted him heading toward the makeshift parking lot.

Something about how he walked—the purpose in each step—had her moving in his direction.

He was leaving. An instinct—a messy mix of panic and heartsickness—warned her he was walking away again.

And this time, he wouldn’t come back.

She picked up her pace as he crossed the dirt road, moving closer to the hundreds of cars parked in neat rows in the next field.

“Jagger,” she called, even as she tried to figure out what the hell she was doing.

She’d made the first move when she spotted him ten minutes ago, taking a chance by closing the distance between them to talk to him.

She’d replayed her conversation with Aunt Maggie numerous times. She desperately needed to protect herself from the pain of having Jagger back in her life. But as much as she didn’t want to hurt, she didn’t want him to hurt either.

“Jagger,” she yelled louder.

He stopped and turned.

Her heart betrayed her, fluttering in her chest just from looking at him.

Jagger wasn't the same man he'd been when he left her all those years ago, but he was still beautiful. "Wait up," she said breathlessly, knowing it was as much from his effect on her as the fast pace she'd been forced to keep.

He started moving in her direction.

She stopped in front of him. "You're leaving."

"It's time for me to go."

The double meaning of their conversation wasn't lost on either of them. She couldn't meet his eyes, so she stared at the ground.

"We, uh, we have a big shipment of flowers coming in on Friday. There's a big wedding this next weekend. I know we could use your help—"

"Are you happy?" he blurted out.

She met his gaze but found it impossible to speak, so she nodded.

"He makes you happy?"

She swallowed past the emotions choking her throat. "We just started dating, but I think so. I think he can. I think we can make each other happy."

He nodded.

She closed her eyes, fighting to keep her composure, feeling the tear trailing down her cheek as she lost the battle. "I don't know how to do this with you here," she said in a shaky whisper.

"I just needed to know that you're okay."

More tears fell as he broke her heart all over again. "I'm okay."

"Let me give Todd a couple of weeks to figure things out. Then I'll go."

Why was this so *hard*? She needed him to leave if she wanted to live her life, yet she didn't know how to let him go.

"If it's okay, I'm still going to help Maggie, but I'll stay out of your way. I'll be gone before you get to the shop. Just like we've been doing things."

She sucked in an unsteady breath. "I'm so sorry, Jagger."

He brought the rough side of his thumb up to wipe at the new tear sliding down her cheek. "There's no need to apologize."

How was there so much tenderness when edgy eyes stared into hers?

He dropped his hand. "I'll see you around."

She nodded as he turned, fighting the urge to run to him—to let herself forget about the past and take what she'd wanted for so long.

She looked over her shoulder toward the noise of long-honored traditions, then back at the man she didn't want to love.

Pulling out her phone, she texted Christy.

*Can you let Ben know I'll be right there? I need a couple of minutes.*

Christy messaged back. *I'm assuming this has to do with Jagger. Are you okay?*

She didn't know what she was anymore—mostly just confused. *He's leaving. In a couple of weeks.*

*It's supposed to be hot tomorrow. Come swim with Brennan and me at the lake. I'll pack us a picnic. We can talk about everything.*

She wanted to lay around and wallow on her only day off. But that wouldn't get her anywhere. *Okay.*

*Take as much time as you need. I'll take care of Ben.*

*You're the best.*

She wandered over to her Sorento, leaning against the hood, no longer in the mood to capture life's precious moments with her camera. Pressing her face into her hands, she inhaled and exhaled a steadying breath.

Jagger would be gone in two weeks. That's what she'd wanted since the moment he showed up in town, so why was she on the verge of sobbing? Why did the idea of sitting next to Ben on a blanket by the bonfire feel so wrong?

She'd told Jagger that she thought Ben could make her happy. A week ago, she'd been far more certain than she was right now.

Taking another deep breath, she looked toward the noise again. "You're fine. Everything's fine."

Pushing off the hood, she started toward her friends, doing her best to muster up some enthusiasm for the evening ahead.

## NINE

JAGGER STOOD IN THE BRIGHT LIGHT ON MAGGIE'S FRONT PORCH, HESITATING before he pressed his finger against the doorbell.

Right about now, he had no idea why he was there. Twenty minutes ago, he'd been ready to grab his shit and go. Then Grace had run after him in the parking lot, breaking his heart with her tears. Before he'd known what he was doing, he heard himself telling her that he would be sticking around for another couple of weeks.

"Come on in," Maggie's voice carried through the screen door of the beautiful Victorian home nestled in Preston Valley's historic district where the Wilson family had lived for three generations.

Maggie and Rose's parents had passed long before Jagger had met Grace. Bonnie Wilson had died after complications from a stroke at the age of sixty-two, and Gabriel Wilson had died six months later from a massive heart attack brought on by a broken heart.

Jagger let himself inside, following the sound of the TV down the short hallway to the living room, sending Asa a nod as he and Maggie sat on the couch, watching a movie.

Maggie set down her knitting as she smiled. "Well, isn't this a surprise."

He shoved his hands in his pockets. "I'm sorry to bother you guys."

"You're not. Asa was talking about snacks anyway."

"That I was." Asa paused the movie as he gained his feet. "Can I get you something, Jagger? Iced tea, coffee, a beer?"

Jagger shook his head. "I'm all set, but thanks."

"I'll be back," Asa said as he left the room.

Maggie held Jagger's gaze as she studied him. "You look like you're

carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders.”

She patted the arm of the chair next to her seat on the couch. “Take a load off and tell me about it.”

He sighed as he sat because this wasn’t his style. He wasn’t a talk-it-out kind of guy—or he wasn’t anymore. He’d learned to keep his thoughts and feelings to himself. It had served him well over the last few years. “I’m going to head out.”

Maggie frowned. “Tonight?”

He shook his head. “In a couple of weeks.”

“Well, that’s a shame.”

He jerked his shoulders. “I don’t belong here.”

She held his gaze again as the silence stretched out between them. “Why did you come back to Preston Valley?”

“I don’t know what the hell I’m doing here.” He huffed out a breath when he knew Aunt Mags didn’t believe that any more than he did. “I needed to make sure she was okay. I haven’t been able to walk away.”

“That probably means something, don’t you think?”

He scrubbed his hands over his face because he’d never been more confused. Grace had moved on. She was dating someone else, but he felt the familiar sparks whenever they looked into each other’s eyes. “She says she’s happy. He makes her happy.”

“You two talked, then?”

He shook his head. “Not really.”

Aunt Maggie put her project in the basket next to her. “I think somewhere along the way Grace convinced herself that this is the life she wants.”

He frowned. “Nothing much stands in Grace’s way. She’s always gone after what she wants.”

Maggie nodded as she sighed. “That used to be the case, but things have been different. Grace never got all of her sparkle back. Eight years was a long time ago, but time doesn’t heal all wounds.”

He swallowed, understanding exactly what Aunt Maggie meant.

“Grace had a rough go of it. The vibrant, confident girl you remember fell apart, honey.”

He clenched his jaw, loathing Aunt Maggie’s words. The only way he’d been able to live with his choices was to imagine how much better Grace’s life had gotten after he left. “Will you tell me about it?”

Aunt Maggie nodded. “She lost the two loves of her life. First, Logan,

then you on the same night. All of it was so tragic—so sudden and unexpected.”

“I had to go—or I thought I did.”

She nodded, touching his hand. “I know you did, honey.”

He gestured for Maggie to go on, impatient to understand what Grace’s life had been like—not the fantasy he’d dreamed up.

She gave his hand another squeeze. “The morning she arrived here in Preston Valley... The day after you left... Steve called to tell me Grace was on her way—that she wasn’t well. When she pulled up in the driveway three hours later, Asa and I hurried out to meet her. Grace looked so different—so broken and disheveled. She got out of her car and sank to the ground, sobbing in a way I’ve never seen anyone cry before.”

Jagger shook his head, staring at the floor, needing to hear what his cowardice had done to Grace.

“Asa carried her into the house, and I tucked her into bed. She slept until the next morning. When she woke up, she cried all over again. Other than the day we spent in Philadelphia for Logan’s funeral, that was Grace’s routine for about eight weeks. I could barely get her up to do much of anything, especially eat. She got so thin. I was afraid I would have to put her in the hospital.”

“Fuck,” he whispered, resting his elbows on his thighs as he settled his face in his hands, hardly able to tolerate the idea of Grace’s suffering.

He’d been kicking ass in training, focusing only on forgetting while Grace had struggled to get out of bed. He lifted his head to look at Maggie. “Things got better after that?”

“I could tell you they did.”

He shook his head. “I want you to tell me the truth.”

Aunt Maggie sighed. “I’m not sure what magic Asa worked, but one afternoon, he and Grace showed up at the shop. Grace didn’t have a lot of energy. Her clothes mostly hung on her tiny little frame, but she helped me with the flowers for a few hours. That night, she took a couple of bites of the meal I made instead of pushing it around on her plate. She started coming in every day after that. I think being creative was her salvation.”

“What about school? When did she go back to Syracuse?”

“She didn’t.”

He restlessly scratched at his jaw with the next shock. That was all Grace had ever wanted—to study photojournalism at the best program in the

country. She'd been working toward her goal long before they ever met. "She didn't finish school?"

"She did. But not the way I wanted her to. About six months after everything changed, I thought we were finally getting somewhere. Grace was eating regularly, and she didn't cry nearly as much. She slowly started innovating and updating the business end of the shop. Christy and Gabby convinced her to go out with them for a movie or dinner every now and again. I was certain that I would be able to convince her to head back to school for the fall semester, but then I got my MS diagnosis. I think it scared her more than it did me—another major blow to her already-shaky foundation."

Maggie paused for a sip from her glass of water. "It wasn't until our argument two years later when I told her that it would break her mother's heart as much as it was breaking mine that I was the reason she wasn't going back to school. That sparked something in her because she came home later that day with a full course load of classes for the fall semester at Timmins."

The shitty four-year party school twenty minutes up the road. "*Timmins?*"

Maggie rolled her eyes as she shook her head. "Don't get me started. Grace changed her major to business and breezed through the classes. She lived here with Asa and me and helped me keep the shop open during my spells."

"What about her pictures? Her photography?"

"She didn't take pictures for a long time, honey. I think it was about a year and a half before she picked up her camera again."

The idea was unfathomable. Grace's camera was practically an extension of her.

"Christy asked her to photograph Brennan's birth. I think Christy knew she wouldn't be able to refuse."

Christy had always been an excellent friend.

"Grace has kept a few of the connections she made at Syracuse," Maggie continued. "One of her friends is an editor at *Travel*. He loves her work, so she does some freelancing for him. More often than not, he buys whatever she gives him—the pictures she takes when she goes off on one of her adventures."

Maggie settled herself more comfortably after she put her glass back on the end table. "I know Grace was offered a job with one of the international magazines, but she turned it down. She bought her house instead. She refuses

to leave me and the shop for longer than a four- or five-day trip now and again.”

He stood, walking over to the fireplace, studying the pictures of Grace and Logan on the mantle. She’d been so *sure* of herself once upon a time—so *bold* and ready to take the world by storm. “Everything was supposed to have been better...”

“Oh, honey, I think there have only ever been two people who thought you weren’t good enough for Grace: yourself and Steven.”

He turned to face her.

“Ben’s a nice man—calm and steady. But Grace was made for adventure. She needs someone who challenges her as much as he loves her. You never had any trouble keeping her on her toes.”

He didn’t know what to say to that. He had no idea what the hell he was supposed to *do*.

“Grace’s friends have introduced her to several men over the years, but it’s never taken her more than a day or two to find something wrong with every single one of them. I think the only thing that has ever been wrong is that they weren’t you.”

He swallowed. “I don’t want to hurt her again.”

“Then don’t. You’re here, Jagger. Grace is here. Second chances are a rare thing. I hope you don’t let yours slip away.”

Maggie stood with the help of her cane. “Come with me for a minute. I have something I’ve been holding on to for a while.”

He followed her down the hall to the room he’d slept in every summer night that he hadn’t snuck up to Grace’s bed.

“If you open the closet door, there’s a box in there that belongs to you.”

He frowned. “A box of mine?”

“It’s some of your stuff from the house in Wakeview.”

He opened the door, looking at the large box labeled *Jagger* in Grace’s familiar handwriting. “I don’t understand.”

“Grace grabbed some of your stuff. It’s yours to take with you.”

He picked it up, eager to bring it back to the apartment and look at what was in there.

“I’ll see you at the store on Monday morning?”

He nodded.

“Good because we have a busy week—a big wedding next weekend. Jen’s twin boys just came down with chickenpox, so we’re down a set of

hands. Grace and I will need all the help we can get with this one.”

“Count me in.” He sent her a small smile. “Thanks, Aunt Mags.”

“Anytime, sweetheart.”

He headed for his car, putting the box on the front seat. Tonight he would be taking another trip down memory lane.

Jagger flipped on the apartment’s overhead light as he used his foot to shut the door behind him. He didn’t bother taking off his jacket or ballcap as he sat on the couch that converted into his bed.

Setting the box on the small coffee table, he pulled the tape off the top, lifting out the large collage of pictures in a frame that Grace had made.

He didn’t know whether to smile or sink further into despair as he stared at the snapshots of a long-ago life he no longer recognized as his own.

He and Logan in their football uniforms, cheesing it up for Grace’s camera. Summer days spent out on the boat in Preston Valley’s small lake. Movie nights in the mansion’s massive living room with all of their friends. Grace and him snuggled up and smiling with the Eiffel Tower as their backdrop during their two-week European adventure for their junior class trip. Posed shots of junior and senior proms. Then there was the picture of him, Logan, and Grace standing in front of the Syracuse University sign on their freshman move-in day.

Setting down the frame, he reached in again, pulling out ticket stubs from the games where he and his football team had been state champions three years in a row.

Three game balls came out next—all were signed with his and Logan’s names.

Then he chuckled when he grabbed the ugly-ass stuffed opossum Grace had picked out for him at the fair during their sophomore year in New York.

*“It’s a little archaic that the guy always has to win a prize for the girl, so I won this for you while you waited in line for the bathroom.”*

*He took the rodent-type thing Grace offered him, holding it up by its tail.*  
*“What the hell is it?”*

*“I think it’s an opossum.”*

*“You think?”*

*“I guess it could be a rat.”*

*“Gee, thanks for the present.”*

*Grace shrugged. “Ugly stuffed animals need good homes too.”*

He chuckled again as he shook his head, reaching back into the box. His smile faded as he stared at the last picture in a frame—a close-up of him and Grace that Christy had taken during their final trip to Preston Valley—the day they had spent at the waterfalls.

Grace squished her cheek against his, hugging him tightly as he leaned back against her while she sat on one of the big rocks. Their hair was wet, and they had droplets on their faces while they grinned for the camera— young and carefree.

His hand moved to the scar on his chest as he stared at Grace’s palm barely covering her name tattooed over his heart. *Gracie*.

It wasn’t long after this that everything had gone so *wrong*. Two weeks later, Logan had called Jagger to come pick him up. Then all of their lives changed forever.

He moved to stand but spotted his old cell phone in the corner of the box—the last item he hadn’t realized was there. Snatching out the ancient iPhone 5s, he pressed the power button, surprised that the damn thing turned on.

He immediately tapped the camera icon, intending to scroll through the hundreds of photos, but he stopped on the first, staring at his last picture with Grace.

The selfie was from their shoulders up. It was impossible to tell, but he knew they were naked as they lay in her bed.

Grace’s skin was dewy, and her lips were still swollen from his. They had just finished making love.

*Grace grabbed his phone off her side table, holding it up so they were both in the frame. “Smile.”*

*He did as she snapped the picture. “Are you moving your photographic interests to porn?”*

*She chuckled as she put the phone back, then settled herself on top of him, resting her arms on his chest the way she always did. “You already know porn’s not really my thing.”*

*She kissed his forehead. “Since we’re heading back to school tomorrow, I thought you should have something to look at during your Econ class—something fun to think about so you don’t fall asleep.”*

*He grinned, sliding his hands up and down the sides of her waist as she kissed the tip of his nose. “So, sitting in class with a hard-on is better than dozing off?”*

*She laughed, reaching for the phone again. “I can erase it.”*

*He stopped her by rolling her to her back, ready to heat Grace up all over again. “No way.”*

*They both chuckled as the phone rang. Logan again.*

*Jagger sighed as Grace did. “I should probably get that since I didn’t answer the first two times.”*

Jagger shook his head as his stomach grew sick, remembering how the rest of the night played out after that. It had haunted him for nearly a decade.

Ready to be done with the past, he pressed the home button, bringing himself back to the original screen.

He moved his thumb to power off the phone but stopped as he stared at the small red circle alerting him to a message on the phone icon.

He swallowed as he clenched his jaw, well aware of what was there—Grace’s call that had come in while he sat on the colonel’s guest bed moments before he left.

Earlier that morning, he’d erased all the rest without listening, knowing that if he’d heard her voice, he wouldn’t have been able to get on the bus for boot camp.

Torturing himself, he selected the last call Grace had made and forced himself to listen.

“Jagger?”

He closed his eyes as he fisted his empty hand, hearing the pain and misery in her one word.

She sniffled. “Where are you, Jagger? If you’re at Colonel Hinder’s, please stay there. I’m on my way now. I’ll be there in a couple of hours.”

She sucked in a quaking breath. “He’s gone. Logan’s really gone, and I

need you. I need you to hold me. I need us to hold each other until everything feels all right again because right now, I'm not so sure it ever will."

He leaned back against the couch cushion, loathing himself for hurting the delicate woman on the other end of the phone. The only woman he'd ever wanted to protect was the one he'd destroyed.

"I know my dad said things to you. I imagine he was terrible, but none of it's true. Wherever you are, please call me. Please come home. I love you so much, Jagger."

Then she hung up and never called him again because she eventually found out that he'd left her for good.

"You're a first-class fucker," he murmured as he gained his feet, unsure of what to do now that another layer of truth had been piled onto the rest.

He couldn't have handled things worse if he'd tried. Just a few days ago, he'd seen red when he thought Ben had used his hands on Grace, but he himself had left invisible scars that would most likely never go away.

Heading to the dresser, he grabbed a pair of jogging pants and his running shoes, putting them on, needing to run until he could think straight.

How did he fix a mess he'd made so long ago? How could he possibly make things right?

Shutting the door behind him, he took off into the night, knowing that Grace had deserved so much better than how he ended things.

# TEN

GRACE SAT ON HER ENORMOUS BLUE-STRIPED BLANKET, STARING AT HER PINK-painted toenails as she dipped them in and out of the warm sand.

She looked up, locking her arms tighter around her knees, smiling as Brennan used powerful kicks and his innertube to swim farther into the depths.

“That’s good, Brennan,” Christy hollered to her six-and-a-half-year-old. “I don’t want you going past your shoulders. The rocks are your stopping point.”

“Okay, Mom.” He waved, favoring his mother with his black hair, freckled nose, and hazel eyes. “Look at me, Aunt Grace.”

Grace lifted her arm high, giving him a thumbs-up. “Your swimming’s come a long way, buddy.”

“I’m going to make a cairn on the big rocks. That’s why I’m wearing my water shoes.”

“Be careful where you step so you don’t slip,” Christy yelled.

“I will.” Brennan swam under his tube to surface seconds later, closer to the grouping of rocks that kept boats away from this part of the lake. He waved to them again, then turned as he got busy with his project.

Christy sighed as she picked up her can of lemon seltzer water. “From dawn to dusk, that child keeps me busy.”

Grace chuckled, fixing the strap on her favorite black bikini as she settled back on her elbows while the sun peeked in and out of the increasingly cloudy skies.

Summer was back with high eighty-degree temperatures—a final blast of heat before autumn officially set in. “He’s a sweetie.”

Christy set her drink back down, watching her son like a hawk as he moved about in the waist-deep water. “So, how did things go with Ben when he walked you to your car last night?”

Grace groaned as she rolled her eyes under her sunglasses, thinking of their awkward goodbye.

Most of the night had been weird after Ben casually mentioned that he saw her talking to Jagger in the parking lot. “I thanked him for a nice evening. Then I kissed him on the cheek.”

Christy winced. “Ouch.”

Huffing out a breath, Grace sat up again. “I didn’t know what else to do. I like him. He’s a great guy, but I don’t want to lead him on when I’m *completely* confused.”

“What’s going on with you and Jagger?”

“Nothing.”

Christy took her eyes off the water long enough to tip down her sunglasses at Grace. “Give me a break. The chemistry *oozes* between you guys when you’re together.”

Grace exhaled a quiet breath because her friend spoke nothing but the truth. “That was a long time ago.”

“Chemistry like that doesn’t just vanish.” Christy focused on her son again. “What did you guys talk about in the parking lot?”

Grace shrugged. “Mostly that he’s leaving in a couple of weeks.”

“That’s it?”

She jerked her shoulders again as another dark cloud covered the sun. “He said he came to Preston Valley because he needed to know I was okay. He needed to know that I was happy.”

“That’s—”

“Mom. Aunt Grace, look at my cairn,” Brennan interrupted as he settled another rock on the stack he’d created.

“Super awesome!” Grace yelled.

“Nice job,” Christy hollered at the same time.

“I’m going to make another one.” Brennan got back to work, moving to a new grouping of rocks slightly deeper out.

“So, the guy you haven’t stopped thinking about for the last eight years has been thinking about you, too?”

Grace shook her head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course, it matters. Especially if you’re still in love with him.”

She focused on her toes again instead of responding.

“Do you love him, Grace?”

She blinked as her eyes filled. “I don’t *want* to love him. I’ve waited so long for him—”

“He’s here, honey.”

She adamantly shook her head this time. “And now that he is, I know I can’t do it again. The way he hurt me... I can’t let myself go there.”

“Well, speak of the devil,” Christy murmured.

Grace frowned. “Huh?”

“The *really* sexy running god at your twelve o’clock.”

Grace turned her head, staring at Jagger’s powerful body as he jogged out of the woods on one of the lake’s numerous nature trails—glistening, glorious pecs and washboard abs dripping with perspiration.

At some point, he’d taken off his shirt, tucking the end in the elastic of his sweat-soaked gray shorts.

“How is that even *legal*,” Christy said under her breath.

Grace swatted at her friend’s leg, then lifted her hand in a wave.

Jagger waved back before he disappeared into the forest again.

“That was Master Jagger from the taekwondo place,” Brennan yelled. “He’s so *cool*!”

Christy looked at Grace, wiggling her brow as the wind picked up, lifting the blanket’s edges. “Half-naked and *hot*. That’s not fair.”

Grace forced a small smile when she knew Christy was trying to keep the mood light. But it was impossible to recalibrate when Jagger kept popping up in unexpected places. “No, it’s not.”

“He’s here,” Christy said again as the sun vanished behind the dark clouds for good.

She shook her head. “I can’t.”

“What if you guys sit down for a cup of coffee and just talk?”

“That sounds so simple.”

“Can’t it be?”

Grace shook her head again. “*Nothing*’s simple with Jagger. Nothing’s the way it used to be. I don’t know how to be around him anymore.”

A low roll of thunder rumbled in the distance, cutting off Christy’s next comment.

“Mom!” Brennan yelled, scrambling off the rocks, hurrying toward his tube in the choppy water.

“Swim back,” Christy encouraged as she stood, moving to the shore when the next rumble echoed closer.

Grace gathered up the blanket, folding it, then grabbed Brennan’s towel as the panicked first grader made it back to the beach.

Brennan wrapped himself in the soft cotton Grace handed him, jumping up and down. “We have to *hurry!* We’re going to get struck by lightning!”

Fat drops of rain started falling in torrents, instantly soaking them.

“Crap,” Grace squealed, snagging her beach bag and blanket as Christy grabbed her soda can and the picnic lunch they never got around to eating.

All three of them ran, heading for the makeshift parking lot.

“I’ll call you later,” Christy shouted as she got in her car after Brennan shut his door.

“Drive safely,” Grace called, getting behind the wheel, dripping all over her seat.

“Well, this is great.” Taking off her sunglasses, she pulled her towel from her bag, drying off. Then she fastened her seat belt, turning over the engine as lightning flashed in the sky, and Christy drove off.

“This should be interesting,” she murmured as she turned the wipers on full blast, then started down the long lane to the main road, looking forward to getting home and getting lost in her work—to stop thinking about Jagger for a while.

But then she gasped, slamming on her brakes when he ran toward her car, flagging her down in the storm. Pulling over next to him, she rolled down the passenger side window a crack. “Get in.”

He wasted no time complying, soaking her seat as he sat down. “I was hoping I hadn’t missed you. I ran like hell to get back over this way.”

She reached for the towel in the back, handing it to him. “Here.”

“Thanks,” he said, burying his face in the cotton, then went after his soaked hair before he dried his chest and arms as the wind knocked against her Kia.

“Are you all set?”

“Yeah,” he said as he fastened his safety belt. “Thanks again for stopping.”

She nodded, forcing herself to relax her shoulders. “Of course.”

Pulling back onto the road in the deluge, she kept her speed low as the trees swayed with the next nasty gust. “You ran out here from town?”

He shrugged. “It’s only five miles.”

“Only?”

He jerked his shoulders again. “I’ve certainly run farther. Ten miles here and back isn’t all that much.”

“Huh,” she said, focusing on the road instead of the fact that Jagger’s eyelashes were still wet and webby, accentuating his fantastic dark-blue eyes.

“You still listen to your nineties stuff?” He gestured to the radio.

She hadn’t been paying attention to the music—to The Sundays “Wild Horses” playing through the speakers.

She quickly slapped at the button, turning it off, remembering the day she and Jagger had ended up on her bedroom floor while the song played in the background.

She slid a glance his way as he looked at her, knowing he remembered too.

God, why wouldn’t the rain *stop* so she could drive faster? “Uh, taekwondo,” she said almost desperately. “How are things going with that?”

He nodded. “Good.”

“Good.”

He got more comfortable in his seat, locking his hands behind the headrest in the way he’d done more times than she could count. “Uh, I stopped by Aunt Mag’s last night. She gave me that box she’d been holding on to.”

Grace sat up straighter, tightening her hands on the wheel, well aware of the box Jagger spoke of. “Oh.”

“I thought all of that stuff would have gotten thrown away.”

She shook her head. “I took it with me when I left Wakeview.”

“Do you ever go back?”

She looked both ways, then pulled onto the main road, heading toward town. “Not since the night I left.”

“How’s Bea?”

“She’s good—getting older. She lives closer to her son—about twenty minutes outside Philly. We get together for lunch a couple of times a year.”

“What about your dad? How’s he?”

“I have no idea.”

“You don’t talk to him?”

She shook her head again.

“Not at *all*?”

“I haven’t seen him since Logan’s funeral.”

The car got quiet again. The swish of the wipers and battering rain on the windshield were the only sounds.

Dropping his hands, Jagger turned his body closer to her. “Listen, Grace —”

She adamantly shook her head, having a good idea of where this was going. “I don’t want to talk about the past. Let’s talk about now. Just now. Tell me about what you’ve been doing all these years.”

He scratched at his jaw in the way that he did when he was frustrated. “I’ve been in the service.”

“I know. Where?”

“I can’t really talk about it.”

She shrugged, even as she grew slightly irritated. He’d vanished from her life, and he couldn’t talk about it. “Fine.”

“I’m not being evasive.”

Her shoulders jerked again. “Your life is your own.”

“I was a soldier in Delta Force. I did a lot of clandestine and covert operations—a lot of black ops.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Everything was off the books. When I was in the field, I was a ghost. That’s all I can tell you.”

Talking like this was much better than the silence—twenty questions. Plus, she was curious about the life he’d lived. “And that’s where you got the scar on your arm?”

His brow furrowed as he glanced toward his tricep. “No. I got that a few weeks ago. I’ve been doing private contracting for the past couple of years.”

“That’s top secret, too?”

He shook his head. “It’s not top secret, but I sign NDAs—nondisclosure agreements.”

“Why?”

“Because the clients I work for are either government entities or ultra-wealthy private citizens who like to keep what they do to themselves.”

She frowned this time. “It’s illegal?”

He shook his head. “I think we operate in a gray area sometimes, but I don’t take jobs that I know are shady. My last assignment got a little sketchy, but we were already on the ground when I figured that out.”

Why did she love the sound of his voice so much—the sound she’d craved to hear again for so long? “Oh. Where do you do these jobs?”

“I’ve spent a lot of time in Africa and the Middle East. I do a lot of reconnaissance work.”

She slowed for the stoplight as they entered Preston Valley’s downtown. “You’ll have to explain again.”

“Basically, it’s research. I accept a contract. Then I go to the areas where my clients will do their business. I plan routes and find things that could potentially pose a danger. Then I get the people who pay me in and out of the location before we get ourselves kidnapped or killed.”

She swallowed, hating the idea of his work. “So, it’s always dangerous, then?”

He nodded. “The people who hire me do so because of my training and skill sets. The odds are better that I’ll be able to get them out.”

She took a left onto Todd’s road, spotting Jagger’s car parked on the street. “And you’ll keep doing that when you go back?”

He shook his head. “I’m not going back.”

She pulled up in front of Todd’s driveway, refusing to believe him. “This looks like your stop.”

He didn’t move to take off his seat belt, holding her gaze. “I’m not going back, Grace.”

“Don’t forget that Aunt Maggie and Asa are picking up that large order at the warehouse Friday morning. I’ll be there early to help with the processing.”

“Grace—”

“She’s stressed out about this wedding,” she rushed on, refusing to start the conversation Jagger wanted to have.

He sighed as he unfastened his belt. “I’ll be there to help.” Opening the door, he got out. “Thanks for the ride.”

“You’re welcome.”

He shut the door and then hurried toward the apartment steps in the steady rain.

Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to relax her fingers on the steering wheel as she accelerated. “Work,” she whispered. That’s all she planned to focus on for the next several hours.

Four and a half hours later, the sun shined again as Jagger walked down Main Street. He had dinner on his mind and Grace—always Grace.

He slowed when he spotted her Sorento parked in front of Simplicity. For a second, he contemplated grabbing both of their favorite sandwiches and knocking on the door, but she needed space.

He winced as he thought of their drive back from the lake. They'd had some semblance of a conversation, but Grace had shut things down when he tried to talk about anything but his job.

“Slow and steady,” he reminded himself, forever remembering that he and Grace were starting from scratch. She was different—so was he. But so many things were the same.

She still listened to her music—the nineties stuff she played whenever she was in a funk. He knew the moment she remembered their *very* sexy afternoon that had started with a searing kiss while The Sundays played in the background.

Eventually, they would talk. At some point, he would say all of the things that he needed to say. But for now, he would eat.

Pulling open the door at Tony's, he walked inside, sending Christy a polite nod as she glanced his way while she paid for her sub sandwiches.

Grabbing her bag, she moved in his direction. “Jagger, it's nice to see you around here again.”

“It's nice to be back.”

“From what I hear, you're creating quite the buzz at the elementary school.”

He frowned. “I am?”

Christy nodded. “The kids love your classes. Brennan's bugging Mike and me to sign him up for taekwondo.”

He loved that the kids were having fun and learning. He'd always wanted to do for others what Master Isaac had done for him.

Master Isaac and Wakeview Taekwondo had saved his life when he'd been a lost, angry kid from the shitty side of town. Master Isaac and Wakeview Taekwondo had *given* him a life. Everything he had now started the day the man opened the door to the eight-year-old boy with the nasty black eye.

“You should bring him over—let him check it out. He can take a class with us for fun.”

Christy beamed. “I'll talk to Mike.” She looked at her dinner. “I should

get this home.”

“Have a good night.”

“Thanks.” She moved past him, then stopped. “She’s afraid, Jagger.”

Sighing, he turned to face her. “I know.”

“You’re here, so that has to mean something.”

He nodded.

“If you want her, do something about it. Stop being so polite and get in her way. Ben’s a nice guy, but she belongs with you. She always has.”

Jagger nodded again. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“I’ll see you around.” Then Christy turned and left.

Jagger exhaled another long breath as he grabbed a spot in line, still coming to terms with the fact that he’d caused Grace so much pain, but he liked Christy’s advice.

It was time to make things as right as he could. It was time to start reminding Grace of exactly what they’d had before he’d thrown it all away.

Grace stared at her bedside clock, huffing out a breath as one thirty-nine turned into one forty. She’d been lying in bed for *hours*, but sleep wouldn’t come. She’d been too busy thinking about Jagger.

Rolling to her back, she settled her arm behind her head, staring up at the ceiling fan blades.

When she told Jagger that his life was his own, she’d so *badly* wanted that to be true. Who he was and what he did were no longer supposed to matter. But she was quickly concluding that thoughts of Jagger would haunt her for the rest of her days.

She’d tried *everything* to get him off her mind. Editing pictures was a strategy that usually worked. But when her thoughts kept wandering to fantastic muscles and dark-blue eyes, she’d snatched up her keys and headed over to Simplicity to get a jump on inventory and prep for next weekend’s big wedding.

Now it was pathetically late while she rehashed their conversation in the car. *Again*.

“Delta Force,” she murmured, sitting up, pulling back her covers as she got out of bed.

She'd resisted all evening, assuring herself she couldn't care less about what Jagger had done for the last eight years. But she walked down the hall to the kitchen table, opening her laptop seconds after she plunked herself down in a chair.

She typed *Delta Force* into Google, glancing at the pictures that popped up on the side of the page.

Unable to resist, she clicked on *Images*, studying heavily armed men in combat gear with their faces smudged out in every shot. Top secret, she remembered Jagger saying.

Eager to learn more, she clicked back to *All*, diving into the available information. "Hostage rescue and direct-action missions," she absently murmured as she read. They only recruited the best of the best—and that was absolutely Jagger Tennyson.

Scrolling down, she moved to the videos, watching in equal parts fascination and terror as she got glimpses into Jagger's life over the last several years. He'd said his job had been dangerous, but that was an understatement.

She went back to Google, typing in *Private Contractor* next, repeating the same process for her research. Again, there were images of highly armed men. Again, his job had been fraught with peril and a high probability of a loss of life.

With her curiosities satisfied, she closed her laptop, staring out into the dark. Jagger was here. He was safe. He wasn't going back. But he wasn't staying either.

Sighing, accepting that her night would most likely be a sleepless one, she walked back down the hall and crawled into bed, realizing that along with all of the sorrow and helpless anger she'd felt over the last eight years, there was now a new layer of pride for the man who'd broken her heart.

Jagger had vanished from her life in the cruelest of ways. For so long, she'd been left to wonder. But Jagger had done massively important things.

Confused all over again, she rolled back to her side, staring at her bedside clock, watching the next hour pass until she finally fell asleep.

## ELEVEN

JAGGER GRABBED THE LAST HEAVY BUCKET ASA HANDED HIM, SETTING IT ON the floor among the dozen other buckets he had yet to put away after Maggie's trip to the warehouse over in Scranton.

"Maggie and I are going to head home to change out of our wet clothes. I'll have her back here as soon as I can," Asa said, wiping at the drops of rain dripping off his yellow slicker in the miserable morning drizzle.

"Take your time. I'll get the buckets taken care of. Then I'll get started on the roses."

Asa nodded. "We appreciate it, Jagger, especially when I'm not available to help with the afternoon deliveries today. Unfortunately, I have a meeting I can't rearrange."

"I'm happy to do it. Go get dried off and warmed up."

Asa nodded again. "We'll be back in a bit."

Jagger closed the back door, shutting out the chill in the air, wiping the rain on his exposed forearms off on his jeans.

Finding it cold, he pulled down the sleeves on the white long-sleeve T-shirt he bought the other day. He'd added several items to his typically minimal wardrobe. The cooler temperatures weren't something he was used to after spending so much time in the milder overseas climates.

Getting back to work, he lugged two buckets crammed with filler greens into the refrigerator. Walking them a few steps inside, he headed back out as he heard Grace's efficient footsteps on the hardwood.

"Hey," she said as she walked into the processing room, dressed in another pair of snug jeans that she'd paired with brown boots and a cream-colored V-neck sweater. She'd added simple silver hoops to her ears and

piled her hair in a loose bun, leaving her sexy, slender neck exposed.

“Hey.”

She stopped in front of him, holding two paper cups. Steam trailed from the lids, carrying the heavenly scents of great coffee and her typical chai tea. “I picked this up for you. It’s a dark roast with plenty of cream.”

He definitely hadn’t expected this—her bringing him his favorite coffee doctored up how he liked it.

He’d assumed Grace would spend her morning in the front, avoiding him like she had last week. Taking the blessedly warm cup, he smiled as he breathed deeply. “Thanks.”

She shrugged. “It’s cold outside, and you’re doing us a huge favor. I pick up hot chocolate for Brandon all the time.”

Getting the gist clearly enough—her gesture meant nothing special—he noted her slightly stiff shoulders and the way she now gripped her cup between two hands before he stared into blue eyes that were all the more fantastic with her face unframed. “I appreciate it.”

She nodded as she looked toward the remaining buckets. “I guess we should get these put away.”

He took a glorious sip, then set the cup on the table, picking up two buckets as Grace did, following her into the refrigerator.

They finished the process in silence—the slight tension between them forever there.

On the last trip into the fridge, he didn’t open the door again when they put their buckets down.

Turning in the small, cramped space, she stopped short of bumping into him. “What are you doing?”

He sighed. “How do we make this not weird? How do I get you to talk to me like you did on Sunday?”

She jerked her shoulders as she crossed her arms across her chest. “I don’t know how to talk to you. I don’t know how to be around you anymore. You were my best friend. You were my lover for years. I don’t know how to pretend that things didn’t end badly.”

Finally, they were getting somewhere—actual words that weren’t small talk. “I’m not asking you to pretend anything.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to do this—bring up the past—especially not in here.”

“Because I used to pull you against me? Because we used to sneak kisses

and drive each other crazy?”

She swallowed as her eyes grew frosty. “No, because it’s cold, and there’s a lot of work to do.”

Understanding that they weren’t getting anywhere after all, he used his ass to push the door open, letting her out before he let the door close behind them.

The silence stretched out again as they began unboxing the dozens of roses for tomorrow’s wedding.

He picked up the dethorning tool and got to work on the first set of stems as Grace did the same across from him at the table. “This is a hell of a lot of white flowers.”

She sent her tool down a stem. “The bridal party’s bouquets are white roses and peonies.”

He touched one of the packages. “What about these burgundies here?”

“The bride has burgundy roses and ranunculus sprinkled into her bouquet to match her bridesmaids’ dresses, but otherwise, the décor is mostly white.”

“Just white?”

She nodded. “Plus, the green filler we’ll use. White’s not uncommon for an evening wedding. It’s very elegant.”

“Huh,” he said, trying to figure out how boring was elegant.

The quiet stretched out again as they efficiently worked through half a dozen packages.

“You jumped out of planes and hung yourself out of helicopters,” she finally said.

He paused, looking at her.

“Delta Force,” she continued. “You risked your life every day.”

He got back to work. “That was my job.” The only topic she seemed to be interested in talking about. But it was something. It was a start.

“What was your title—your position?”

“I was a master sergeant.”

She shook her head. “But what did you do?”

“I did lots of things, but mostly I sniped.”

“A sniper?”

He nodded.

She picked up another flower, studying one of the blooms, plucking off a bent petal. “I read that some Delta guys do stuff with the CIA. Did you?”

“Grace, I can’t tell you that.”

“What can you tell me?”

“Not much.”

She nodded, picking up another flower. “Delta Force does hostage rescue.”

“We do,” he confirmed, knowing her well enough to understand that there would be a follow-up to her statement.

“There was a raid two and half years ago in Afghanistan—for those foreign aid workers that were kidnapped by that terrorist group. It was all over the news for weeks. Maybe Delta Force was there. Maybe you were there.”

He held her gaze, sending her the slightest nod, wanting to give her something—to share a small piece of who he’d been. “If I talk about missions, I put my team members in danger and compromise national security.”

She sent him a small smile as she nodded again. “Top secret.”

“That’s right.” He winked, focusing on the stems, thrilled that her smile had been for him.

“What contracting group do you work for? If it’s okay to ask.”

“I *worked* for Gray Corporation.” He cut several of the processed stems, setting them in the bucket of fresh water. “You won’t find much about it online—probably nothing. They’re ultra-exclusive—a referral company.”

“Oh.”

He opened a package of the burgundies next. “You know, we talk a lot about me, but what about you? Aunt Mags said you freelance for *Travel*.”

She nodded, cutting a group of stems, then set the flowers among the other blooms in the new bucket. “When I have time. I’m making my way to all fifty states. I visit both urban and rural settings while I’m there. The readership seems to enjoy my adventures, so that makes it fun.”

They were actually having a normal-ish conversation. She was letting him in, even if it was just a little bit. “Aunt Mags also mentioned that you changed your major to business.”

She shrugged. “It seemed to make sense since I run the business side of the shop.”

The back door opened, and Maggie walked in, depending heavily on her cane as she took off her rain jacket to hang it on the peg. “All of this rain. I sure hope the weather clears up before tomorrow.”

Jagger slid a glance Grace’s way, noting the furrow of worry creasing her

brow as Maggie's gait looked as bad as he'd ever seen it—incredibly stiff and uncoordinated with each heavy step. “I thought I heard that things are supposed to clear up—get warmer and sunny,” he said.

Maggie awkwardly took her seat. “It better. This is *the* wedding of the year. Centerpieces for thirty tables, ten bouquets and boutonnieres, and the damn floral chandelier.”

Grace exhaled a quiet sigh before she sent Aunt Maggie a smile. “I thought we decided you weren't going to worry.”

“Every bride and groom deserves the best on their special day.”

“Yes, they do. That's why you're taking care of the bouquets and boutonnieres, and I've got the rest. Jagger's already agreed to help me tomorrow.”

His gaze whipped to Grace's as Maggie blinked her surprise.

“Is that right?”

Jagger nodded, still staring at Grace. “We were talking about it before you walked in. Everything's all set. I'll head over here after my last taekwondo class at one.”

Grace sent him a silent thank you before returning her attention back to the roses. “See? The worry's officially been taken off your plate. Jagger and I are handling deliveries and site setup, so you and Asa can stay here.”

“We're even having dinner after,” Jagger tossed in.

Grace's gaze flew up to meet his this time. “Uh, and we're having dinner after,” she conceded.

Maggie beamed. “That's excellent.”

“Mm,” Grace said as she forced a smile.

“And you'll be able to pick up the lattice from Blake? He's setting that big piece aside for us at the hardware store. We'll need that for the flower wall for the kids' high school dance next week. Homecoming's a big deal.”

Grace nodded. “It's already on our agenda.”

“We thought we'd grab it before dinner,” Jagger improvised. Because Grace wasn't going to have any excuses to cut their meal short. He was officially taking Christy's advice, using every new opportunity he had to get in Grace's way.

“That's a good idea,” Maggie said as she settled her supplies around her. “You'll be able to enjoy your dinner.”

“That's the plan,” he said, watching Grace pause with the slide of the dethorner down the next stem. But she said nothing as she continued with her

work.

Maggie grabbed one of the burgundy roses to start on the first boutonniere. “Where are you eating?”

“Out at Rafferty’s,” he decided, wanting to keep the mood simple and fun—and that’s what Rafferty’s was, with its gorgeous lake views and family-friendly atmosphere.

Maggie smiled again. “You kids always loved that place.”

“Yes, we did.” Jagger reached for the next box of roses, answering Maggie’s occasional question as Grace headed over to start on the large chandelier she would create.

Grace worked quickly as she placed greenery around the large hoop she’d fitted with florist foam that hung from the thin rope attached to the ceiling.

Stepping back, she narrowed her eyes, checking for balance, making certain she was achieving the romantic effect the bride was looking for.

Deciding the left side was slightly sparser than the right, she grabbed some of the seeded eucalyptus from the bucket, snipped off the end, then stuck it in its place before she reached for a leafy bunch of Ruscus.

Shoving the piece in place, she glanced toward Aunt Maggie, struggling not to worry as she watched her work on another boutonniere with clumsy fingers.

Another spell. The decline was happening so *fast*—and this wedding wasn’t helping.

Selecting a piece of ivy next, her gaze wandered to Jagger as he opened one of the last packages of roses. Guilt swamped her for her poor behavior—for putting him on the spot in a major way. But he’d rolled with it, helping her out of another jam.

Her guilty conscience only compounded because she hadn’t been entirely friendly when she walked in with his cup of coffee. But her cool composure seemed to be her last defense.

How was she supposed to ignore him when he was *everywhere*? How was she supposed to *resist* him when she knew exactly what those hands and his mouth could do to her? Because despite her denial while she stood trapped with him in the refrigerator, she remembered all too well their stolen kisses

and the way they used to drive each other crazy.

And now they were having dinner.

The other day she'd told Christy that sitting down for a cup of coffee was too complicated. This was an entire *meal*. And that was after spending the majority of the afternoon together.

She sighed as she stepped back to recheck the balance of greenery, satisfied that the chandelier was lush and even.

Grabbing a bucket of the white roses, she brought them over to her workspace, pausing as she moved to pick up her shears when her phone alerted her to a text.

Pulling her phone from her back pocket, she swallowed as she read Ben's message.

*What are you up to this weekend?*

She hadn't seen him since the bonfire, and they hadn't talked in a couple of days while he'd been away at a conference. Mostly, she didn't know what to do—how to navigate such turbulent waters.

*It's the big wedding weekend.*

He replied immediately. *That's right.*

She snagged her lip with her teeth, trying to figure out how to tell him about the rest. Everything had happened so fast—Aunt Maggie's awful gait and her knee-jerk reaction to seek out Jagger's help. Then the whole dinner thing had come up.

*Jagger's going to give me a hand with the setup.*

Ben replied again. *You two seem to be in the same places a lot.*

Didn't she know it. *He does a lot to help my family. Aunt Maggie's having a flare-up. There's talk of pizza at Rafferty's afterward. To celebrate a job well done.*

It took Ben a moment to text her back. *Sometimes I get the impression that it's more than that. Should we be taking a step back?*

She sighed. Why was all of this so *messy*? Ben was one of her good friends. They had fun together. He was the only man she'd been even remotely interested in dating since Jagger walked away. But she couldn't lead him on when she was so unsure. *To be honest, I'm confused. I don't want to hurt you. You're one of my closest friends. You're so important to me.*

She held her breath, waiting for his next reply, her stomach growing sicker as the seconds ticked by.

Finally, he responded. *You need to do what's right for you. Good luck*

*with the wedding.*

She closed her eyes, knowing she was on the verge of losing one of the most important people in her life. Blinking back tears, she typed again. *I'm so sorry, Ben.*

She waited another minute, hoping he would type something back, but he didn't. Putting her phone away, she stared at the floor.

Jagger stopped in front of her, carrying two buckets of the flowers she would need. "Is everything okay?"

She looked at him, never feeling more torn. Everything was falling apart. Her life had been a mess since she saw him running in Central Park.

So why was she as happy as she was angry that he'd come back? Why was she incapable of doing anything about it when this was exactly what she'd wanted—when he stood right here?

"Everything's fine. I need to get the peonies," she said, walking away, needing a break from the complications of her current reality.

## TWELVE

THE SUN QUICKLY DESCENDED TOWARD THE HORIZON AS JAGGER SET THE final centerpiece on the last table under the massive tent. The clouds and drizzle of yesterday had given way to warmth and clear skies for the bride and groom's special day.

Maggie had been right when she'd called this the wedding of the year. There were two dance floors for two hundred and fifty guests and a kick-ass band already setting up for the evening's festivities. The swank country club gardens surrounding the event only added to the elegance Grace had spoken of while they dethorned roses in the processing room.

He glanced in her direction, hurrying her way as she stepped another rung higher on the twelve-foot ladder she stood on, stretching to add another piece of the trailing ivy to the chandelier she was finishing with the final touches.

"Hold up," he said, climbing up far enough to grab the back waist of her jeans, keeping her steady as she reached over her head again.

She looked down. "Thanks. It's pretty high up here."

"You're definitely braver than me."

She raised her brow. "Says the guy who regularly jumped out of planes."

He smiled. "Yeah, but I had a parachute."

She grinned before she turned to get back to work, standing on her tiptoes as she pushed another piece of ivy into place.

He grinned at her back as he tightened his hold on her pants, loving that she'd tossed more than a few smiles his way over the last couple of hours. So far, things were going great.

They'd made a good team, falling into the efficient rhythm of two people who had done several site setups together over the years. Grace had delivered

bouquets to the bridal party, then worked on the chandelier while he took care of the centerpiece arrangements.

And conversation was getting easier between them—not quite as stiff. But she still peppered him with questions about his former career: what was direct-action warfare, who did he talk to when he wore those headphones she saw in so many of the pictures online, and what were Africa and the Middle East like?

He wanted to talk about something different—more important things. But for now, he would take what he could get.

Grace dropped back to her feet on the metal rung, looking down at him again. “I think that’s it.”

“It looks great.” And it did. Grace had done an amazing job. The twinkle of interwoven fairy lights and the new trailing vines brought the entire space together.

“Thanks,” she said, climbing down after him, brushing off her hands. “Everything’s coming together.”

He studied the sweeping white ceiling drapes and the dozen smaller bubble light chandeliers that complimented Grace’s hard work. The table flowers centered among fine china and crystal glassware added to the stunning effect. “You were right.”

She frowned. “About what?”

“When you said white on white was elegant, I had a hard time believing you.”

“Wait till they start lighting the candles on the tables.”

“It’s beautiful.”

She touched his arm. “Thank you, Jagger, for helping me. This would have been a lot for Aunt Maggie, especially with all the deliveries we took care of first.”

He nodded. “I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.”

She swallowed as she held his gaze, clearly understanding his double meaning.

“Grace.”

They both looked over when the petite raven-haired woman walked their way in a burgundy spaghetti-strap dress.

Grace smiled. “Rachel.”

Rachel pressed her hand to her heart. “Everything’s so *stunning*.”

Grace smiled again. “Including you.”

“Aw,” Rachel said as she beamed, reaching for Grace’s hands. “Aren’t you sweet?”

Grace gave her fingers a squeeze. “How’s your sister holding up?”

Rachel puffed out a breath. “She’s hanging in there. I just wanted to take a peek and make sure everything’s all set.”

Grace nodded. “Jagger and I just finished with the flowers, and everyone else seems to be working hard.”

Rachel sighed her apparent relief. “Thank you for all that you’ve done. My family and I will *definitely* be recommending Simplicity to everyone.”

Grace chuckled. “We appreciate it.”

“So, you’re heading out?”

Grace nodded. “I’d say our work here is done.”

Jagger glanced toward the darkening sky, not hating that he and Grace would be heading to Rafferty’s soon. And they would have a full moon to enjoy while they ate their dinner by the lake.

Rachel gave Grace a hug. “Thank you again. You and Maggie are the best.”

Grace hugged her back. “It was our pleasure.”

Rachel sent Jagger a polite nod. “Thanks for your help.”

“No problem.”

“Bye,” Rachel said, smiling as she walked off.

Jagger gave his attention to Grace, eager to move their night along. He wanted her all to himself. “Should we grab our stuff and get the lattice from Blake? Then we can head out to dinner.”

Some of the easiness left her eyes. “Sure.” She sent him a weak smile before she turned.

He snagged her arm, turning her back. “I’m not going to force you to eat with me. If this makes you uncomfortable, we don’t have to do it. You can drop me off at the shop, and I’ll get my car.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s fine.”

He clenched his jaw, struggling with frustration. Hadn’t they just had a good day? “I don’t want it to be fine—an obligation.”

She shook her head again. “It’s not. Rafferty’s sounds delicious. I’m starving.”

He exhaled a quiet breath, wondering if this was as good as it would get between them—a few easy moments scattered here and there. Maybe there really was no coming back from the mess he’d made. “Me, too.”

She touched his arm in what could only be an apology before she took his hand, pulling him along. “Let’s go eat. We can even use the app to order ahead. Everything will be ready when we get there.”

Pop music played through the speakers as Grace sat across from Jagger in one of Rafferty’s big booths. They’d shown up at just the right time, snagging the last table by the windows as families piled into the restaurant after games of miniature golf and laps around the track on go-karts at the fun park across the street.

“It’s exactly how I remember it,” Jagger said in the noisy family-friendly atmosphere before he pulled another drink of water from one of Rafferty’s signature blue plastic tumblers.

“So, you mean loud?”

He smiled. “Pretty much.”

She smiled back, forever reminding herself to relax as she stared at his gorgeous face. Although today had gone far better than she’d expected.

Jagger had made the afternoon easy, both of them falling into a rhythm they knew well as they ran a few deliveries and set up for the wedding. So far, dinner didn’t appear to be a big deal either.

“But the view’s gorgeous,” he added.

Their view out the window was fantastic as the moon shined brightly on the water. “It’s stunning.”

“Here you go, folks,” the waitress said as she walked over with their order, setting three huge slices of green pepper, onion, and pepperoni pizza in front of Grace.

Grace smiled politely. “Thank you.”

“Sure thing, honey.” Then the woman set three slices of sausage and jalapeno pizza in front of Jagger. “And that’s for you.”

Jagger smiled. “I appreciate it.”

Their waitress took a step back. “Can I get you anything else?”

“Maybe some more water,” Jagger suggested.

The waitress smiled. “Sure thing.” Then she walked off.

Grace breathed deeply as she picked up two slices of her pizza and set them on Jagger’s plate as he did the same, putting one of his slices on hers.

“This smells so *good*.”

He rubbed his hands together. “I’ve been waiting all day to dig in.”

She went about plucking the jalapeno pieces off her pizza, enjoying the flavor of Jagger’s favorite toppings but not the heat. “You know, they have that pale ale you like.”

He shook his head. “I don’t drink.”

She frowned because he’d always had a beer or two when they went to a party. “At all?”

He shook his head again. “I gave it up. I was drinking too much.”

She stopped plucking at her pizza. “Oh.”

“I found myself coming back from missions, reaching for a bottle. After four years of doing the work I did, it was getting harder to compartmentalize the things I would do or see. At some point, I realized the booze was becoming a crutch—that I was starting to need it the way my mother and brother had seemed to need it, so I stopped. I also decided not to re-up.”

She reached over, touching his hand, remembering well enough the stories he’d shared of his life before they’d met: strange men in and out of the house, on-and-off domestic violence, food insecurity, and neglect.

The one time Jagger had taken Grace into his world—the only time she’d met his mother, Jasmine Tennyson had been drunk. “I’m sorry.”

He covered her fingers, giving them a gentle squeeze as he sent her a small smile. “I’m good.”

She smiled back, finally understanding the wary harshness she often saw in his eyes. Long ago, he’d escaped his old life when her father had extended Jagger an invitation, but his career had taken its toll. “Good.”

He gave her fingers another gentle squeeze before he moved farther back in his seat. “Let’s dig—”

“Master Jagger. Hi, Master Jagger,” a couple of elementary-age kids enthusiastically waved as they walked by with their family.

Jagger smiled. “Hey, Mason. Hey, Chance.”

“We’ve been practicing our *poomsaes*,” one of the boys yelled over his shoulder.

Jagger nodded his approval. “Show me Tuesday night.”

The kid beamed. “Okay.”

Jagger chuckled, shaking his head as he looked at Grace again. “That’s Mason and Chance. Mason’s excited about his *poomsae*.”

Grace grinned, finding Jagger irresistible. He’d always been so good with

kids. “I noticed.”

Chuckling again, he picked up his first pizza slice as Grace did the same, both of them touching their pieces together in a toast. “Enjoy.”

“Enjoy,” she said, blinking as she bit in, chewing slowly as she glanced from her plate to his, only now realizing what they’d both done.

“Old habits die hard.”

Looking up, she held his gaze. Everything about the last several minutes had been so normal—so *automatic*.

They’d always shared their pizza. She’d always given him two of her slices, and he gave one of his slices to her. Even pulling off the jalapenos and toasting their damn slices. “Yes, they do.”

“I was waiting for you to finish that up, then hand me the crust.”

She closed her eyes as she smiled, doing her best to ignore how *right* it felt to be sitting across from Jagger at Rafferty’s.

He gave her calf a quick rub with the side of his sneaker. “Tell me more about your photography. You said you’re traveling to all fifty states for the magazine.”

She nodded, biting into her pizza again, giving herself a moment to steady. “It’s slow going. I started the project six months ago. I’ve been to most of the Northeastern and Southern states. I’d like to head out west next.”

“So California, Oregon, Washington?”

She shook her head. “No, not yet. I want to go to Montana first.”

He raised his brow. “What has you excited about Montana?”

“The mountains.” She grinned, already imagining the pictures she would take. “The sunsets. I want to set up just before the golden hour and wait for the magic to unfold.”

“I imagine it’ll be fantastic. If you wait around long enough, I bet you’ll get some great shots of the stars. You won’t have to worry about light pollution way out there.”

“Mmm.” She nodded enthusiastically, loving that she didn’t have to explain herself—that Jagger understood everything about her world.

He’d gone with her to so *many* places, patiently waiting for hours while she took her pictures, perfecting her photography skills. “And I want to stay on one of those dude ranches.”

He frowned as he stopped mid-chew. “A dude ranch?”

She laughed. “Yes. The pictures will be *amazing*—the animals in the pastures. Capturing the ranchers in action. Maybe I might even catch a

Montana snowfall.”

He nodded. “I can see it.”

“I might take a couple of days and go in November.”

“It sounds like you have a plan.”

She took another bite, sitting back as she chewed, debating whether to confide an opportunity she’d been toying with. “Marjorie Nickels, the high school principal, approached me about teaching photography at the school next year.”

He snatched up one of the pepperoni slices she’d put on his plate. “No kidding?”

She shrugged. “I currently volunteer a couple of hours a week. I’ve been working with some of the kids on the yearbook staff—helping them with their photography skills. It would be part-time. A new class offering.”

He leaned farther forward. “That sounds great, Grace.”

She jerked her shoulders again as she handed him her crust. “I don’t know.”

“What’s got you hung up?”

She sighed. “It would be a lot with my full schedule—a couple of afternoons a week. Tuesdays and Thursdays, I think. Plus, I’m not sure that I’m teacher material—that I actually know how to stand up in front of a classroom and teach.”

He broke off a piece of the crust she’d given him. “You’re patient and compassionate. You explain things well. I’ve learned all kinds of stuff about photography just from watching you. You’re teaching the kids right now, aren’t you?”

She sighed again. “Mostly, I give hints on improving technique. I don’t know if that qualifies as actual instruction—lectures, lessons, *grading*.”

He shrugged this time. “So, you’d take it as it comes. You’d figure it out. You always do. Especially if you let yourself have fun with it.”

His absolute faith in her was infectious—a balm over her hesitations to try something so overwhelming. “The yearbook kids seem like they’re enjoying themselves. And their pictures are getting better.”

He smiled as he nodded. “See? There you go.”

She huffed out a laugh, growing excited about new possibilities—something she’d never even considered. “Marjorie said she would set me up with a mentor.”

He nodded. “You’ll be great.”

She grinned. “I think I might actually give it a shot.”

“You’ll be the best thing that ever happened to those kids.”

“Thanks. But don’t tell anyone. I need to talk to Aunt Maggie before I say anything to Marjorie.”

He crossed his finger over his heart in the way that he had when he promised Aunt Maggie he wouldn’t leave without saying goodbye. “You’re secret’s safe with me.”

She smiled again. “Thanks for listening.”

He tossed her a wink. “Anytime.”

She looked toward the booth across from theirs when two kids scrambled out of their seats and started dancing by their table. “That looks like fun.”

“It’s the music. It’s catchy.”

“It’s BTS.”

He shook his head as he shrugged. “I’m not sure who that is.”

“They’re a South Korean boy band. Brennan loved this song when it came out a couple of years ago. ‘Butter.’”

“It’s catchy,” he repeated, breaking out the Cabbage Patch in his seat, his rhythm and moves excellent.

She tipped her head back, laughing.

Grinning, he wiggled his brow as he continued to keep the beat with his head and shoulders.

She stared at him as he flashed her that slightly crooked grin—the carefree smile she hadn’t seen in years.

For just a moment, he was back with his silliness and bright eyes—*her* Jagger. The sudden flood of longing and love overwhelmed her as much as it terrified her.

What was she *doing*? Why was she here with him like this? Rushing up, she grabbed her purse and headed for the door.

“Grace.”

She shook her head, ignoring him as she shoved her way through the people waiting by the hostess stand and walked outside.

She had to get out of there. Dinner with Jagger had been a terrible mistake.

Jagger hurried to his feet, staring after Grace as she weaved her way through the dozens of people waiting by the hostess station before she pushed open the door.

What the hell just happened?

Reaching for his wallet, he caught their waitresses' attention with a wave, throwing a fifty-dollar bill on the table before he rushed outside, scanning the dark for Grace. She couldn't have gone far because he had the keys to the van.

He spotted her moving toward the public access beach down the hill from the parking lot and followed at a jog, quickly catching up. "Grace."

She moved faster.

"Gracie." He grabbed her arm. "Stop."

She whirled around as tears slid down her cheeks. "Why are you here, Jagger?"

He frowned, caught off guard by the venom in her voice. "I'm here for you."

She swiped at her cheeks. "Did you come back because you want me, or are you trying to ease your guilty conscience before you walk away again?"

So, it would be tonight. They were finally going to hash things out right here on the local beach. "I want you. I've *always* wanted you."

She adamantly shook her head. "Then why did you go? Why did you leave me?" Pushing at his chest with a bad-tempered shove, she turned, walking away again.

He followed, grabbing her arm a second time. "Grace."

She whirled around again as more tears fell. "I needed you, and you walked away."

"I had to."

"No, you didn't."

"Your dad—"

"Do you think I would have chosen him over you—that I would have chosen the money?"

"No, I don't. That's why I left. I had nothing to offer you. I had nothing I could give you. You were the only one who never figured out that I wasn't good enough for you."

"God, I *hate* when you say that. I hated it then, and I hate it now."

"It's true."

She cried harder as she shook her head. "You were all I needed, Jagger."

All I needed was you.”

“Grace—”

“You were supposed to have loved me enough to stay. You were supposed to have respected me enough to let me choose. Because it *always* would have been you.”

God, she was ripping him to pieces with her big, sad eyes—with the agony radiating in her voice. “Gracie—”

“How could you do it? How could you throw it all away? There was no phone call. Not even a note. You were just gone.”

“I couldn’t call you, Grace. I wouldn’t have been able to leave if I heard your voice. If I didn’t go exactly when I did... I’d convinced myself I was making your life better by leaving.”

She huffed out a pained laugh. “You didn’t free me from you, Jagger. You *destroyed* me, damn you.”

She covered her face with her hands, crying harder yet. “Why didn’t you love me, Jagger? Why didn’t you love me enough to stay?”

“Grace.” He pulled her against him, wrapping her up, holding on tight. “I *did* love you. I still do. I never stopped.”

She shook her head.

Closing his eyes, he kissed the top of her head, rubbing his hands up and down her back. “I don’t ever want you thinking I didn’t love you,” he repeated, resting his cheek on her head. “I’ve never loved anyone the way I do you.”

Eventually, her arms came around him, clinging as she sucked in several unsteady breaths against his chest.

He held her closer yet as gentle waves lapped against the sand. “I’m so sorry I left the way I did. I’m so sorry I hurt you.”

Her shoulders relaxed as she nestled herself closer. “I don’t know what to do.” Sniffling, she eased slightly back. “I don’t know what we’re supposed to do.”

All he knew was he never wanted to let her go. But he also knew it wouldn’t be as simple as telling her so.

Sighing, he rested his forehead against hers. “What if I take you home? What if I give you some space?”

She nodded. “Okay.”

He brought her knuckles to his lips. “I’m sorry, Grace.”

She held his gaze, swallowing as another tear fell. “I want to go.”

He kept her hand in his as they started back toward the van.

This wasn't exactly how he'd hoped their dinner would go, but he also wasn't sorry. They'd both finally said what they needed to say.

# THIRTEEN

GRACE STARED AT THE MOON, SWIPING AT ANOTHER STRAY TEAR AS JAGGER drove the delivery van closer to home.

Closing her eyes, she inhaled another steadying breath, finding herself exhausted after her outburst on the beach.

She'd never meant to say half the things she'd said, but once she'd spewed her first question, she couldn't stop with the rest—the nearly decades-old pain and anger she'd bottled up had finally burst free. Now, she felt wrung out and raw.

Jagger braked at the stoplight on East Main Street, sliding his thumb along her skin as he held her hand.

When he'd reached for her as he pulled out of Rafferty's parking lot, she'd intertwined her fingers with his as she had hundreds of times before, craving the connection, even when she needed space.

"How are you doing over there?"

She looked at him in the glow of the dashboard and streetlights, sending him a small smile. "I'm all right. How about you?"

"I'm hanging in there," he said, smiling back. "How about I drop you off at your place? I'll bring the van back to the shop and grab my car. We can deal with the lattice tomorrow."

She shook her head because tomorrow she planned to pack up her camera and head out of town for the day.

She craved the peace of getting lost in her passion. She knew *exactly* what to do with her camera—something she couldn't say about any other aspect of her life. "Let's just put it in my garage, so it's done. We don't need it at the shop until Thursday, but Aunt Maggie will feel better knowing we

have it.”

“Sure.” He accelerated again, taking a left onto Summer Street, eventually backing up in her driveway.

She took off her seat belt, intending to reach for her purse as she moved to get out, but Jagger snagged her hand before she had a chance.

“Grace, wait.”

She met his gaze as he nudged her knuckles up to nuzzle them against his jaw.

“If I could go back... If I could do things differently...”

The regret radiating in his eyes also strained his voice. Both of them wished things could have been different. But they weren’t. She nodded. “I know.”

He sighed, gently squeezing her fingers. “We’ll make this quick.”

She sent him another small smile, understanding that he was in just as much pain as she was. It was hard not to believe what he’d said to her by the water—that he’d loved her all this time. “Okay.”

Jagger got out as she did, meeting her at the back of the van. He opened the door, pulling the massive piece of lattice forward. “Ready?”

“Almost.” She walked over to the garage, punching in her code, sending the door up.

“Let’s do this,” he said.

She moved to face him on the other side of the sturdy, oversized panel, pulling the wooden piece farther forward.

Jagger walked to the opposite end. “If you hold that there, I’ll grab this side. We can swing it around, and I’ll walk in backward.”

She nodded, moving farther back until Jagger swung around, walking backward into the tidy space. “Watch the shelf on your right.”

“Thanks.” He lifted the lattice higher, maneuvering around her lawnmower. As he took another step to avoid her SUV’s mirror, his tricep connected with the shelf’s edge. “*Fuck.*”

She winced as pain radiated across his face.

“*Fuck,*” Jagger said again, clenching his jaw. “I guess that’s the shelf you were warning me about.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll live.”

But she gasped when blood bloomed on the white cotton of his shirt. “You’re bleeding.”

He glanced at his arm, setting the lattice down as she did, leaning it against the wall. “I opened the damn thing up again. My scar.”

“Let me take a look,” she said, moving closer as he gingerly eased up his sleeve. She sucked in a breath through her teeth, studying the bloody three-inch gash already blooming with a bruise. “*Ouch, Jagger.*”

He shrugged. “It stings, but I’ve had worse.”

She settled her hand on his elbow, intending to lead him toward the house. “Come on in—”

He shook his head, pulling away from her. “It’s no big deal. I’ll clean up at home.”

She frowned as a drop of blood trailed down his arm to drip on the cement floor. “But I have Band-Aids right here.”

“It’s no big deal,” he repeated, taking another step back.

Not entirely interested in arguing, she walked to the interior door, hitting the button to close the garage as she stepped inside her laundry room, flipping on the light, knowing he would eventually follow.

Jagger sighed as he stared at the doorway Grace had just walked through, recognizing that he wasn’t going anywhere until she fussed with his arm.

Mostly, he just wanted to get the hell out of there so he could get home, lace up his running shoes, then put himself through the paces until he could think straight again.

*You didn’t free me from you, Jagger. You destroyed me, damn you.*

“*Fuck,*” he muttered, clenching his jaw as he shook his head, loathing himself all over again as Grace’s words haunted him.

Twenty minutes ago, he’d been relieved that they’d finally said what they needed to say, but he didn’t know how to fix their mess any more than Grace did.

“*Fuck,*” he repeated, following her inside, noting the fancy washer and dryer in the small laundry room as he shut the door behind him.

“Grace,” he called, breathing in the subtle hints of shampoo and perfume as he moved into the dimly lit kitchen, studying the open-concept space that was one hundred percent Grace.

White cabinetry, swirled pale-gray quartz countertops, stainless steel

appliances, and a gorgeous, sturdy table with seating for six tucked in its designated spot off to the left.

Everything was new in the home that had recently been renovated—warm, cozy, and stylish with accent pillows and a pretty fall-themed throw tossed over the plush light-beige couch, fat candles and thriving plants placed on the fireplace mantle and coffee table, and gorgeous area rugs covering large spaces of neutral hardwood flooring.

All of the class with none of the stuffiness of her upbringing.

“Gracie,” he called again, following the sounds of cupboards closing down a short hallway.

He hesitated as he stepped into the master bedroom Grace had decorated just as beautifully with another area rug, pretty plants and furnishings, and brand-new French doors that led to the backyard.

Zeroing in on the queen-size bed—where he immediately *craved* to lie down with Grace—he kept moving to the en suite doorway.

She glanced over her shoulder, sending him a small smile as she grabbed a couple of cotton balls from a glass jar, setting them next to the bottle of antiseptic and the box of Band-Aids on the countertop. “Let’s get you fixed up.”

His guilt compounded as he studied her in the dim overhead lighting. Grace’s lips curved as she looked at him, but her eyes were still puffy and her nose and cheeks red and blotchy the way they always were after she cried.

He’d done that. He’d made her sad, yet she still wanted to help him. “You’re making this into a bigger deal than it is.”

“It’ll only take a second.”

He steamed out another breath as he moved to stand in front of her. “It’s hardly bleeding anymore.”

“That’s good.” She dampened a cotton ball with the peroxide, then nudged him closer to the sink. “But that doesn’t mean your cut can’t get infected. That shelf is dirty.”

He leaned his butt against the countertop, holding out his arm to her. “Let’s get this over with.”

Stepping closer, she slid the cotton over his newly opened cut, blowing as she blotted.

Frowning, he hissed out a breath with the hellfire burn of her gentle movements. “*Shit*, that hurts.”

“I bet. I’m sorry.” She kept a firm hold of him, blotting again, blowing

some more. "I'm almost done."

He pulled away, blowing on the cut himself. "That's clean enough."

"I'm sorry," she repeated as she grabbed a washcloth, wiping up the dried blood from his elbow to his tricep before she peeled the larger bandage from the packaging.

He held out his arm to her again.

She carefully secured the Band-Aid in place, her brow furrowing in the irresistible way it did whenever she concentrated as she traced the adhesive edges with her finger. "It looks like you're all set."

He inspected her work instead of focusing on how good she smelled or how great it felt to have her hands on him again. "Thanks."

She gently eased his sleeve back down. "Blood stains on a white T-shirt. I think it's safe to say that's ruined."

He nodded. "I'll throw it away when I get home."

She swallowed, nodding this time, holding his gaze.

It would have been so damn easy to sit there and drown in those big blue eyes—to selfishly waste more of her time just to spend a few more minutes in her presence. But his selfishness had already hurt her enough. "I should head out."

"Okay." But as she said so, she stopped him from standing with her hand on his arm.

He recognized desire—her wanting. "Grace—"

"Just wait," she murmured as she stepped closer, bringing her fingers up to trace along the short scruff of his beard.

Christ, she was killing him. He struggled not to moan as he grabbed hold of her wrist, stopping her movements. "What are you doing?"

Her breathing came faster as she shook her head. "I don't know."

Clearing his throat—clearing away the gruffness and strain he heard seconds ago—he gripped her tighter. "I want you, but not like this—not when you're vulnerable."

"We're both vulnerable."

He nodded, acknowledging his weakness. "I don't want you regretting this."

"I won't."

He shook his head this time. "I can't stand the idea of you resenting me in the morning."

"I don't resent you, Jagger. I've tried, but I can't seem to get there."

“Grace—”

“I want to *feel*,” she said, stepping closer yet—until they breathed each other’s breath. “I’m so sick of *thinking*. I’m so sick of reliving the past. You’re right here.”

He clenched his jaw as his resolve to walk away quickly started crumbling. “Grace—”

Leaning in, she pressed her lips to his chin. “Kiss me,” she whispered.

Finding it harder to resist, he let go of her wrist to slide her silky locks behind her ear—to stroke his fingers along her jaw.

Closing her eyes with her shuddering breaths, she nipped at him this time. “Kiss me, Jagger.”

Unable to fight it any longer—not *wanting* to—he pulled her against him, groaning as his mouth finally captured hers.

Whimpering, she opened to meet his tongue as he instantly took them deep—as they came together as if they’d been starving.

“Grace.” He stood, cradling her face in his hands, staring at everything he’d needed. “Gracie,” he whispered, craving another taste as he dove deep again.

Moaning, she wrapped her arms around the back of his neck, pressing herself against him.

“God, I want you in your bed,” he murmured as he feathered kisses along her jaw and temples while he walked her backward to the bedroom. “Let me be with you in your bed.”

“Yes,” she said, mostly breathless, pulling her shirt over her head. Then she reached for his hands, pressing his palms against her breasts.

Another rumble erupted in his throat as he gave her a gentle squeeze before he quickly freed her from her bra, tossing it to the floor.

Cupping her again, he brushed his thumbs over pebbled nipples, loving it when she gasped. “I’ve missed touching you.”

“Touch me some more,” she said, pulling his mouth back to hers, teasing her tongue with his in another searing kiss as they stopped by the bed.

Eager to comply with her greedy demands, he went after the snap on her jeans, impatient to get her naked—to sink himself deep into Grace. “You’re still on birth control?”

“Yes.” She went after his neck with her teeth and tongue. “You’ve been safe?”

He nodded, tugging on her zipper. “Condoms always. You?”

She didn't respond as she pulled his shirt up and off, making him shiver as she slid her hands up his waist.

"Grace, you've been safe?" he asked again when she didn't answer.

She avoided his gaze as her magic fingers moved to trace his pecs. "I haven't been with anyone else."

Shocked by her words, he stopped her movements, trapping her hands against his skin. "You haven't been with anyone?"

She shook her head, finally looking at him. "There's no one else I've wanted."

Eight long years, and she'd wanted no one else. Sighing, he closed his eyes as he rested his forehead against hers.

"Grace," he whispered, stroking her cheeks, kissing her tenderly.

Moments ago, he'd been eager to take her up fast—to satisfy them both quickly. But she'd changed everything with her confession.

Now, he would take his time. He would savor the woman he'd been certain he would never touch again.

There had always been two ways with Grace. Bringing her up slowly took time, but it was always worth the wait. Tonight, he wanted her undone when he finished them both.

She followed his slower pace, wrapping her arms around his waist, pressing her breasts against his chest.

"You're so soft," he murmured next to her ear as he trailed his fingers down her back. "I want you to remember what it's like when I touch you everywhere."

She moaned as he hooked his thumbs in her jeans, taking her panties with the denim as he tugged them to the floor.

She stepped out of the rest of her clothing, pulling at his snap before he eased her back to the mattress, following her to the center of the bed, settling himself on top of her for another deep kiss.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered, savoring her body beneath his, trailing kisses down her neck, then her collarbones before he moved to her breasts, tracing her nipples with his tongue, then pulling her into his mouth.

Whimpering, she arched, playing her fingers through his hair.

"I want more," he whispered, nipping and nibbling his way down to her hips as he settled himself between her thighs, taking his time as he spread her open.

Her breath caught, and he watched her snag her lip with her teeth as he

traced her sensitive skin. Then he touched her with a gentle rub of the pad of his finger against her bud.

Gasping, her hands wandered through his hair again as his mouth went to work—as he teased his tongue against swollen skin already wet and slippery for him.

Her hips rocked as she whimpered and moaned, already close to the edge.

Not quite ready to finish her, he changed his rhythm, backing off with barely there strokes when he knew that wasn't what made her fly.

She frowned. "Jagger, don't *tease*."

He pressed gentle kisses against her, heating her with his unsteady breaths. "I want you crazy."

She tugged his head back to her. "Trust me. I'm crazy."

He grinned, loving that Grace had never been shy in the sack. "Not yet, but you're close."

Getting back to work, he brought his hands up to play with her breasts, stroking her nipples as he lapped and suckled her in the way he knew she liked best.

"Jagger," she whispered, cupping her hands over his, pressing his palms down as her thighs shook and her hips started moving in the jerking rhythm that told him she was ready. "I'm close," she panted out.

He pulled his hand free, bringing it down, dipping two fingers inside.

She gasped, tensing, just about there.

Then he plunged into silky heat in the rhythm that always made her melt.

"Jagger," she moaned, clutching at his ears as she tipped her head back while her body bucked and trembled.

He groaned as he kept his pace, taking her higher as she thrashed around, waiting as she came back down.

"Jagger," she panted. "Jagger."

"God, I need you," he said as he unzipped his jeans, tugging at his pants and boxers, freeing his erection as he sent his clothes to join hers on the floor.

She stared up at him with pleasure-glazed eyes as he covered her body with his weight.

"Gracie," he murmured, kissing her.

She kissed him back, gasping as he did when he pushed himself deep, invading her as he'd done so many times before.

But nothing had ever felt as good as it did tonight—their joining. He grabbed her leg, pushing it back so he hit her spot with each thrust.

She arched, clutching herself around him, clinging with her next trembling orgasm.

Lacing their fingers, he moved with her, staring into her eyes. “Are you going to come again?”

She nodded. “If you keep doing that.”

He sped up his movements. “So, like this?”

She whimpered, smiling as he did. “Just like that.”

His smile vanished as he felt his build—as Grace’s breathing changed again.

He moved faster yet—flesh slapping against flesh, savoring the sound of her loud moans joining his groans as they came together—as he finally filled her full after too many years.

Grace gasped for each breath as the heat from Jagger’s panting puffed against her neck.

Shutting her eyes, she breathed him in, savoring that his powerful body smooshed hers into the mattress—that he still lay nestled deep inside of her.

This was what peace felt like. This was what it felt like to be completely satisfied. Somewhere along the way, she’d forgotten.

He grunted before his lips tickled her skin with a gentle kiss. “You smell good—taste good, too.”

She grinned, holding him tighter. “Salty, I’m sure. I’m sweaty.”

Lifting his head, he pressed a quick kiss to her lips. “Perfect.”

Her smile was back as she stared into his eyes, using her fingers to wipe at the dewy drops forming on his forehead after he’d one hundred percent made her crazy. Jagger had always known what to do with her body. That hadn’t changed.

“Let’s do this,” he said, wrapping his arm around her as he rolled, keeping her on top of him.

She settled in, adjusting her arms on his chest like she had so many times before.

“Better?” he asked.

She shrugged. “The other way worked for me, but this isn’t half-bad either.”

He grinned. “I don’t have to worry about squishing you when we’re like this.” He played with the ends of her hair. “Any regrets?”

“Just one.”

He frowned. “What?”

“I feel a little guilty for using your injury to seduce you.”

His crooked grin was back as he laughed—another sound she hadn’t heard in so long.

“I’m all for a top-notch seductress.”

“At least we got you bandaged up first.”

He laughed again. “I like lying here with you like this.”

“I like it too.” She let her fingers trail along his skin, eager to explore. “Your body’s different. Tougher.”

“Keeping in shape—pushing myself—kept me busy.”

She stopped as she touched the marred skin on his once-perfect left pectoral.

He pressed his hand over hers before she could move it. “I didn’t want to do that.”

She shrugged, staring at his shoulder, not wanting it to matter that he’d so easily erased her from his life.

He gently tugged on her chin. “Will you look at me?”

She met his gaze, seeing the familiar regret.

“The tattoo was all I had left of you—your handwriting, your name.”

“What happened?”

“I burned it.”

She blinked her horror. “*Why*, Jagger? Why would you do that to yourself?”

“Because what I did was dangerous. More often than not, we were behind enemy lines, which meant we were on our own. If a mission went sideways and I would have gotten captured... If they ever would have found out who I was... I never wanted anything I was doing coming back on you. If I wanted to keep you safe, I had to let you go.”

She flinched at his words, blinking back tears as she tried to get up.

“Grace.” He locked his arms tightly around her, rolling her back under him.

She turned her head away, closing her eyes as her tears fell. “Jagger, get off.”

He gently trailed kisses along her jaw. “Not until you understand that

there was nothing more important to me than keeping you safe.”

His mouth moved closer to her ear. “You *haunted* me, Gracie. Every minute of every day.”

She shook her head, not so sure she believed him. Because if she’d had any idea of where he’d been over the last eight years, she would have gone to him. She wouldn’t have been able to stop herself.

“Every minute,” he repeated.

She looked at him now. “You moved on.”

It was his turn to shake his head as he brushed the dampness off her skin. “I knew the minute I came stateside I would come find you. After I saw you in the park, I couldn’t stay away.”

“But you’ve had other partners. You’ve had other relationships.”

“Sometimes sex is just sex—a release.”

Was that supposed to make his moving on sting any less?

“I had one partner—a friends-with-benefits situation for a couple of years. Jana. We were in somewhat similar situations. She’d left a guy behind when she joined up, so we chose to be miserable together. She got out right around the same time I did. She came home. I went into private contracting. From what I hear, they got married last year. I think they’re expecting a baby.”

Grace swallowed, not so sure that she wanted to hear about Jagger’s friend-with-benefits arrangement. “Let’s get up—eat something.”

Jagger pushed her deeper into the mattress. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

She lifted her chin, narrowing her eyes, hating that she was trapped. “I think this isn’t fair—you using your body weight to keep me here like this.”

He nodded. “I’m willing to risk dirty tactics because I know that if I let you go, this conversation will be over. Tell me what you’re thinking, Grace.”

Not all that long ago, he already would have known. But that wasn’t the way things were anymore. “All right. I don’t like your buddy. I don’t like any of it. You burned your skin, picked a new partner, and turned the page.”

His brow furrowed. “I didn’t walk away and brush off my hands. *Nothing* about being away from you has been easy. I could barely stand the idea of you moving on—of anyone else touching you.”

He cupped her face between his hands. “I’m *sorry*, Grace. I’m sorry for so *many* things—for messing everything up.”

She sighed because being angry and jealous changed nothing. She still

felt what she felt, but it helped no one. “You were trying to make a new life. We both were.”

He stroked her skin. “You’ve made something amazing for yourself. Simplicity is so streamlined, and your house is beautiful.”

“Thank you.” She covered his hand with hers. “I needed this place—this project. I wanted something that was entirely my own. I bought it three years ago. My mom left money for Logan and me that I never knew about. We were supposed to be granted access to it on our twenty-fifth birthdays. I didn’t want to spend it at first. It felt wrong—like what was meant for Logan shouldn’t be mine.”

Jagger nodded his understanding.

“I was so torn until Aunt Maggie asked me what she thought my mom and Logan would want. I know they would want me to be happy, so I dove into making this place. Everything had to be completely redone.”

His gaze traveled around the room. “It has a good feel to it—comfortable and cozy. Really homey.”

She smiled. “That was the goal.” She looked toward the French doors. “You’ll have to take a look at the back when the sun comes up. Getting the yard into shape was a project. I made a space for them—for Mom and Logan. I rarely go to Philly where they’re buried, so I like to have a spot for them right here where I can sit and remember them.”

“That’s really nice, Grace.”

“Thank you.”

He settled his forehead against hers. “I’ve missed you. I’ve missed this—all of it. Everything.”

She sighed, sliding her fingers through his hair. “Me, too.”

He brushed his lips against hers, keeping the kiss gentle as his tongue sought hers. “I want to be with you again,” he whispered.

She opened for him, welcoming him, sighing her pleasure—her contentment—as she held his gaze, slowly moving with him.

## FOURTEEN

JAGGER GRIPPED THE BLANKET AROUND HIS NAKED SHOULDERS AS HE SAT ON the pretty wooden bench in Grace's backyard.

The moon glowed brightly, illuminating dozens of fall flowers and a growing oak tree.

He shook his head, staring down at the blue jeans he'd pulled on before he headed outside, unable to find the peace the beautiful space was meant to provide.

He'd been restless since Grace fell asleep wrapped up in his arms. Holding her close was everything he'd wanted and needed since the moment he walked away, yet he hadn't been able to shut off his thoughts.

Everything Grace had said by the water—the pain in her voice and her endless tears—still made him clench his jaw. But as he glanced at the flowers again, heart-sickening memories flashed through his mind, shaking him to his core.

He'd found ways to block them out for long stretches—to keep his life compartmentalized. But not tonight. Logan's gory wound and the blood. There had been so damn much.

Over the last eight years, he'd seen his fair share of horrible things, but *nothing* would ever be as bad as watching his best friend die.

He should have called for the ambulance. He should have driven *faster* to the hospital. But what ate at him the most was that he never got a chance to tell Logan goodbye. He'd been too busy fighting to save his life.

But even before that, their last real conversation had been angry words spewed back and forth. Neither of them had had a chance to apologize—to take them back.

Jagger hurried after Logan as he stormed out of the mansion, heading for his Porsche. "Get back here, you selfish bastard."

Logan whirled. "Fuck you."

Jagger continued walking Logan's way but stopped a few feet from his friend's car, afraid that if he moved any closer, he'd punch him. "What the hell is up with you yelling at her—with making her cry? That seems to be all you do these days."

"Grace is fine. She has you, doesn't she?"

Jagger steamed out a breath, staring at a man he hardly recognized anymore. Logan's clean-cut good looks had gone to hell. His too-long, greasy blond hair needed shampoo and a pair of scissors, and his typically muscular build needed a solid fifteen pounds. "Look at you, man. I don't know how to help you anymore."

"I don't want your help. When are you and Grace going to get that?"

"Just when you need your ass bailed out of jail, right? Was last night the third or fourth time? It's getting hard to keep up."

"Grace can afford it. She's still helping herself to Dad's pot of money."

"You used to help yourself to the same pot. You're the one who got yourself cut off. He warned you several times. He gave you more than enough chances." For some reason, Logan always seemed to forget that part.

"Am I actually hearing this? Now you're defending my father?"

Jagger shook his head as he turned away.

"You stole my life, man."

Jagger whirled back. "What?"

"The golden boy, Jagger Tennyson. The guy from the wrong side of the tracks makes good. Perfect grades and even better looks. The fucking athleticism."

Logan laughed harshly. "You even stole my sister. She loves you more than she's ever loved me. Tell me, Jagger, do you have any flaws?"

This version of Logan was pathetic. "You could have everything I do. Natalie was crazy about you until you fucked everything up. And that's the problem. You love your pills, booze, and whatever the hell else you're on more than you love anything else."

Logan gave him the finger.

Jagger shook his head again, no longer interested in concealing his

disgust. He wanted off the Logan Evan's roller-coaster ride. "Call me when you're ready to clean yourself up. Otherwise, keep your bullshit away from Grace. You break her heart whenever she has to see you like this."

Logan covered his heart as he batted his lashes. "The knight in shining armor."

He kept his temper in check, even as Logan continued to bait him. "If that's what it takes."

"If being Grace's protector ever gets old, your brother wouldn't mind a shot at that."

And then Jagger saw red as he rushed forward. "You fucker."

His fist was in Logan's face, knocking him to the ground with the force of the blow. Before Logan could recover and put up any sort of block, Jagger was on top of him, plowing his knuckles into Logan's cheekbone.

Logan groaned as more bruising bloomed.

Jagger reined himself in, yanking up on Logan's collar. "Never, ever talk about Grace to my brother, you pathetic piece of shit."

He gave him a shake. "You might be playing it all badass these days, but let's not forget which one of us is actually from the streets."

He moved his face closer to Logan's. "If you ever bring any of those disgusting pieces of slime around here when Grace is home, I will end you. I promise I'll end you. Stay away from me, man. Stay away from your sister."

Jagger gained his feet, leaving Logan where he'd dropped him, eager to help Grace pack and head up to Preston Valley.

He'd be damned if they weren't going to enjoy the last few days of summer before they had to get back to Syracuse.

Two weeks later, Logan had bled to death in the passenger seat of his car.

"Fuck," Jagger murmured as he sat with his face in his hands, scrubbing his palms over his cheeks, absolutely wrecked with a new wave of regret.

"Jagger?"

He looked up as Grace walked his way, sleepy-eyed and slipper-clad, wrapped in her dark-pink robe.

"What are you doing out here? It's freezing."

"I couldn't sleep."

She stared at him as she stopped in front of him. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he said as he nodded his lie.

She sat down next to him. “No, you’re not.”

He moved to wrap the blanket around them both in the chilly air.

Grace settled her head on his shoulder as she locked her arms around his waist. “What’s wrong?”

He leaned into the comfort that was Grace. “I can’t stop thinking about Logan—about that night.”

She tilted her head up to meet his gaze.

“I’m so sorry I couldn’t get him there in time.” He sucked in a breath when his voice broke. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t save him.”

“Jagger,” she whispered, moving to sit on his lap and hold him even closer.

“I’m sorry,” he said again.

“You did everything you could.”

He shook his head as he wrapped her up, nuzzling against her. “There were so many things I could have done differently.”

“No, Jagger. I heard the nine-one-one call.”

He frowned as he looked at her. “I thought the case went to a plea bargain—that the bastards are rotting for the next fifteen to twenty years.”

She nodded. “They plead guilty to first-degree manslaughter.”

He shook his head with his anger. James Marsh and Brett Harley—two of the lowest lifeforms he’d ever met—robbed his brother and murdered his best friend for a handful of dime bags. “That’s not enough. Logan’s life was worth more than that.”

“Yes, it was.” She frowned. “How did you know? About the plea bargain? That happened after you left.”

“I asked Colonel Hinders to get me word on how everything worked out.”

She swallowed. “Oh.”

“You shouldn’t have heard that call, Grace.” It made him sick thinking that she had. She was supposed to have been spared from the horrors of Logan’s last few minutes alive.

She nodded. “Yes, I should have. I needed to.”

“The only good thing that came out of that night was that you weren’t with me.”

“I needed answers—the ones no one could give me. I needed to know what happened. I had so little control over any aspect of my life after Logan died. When we got word from the district attorney that there would be no trial, I drove to his office. I told him I wanted to know everything he could

share about the case. He told me what he could. He mentioned all that you had done to help with the case—to try to help Logan. He also mentioned the nine-one-one recording. I asked him to get it—to play it for me.”

“He shouldn’t have done that.”

“He wasn’t excited about it, but I insisted.”

“He still could have said no.”

She stroked his skin. “I could hear how scared you were—how frantic you were to get Logan help. That night was *awful*. Logan was awful the last time we saw him, but you went to pick him up when he called. You tried to get him to the hospital. There was nothing more you could have done.”

He wanted to be able to believe that—to not pick apart and second-guess every minute of that evening. “There’s always something more.”

She adamantly shook her head. “Not this time.”

“Sometimes I was afraid that maybe you would blame me too—that you would start seeing me the way your dad did.”

She stared at him with shocked horror in her eyes. “No, Jagger. No. I loved Logan so much. I still do, but the drugs and his choices are what killed him.”

He shook his head as he felt the tear trail down his cheek. “I grew up around that shit. I should have seen the signs that he had a problem sooner. I should have done more before it got so out of control.”

Grace wiped it away, then swiped at her own. “He was my brother. He was older, but I was Logan’s rock after my mom died. We were both so close with her, but as much as I loved her and she loved me, they had a different bond. I tried to fill the void, but I couldn’t.”

“You were a damn good sister, Grace.”

“And you were a damn good friend.” She kissed him. “We did everything we could, Jagger. We visited him every weekend—both times he was in treatment. We bailed him out when we more than likely shouldn’t have. We were his support system. When I look back, I know that after my mom died, that’s when he started getting lost. We tried so *hard* to help him, but there was the Logan before his injury and surgery and the Logan after. Little by little, we lost him. By the time he left us, he was my brother, but he also wasn’t. He wasn’t the same. He died a little each week. The last time we saw him, it felt like he was a stranger.”

“He loved you, Grace.”

She nodded. “I know he did.”

“When I was carrying him out of the junkyard... Before he lost consciousness, he told me to tell you how sorry he was.”

Her face crumpled as she started to cry.

He held her again, hurting for her—hurting for both of them. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner—that I didn’t write to you or something. You had a right to know what his last words to you were before now.”

She sniffled against his neck. “I think we’ve both done the best we could with all of this.”

He nodded. “I just hate how much this has hurt you—how much *I’ve* hurt you.”

“You were my rock through so much. You worked so hard to protect me from the worst of Logan’s ups and downs. I miss him—our Logan. I wish he could be here with us right now, but since he can’t, I wish you peace, Jagger. He would want you to find peace.”

He closed his eyes with the next wave of emotion.

“You did everything you could,” Grace continued. “I know that. I want you to know it for yourself.”

How had he lived without this woman for the last eight years? “I think I do now.” Or he was going to try, but it would never be easy. It would take time.

“That’s good,” she whispered, holding him close for several minutes, resting her head on his shoulder. Finally, she looked at him again. “Do you think if we go back inside, you might be able to get some sleep?”

He nodded, standing, taking her hand as they headed toward the bedroom, feeling settled in a way he hadn’t been in years. “Let’s get some sleep.”

## FIFTEEN

GRACE STARED OUT THE WINDOW, LISTENING TO JAGGER'S DEEP, STEADY breathing as the sun rose along the horizon.

When they'd come back inside, he'd wrapped her up in his arms, snuggling her against his powerful body as they'd settled under the covers to sleep. Even hours later, he hadn't let her go, keeping her tucked close.

Her gaze trailed around her bedroom floor, studying their clothes scattered over the area rug after a long night of loving.

How many times had she woken just like this?

There were too many mornings to count—years of opening her eyes to Jagger's face nestled in the crook of her neck while he cocooned her in his warmth.

But she also remembered that first cold, cruel morning when she'd awoken alone at Aunt Maggie's house. She'd been so *broken*. Everything that had mattered had been gone.

It had taken *months* before she'd stopped rolling over to reach for Jagger in the dark. Years had ticked by before she'd been able to pick up all the pieces and make herself whole again.

So, what the hell was she *doing*? Because losing Jagger once had been more than enough.

Suddenly desperate for space, she carefully inched her way out of Jagger's hold.

Sitting up, she found her freedom refreshing and *vital* as she hurried for the shower in the master suite, staring at her trembling hand as she opened the glass door and turned the nozzle to hot.

The steam rose to greet her as she stepped under the steady spray, closing

her eyes as her mind raced.

What was she supposed to do when she loved Jagger as much as she feared him? Because she was suddenly terrified now that they'd officially crossed the line.

Last night had been for vulnerability, tenderness, and pleasure. Today, reality was back with a vengeance. How did she go back to keeping her distance—to protecting her heart?

She gasped when strong arms wrapped around her waist. Whirling, she felt her shoulders stiffen as she stared into sleepy blue eyes. "Jagger."

He smiled before it quickly disappeared. "I was going to say good morning, but maybe it's not."

She stepped out of his hold, grabbing the bottle of shampoo, needing something to do with her hands. "I didn't hear you open the door."

He held her gaze, studying her, exhaling a quiet sigh. "Are you sorry now that the sun's up?"

Pouring shampoo into her palm, she began working it through her hair. "No."

"Then what's up?"

"Nothing."

His brow rose.

"I don't know," she amended, taking another step back.

His jaw clenched next—a sure sign of his frustration. "This is new—you not telling me what you're thinking."

She sighed this time. "I'm not sorry we were together, Jagger. Being with you again was..." She wanted to say exactly right, but she stopped herself. Instead, she shrugged. "I initiated the whole thing."

"You don't regret it, but when I opened my eyes this morning, you weren't lying beside me. We used to wake up and talk before we started our day."

"Yes, we did. But that was then." She huffed out another breath because *nothing* was simple anymore. Nothing was the way it used to be.

"I'm not sorry about last night, but for the last eight years, I've slept by myself—showered by myself. It took a long time to get used to that. Now you're here. In my bed. In my shower. I wasn't expecting dinner at Rafferty's to turn into this."

He wiped away a trail of suds heading for her eyes. "Dinner wasn't about getting you into bed, Grace. I just wanted to spend time with you."

And now she blinked back tears because she knew that was the absolute truth. “What exactly do we do here, pick up where we left off?”

“Yeah—or as close to it as we can.”

The fear was back. He was asking for too much. “Before you left, we were a day away from moving into our own apartment. We were building a life together. Until three weeks ago, a part of me was still trying to come to terms with the fact that I was never going to see you again.”

“I’m right here.”

She shook her head. “You’re right here right now.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Her heart kicked up several beats because she *wanted* to believe him, but she couldn’t. “I don’t know if I can do this with you. I’m terrified to give you everything again.”

He stared at her in the tense silence.

She turned away into the water, using the need to rinse her hair as an excuse for a little distance.

Seconds later, his arms came around her waist as he kissed her ear. “I’m not going anywhere, Gracie.”

She faced him again, allowing herself the pleasure and pain of remaining in his embrace. “Preston Valley’s a small place. You’ve traveled the world—done big, exciting things. What if you realize that this isn’t enough? What if you don’t want to stay?”

“The only thing I’ve ever wanted is you. I *love* you. A lot of years have passed, but that’s never changed.”

“Jagger—”

He settled his forehead against hers. “The only way I’m leaving again is if you ask me to—is if this isn’t working for you. Preston Valley’s always felt like home, but this is your place. It was yours long before it was mine.”

Her hands moved along his arms. “Working with Todd makes you happy?”

He nodded. “It’s good to be back in the dojang.”

“But it’s part-time.”

He shrugged. “I worked nearly every day for eight years. Part-time is just fine for a while—until I figure something else out. It gives me a chance to help you and Aunt Mags, which is something I’ve always liked doing.”

“What about— Can you afford to do that?”

He nodded. “I have plenty of money in the bank.”

She sighed, wanting nothing more than to throw caution to the wind. “I need time.”

“We have plenty of that.”

She looked at the bruise surrounding his Band-Aid. “How’s your arm?”

He glanced at it dismissively. “It’s fine.”

“We need to get you fixed up with a fresh bandage.”

“I just want to fix us.”

Relenting, she hugged him. “I’m glad you’re here, Jagger.” She wanted to be able to give him more, but this was the best she could do for now.

He wrapped her up tightly. “Me too.”

She eased back. “I need to talk to Ben this morning. He’s a good friend. I don’t want to ruin that.”

He nodded. “Let’s wash up. Then you can drop me off at my car.”

Grace’s stomach jittered as she stood on Ben’s pretty wraparound porch in Preston Valley’s Historic District. She exhaled a shuddering breath as she rang the doorbell, more than a little afraid she was about to lose one of her good friends.

Moments later, he glanced out the glass front, smiling as he opened the door, dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt. “This is a surprise.”

She tried to smile as she stepped inside. “I hope you don’t mind an impromptu visitor.”

He shook his head. “Not at all.”

She lifted one of Brew’s familiar to-go trays. “I came with the good stuff.”

He shut the door behind her. “I see that. Coffee *and* muffins?”

She grew sicker by the second because there was no one she wanted to hurt less than the sweet man eyeing the breakfast she held in her hands as they walked down the hall to the newly renovated kitchen. “Apple cinnamon.”

His smile widened. “This is turning out to be one heck of a Sunday morning.”

She laughed quietly—uncomfortably—because she was about to ruin that.

His smile faded. “Is everything okay?”

Her eyes filled as she shook her head.

He nodded as he invited her to take a seat with a gesture of his hand.

“We’re going to have a conversation about Jagger, aren’t we?”

She sat next to him at the kitchen table. “I’m so sorry, Ben.”

“I just want you to be happy. I’m sorry it’s not with me.”

His understanding made her guilt all the worse. “It’s not that you don’t make me happy. You’re such a good man, Ben. You’ve never been anything but wonderful to me.”

He sighed. “Unfortunately, it can’t be as simple as that.”

She shook her head. “I’ve tried so *hard* to move on. I really thought I could with you. I wanted to.”

He sent her a small smile.

“I’ve been so confused lately. I’m sorry you got caught in the middle.”

He covered her hand with his. “You didn’t know he would pop back up in Preston Valley.”

“No, I definitely didn’t.”

“You’re sure this is what you want? He’s what you want?”

“He’s all I’ve ever wanted.” She winced as Ben removed his hand from hers because she certainly hadn’t meant to say that.

She needed him to understand. “Jagger moved into my family’s home in high school. My dad took advantage of Jagger’s disadvantaged background and the fact that he was a phenom of sorts. He excelled at pretty much everything: sports and academics.”

Ben nodded. “I’ve heard.”

She smiled. “Chiropractors.”

He smiled back. “Chiropractors.”

She traced the outline of her cup. “We were cautious friends at best until my dad made us start studying together.”

Ben sipped his coffee. “And the rest is history.”

She nodded. “Pretty much. Things got serious fast—stayed serious. We were together nearly every day for five years.”

“But he left you, Grace.”

She nodded again. “I wanted to hate him. I’ve put a lot of effort into trying, but I’ve never managed to accomplish it.”

She sighed as she looked at a car passing by before she met his gaze again. “Jagger was Logan’s best friend. They met at the taekwondo studio

when Logan joined late in his eighth-grade year. Jagger had been practicing for years by that point. He was already a black belt. He took Logan under his wing—spent a lot of time helping him quickly advance through some of the earlier belts.” She exhaled another quiet breath. “Jagger was there the night my brother died—”

“You don’t have to talk about this. I know it upsets you.”

She’d never talked about the details of that night to anyone but Christy. “I want you to know.”

“Okay.”

“Jagger tried to save Logan, but my brother lost too much blood.”

“It was a gunshot wound?”

Grace nodded, not bothering to ask how he knew. Logan’s death had rocked Preston Valley—had made the news. The rumor mill had run rampant for a long time.

“Logan was struggling with addiction. He got injured at the football state championships our senior year. He got sacked on the last play of the game. He suffered from a major shoulder separation and needed surgery. Shortly after, he got hooked on the pain pills.”

Ben sighed. “Unfortunately, that happens.”

“My dad’s orthopedic center is famous for its pre- and post-surgical super infusions and regenerative stem cell therapies. Patients heal significantly faster when they work with his team, but there was a lot of bad blood between my dad and brother. Logan never forgave my dad for remarrying so quickly after my mom died, so Logan refused to let him help with the recovery process.”

“That’s tough.”

Grace nodded. “Nothing was the same after that. Logan started running with the wrong crowd—Jagger’s older brother and some other guys. When he died, my dad blamed Jagger. He threatened to cut me off if Jagger didn’t leave. Jagger left that night, joined the military, and became one of the best of the best.”

“And now he’s here.”

She covered Ben’s hand this time. “And now he’s here.”

He gave her fingers a squeeze. “I get it.”

Grace smiled. “I appreciate that you do.”

Ben exhaled a long breath. “I guess timing is everything.”

“It is.” But it was so much *more* than that. She’d been waiting for Jagger

for eight years. She'd been in love with him for almost half her life. He'd been "the one" since the beginning. Even if he had come back a year from now or even five, that fact would have remained entirely true. Jagger would always be hers.

"So, you guys are going to try again?"

"Yes." She surprised herself as she answered without hesitation. The man she'd been yearning for was a mere four blocks away. "I'm sorry, Ben. I truly am."

"I can't pretend that I'm not a little crushed. But I truly understand."

She stood because as much as she wanted to smooth things over with Ben, she needed to talk to Jagger again.

When she'd left him at Simplicity, there had been the newly familiar tension hanging between them. "I hope we can still be friends—that you'll still be up for grabbing a coffee from time to time."

He gave her a hug. "Things are turning out differently than I expected, but nothing's changed about our friendship."

She hugged him hard. "Thank you, Ben."

He eased back. "Anytime."

"I should go."

He nodded. "I'll see you around."

Jagger shut the fridge door harder than was necessary after grabbing the gallon of milk for a late-morning bowl of cereal.

Steaming out a breath, he popped off the top and poured, still trying to rein in his frustration after his conversation with Grace in the shower a couple of hours ago.

A long run usually settled him down when things weren't going his way, but that wasn't the case when it came to Grace. Eight miles and another shower had done nothing to ease his worries.

When he came stateside to find her—because there was no use pretending he'd come home to do anything else—he'd known the odds of getting her back were stacked against him.

But now that he'd had Grace again—now that he knew there was still so much left between them—he was desperate to find a way.

“Son of a bitch,” he muttered, picking up his bowl to bring it to the small table.

He’d done a number on her. Even after their years together and the *heat* they still shared in the bedroom, she didn’t trust him at all.

He didn’t know how to show her he was here to stay—that she was all he’d ever wanted.

He dropped his spoon back into his bran flakes when footsteps climbed the stairs to his apartment. He moved to the door, opening it as Grace raised her hand to knock.

She sent him a small smile, looking pretty in her sweater and jeans. “Hey.”

“Hey.” He stepped back to invite her inside. “Do you want to come—”

“I love you, Jagger.”

Shocked, thrilled, *relieved*, he stared at her. He’d had so many bad moments over the past three weeks, fearing that he would never hear those words from her again.

“I love you,” she said again.

“Come in, Gracie.” Taking her hand, he pulled her into his tiny living room, shutting the door behind her as he wrapped her up in a hug.

“I love you,” she whispered a third time, enveloping him, holding on tight.

He sighed. “I love you, too.”

“I’ve waited for you for so long.” Easing back, she stared into his eyes. “I’ve hoped for this since I realized you were gone.”

“Grace.” He kissed her. “Gracie.”

“I don’t know how to do this with you anymore. I’m afraid. But I want to try.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” He’d tell her until she believed him.

“It’s more than that. All those years ago, we dove in. From the first second, everything was so intense. We were so wrapped up. You were *everything*. I gave you everything about me. We were so steady and strong. It never occurred to me to doubt anything about us.”

“I don’t want you to doubt us now.”

“You make it sound so simple—just picking up where we left off. But it’s not. So much time has passed. We’re different people.”

“We’re not that different. Under the years and experiences, plenty has stayed the same.”

She shook her head. “Jagger—”

He cupped her cheeks, bringing his face closer, needing her to see in his eyes that he was all in. “You’re all I’ve thought about for eight years. You’re all I’ve wanted since the beginning. We’re going to figure things out.”

She nodded.

He fought the need to clench his jaw when he knew she still doubted. “I messed things up. *Badly*. I’d change it all if I could. Since I can’t, all we can do is start now.”

She sighed as she rested her head against his chest.

“We have so much going for us, Grace. Our chemistry’s off the charts, and we have an amazing history. But none of it means anything if you don’t trust me.”

She frowned as she looked at him. “I do trust you.”

He raised his brow.

“Okay, I *want* to trust you,” she admitted.

He smiled. “I just need you, Grace. I always have.”

“I need you too.”

“That’s the part that matters. Let’s take what we had and build on the good stuff. Let’s start over with the rest.”

“That sounds good.” She kissed him. “I want this, Jagger. So badly.”

“What if we date—like any regular couple who just met? We’ll take things slow—take our time.”

It was her turn to raise her brow. “We’ve slept together. Twice.”

He grinned. “And I want to keep on doing that. Whenever you’re up for it, I’m *definitely* game.”

She grinned back.

“Give me a chance to show you how good we can be together again.”

She pressed her lips together as she nodded. “Okay.”

“How about I take you out this next weekend?”

“How about you take me out tomorrow night?”

He grinned as she did. “I finish up at the dojang at seven. After a shower and a change, I can be at your place by seven twenty.”

“I’ll be ready to go when you get there.” She kissed him. “I was thinking about heading out to take some pictures before I catch up on some paperwork at the shop.”

“Are you up for some company?”

She nodded.

“Where should we head?”

“Anywhere. We’ll just find a spot.”

They still had a *long* way to go, but they were getting there. “That idea works for me.”

## SIXTEEN

THE STARS WINKED HIGH IN THE SKY AS GRACE HELD JAGGER'S HAND WHILE they walked through the park a couple of blocks from her house.

"Are you warm enough?" he asked.

She nodded, sending him a smile as the wind teased the leaves turning colors on the trees in the low fifty-degree temperatures. She'd grabbed her favorite black beanie and thicker jacket when Jagger had pulled up promptly at seven twenty.

"It's not too bad when the breeze behaves." She snuggled closer against his arm, consciously trying to stay in the present, reminding herself that the past had come and gone.

As Jagger had said yesterday, they had now. She was trying her best to keep her walls down—to trust his promise that he was here to stay. "Did you get enough to eat?"

He moved so that he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "Definitely."

"Good." Sighing her contentment, she locked her arms around his waist. "It's so pretty out here. I like that we stopped off to do this."

He kissed the top of her head. "Everything's been great—a killer dinner and even better company."

She looked up, smiling into his eyes again, loving the simplicity of their official first date.

They'd talked about their days over bowls of soup, salads, and sandwiches at the Main Street Deli before Jagger pulled over on the way back to her house, suggesting a walk in the park.

They'd strolled this same path dozens of times before, but usually during the summer months. "It's still so hard to believe this is *real*—that we're here

like this again.”

“Oh, it’s real.”

“So much between us is the same, but so much is different.”

“Not that different,” he reminded her as he had yesterday.

“Tell me something I don’t know about you.”

“You’re the only person who’s ever known me, Grace.”

“But there’s more now. I want to know everything I missed these last eight years.”

He sighed as he shrugged. “Mostly, I worked. I was in the field more than I wasn’t.”

So much of who and what he’d been was a secret. “It’s kind of weird to think that you were a business and communications major when you left. Now you’re like this super soldier spy guy.”

He frowned as he looked at her.

She shrugged. “Or I *assume* you are.” Because she’d spent countless more hours researching Delta Force, greedy to understand who Jagger had been when he’d been gone.

“I could tell you, but I think you know how the rest of that saying goes.”

She laughed.

He sent her one of his sexy grins as he winked, pulling her tighter against him. “I just worked, Grace. Whatever I had to do to stay busy enough not to think about you.”

Her smile dimmed.

He gave her a little nudge. “Tell me something new that I don’t know about you.”

“Mm, let’s see…” She puffed up her cheeks and then blew out a breath. “I can cook.”

“You’ve always been able to cook.”

She shook her head. “I’m talking *real* cooking. Not canned soups and grilled cheese or that boxed macaroni-n-cheese stuff.”

“Hey, that creamy orange goop isn’t half-bad.”

They both smiled.

“Well, I make the homemade kind now, and it’s insanely good.”

“And where did you learn this skill?”

“After Brennan was born, Christy and I signed up for a cooking class—a once-a-week girls’ night over in Scranton.”

“That sounds fun.”

“Christy was mostly just trying to stay sane, but it was fun, too.” She laughed. “Poor Brennan had *terrible* colic. He cried for hours every single day.”

“It sounds like poor Christy and Mike to me.”

Grace nodded with feeling. “The first three months were *rough*. But they made it through, and I’d say it’s been a win-win. Brennan’s an awesome kid, and Christy and I both have mad kitchen skills.”

Jagger puffed out a breath as he raised his brow. “*Mad* kitchen skills. That’s quite a self-endorsement.”

She batted her lashes at him. “I feel comfortable standing behind it.”

“You’ll have to let me be the judge, particularly of this homemade mac-n-cheese you’re bragging about.”

She shrugged. “You have to be pretty special to rate a bowl of the good stuff.”

He chuckled, kissing her forehead this time. “Maybe we could make it together sometime. You can share some of your mad skills.”

She beamed, loving the idea. “Absolutely.”

“My mouth is watering already.”

She laughed.

Grinning, he wrapped her up closer. “So, Todd and I were talking between classes. He was telling me about the Halloween party over at the Hyatt. He and Ruby are going. Apparently, it’s pretty popular.”

She nodded. “Fright Night. They’ve turned it into a charity event for the library. The costume contest is a big deal. People get pretty competitive about it.”

“Maybe it’s forward because this is our first date and all, but I happen to remember that you like Halloween. I also remember how we kicked *ass* at the whole costume thing. Will you go with me?”

She and Jagger had had epic costumes over the years. Batman and Cat Woman; Daphne and Fred; Beetlejuice and Lydia; a pooper scooper to Jagger’s poop emoji. They’d easily won all of the contests.

She’d chosen to stay home and hand out candy since he’d left, deciding that the fun of Halloween belonged to the kids. “You want to get dressed up?”

“Hell yeah, I do. We can make another date out of heading into Scranton to pick out our costumes.”

She snagged her lip with her teeth as they crossed the street toward her

house. “I don’t know, Jagger.”

He frowned. “Really? You used to live for this stuff.”

“All of the good costumes are probably gone by now.”

“We have more than a month. There’s still plenty of time.”

“I guess we could. I just—I’m still trying to decide if I like you, though.”

He narrowed his eyes as he abruptly stopped. He surprised her by picking her up and spinning her around.

She locked her legs around him, squealing as he went around for a second turn.

“I thought you were *serious*.”

She grinned, struggling not to laugh as she held on tighter. *This* was the same, yet it was also perfectly different. “Aunt Maggie tells me I’m picky about men—that I’m quick to find flaws. A little over a month is a long time from now.”

“I’m a damn good catch.”

She laughed as her feet touched the ground, but she kept her arms locked around the back of his neck. “You’re cocky.”

He grinned, resting his forehead against hers. “I call it confidence.”

“I like confidence. It’s an attractive quality.”

“So, you’re up for the whole Halloween thing?”

She nodded. “Definitely.”

“I have the early class on Wednesday evening. If you want, we could head into Scranton for the good costume shop when you finish work.”

“I can be ready at five thirty.”

“I’ll pick you up.” He glanced toward her walkway. “Let’s get you home.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

They held hands again until they stopped at her front door. Tonight she felt none of the awkwardness she remembered when she’d stood here like this with Ben. “Thank you for dinner and a great walk.”

“I had a nice time, Grace.”

She nodded. “Me, too.”

He lifted his hand to stroke his fingers along her jaw—gentleness wrapped in all his strength. “How do you feel about a kiss?”

“I feel fine about it.”

“That’s good because I don’t think I can walk away without tasting you,” he whispered as he leaned in, touching his lips to hers.

Melting against him, she let her eyes close as she opened for him, meeting the teasing slides of his tongue.

He dove in once more before he eased back. “Good night, Gracie.”

It felt odd to leave him here at the doorway instead of inviting him in to finish their evening in the bedroom, but they were starting fresh—taking their time and building something new. “Good night.”

He stepped back. “Call me sometime.”

She pushed her key into the door. “I’ll probably do that.”

He grinned as he turned and walked away.

Jagger walked to the curb before he looked over his shoulder to hold up his hand in a wave as Grace watched him from her living room window.

She blew him a kiss and winked before she closed the curtains for the night.

Chuckling, he crossed the street to walk the same path through the park back to his car.

“Fuck yeah,” he muttered, grinning in the dark.

Tonight was *exactly* right—easy conversation and a whole lot of fun. He’d yearned for this on those long, lonely nights without Grace.

She was his again. She’d smiled at him with her big blue eyes full of trust.

They still had work to do—the damage had been done—but he planned to show her every day and in every way that he was hers too.

He made it back to his car, unlocking the door, scanning the area as he got behind the wheel, wondering if the potentially lifesaving measure would ever fade after such a long time overseas.

Turning over his engine, he flipped a U-ey in the quiet street, driving by Grace’s, needing to see that her house looked secure. When all appeared well, he snatched up his phone, dialing her number.

“Is everything okay?” she answered.

He felt himself smile when she sounded at ease—happy. “Everything’s good.”

“I think you’re supposed to wait a couple of days before you call. Ten minutes feels a little desperate.”

He chuckled, loving that they were back to this. “Tonight was good, Grace.”

“It was.”

He could hear the smile in her voice each time she spoke. “I love you.”

She sighed. “I love you, too.”

His smile was back. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

Hanging up, he pulled onto Main Street, already counting down the minutes until their next date.

## SEVENTEEN

JAGGER DROVE CLOSER TO SCRANTON'S BUSY DOWNTOWN, HOLDING GRACE'S hand as he navigated the six o'clock traffic.

He moved into the interstate's left-hand lane, avoiding several slower vehicles, occasionally checking his mirrors to see if anyone followed his path—another habit long ingrained.

He was doing his best with the average Joe thing, but he regularly found himself on alert—or certainly more than he needed to be for his low-risk lifestyle in the States.

He knew paranoia wasn't uncommon after spending so much time doing what he'd done, but he'd assumed he would step back into the fold of everyday living mostly unscathed.

Apparently, decompressing wouldn't be an overnight thing—  
“What are you thinking about over there?”

He took his eyes off the road long enough to glance at Grace. She'd pulled off classy and sexy in an olive-green sweater dress and boots combination. He loved that she'd left her hair down to flow past her shoulders. “I was thinking about kicking Todd and Ruby's asses in the costume contest.”

Grace grinned. “He's been smack-talking you, huh?”

Jagger laughed out a dismissive puff. “He doesn't seem to understand who we *are*—that we're reigning *champs*.”

Grace's smile was back.

“Although I'm not sure how we're going to beat our own game—the pooper scooper and shit emoji were pretty epic.”

Grace nodded with feeling. “That was definitely our best.”

He shrugged. “We could do the same thing but maybe hot glue some corn kernels to my swirls or something.”

Grace laughed this time—one of her *tip her head back in the seat* laughs.

He chuckled, *loving* that sound. “It’s not a bad idea if you think about it.”

“That’s disgusting.”

He shrugged again. “You can be anything you want on Halloween, even disgusting.”

She lifted his hand, kissing his knuckles, shaking her head as she laughed again. “I *missed* you, Jagger.”

His grin was back as he met her gaze. “Well, here I am.”

She kissed him a second time. “Thank goodness.”

He winked. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” She laced her fingers with his again. “I’m not sure what we’ll do or what we’ll find, for that matter. Christy and Mike said things were pretty picked through when they were here with Brennan over the weekend. But we’re creative.”

“I’m still digging the poop idea. I think we’ve got something there.”

She shook her head, rolling her eyes with another chuckle. “What if we leave that as a backup?”

“Sure.”

“Can I ask you about something that has nothing to do with poop or costumes?”

He grinned. “Definitely. What’s up?”

“I’ve been thinking about our macaroni and cheese conversation.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Mm-hmm. Maybe you can come over on Saturday—”

Grace trailed off, tensing her fingers against his as she stared at the Philadelphia Orthopedic and Regenerative Medicine Clinic billboard lit up in the dark a couple of miles in the distance.

*Worry Less; Heal Faster. A Holistic Approach with World-Renowned Care.*

“That looks new,” he said, taking his eyes off the road in snatches to study Doctor Steven Evans and his two equally famous colleagues, anti-aging doctors Paul Becker and Brianna Kimball, as they smiled down at Scranton while they stood with their arms crossed.

The billboard was a long way from Philly—a good three hours. But it didn’t matter. Steve and Paul had built themselves a reputation for excellence

over the years.

The Evans Infusion—a pre- and postoperative mega-dose of amino acids, collagen, vitamins, and minerals developed by Steve and Paul—had put the doctors on the map when Grace had been a baby.

Patients came from far and wide for their orthopedic care. The clinic treated everyday people and world-renowned athletes, plus Steve had operated on a couple of former United States presidents.

“He looks older,” Grace commented quietly.

Steve still looked damn good for a guy in his midsixties—a few gray hairs and a wrinkle here and there, but Steve had always been considered a very attractive man.

Grace mostly looked like her mom but had her dad’s chin.

“A little,” Jagger agreed as he frowned. “When did they hire Brianna?”

“Aunt Maggie mentioned something about it a couple of years ago. I imagine she’ll take over the entire practice when my dad and Paul are ready to retire.”

Jagger whistled through his teeth. “That’ll be one hell of a buyout.”

Grace shrugged. “She’s a celebrity in her own right with her books and television appearances. Plus, her big brother and his teammates always talk up the clinic, so I imagine she can afford it.”

“It sounds like her brother’s surgery was iffy. His odds of returning to the football field don’t sound good.” And that was tragic because Brian Kimball was one of the NFL’s greatest of all time.

Grace jerked her shoulders again. “My dad and Paul are his best chance at a full recovery.”

“Hopefully, they have a miracle up their sleeves. Blowing out his ACL *and* MCL. That’ll be a hell of a comeback, especially when rumors are floating around that he’s also been dealing with post-operative infections.”

“Hmm.”

He glanced at Grace as he slid his thumb along her skin, understanding that she had no desire to talk about sports. Over the past few days, they’d talked about a lot of things but never her dad. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “I wasn’t expecting that. That billboard has been an advertisement for Scranton Memorial’s new maternity wing for a couple of years.”

“That’s definitely a change.”

She nodded again. “It’s been such a long time since I’ve seen him.”

“Have you thought about reaching out?”

She shook her head. “He was *awful* to you, Jagger.”

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t have everything I do if it wasn’t for him.”

Her surprised gaze whipped up to meet his as she frowned. “Jagger—”

“Logan was my best friend. I got a great education. I met Colonel Hinders and had a hell of a career. But mostly, I have you, Gracie. None of that would have happened if your dad hadn’t opened the doors to me.”

Her frown deepened. “You worked hard for what you have. You *earned* what you have.”

“But he was the catalyst for all of it.”

“So, we should thank him?”

He shrugged. “Sort of.”

She shook her head, pulling her hand free from his. “He blamed you for something that was never your fault. He and Colonel Hinders used Logan’s death against you—against both of us. The colonel always wanted you, and my dad wanted you gone. They got their wish no matter what it cost.”

“That’s true, but—”

“Don’t defend them, Jagger. There are no ‘buts’ that will ever justify what they did.”

“Grace—”

“Let’s drop it. I don’t want to talk about this.”

He sighed, quickly moving over two lanes to take the nearest exit because they were going to fix this right now.

Pulling off on the quiet street in an area that had seen better days, he stopped in an abandoned warehouse parking lot while Grace gripped her arms across her chest and stared out her window. “Will you look at me?”

She turned her head. “What?”

“I’m not defending your father. He’s done a lot of shitty things, but I don’t care about any of it.”

She blinked as her eyes filled. “We lost eight years, Jagger. We don’t get that time back.”

He captured her hand between the two of his, playing with her fingers. “No, we don’t.”

“He took you away from me. I don’t know how to be okay with that.”

“I’m right here.”

“But you weren’t. For a long time, you weren’t.”

“You’re sitting in my car with me. We’re about to pick out Halloween

costumes. We get to make every second we have now count.”

She unbuckled her belt, wrapping her arms around him.

He unbuckled himself, moving to hold her just as tightly, breathing in her shampoo.

She eased back, staring into his eyes. “I’m so glad you’re here, Jagger.”

He tugged her mouth to his, wanting to show her instead of tell her how much he agreed.

Moaning, she kissed him back with an urgency of lips colliding and tongues tangling.

“Come here,” he said, pulling her toward his side of the vehicle.

She awkwardly climbed over the console, straddling him in the cramped space, kissing him again.

His hands wandered to her breasts, cupping her, then down, lifting her skirt higher, squeezing her ass, grinding her against his erection. “I want you,” he panted out. “Right here, I want you.”

She nodded, standing up on her knees so he could pull at his snap, yank at the zipper, and free himself from his pants.

“Now, Gracie.”

“Yes.” She slid her panties to the side, whimpering as she sunk herself on him, taking him in deep.

He groaned, letting his head rest against the seat as she surrounded him with her silky heat. He’d always fit just right—snug and tight.

“Jagger,” she whispered, using her hands on his shoulders to rock a sinuous rhythm.

Gripping her hips, he helped her move faster. “You feel so *good*.”

She gasped, staring into his eyes as she climbed, moving faster yet.

He clutched at her skin as her panting gasps turned into shuddering moans before she tensed, crying out.

He struggled to hang on, pumping up hard, waiting for her to fall over the edge again.

And then her nails bit into his shoulders through his shirt as her body froze, then quaked.

Groaning, he jerked up several times, finally erupting.

She let her head rest in the crook of his neck as their ragged breathing filled the silence. “I’m so glad I didn’t change into pants.”

He grinned. “Ditto on that.”

She sat up, looking at him. “It’s been a long time since we’ve done

anything like this.”

“I’d say we’ve got it down to a science.” He stroked her cheek as she smiled. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

She nodded.

“And we’re good?”

She nodded again. “We’re good. I just don’t like talking about my dad.”

“I get it. It’s a complicated situation. But don’t let me be the reason you don’t fix things if that’s what you want to do.”

“Maybe someday, but at this point, I’m fine with how things are. I want to focus on me and you.”

“I get that, too. I want to build a life with you, Grace. Whatever that looks like for us now.”

She rested her forehead against his chin. “That sounds really good.” She kissed him. “Are you still up for costumes?”

“Hell yeah, I am. Since we’ve just started dating, I should probably tell you that I’m slightly competitive.”

She grinned. “I think I’ve heard something about that.”

He kissed her. “Let’s do the best we can to clean ourselves up. Then we have work to do because we’re bringing home first prize Halloween night.”

Three hours later, Jagger awkwardly resituated the big bag of Chinese food he held in his arm as he unlocked Grace’s front door.

“Do you want me to take that?” she asked, holding her new blue gown and the accompanying shoes they’d stopped off for before they left Scranton.

Mike and Christy had been right about the slim pickings. The lack of inventory and their significant size difference had made couples costuming nearly impossible.

With little choice, they’d gone the Disney Princess to his Prince Charming route, which hadn’t necessarily excited either one of them. But Grace had looked stunning as he stared at her in the cramped dressing room.

“Nah, I’ve got it.” He gave the key a turn. “Here we go,” he said, pushing the door wider so Grace could step in before him.

“Thanks.”

“Sure thing.” He shut them inside, breathing in the familiar scent of

Grace as she headed for her bedroom with her stuff. “Do you want to eat at the table or watch some TV on the couch?”

“I’m *starving*, so I’m good with whatever,” she called behind her.

Setting the bag on the counter, he opened the cupboard doors, looking for plates.

“Bingo,” he said to himself, grabbing two, deciding that dinner at the table worked. Staring into Grace’s eyes while he sat across from her never got old.

Setting down the dishes, he went on the hunt for glasses next, eager to get them situated so they could dive in. “What do you want to drink?”

“Water’s fine, thanks,” she said as she returned, pulling her hair into a ponytail. She’d changed, dressing down in white yoga pants and a pale-pink sweatshirt.

He loved being in her space with her like this—normal, everyday life he’d taken for granted long ago.

They’d both gone to work and went out on a little date. Now they were sitting down to enjoy a meal together. “Looks comfy.”

She smiled. “It is. Thanks for grabbing the plates.”

“Definitely.” He brought two glasses of ice water over to their settings.

“Be careful not to trip over there. I haven’t had a chance to put away all my equipment yet.”

He glanced toward the tripod and light boxes zipped up in their bags, tucked in the corner. “Why don’t I take them back?”

“I can take care of it later. Or tomorrow,” she amended with a grin. “It’s already on the to-do list. Plus, I want to put this receipt on my desk.”

Deciding to help her out now, he hefted up the awkward items, stopping in front of her and the bag of food she’d opened. “I wish you would have let me buy dinner.”

“You bought last time, which means it was my turn tonight. This is a fifty-fifty relationship.”

It had stuck in his craw a bit when she’d pulled out her credit card before he could grab his when they’d stopped off to pick up their dinner—like some sort of old habit.

Grace or Logan had paid his way into things more than a few times. And he’d hated the hell out of it.

Steve had set him up with a monthly allowance, the same whopping amount as Grace and Logan’s. But Jagger had never touched it—not once.

The small wage he'd earned working weekends when he could at the old Wakefield dojang had covered gas, car insurance, and a couple of necessities. Otherwise, he'd been chronically broke.

But that was then. He no longer needed anyone to take care of him. "Thanks for dinner."

"We haven't eaten it yet."

He smiled. "I can take the receipt." He opened his mouth for Grace to put the piece of paper between his lips, then headed down the hall, flipping on the light with his elbow as he moved into her office.

He set down the equipment in the corner by her other stuff, then stopped at her desk, finding her professional space as tidy as the rest of her home as he set down the receipt.

"Do you want to grab the advance copy of *Travel*?" Grace called down the hall. "It should be right there on the desk. I got it in the mail a couple of days ago, but I haven't had a chance to check it out yet."

"Definitely." He grinned his pride when his gaze landed on the latest edition of Grace's magazine. Immediately, he recognized her work on the cover.

Snatching it up, he stopped to grab the small stack of earlier editions on the right-hand corner of the desk, eager to look through all of them with Grace.

His smile faded as he stared at the pamphlets the magazines had covered.

*The Adoption Option*

Frowning, he picked it up, then swore as he read the next.

*Artificial Insemination: Is It Right for You?*

"What the—" Shocked as hell—and he didn't know why—he walked back down the hall. What Grace did with her body was her choice, but *they* were supposed to make a family together.

Eight years ago, he left. He'd walked away and changed the rules. But they'd always talked about traveling the world, then settling down with a house and kids.

He'd been *beyond* lucky when he came home to find Grace unattached. Over the last month and a half, he'd let himself cozy into the idea that everything they'd dreamed of was still possible. "Gracie?"

She looked up as she dug through the bag, setting their dinner options on the counter. "Yeah?"

"What's this?"

She frowned as she stared at the booklets he held in his hand before she snatched them away.

“You want to adopt?”

She stared at the pamphlets. “I don’t know.”

“You want a sperm donor?”

She jerked her shoulders. “I’m not sure about that either.”

“Adoption’s one thing, but Jesus, Grace, don’t do the frozen sperm thing.”

Her shoulders stiffened as she met his gaze again. “I’m a single twenty-eight-year-old who wants a family.”

He clenched his jaw when she called herself single. “I thought we were dating.”

She set the pamphlets on the counter. “We are.”

“I thought things were going well.”

“They are. But you’ve been home for a month and a half. We’ve been dating for less than a week. I’m just—I’m keeping my options open.”

Restless with an urgent sense of desperation, he slid his hand through his hair, not liking that she was considering any option but him.

Tonight was another reminder that she could and would pick up her life without him. He needed Grace so much more than she needed him. “If you want a baby, I’ll give you a baby. I’ll make a baby with you.”

She blinked her surprise as she took a step back. “We’re still figuring things out.”

“Okay, fine, so we’re still figuring things out. But don’t go make a kid with a stranger. Not when I’m standing right here. If you want to ditch your pills tomorrow, just say the word. We’ll get you some vitamins and start trying.”

She huffed out a laugh. “That’s a big ask when we’re not sure what the future holds.”

“I know what the future holds. Things between us are going to work out fine. We’re going to have all of the things we’ve always talked about.”

She sighed as she shook her head. “Jagger—”

He took a step toward her, capturing her hands in his. “Promise you’ll talk to me before you make any plans.”

“I’m not making any decisions in the immediate future. I mean it when I say I’m only exploring my options. Christy’s so good with Brennan. And watching all of Gabby’s fertility struggles... She and Jerrod are so happy

with the baby nearly due. It got me thinking. That's all."

He closed the remaining distance between them, wrapping his arms around her as he settled his forehead against hers. "Promise me anyway."

She nodded. "I promise."

"We're supposed to make babies together. You're the only woman I want to be the mother of my kids."

Sighing, she slid her hands up his arms to lock her fingers against the back of his neck. "When I talked to my doctor a few months ago, I had no idea you were coming home."

"Here I am," he reminded her yet again, needing her to truly believe him. "I know this isn't fair—to come back after all this time and ask so much of you. But here I am, Grace."

"I see you, Jagger."

"But do you believe me? It only matters if you believe me."

She nodded again. "I do."

He exhaled a slow breath. "This is what I want for us—cozy nights when it's cold outside. Dinner together after a busy day."

She smiled. "Me too."

"I *love* you, Gracie."

"I love you, too." She kissed him as her fingers wandered into his hair. "What if we make Saturday night cozy too? We can make dinner together—macaroni and cheese—and watch movies."

He groaned as he started swaying, moving with her in a slow dance. "That sounds awesome."

"Maybe you can bring a change of clothes, just in case you want to wake up with me on Sunday morning."

He smiled. "I hear that cozy can be sexy."

She smiled back. "I certainly hope so."

He kissed her. "Do you want to eat?"

She nodded. "The crab Rangoon is calling my name."

He kept her hand in his as they turned toward the counter. "Let's grab the goods and take a seat."

## EIGHTEEN

TOP 40 MUSIC PLAYED THROUGH THE SPEAKERS WHILE JAGGER STOOD NEXT to Grace in the kitchen, going to town with a grater and his second big block of cheese.

Feeling the burn in his forearm, he stopped to flex his hand, more than a little relieved that he'd nearly finished his task. "This is no joke."

Sending him a sympathetic smile, Grace wiggled her hips to the beat of the song while she stirred a gloppy mixture in one of the larger pots on the stovetop—a roux, she'd called it. "It's the only downside to the whole dish."

He shrugged. "Sometimes you have to pay to play, I guess."

She laughed. "I promise it'll be worth it."

He grinned, getting back to work, loving everything about this moment—loving everything about their Saturday.

When he'd walked out of the dojang at one, Grace had been waiting, leaning against the driver's side door of his car with a picnic basket in her hands.

Lunch at the park and a quick stop at the grocery store for dinnertime ingredients followed. Now they were home, making a meal while the rain that had threatened all afternoon fell in sheets.

"And just like that," he said, finally finishing up with the last little hunk.

Grace raised her brow as she nodded. "I'm impressed. Eight minutes or less. That usually takes me forever."

He flexed his hand again. "That's a hell of a lot of cheese."

She nodded again. "Four cups of the cheddar and two of the Gruyere."

He moved to the sink to wash his hands. "And why didn't we just get the already shredded stuff?"

She added milk and cream to the gooey mixture. “Because it doesn’t melt as well. And we’re going for perfection. I promised you an epic dinner.”

“With your mad kitchen skills,” he added.

“That’s right.”

Drying off his hands, he walked up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist, bending down to kiss her neck. “I can already tell it’s going to be killer.”

She tipped her head to the side, giving him more room to continue his work. “I’m just waiting for this to thicken up a bit before I add the cheese. Then we’ll pour it over the noodles we cooked.”

He snagged her ear, smiling when she quietly shuddered out her next breath. “Then we eat?”

She shook her head. “It needs to bake for a while. That’s why we preheated the oven.”

He let his palms wander up her gray New York City sweatshirt, stopping to cup her breasts—to tease her nipples with gentle slides of his thumbs. “How long will we have?”

“About thirty minutes.” She made a sound in her throat, then gave him a bump with her butt. “You’re distracting me.”

His mouth went back to her neck. “Sorry.”

She grinned. “No, you’re not.”

He chuckled, stopping his teasing, holding her around her waist again. “This feels good. Being here like this.”

She leaned back into him. “I’d say it’s perfect.”

“Maybe we can do something like this next weekend too.”

She nodded. “I’ve been looking at some recipes for chicken cordon bleu.”

“Yes,” he said, nodding his enthusiasm. “This whole Grace Evans chef thing works for me.”

She laughed. “I’m definitely not a chef.”

“You could have fooled me.” Unable to get enough, he cozied her closer. “Maybe after I’ve watched you in the kitchen a couple more times, I can try cooking something for you.”

“I’d like that.” She kissed his cheek. “Since we’re talking about next weekend, do you have plans Friday night?”

He shook his head.

“The yearbook kids are taking pictures at the football game. I told them I would be there if they wanted any hints with their shots. If you’re up for it,

you can come along.”

“Friday night lights with my favorite girl?” He nuzzled her neck. “Try and keep me away.”

She smiled. “Christy, Mike, and Brennan are coming. I think Ben mentioned something about stopping by too.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“I thought so.” She reached for a handful of the cheddar, adding it to the pot, whisking it into the mixture. “It’s been a long time since we’ve watched a football game together.”

They’d gone to several Syracuse home games, donning their ugly orange and blue in the name of school spirit. “Bring on the crappy nachos and cold pizza.”

She laughed.

He smiled again. “How else can I help with dinner?”

“Are you up for a little salad prep? Everything’s already washed. It just needs to be chopped.”

“I can do—” His phone started ringing.

Pulling it from his back pocket, he sighed as he read Jason Gray’s name.

Grace frowned. “Is everything okay?”

He nodded, deciding he might as well answer. Because Jason would just keep calling if he didn’t. “It’s my old boss.”

“Oh.”

“This should only take a second.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

Sighing again, he answered as he stepped back from Grace. “Hello?”

“Are you bored playing average Joe yet?”

He moved farther away when Grace’s brow furrowed again. “I’d say it’s working just fine for me.”

“I have a job for you. South America. Thirty days. A hundred thousand dollars.”

Jagger moved to the fridge, grabbing the peppers, carrots, and tomatoes for the salad. “No, thanks.”

“They want you. *I* want you. You’re the best I have.”

He headed for the counter, watching Grace pour the cheese over the macaroni, then slide the large casserole dish into the oven. “I *was* the best you *had*.”

“What if I can get you a hundred twenty-five?”

He picked up his knife to get started on the red pepper but set it back down when he noticed Grace's stiff shoulders as she headed for the laundry room. "You could get me two, and I'd still say no."

"What about two twenty-five?"

He reached for Grace, catching her by the elbow as she walked back with a load of clean towels in her basket.

She pulled away, sending him a small smile as she kept walking toward the bedroom.

"The answer's still no. I'm exactly where I want to be."

"That's what they all say. For a while, anyway."

"I'm hanging up." True to his word, Jagger disconnected the call, clenching his jaw as he shook his head.

Jason had a big damn mouth and an even louder voice.

"Son of a bitch," he said on his exhale, glancing around the empty kitchen, well aware that everything he and Grace had been working so hard to fix was in jeopardy again.

Grace grabbed another extra-large bathroom towel from the basket, folding the soft cotton with hands that weren't quite steady as her heart pounded in her chest.

*Are you bored playing average Joe yet?*

She closed her eyes as Jagger's boss's voice echoed in her head—as flashes of the Delta Force videos she'd watched reminded her of just how intense Jagger's life had been.

She'd been so foolish—so *stupid*—to let herself believe they could pick up where they'd left off. So much time had passed. They were entirely different people.

"Gracie."

She opened her eyes, focusing on her chore. Because at this moment, she had no idea what to do. "Dinner should be out of the oven in about twenty minutes."

He snagged her by the arm, turning her to face him. "I don't know how much of that you heard..."

She'd heard all of it. But she shrugged, crossing her arms at her chest so

he couldn't see her hands tremble. "I thought I would give you some privacy."

"I meant what I told him. I'm happy right here."

And she believed that he believed that. He was happy for *now*, while everything felt new. "That's a lot of money to turn down."

"I don't need the money. I've made more than enough the past couple of years."

She wanted to turn and reach for another towel but held his stare. "Macaroni and cheese and Friday night lights. This is really enough?"

"Feeling like I'm home again? Fixing things with you? That's *everything*, Grace."

"You're the very best there is. You're wasting that in this little town."

He clenched his jaw. "I'm not wasting anything."

She huffed out a humorless laugh because Jagger had never been able to see just how amazing he was. "You were always afraid you were holding me back. It was never true, but..." She shrugged. "It's funny how the tables have turned."

His eyes flashed with temper. "That's bullshit."

Shaking her head, she turned away, afraid she would burst into tears.

He turned her back. "I don't *want* that anymore, Grace. I've never wanted any of that more than I've wanted you."

Her tears started falling. "I just want you to be happy."

He sighed. "I *am* happy."

"But for how long? You're a brilliant, highly skilled man—quite the opposite of the average Joe."

His nostrils flared now. "Jason's an idiot."

"He's also *right*."

"Damn it, Grace, how do I make you *believe* me? How do I make you understand that I don't want to live out of a suitcase in some godforsaken place? Proof of life protocols and being responsible for other people's lives... I don't want to look over my shoulder and dodge bullets anymore. I want *you*. I want *this* right here. More than that, I *need* it. I need you, Grace. I always have."

She needed him too, but mostly she needed him to make his dreams come true. No one deserved an amazing life more than he did. "If you ever change your mind—"

He yanked her against him. "I won't." He cupped her cheeks. "You're so

afraid that I'm going to walk away. But maybe you'll wake up one of these mornings and remember you've done just fine without me."

She adamantly shook her head. "I haven't been fine, Jagger."

"Neither have I. I walked away when I never should have. I did a job that was as exciting as it was terrifying. Now I'm home—right where I want to be."

She wrapped her arms around him, finally choosing to surrender—to let herself embrace that this was real. Jagger was truly home for good. "I love you."

Returning her embrace, he kissed the top of her head. "I love you, too." He kissed her again. "Please, let's get back to our evening—to macaroni and cheese and movies."

She nodded. "I'd like that."

## NINETEEN

GRACE HUMMED ALONG WITH THE RADIO AS SHE TIGHTENED HER FOCUS ON A generous bunch of boldly purple asters in their galvanized steel bucket.

Clicking the shutter button, she pulled the camera back, studying the screen, pleased with the subtle blur of the various other fall flowers available for sale in the pick-your-own section of the store.

Aunt Maggie used her cane to walk from the back. “How are the pictures coming along?”

Grace glanced at her screen again. “Great. I have what I need for today’s upload to The Gram.” She looked up, meeting Aunt Maggie’s watchful gaze. “What?”

“You’re glowing, honey.”

She shrugged as she snagged her lip, trying to disguise her smile. “You know how much I love Wednesdays: buy one bundle, get one half off.”

Aunt Maggie laughed. “Is that what it is?”

Grace gave up, grinning. “I like a solid profit margin.”

Aunt Maggie chuckled again. “And here I thought it had something to do with you and Jagger being roommates again.”

All innocence, Grace settled her hand on her chest. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Aunt Maggie sent her a knowing nod. “It’s been quite a while since I’ve seen that twinkle in your eyes.”

Grace’s grin returned because she’d seen the same twinkle reflecting at her in the mirror when she and Jagger had stepped out of the shower this morning. Initially, they’d decided to take things slow, but things had stayed fast and hot since Jason Gray’s phone call.

Jagger had gone to Todd's for changes of clothes, but he'd fallen asleep with her in her bed the last four nights. It had been so long since life had been this good. "I'm happy."

Aunt Maggie winked. "Good for you, sweetie."

The door opened, and Jagger walked in, wearing his dobok and a pair of sneakers.

"Well, here's a surprise," Aunt Maggie said as she headed to sit on the stool behind the front counter. "It's been four whole hours since we saw you last."

Jagger grinned. "Hey, Aunt Mags." He kissed Grace as he stopped in front of her. "Hey."

Grace smiled. "Hey."

"Do you have a second?"

Her smile dimmed as she studied the intensity of his gaze, sensing that something was up. "Sure."

"We'll be right back," Jagger said to Aunt Maggie as he took Grace's hand, pulling her down the hall to her office.

She closed the door behind them, setting her camera on the desk. "Jagger, what's going on?"

He took her hands, kissing her again. "I have about fifteen minutes before I need to get back, but I want to talk to you about something."

"Okay."

"Jason called me again."

Her stomach clenched with a sudden rush of nerves. But she forced herself to smile. "Another job offer?"

He nodded. "Freelancing—doing some risk assessment."

And then her stomach sank because he hadn't turned it down. "The same stuff you were doing?"

"Sort of."

She pulled her hands free from his and turned to stare at the neatly stacked paperwork that needed her attention. She would *not* cry. She would *not* be selfish if this was what Jagger wanted. "So, you're leaving."

"No." He tugged her around, capturing her hands again, squeezing. "I'm not."

But her guard was up despite what he said. "I guess I don't understand."

"I'd be doing risk assessment, but I'd only work stateside."

"It's dangerous?"

He shook his head. “Basically, I’m troubleshooting. I’d travel to the destinations where Jason’s high-profile clients are slated to visit—look for potential security risks, make my reports and recommendations, then come home. I told Jason I needed to discuss this with you before I gave him any sort of commitment.”

“I remember Jason saying something about thirty days. You’ll be gone for a month at a time?”

Jagger shook his head again. “Three or four days a month. Five days, tops.”

Her shoulders relaxed because that didn’t sound so bad. “You don’t need my permission, Jagger.”

“I want your blessing. Jason’s talking about keeping me on retainer, but I thought I could try this one job first. I would have to go to DC for a couple of days. If it feels like a good fit, I might take another job next month.”

“Is this what you want?” But even as she asked, she could see the excitement in his eyes.

He puffed out a breath. “I never really considered it until Jason brought it up. But yeah. Maybe.”

“Then I want you to do it.”

He kissed her. “Do you remember that paycheck Jason mentioned for the South America job?”

Grace nodded.

“I can make fifty percent of that for a couple of days of work each month if he keeps me on retainer.”

Her eyes grew huge. “And you’re sure this isn’t dangerous?”

He shook his head. “I’ll be there and gone before the asset even arrives. I imagine there might be some trips where you could even come with me. I’ll do what I need to do, then we can take a couple of extra days for ourselves.”

She *loved* the idea of traveling with Jagger—their original dream. “That sounds like fun.”

“I think this could be good, but it has to be okay with you. This has to work for what we’re building.”

“I want you to do this. I want you to be happy.”

“I am happy.”

“All the way happy—professionally fulfilled. That matters, Jagger.”

“This could be the best of both worlds. Lots of this.” He gestured to the two of them. “And a little of that. Plus, I can still work with Todd.”

“I think this sounds great.” And she truly did. She wrapped him up in a hug. “Congratulations.”

He returned her embrace. “Thanks.” He sighed. “If I take this job, I have to leave tomorrow. I’ll miss the game on Friday.”

“Okay.”

He shook his head. “It’s not. We made plans. Nothing’s more important than you. Than us.”

She smiled, knowing he meant it. “There will be other football games.”

“I’ll make it up to you.”

“There’s nothing for you to make up. I want this for you—for your dreams to come true. Whatever they are.”

He sighed as he rested his forehead against hers. “How did I get so lucky, Grace? How are you mine?”

She stroked his skin as her heart melted. “I think we’re both pretty lucky.”

“I’ll be home Saturday afternoon. We can still do chicken cordon bleu.”

“I can’t wait.”

“I should talk to Todd before the next class—work something out with him. Then I need to call Jason and get things set up.”

“Go get ’em, tiger.”

He grinned. “I’ll see you tonight?”

“Yes, and that reminds me.” She broke their embrace to move to her purse, digging in. “This is for you to use when you want to.”

He stared at the key she’d had made when she stopped off at the hardware store this morning.

She nibbled her lip, knowing that it was a big step. But they were already eight years behind. “If you want it, that is.”

“Yes.” He pulled her to him again. “Yes, Grace.”

She grinned. “I’ll see you tonight.”

He kissed her, waved in the doorway, then walked down the hall.

She stared at the floor for several seconds, acknowledging her fears that he would get a taste of his old life and walk back out of hers again.

“No,” she said out loud. She wasn’t living like that anymore—constantly questioning. Jagger would stay, or he would go. Hopefully, he would stay.

Walking around her desk, sitting down with a job to do, she ejected the memory card from her camera to upload her shots to Instagram, deciding that she would be making Jagger a celebration dinner tonight.

Mentally adjusting her schedule, she slotted enough time to stop at the store for meatloaf and sour cream and chive mashed potato ingredients—Bea’s recipes. One of his all-time favorite meals.

# TWENTY

JAGGER SPOTTED THE OUTLINE OF THE BIG ABANDONED BARN IN THE overgrown field and impatiently gave the Stingray more gas.

Typically, the old landmark was a welcome sight, but tonight it was a reminder that he was still a good ten miles from Preston Valley.

“Damn,” he whispered, resisting the urge to press the pedal to the floor.

When he’d hopped on the five o’clock flight from DC to Scranton, he’d figured he would have time to change his clothes, then head over to the football field for halftime.

The thirty-minute delay on the tarmac by the gate hadn’t been part of the plan. At this point, he’d be lucky to make it to the high school before the game ended.

“Damn,” he said again, clenching his jaw.

He’d busted his ass since the wheels went up on his flight yesterday morning. His DC assignment had started relatively simply. Jason’s client was scheduled for three stops in the capital before the VIP returned to Europe.

Problems had been few and far between as Jagger ran the routes from location to location. When he’d found only minor issues with easy solutions, he’d been optimistic that an earlier-than-expected return home would be possible.

Then he got to the five-star hotel and realized that despite the facility’s numerous top-notch amenities, the construction and renovations on the first three floors created several possibilities for a security breach.

After plenty of back and forth with Jason and the client’s full-time security team, a new hotel was selected and thoroughly inspected. By the time Jagger made it through the city traffic, he’d had to run to his gate before

they closed the doors.

“*Finally*,” he muttered as he breezed past the sign welcoming him to town.

He let his shoulders relax as he approached the school, pulling into the packed parking lot.

Finding a spot toward the back, he jog-walked to the gate, reaching for his wallet to pay admission.

The woman shook her head. “There’s only half a quarter left. Head on in.”

Jagger pulled a twenty from his wallet anyway. “How about a donation, then?”

She smiled. “That’s kind of you. Master Jagger, right?”

“Just Jagger.”

She smiled again. “My niece, Nila, is in your class.”

He grinned as he nodded. “Nila’s a great kid—a hard worker. She has a hell of a hook kick.”

Nila’s aunt beamed. “She’s testing for her blue belt next week.”

Jagger nodded again. “I remember. I have no doubt she’ll do great.”

The smile never left Nila’s aunt’s face. “She sure thinks the world of you and Todd.”

“We’re glad to have her.”

“Head on in.”

“Thanks.” He headed past the gate, searching the sea of spectators supporting the Preston Valley Bulldogs.

He smiled when he finally spotted the gorgeous blonde dressed in snug jeans and a maroon and white jacket—the school’s colors. She’d even pulled her hair back in a coordinated scrunchie.

Making his way down the steps, he watched as she spoke to Brennan and Ben. Her cheeks were rosy in the chilly air, making her eyes all the more captivating.

“Excuse me,” Jagger said, skirting by several students and parents on his way to the empty spot behind the woman he’d been waiting to see since he kissed her goodbye yesterday morning.

“Do you think they can win, Aunt Grace?”

Grace nodded. “Definitely. There’s still plenty of time to tie things up.”

“But we’re down by two *whole* touchdowns.”

“Five minutes is *forever* in football. But they need to know we believe in

them.”

“You can do it!” Brennan yelled.

“Come on, Bulldogs! Let’s get this first down!” Grace chimed in.

Jagger sat down, tapping Grace’s shoulder.

She turned, politely smiling, before her eyes lit up with unmistakable delight. “*Jagger!*”

Gaining her feet, she launched herself into his arms.

He laughed, returning her embrace, breathing in her shampoo as he kept her close. This moment had made every frustrating second of the last four hours worth it.

Easing back just a little, she kissed him. “I thought I wasn’t going to see you until tomorrow.”

He kissed her this time. “We had a date. I wasn’t missing it.”

“Aw.” Her big blue eyes went soft as her mouth found its way back to his. “You’re still in your suit.”

Needing to touch her, he played his fingers through her hair. “The plane was late.”

She rested her forehead against his. “I’m so happy you’re here.”

The crowd erupted around them as the Bulldogs got their first down.

“They did it, Aunt Grace!” Brennan looked at Jagger. “They did it, Master Jagger!”

Jagger roughed up Brennan’s black hair. “That’s good stuff.”

Brennan beamed at Jagger, then at his mom.

“Come sit with me,” Grace invited.

“There’s not a lot of room.”

“There’s plenty.”

“Okay.” Jagger settled on the uncomfortable metal bench, taking Grace’s weight as she sat on his thigh. He nodded to Ben, aware that Grace’s buddy wasn’t his number one fan. “Hey, man.”

Ben nodded back. “Hey.”

“They need to get two touchdowns to tie the game,” Brennan informed Jagger.

“They’re going to go for one right now,” Jagger said, watching the quarterback searching for an open receiver as he took the snap. “Right there on the ten-yard line—number twenty-two.”

As he said it, the quarterback threw to twenty-two, and the crowd went wild again as the kid ran it into the endzone.

Brennan blinked as he stared at Jagger. “How did you *know* that?”

“I read the field.”

Brennan frowned as he looked at the defense running in to take their places. “I don’t know how to do that.”

“So, let’s teach you.”

Grace snuggled against him as they cheered the Bulldogs to a nail-biting victory—as Jagger gave Brennan his first lesson on seeing the open pockets.

Grace sat on one of the comfy barstools at her kitchen island, sipping a cup of tea while Jagger leaned against the counter, eating a big bowl of cereal in the dim light glowing from above the stove. “Are you sure you don’t want something else? Grilled cheese is super easy, or we can make you some eggs.”

Jagger shook his head as he spooned up the last bite. “This is easier. And it hits the spot.”

She shrugged, studying him in his dark-gray slacks and the snug tank undershirt he wore after he’d tossed his tie and white button-down on the couch when they stepped through the front door.

Broad shoulders and tough arms. So much sexiness. And he was all hers. “If you change your mind...”

He shook his head again. “I won’t. Mostly I want to get changed and snuggle up with you—enjoy the rest of our evening.”

“Mm, that sounds good—nice and cozy.”

“That’s what *I’m* saying.” He moved to put his bowl in the sink and fill it with water.

Abandoning her tea, she walked his way. “I still can’t believe you were able to get home for our date.”

He turned. “I’m sorry I missed most of the game.”

She stopped in front of him. “You made it when you could, which is incredibly sweet, Jagger.”

He slid his knuckles along her jaw. “The plan was halftime at the latest.”

“You’re here.” She pressed a gentle kiss to his lips. “That’s all that matters. And you made Brennan’s night.”

“He’s a great kid.”

“Yes, he is.”

“Let me get changed. We can hit the couch and watch some TV—maybe watch most of a movie before we both fall asleep.”

She shook her head, holding his gaze as she traced his left pec through the thin cotton of his top. “I don’t want to watch TV.”

He swallowed as her finger slid down the center of his abs. “What did you have in mind?”

“I was thinking we could take this off.” As she spoke, she tugged his shirt up and off. “Then I could do this.”

She gained her tiptoes, pressing several slow kisses along his jaw. “And this,” she whispered, continuing down his neck to his chest.

He exhaled a long breath as he pulled her shirt from the waist of her jeans. “Let me take it off.”

Obliging him, she raised her arms above her head.

He sent her shirt to the floor.

Before he could free her from her bra, she focused on the bulge in his pants, slowly sliding her fingertip along his long, thick shaft.

He pulled her closer, nipping her bottom lip with his teeth. “You’re teasing.”

She smiled triumphantly as his voice grew rough and his eyes darkened with desire. Moving her palm, she rubbed against him. “I was thinking of it as more of a warming up.”

He clenched his jaw. “Let me warm you up.”

Smiling again, she shook her head. “It’s still my turn.”

Her focus moved to his belt buckle and the snap on his pants. Then his zipper.

“These should go,” she said, getting on her knees, looking up to stare into his eyes as she gave them a tug, making certain his boxers followed.

“What should we do now that I’m naked?”

“You’ll see.” Holding his gaze, she gripped him, sliding up and down. Then she put him in her mouth, moving how she knew he liked.

He groaned as his fingers found their way into her hair. “Gracie. That feels so *good*.”

She kept up her work, cupping him, using a steady rhythm as his breathing changed and his stomach muscles shuddered.

“Grace,” he said through his teeth. “Come here.”

She let him help her to her feet, welcoming his hungry kiss—savoring the

way he devoured her mouth.

Within seconds, her bra hit the floor, and he palmed her, then teased her nipples to perky points with his thumbs and index fingers before he circled her with his tongue.

“Jagger,” she whispered with a moan.

“Your jeans,” he said as he went after the snap and zipper. “Let’s take off your jeans.”

Eager to comply, she sent them down her legs, dropping her panties too.

“Here,” he said, lifting her to the countertop, dropping down to yank her close and give as good as he’d gotten.

She sucked in a breath, letting her head fall back with a moan as his tongue went to work with long laps and his lips with gentle suckles. It wasn’t long until she tensed, feeling the delicious ache as she climbed, waiting to burst. “Keep doing that.”

He complied, keeping a steady rhythm.

“Jagger,” she choked out, curling her toes as she let herself go, throbbing, crying out as pleasure rushed through her body, engulfing her soul.

He kept her high with the plunging of his fingers as he stood. “Look at me.”

As she opened her eyes, he shoved himself deep, groaning as she moaned—as his girth stretched her and hit all of her sweet spots just right.

Clutching at his arms, she trembled with the next orgasm. “Jagger,” she choked out. “Take me to bed.”

He lifted her, gripping her butt cheeks, ravishing her mouth on the way down the hall, stopping to pin her up against the wall. “I can’t get enough of you.”

He plunged in again, holding her gaze as he pumped several times.

Cradling his cheeks as they breathed each other’s ragged breaths, she waited for the next rush of ecstasy. “I’m going to come.”

He thrust harder. Faster.

She gasped, going wild in his arms, squeezing her legs around him as she bowed against the wall with the power and heat.

“Christ, I love watching you.”

Struggling for each breath, she kept his face close. She wanted to watch him—to do to him what he was doing to her. “The bed.”

Moving with her to the bedroom, he crushed her into the mattress.

“I want to be on top.”

“One of my favorites.”

She grinned, rolling with him, sinking herself onto him, whimpering.

“Gracie,” he mumbled, lacing their fingers.

She moved, rocking her hips—slow strokes—to draw out his pleasure. Their pleasure.

His hands tensed against hers as they held each other’s gazes. “Let me touch you.”

She let him go, enjoying his palms rubbing against her sensitive nipples, then his hands gripping her hips. He squeezed now, clutching. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

He pulled her down to him, kissing her as he wrapped his arms around her waist, thrusting up again and again. And then his jaw clenched when he jerked. As he hissed out several breaths while he groaned.

She felt herself grow slipperier—and for the final time, she came, collapsing against him, listening to his heart pounding against his chest.

“Damn, Grace,” he said moments later, wrapping his arms tighter around her.

She smiled, lifting her head to kiss his chin. “Welcome home.”

He grinned. “Thanks.”

She moved in again, her lips lingering on his mouth, forever remembering how she’d yearned for something like this a mere two months ago. “You were barely gone two whole days, but I missed you.”

He slid her hair back from her face. “I missed you, too.”

“I’ve also wanted to rip off your clothes for the last couple of hours. You know how to wear slacks and a tie.”

He laughed. “I’ll have to keep that in mind.”

Her smile returned. “Thank you again for such a wonderful surprise.”

His fingers moved to slide along her jaw. “You’re welcome.”

“We haven’t had much of a chance to talk about your trip. How was it?”

“Fast.” He shrugged. “Pretty good. Or at least until I got to the hotel.”

She frowned. “What was wrong with the hotel?”

“Just about everything. It took me less than five minutes in the lobby to spot half a dozen ways someone could get up to the penthouse if they really wanted to.”

She shook her head, not understanding.

“They’re doing construction at the client’s preferred accommodations.

Trying to convince him that staying somewhere else—just this once—turned into a thing.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Oh.”

He shrugged again. “Mostly, that’s Jason’s problem, but I have a feeling it’s about to turn into mine.”

“How come?”

“Jason called me during my sprint through the airport. There’s a chance I’ll have to go back and rerun routes. The client’s talking about changing his plans to skip an overnight stay altogether.”

“Oh,” she said again.

“If I go, it’ll most likely be this next week. Just one day—two tops. Maybe Friday and Saturday again.”

“Okay.”

“It’s not going to be like this regularly. I promise.”

“You have a job to do. I understand that.”

“Yeah, but if I’m going to do this, I want it to be a once-a-month-type deal. Todd’s counting on me. And I want to be here with you. I know you’ve been taking on even more with Aunt Mags having her setbacks.”

She loved how much he wanted to help, but she only ever wanted to rely on herself when it came to running the business.

Simplicity had been her light in the darkness—a place to rebuild and create something new. When everything had fallen apart, the store had been one of the only places where she’d felt like she had a modicum of control. “Aunt Maggie and I are fine.”

“Once a month with the exceptionally rare occasion of two. That’s what I told Jason. That’s what I’m promising you.”

She nodded. “That sounds nice.”

“I want normal, Grace. With you.”

She smiled. “That sounds good, too.”

He let his hands slide up and down the sides of her waist—one of her favorite things he’d always done. “I had a couple of thoughts about ‘normal’ on the flight home.”

She stroked his skin, always fascinated by Jagger’s brain. “Do tell.”

“Well, I was thinking about how you mentioned possibly taking a couple of days off in November. We should do something.”

Her fingers stilled against his skin. “I was planning to head to Montana.”

He nodded. “I remember.”

Her smile was back. “You want to go with me?”

“Hell yeah, I want to go with you. Let’s make it a real vacation.”

She winced because she wanted nothing more. *Nothing* sounded better than a real vacation with Jagger. “But I have to do some work for the magazine.”

“So do your work, but let me get us a room at one of the resorts—maybe a fancy dude ranch like you were talking about. We can do massages, and you can get a facial or whatever else they do when you’re not taking your pictures. We can order room service and eat naked in bed. We can sit under the stars in a private hot tub.”

She grinned as she made a sound in her throat. “That sounds *amazing*.”

He nodded. “I never got the chance to do anything special for you.”

She frowned as she remembered a sweet eighteenth birthday dinner at her favorite restaurant and a tattoo. Random bouquets of flowers, surprise picnics, and fun notes left around the house. “Yes, you did. All the time.”

He shook his head. “Not the way I wanted to. Not the way you deserved. But I can take you away now. I can give you everything I couldn’t.”

She could see how important this was to him—all the extra stuff she’d never been overly concerned with. “I think we should do it.”

He smiled. “Yeah?”

She nodded. “Eating naked in bed. Sharing a hot tub under the stars. Those sound like the best parts.”

“Then we’ll pick out a place and make it happen—book a reservation.”

She moved to get up. “I’ll grab my laptop—”

In a lightning move, he nudged her arm so she collapsed against his chest. Then he rolled her under him. “But we should do this first.”

She grinned as she felt his erection against her thigh. “I like this idea.”

“Occasionally, I have a good one.”

Her smile vanished as she gasped when he eased himself inside.

He stared into her eyes. “I want to make you come. It’s so damn sexy when you come, Grace.”

Eager to get started, she pulled his mouth down to hers.

## TWENTY-ONE

GRACE STOOD IN THE PROCESSING ROOM, ADDING PRETTY PEACH ROSES TO one of the vases she'd set out, getting a head start on the first few orders that had come in for tomorrow's a.m. deliveries.

The shop had been quiet for hours—once the cold rain and blustery winds had rolled in shortly after lunchtime. After she sent Jen home early, she'd taken advantage of a rare opportunity to cross several to-dos off her endless list.

Paperwork had been scanned for the accountant at Asa's firm, signatures were scrolled on their designated lines, and dozens of supply orders were completed.

With thirty minutes left until closing, this was the last objective for the day—playing with the flowers—which was one of her favorite things.

"I'll have food sent up to my room if you're still up for a FaceTime dinner," Jagger said as he drove his rental car in the DC traffic.

Grace grinned, holding her phone up to her ear with her shoulder as she reached for a white lily. "Definitely. What's on the menu?"

"Probably a burger and fries. I imagine I'll add a salad because I'm good like that. What about you?"

"I'm thinking about a big bowl of chicken barley soup with a thick, buttery slice of sourdough." She glanced up as a gust of wind blew against the building. "It's so *cold* outside."

"It's raw down here too. I wish I could be there with you. Tonight's the perfect night for blankets, popcorn, and a movie."

She picked up a succulent to add to the lilies and roses combination. "Add warm double-chocolate brownies to the menu, and we've got

something.”

He groaned. “Now you’re speaking my language.”

She grinned because she knew what he liked. A lot of things had changed over the years, but not his favorites. “I wish you could be here, too, but I think I like this arrangement better—you being gone on a Thursday night instead of this weekend.”

“Yes.”

“We still have to figure out what we want to do.”

“I have a few ideas.”

Her smile was back as she rolled her eyes. “I bet you do.”

He chuckled. “Getting you naked is definitely on the agenda, but we also need to look at the resort’s spa menu—the woman who took our reservation suggested we get something booked as soon as we can.”

She nibbled her lip with another grin. They were doing it—actually going away on a real vacation together. Flights and accommodations had been booked shortly after they’d both orgasmed last Friday night. “I was scrolling through the website this afternoon.”

“Always so efficient.”

She turned the vase in a slow circle, scrutinizing her work. “Of course. They’re supposed to have excellent estheticians. We can add facials after our massages. The nourishing avocado honey mask sounds *amazing*.”

Jagger made a sound in his throat. “How about you add a facial after your massage?”

“Facials are the *best*. You don’t know what you’re missing.”

“I can live with that.”

She laughed.

He chuckled again. “I’m about ten minutes from my hotel. I need to give Jason a quick call so I can start wrapping this trip up.”

“That’s perfect because these flowers have a date with the fridge.”

“Text me when you’re settled in at home, and we’ll get this dinner thing going.”

“Okay.”

“I love you, Gracie.”

She grinned, certain she would never get tired of hearing him say so. “I love you, too. I’ll talk to you in a bit.”

Hanging up, she set her phone on the counter to bring the vases to the cooler.

Goosebumps puckered her skin as she stepped into the chilly space despite the white cable-knit sweater and jeans she wore.

“This is the *last* place I want to be, but you ladies will be much happier in here. And you look amazing, by the way.”

Chuckling at her own joke, delighted with life in general, she set the arrangements on the shelf, then hurried back out as the store phone started ringing.

Glancing at the clock, she wrinkled her nose. Five minutes till closing was plenty of time to help a potential customer. “Simplicity Florist and Gifts —”

“Grace?”

She frowned when she didn’t recognize the man who clearly recognized her. “Yes. Who’s this, please?”

“Grace, it’s Paul Becker.”

She blinked her surprise. She hadn’t spoken to her dad’s longtime friend and business partner since Logan’s funeral. “Paul—”

“I know it’s been a long time. I’m sorry to contact you like this, but it’s your dad, hon. He’s been in an accident.”

She gripped the phone tighter as her stomach filled with dread. “Is he okay?”

But she already knew he wasn’t, or Paul would never have called.

“He was hit by a car—”

She clutched the cold metal counter as she shook her head. “Hit by a *car*? What— What...”

“He stopped to help at an accident. That’s all I know so far. It happened downtown about half an hour ago.”

She closed her eyes now, fighting to keep her breathing steady—to focus on what Paul was telling her.

“I know things are strained between the two of you, but you should come. He’s in surgery with some internal bleeding. It’s critical, hon—pretty touch and go.”

“Oh, God,” she heard herself say.

“Just as soon as you can get here, Grace.”

She nodded, then made herself answer. “I’ll leave now.”

“We’re at Philadelphia General.”

“Okay. I’ll be there in about three hours.”

“Why don’t you give me your cell phone number so I can keep you

updated.”

“Yes. That’s a good idea.” She rattled off her number.

“I’ll stay in touch.”

“Thank you, Paul.” She hung up, pacing a couple of times to try to catch her breath as her heart beat too quickly. Then she grabbed her phone, dialing Jagger, listening to two rings turn into three.

“You miss me already.”

She pressed her hand to her mouth when she heard his voice. “Jagger.”

“What’s wrong?”

“My dad. It’s my dad. He’s been in an accident.” Her voice broke. “He’s in surgery with internal bleeding. Paul said it’s touch and go.”

“Where is he?”

She raked her fingers through her hair, trying to think. “Um, Philadelphia General.”

“I’ll head for the airport. I’ll grab the first flight I can get to Scranton—”

“No.” She hurried around the store now, abandoning her mess on the table, pulling the money from the drawer in the register to put the stack of cash in the small safe they kept hidden in the floorboards in her office. “I’m going to the house to pack a quick bag, then I’m heading to Philly.”

“That’s a long drive when you’re upset—when the weather sucks.”

“I can’t wait.” She inhaled an unsteady breath. “It doesn’t sound like I should wait. It’s bad, Jagger.” Because Paul hadn’t tried to reassure her otherwise.

“Okay. I’ll catch a flight to Philly, then. It’ll probably be easier to get a flight there anyway.”

“All right.”

“I’ll get something booked and call you back. If I can get something soon, I might beat you there.”

She allowed herself one moment to close her eyes—to let herself be grateful that she wouldn’t have to go through whatever this journey would bring alone. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, Grace. We’re in this together. Let me get a flight.”

“Okay,” she said, hurrying outside into the frigid rain and nasty wind, locking up. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Drive safely.”

“I will.” Hanging up and running to her SUV, she got behind the wheel, took a second to buckle in, then gunned it out of her spot, desperate to get

home to call Aunt Maggie, pack a few things, then get to Philly to be with her dad.

## TWENTY-TWO

GRACE PULLED HER SORENTO INTO THE FIRST PARKING SPOT SHE COULD FIND on the sixth floor of Philadelphia General's parking garage.

She quickly got out, then jogged to the elevators, jabbing at the down button with an impatient finger.

"Hurry up," she said, pushing at the glowing light again, growing more frantic by the second.

Every minute of the last four hours had passed in *centuries*. The rain and downtown Philly gridlock had added an extra forty-five minutes to her trip—a nightmare when time wasn't on her side.

Glancing at the time on her cell phone screen, she paced away, then back, barely able to tolerate the ceaseless waves of helpless energy.

Information had been stingy at best while she endured the endless waiting game. Three texts had come in while she'd been on the road: two from Jagger letting her know when his plane had been set to take off and again when he landed. The other had been from Paul nearly an hour ago, informing her that her dad had lived through his surgery.

The elevator finally dinged, and the big metal doors slowly slid open.

Stepping into the empty car, she hit the button for the lobby floor before she sent Jagger a text. *I'm in the elevator.*

His reply popped up. *The woman at the desk said your dad's been moved to the Critical Care Unit.*

"Critical Care," she whispered, pressing her hand to her jittery stomach. The name alone sounded terrifying, but her dad was hanging in there.

"Keep holding on," she muttered. *"Please."*

The door opened to the noise and general business in the hospital's main

lobby.

Her eyes locked with Jagger's as he stood off to the side, waiting for her in another one of his suit and tie combinations—navy-blue this time. Hurrying out, she rushed into his arms. "Jagger."

He clutched her close. "I'm right here."

She eased back. "Have you heard anything else?"

He shook his head. "I just beat you here. They're not saying much. I had to tell them I was your husband to get what I did."

She nodded. "Let's go up. I need to know what's going on."

Jagger took her hand as they headed for the bay of interior elevators. "ICU's on the seventh floor."

*Finally*, they made it to the Critical Care wing, stepping out to find Paul waiting.

"Grace." Paul stepped forward, hugging her.

She returned his embrace—the tall, health-club-fit man she'd known her entire life. "Paul. How's he doing? How's my dad?"

Paul nodded to Jagger, holding out his hand. "Jagger."

Jagger returned his greeting. "Paul."

"It's still touch and go," Paul said, blowing out a long breath—his typically olive skin pale and drawn. "Doctor Hardy and Doctor Shed, the trauma and neurosurgeon who worked on your dad, were paged into another surgery about thirty minutes ago, but I can tell you what I know."

She nodded. Because the not knowing was almost too much to bear. "Please."

Paul sighed again. "Steve's had significant internal bleeding. They gave him a massive transfusion and removed his spleen to stop the hemorrhaging."

"Oh, God," Grace whispered, gripping Jagger's hand as he offered it.

"His femur and pelvis are fractured along with most of the left and right sides of his rib cage," Paul continued. "There was some head trauma, hon. Your dad's in a coma right now."

Grace shook her head with the next blow. This wasn't happening. Even when Paul had given her no illusion that her father's condition was anything but bad, she'd let herself believe that everything would be okay once he made it out of surgery. "A coma?"

Paul nodded. "His impact with the car was significant. He has some swelling on the brain."

Her legs felt like jelly as the room spun. "Is he— Will he have brain

damage?”

Paul pressed his lips together in a firm line. “It’s early, Grace. Let’s get him through the next forty-eight hours.”

Jagger pulled her against him with his arm around her waist. “Can Grace see him?”

Paul inhaled. “Steve needs his rest, but I’ll see what I can do to make that happen.”

Grace tried to smile. “Thank you, Paul.”

“I’ll be right back.”

Grace shook her head as she met Jagger’s gaze. There were tears—a waterfall of them she needed to cry—but they wouldn’t come. “A coma,” she whispered.

He wrapped her up in a hug. “He’s strong. And stubborn. Those are good things in a situation like this.”

She nodded as she returned his embrace, clinging to him, wanting to believe those qualities were enough. “I need to see him.”

“Paul has pull around here. Your dad isn’t just any patient.”

She nodded again because Jagger spoke the truth. Her father was incredibly well respected in the medical community. Everyone knew who Steve Evans was. Tonight she would use that to her advantage.

She glanced toward the empty waiting area, relieved that Veronica wasn’t sitting in one of the chairs. She’d heard her dad and stepmother divorced two years after Logan’s death.

“Grace?” Paul came back with a nurse by his side. “They’ll let you see him. But just for ten minutes.”

Grace looked at Jagger with the next wave of relief and terror.

“I’ll be right here.”

“Okay.”

“Follow me, sweetie,” the older woman said as they moved past the wooden doors down a quiet hallway. “We’ll get you back to visit with your dad.”

“How’s he doing?”

The nurse sent her a small smile. “He needs a lot of TLC right now. We’re watching him closely.”

She nodded, accepting the nurse’s non-answer as they stopped by a partially closed sliding glass door.

“There are lots of tubes and monitors, which can be disconcerting, but

you can hold his hand and talk to him. That will be good for him.”

Grace nodded as she stepped inside, listening to the quiet beeps and dings of the numerous machines. She fisted her trembling hands as she swallowed, staring at the wires and tubes *everywhere*.

“I’ll come get you in about ten minutes, honey,” the nurse said. “If you need anything, hit the button on the bed and ask for me—Charlotte.”

“Thank you, Charlotte.” She inhaled a deep breath as she took another step forward, studying the pale, battered man wrapped in casts and bandages as one of the machines breathed for him.

“Look at you,” she shuddered, horrified that this was her father.

She moved closer to the bed, pulling over a stool to sit next to him.

“Dad?” Hesitating as she touched his hand, terrified that she would somehow hurt him further, she carefully held his fingers. “I’m here.”

She cleared the tightness in her throat when her words came out as whispers. “It’s been so... This isn’t how we were supposed to see each other again.”

She settled more of his hand in hers. “The last night at the house... I said so many terrible things.”

She shook her head as she looked at his bruised and swollen face. Now wasn’t the time or place. “We’ll talk about that later—when you’re feeling better.”

She jumped when the blood pressure cuff tightened on his arm. Closing her eyes, she took another deep breath. “It’s been so long since I’ve been in the city. I forgot how crazy the traffic can be.”

She shook her head again, sighing when nothing she said felt right. Their relationship had been stiff and strained for such a long time—even before Logan’s death.

Determined to do better, she gently cradled his hand in both of hers, willing him to feel her presence.

“I’ve been working with Aunt Maggie at the shop.”

She wrinkled her nose at her next poor attempt at a one-sided conversation. “I imagine you already know that. But maybe you don’t know that I run the business side of Simplicity. I finished school and got my business degree.”

She glanced toward the city lights through the big window. “We saw your new billboard in Scranton. It looks really good. All of your patients and colleagues will be waiting for you to get back to the clinic. So many people

need you, Dad. You're so good at what you do. No one knows what to do with hips and knees better than you."

She looked out the window again. "I should tell you that Jagger's back. I think I always knew that he would come—like an instinct, I guess."

She stroked her father's knuckles with her thumbs. "I know you never thought he was good enough, but maybe he's always been too good for all of us. He could go anywhere and do anything, but he came home. He wants to be with me."

Her gaze wandered to the machine monitoring her father's heart, ensuring that her words weren't upsetting him, even when she wasn't certain he could hear her.

"He's working with Todd at the dojang and for some super-exclusive security firm. We're building a life together in Preston Valley." She stared at her father again. "I love him, Dad. I always have. When you wake up, when you're strong enough—"

The door slid open behind her.

She turned, surprised to see Jagger standing next to Charlotte.

He sent her a small, sad smile as he walked to stand by her side. "How are you doing?"

She shook her head, still waiting for the tears that wouldn't come. "Look at him."

He nodded, settling his hand on her shoulder. "We should let him rest."

She hesitated before she nodded because she didn't want to leave her dad when he needed her the most. "Okay."

"You can come back and visit in the morning," Charlotte added.

Grace opened her mouth to tell Charlotte she wasn't going far, but she nodded again.

Gaining her feet, she moved to the upper half of the bed, bending closer to her dad's bandaged head. "We have a lot to talk about, so you need to wake up."

Touching her fingers to her lips, she carefully brushed his cheek. "I love you. I'll be right outside if you need me."

Jagger reached out his hand to her.

She grabbed it, holding on tight as she walked out with him, looking over her shoulder, willing her dad to open his eyes before they disappeared from his sight.

Jagger settled his arm around her shoulders. "What do you say we head

down to the cafeteria for something warm to drink? Maybe we'll find something to eat too."

Food was the last thing on her mind. "I want to stop by the bathroom first."

"Okay." He kissed the top of her head as they stopped by the women's room. "I'll wait here."

She nodded, pushing her way into the bathroom, stopping as she passed the large mirror, staring at her face—her chin, just like her father's.

Turning on the sink, she locked eyes with herself in the glass. "He's going to wake up. He's going to be okay."

Terrified that even as she said so, it might not be true, she put her chilly hands under the warm flow of water and allowed herself to tremble as she'd needed to for the last few hours.

Jagger clenched his jaw as he leaned against the wall outside the women's room. He'd only ever felt this helpless once before, which was something he could do without. Everything about this situation *sucked*.

He'd stood by Grace's side while Paul had given them an update on Steve's condition, but he'd still been shocked to see the invincible Steven Evans in such *bad* shape.

Steve had always been larger than life. Now the world-famous doctor would be lucky to make it through the night.

He steamed out a breath as he glanced toward the bathroom door.

Grace was doing all she could to stay strong, but he knew her well enough to understand that she was barely keeping it together.

When she'd turned to look at him in her father's room, her cheeks had lacked any color. Her hands were ice-cold, and her eyes were huge and haunted. He doubted she recognized that she was in shock.

It turned his stomach to imagine she'd looked much the same when she fell apart in Aunt Maggie's driveway eight years ago.

But this time Grace wouldn't go through whatever this would be without him. He would be here for her the way he hadn't been after they lost her brother—the biggest failure of his life. He'd done a lot of things wrong, but never anything more wrong than that.

He stood straight when Paul walked his way, studying the man dressed in khaki slacks and a white button-down that accentuated his grim brandy-colored eyes and the ghostly pallor of his skin. “How’s Steve doing?”

“About the same. Stable but extremely critical.” Paul reached into his pocket, handing Jagger a set of keys. “These are Steve’s. I know he would want you and Grace to stay at his place and be comfortable.”

Jagger pocketed the set, even when he wasn’t sure that Steve would want him in his house. But the complications of the past would have to be sorted out later. The only thing that mattered was what Grace needed now—and that was a quiet place to get some sleep, catch her breath, and have a solid meal.

When Grace got upset, her appetite was the first thing to go. He’d be *damned* if she would lose a shit-ton of weight again. “Thanks.”

Paul looked over his shoulder. “Where’s Grace?”

“In the bathroom.” He waited for Paul to meet his gaze again. “How do you think this will go? What are Steve’s odds?”

Paul sighed as he shook his head. “Trauma isn’t my scope, but he’s sustained a lot of damage.” He glanced around as he took another step closer. “The car *creamed* him—sent him up and over the vehicle’s roof.”

Jagger blinked his surprise. They’d been so worried about Steve’s current condition that the details of how all of this had come about hadn’t been a thought until now. “Do you know what happened?”

“Yeah, mostly.” Paul rubbed at the back of his neck. “Steve was wearing jogging clothes when they brought him in, so it’s easy to surmise he was out for one of his evening runs.”

Jagger nodded because everyone knew Steve had always taken excellent care of his body.

“When I got the call that they’d brought Steve in, I ran over from our place,” Paul continued.

Steve and Paul’s orthopedic center was just blocks from Philadelphia General.

“Eventually, I was able to pull one of the cops aside to find out what the hell was going on. Apparently, someone clipped a college kid who was riding his bike with their car. The kid flew over the handlebars. He wore a helmet, but it rang his bell and messed up his knee. Steve was helping the driver get the kid out of the road. The three of them were nearly to the curb when Steve suddenly shoved the kid and the guy out of the way. Steve got hit seconds later.”

Jagger steamed out a breath as he scrubbed at his jaw. This was going to crush Grace.

“From what I understand, it was an older woman—the person who hit Steve,” Paul said. “She said she didn’t see him until it was too late. It’s dark out there tonight with all the rain.”

“Damn,” Jagger said. “I’ll have to give the police a call and find out who’s working the case.”

“The cop mentioned that they would reach out to Grace, but I wasn’t sure of her contact information at that time. I had to call Steve’s assistant, Jade. It took us a few minutes to find the number for Maggie’s shop. By that point, the cop was gone.” Paul rubbed at the back of his neck again. “I know they were going to look at the cameras in the area for a better idea of what’s what.”

“What are Steve’s chances for a full recovery?”

Paul shook his head. “I’m an anti-aging doctor, Jagger.”

“But you have an idea.”

Paul sighed. “They’ve managed the blood loss, and eventually, his bones will heal. It’s the head trauma that has me worried. We need to get through the next forty-eight hours, but Grace needs to be prepared. The intracranial pressure’s a problem.”

Grace walked out of the bathroom, sending Paul and him a forced smile.

Jagger studied her, noting that her eyes were dry, but her shoulders were rigid, and her cheeks were still pale after her visit with her dad. “Here’s my girl.”

Grace’s lips curved again. “Here I am.”

“We should head to the cafeteria for something to eat.”

Grace shook her head. “If you want to go, I’ll stay here and wait for more news.”

Paul glanced at his watch. “I gave Jagger your dad’s keys.”

Grace frowned. “I can’t leave.” She looked at Jagger. “We can’t leave.”

Paul took her hand. “It’s well after ten, hon. There’s nothing more you can do for now.”

“This is where I need to be.”

Paul shook his head. “The best thing we can all do is get some rest. Doctor Hardy and Doctor Shed are still in surgery. It’s doubtful they’ll be able to talk to you before tomorrow morning. I’ll sit with Steve and call you if anything changes.”

Jagger stepped in. “Let’s get something to eat and catch a nap. We can come back in a couple of hours.”

Grace hesitated. “I told him I would be right outside.”

“We’ve already bent the rules,” Paul added. “They won’t let you see him again until eight a.m. This is going to be a long process, Grace. Your dad needs you rested.”

Jagger nodded when she looked at him. “We should listen to Paul.”

Grace sighed. “Okay. But just for a couple of hours.”

Jagger let his shoulders relax a little. He wanted Grace out of there, so he could fill her in on what he’d just learned about Steve’s accident—the fucking *tragedy* of it all. He didn’t want to mention it, but she would find out sooner rather than later, so he would tell her in his own way. “We’ll see you in a little while.”

## TWENTY-THREE

JAGGER DROVE GRACE'S SORENTO THROUGH THE SOGGY STREETS OF downtown Philly, remembering the route to Steve's place easily enough.

He, Grace, and Logan had made the drive from Wakeview to the posh city condo several times during their high school years.

Tickets to professional sporting events, five-star dinners at fantastic restaurants, and exclusive parties with numerous well-known athletes filled more than a few of their weekends during the off-season.

The visits had become fewer and farther between after graduation—after Logan had stopped talking to his dad entirely and Grace had been stuck in the middle.

Eventually, the trips to Philly stopped altogether when Steve grew more frustrated with his son and started dropping hints that Jagger wasn't good enough for his daughter.

Jagger made it through a yellow light, then stopped for the red up the next block. Glancing Grace's way as the windshield wipers swiped at the rain, he caressed his thumb along her knuckles. "It's just for a little while."

She continued to stare out the window. "We should have stayed. Or I should have stayed, anyway."

He shook his head. "You won't be any good to him exhausted."

She sighed as she met his gaze. "It doesn't matter if I lie down. I won't be able to sleep."

He imagined that might be true, especially after he told her what he'd been holding off saying. But eventually, her body would give her no choice but to rest. He wanted her near an actual bed when she finally gave in.

Pressing on the gas as the light turned green, he slammed on the brake

when a pedestrian walked into the street. “Idiot,” he muttered, tapping the horn.

The man tossed up his hand in a quick wave, then kept jogging across to the curb.

Shaking his head, Jagger started moving again.

“He didn’t have the right of way.”

Jagger glanced at Grace again. “No, he definitely didn’t.”

“It’s ironic that my dad’s the one lying in a hospital bed because he would never have done anything stupid like that.”

Jagger exhaled a quiet breath as he gripped her hand tighter.

“I’m realizing I don’t even know where it happened.”

“On Chestnut Street.”

Grace looked at him.

“Paul filled me in,” he explained.

“There was an accident. He got hit by a car. That’s all Paul said. I didn’t think to ask about the rest.”

He nodded, even when this wasn’t how or where he wanted to tell her. But she needed the answers. She deserved them. “A college kid got clipped on his bike and flipped over the handlebars. Your dad and the driver were getting him out of the road. Your dad shoved them out of the way when the car came.”

He imagined the accident would make the news with all its gory details. It probably already had. He wanted to protect her from the truth, but there was no way to do so, so he gave it to her as gently as he could. “The driver hit him hard, Grace. He flew up over the car.”

She stared at him as her fingers went lax against his.

“It was an older woman who didn’t see him on the road. I don’t know if there have been any further developments. I’ll contact the police once we get settled.”

She swallowed as she looked out the windshield again.

“I’m sorry, Gracie. I’m sorry that any of this is happening at all.”

She said nothing as she let him go to clutch her hands together in her lap and close her eyes.

*Damn it.* Flipping on the blinker, he turned right for the parking garage beneath Steve’s building, using the fob on the keychain to open the gate.

Driving through, he pulled into one of Steve’s reserved spots next to Steve’s prized Jaguar on the second deck, then shut off the ignition. “Grace.”

“He was helping someone. He was doing the right thing. How does something like this happen when you’re doing the right thing?”

“I don’t know.” He released his seat belt, then hers, doing his best to pull her against him with the console between them, feeling her body trembling as she held herself rigid.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated because there was no way to make any of this better.

Her arms came around him. “I’m asleep, right? This is just a nightmare?”

He kissed her temple. “I wish it was.”

She eased back. “He’s going to be okay.”

He hoped to hell so, but Paul’s concerns weren’t far from his mind. “Let’s head upstairs and settle in for a little while.”

She nodded. “All right.”

Grace stood in the hallway on the twentieth floor of her father’s building, gripping her arms around herself, unable to warm up as Jagger unlocked the door.

“Here we go,” he said, opening the door wider for her to step in before him.

She hesitated, then went inside, breathing in the subtle hints of her dad’s cologne as she glanced toward the city views while rain trailed down the massive windows.

Jagger set down their bags and put the keys on the entryway table. “It looks like he redecorated.”

Long ago, the space had favored her stepmother’s tastes. Now the simple décor and easy class reflected her dad’s preferences. “I guess so.”

The familiarity of the space brought a confusing mix of comfort and sadness. Once upon a time, her brother had stood in this room. Once upon a time, there had been good times and laughter—or at least when Veronica had been out of town.

Things had been easier between her brother and father when professional sports and excellent food had been part of the equation.

Pieces of the past had happened here—happy moments that were long gone.

Jagger moved to the kitchen in the open concept downstairs, looking through the cupboards and fridge. “There’s not much in here. Fruits and vegetables for your dad’s juicing and a package of old-fashioned oats.”

She didn’t mind at all. The idea of eating anything made her nauseous. “I’m not hungry, but we can order something for you.”

“I’m all set for now.”

She absently nodded, wandering toward the small library—her favorite room in the luxurious home.

Stepping in, she hit the light switch, studying the large rugs on pretty hardwood, strategically placed plush couches, and the familiar abstract art on the walls—dramatic splashes of dark-blue paint. “Better,” she murmured.

Jagger stepped up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist like he so often did. “How are you doing?”

“I don’t know.” She turned her head to look up at him. “All of this feels surreal.”

He sighed, kissing her temple. “It’s a little weird being here.”

“The view’s so pretty—so much the same. And that gorgeous deck. How many times did we sit out there, Jagger? How many times did we sneak out there after we knew everyone else had gone to bed?”

“Too many to count.”

She looked toward the fireplace and frowned when dozens of photographs caught her eye. “What’s this?”

Easing away from him, she moved to the sleek mantle, studying the pictures.

A smile ghosted her mouth as her gaze wandered over baby and toddler versions of herself and her big brother.

The blond boy and girl with big blue eyes grew older the farther she walked to the right: grade school, middle school, the shot of her beaming as she held up the first real camera she had been gifted on her eleventh birthday.

Her smile dimmed as she looked at Logan, grinning in his navy-blue and white Sheraton Prep football gear. Then there was a picture of herself and her brother at Syracuse—when things had been good before the relapse.

She stopped moving, swallowing—*shocked*—as she stared at the eight-by-ten image of her family of four on their last family vacation to Europe— one of the final happy shots before the drunk driver killed her mother.

“How is this happening,” she whispered, tracing her brother’s handsome fourteen-year-old face.

“We were so happy—a perfect family. The successful doctor and his beautiful wife and kids. He was always so busy with his job, and Mom was always busy with us or driving up to Preston Valley to help Aunt Maggie. But they made it work. They were so *solid*.” Her finger moved to her mother’s stunning face. “Then she died, and everything fell apart.”

Jagger sighed as he settled his hands on her shoulders. “I’m sorry, Grace.”

She traced her father next—fifteen years younger. Healthy, well built, and movie-star handsome. “He looked so broken tonight—so fragile and vulnerable.”

Jagger wrapped her up again. “He’s holding his own.”

She looked at the Evanses again—the grinning, carefree bunch. “I’m so glad we had this moment—that we had no idea it was all about to unravel.”

“It’s a good picture—one of the ones you kept in your room.”

She nodded. “I guess he took it with him after I left.” Her eyes wandered to her dad again. “If he doesn’t make it, I’ll have lost them all—my entire family.”

Jagger turned her to face him. “Let’s take this one day at a time—one minute at a time if we have to.”

She nodded because there was nothing else they could do.

He rested his forehead against hers. “And you’ll never be without family, Grace. You have Aunt Mags, Asa, Christy, Gabby, Mike, and Brennan. Ben. You have me, Gracie. I’m right here. *Always*.”

She nodded again, wanting to feel something other than...*nothing*. “Everything’s so foggy. Everything feels so far away.”

“You’re in shock, Grace. I don’t know how you couldn’t be. This is a lot.”

She sighed. “Weren’t we just talking on the phone about our weekend?”

He nodded. “Not too long ago, we were.”

“It changes so quickly—when the bad stuff happens. One second, things are one way, then they’re never the same again.”

He stroked his fingers along her skin. “You’ve certainly had your fair share of the bad stuff. But we’re going to make it through this together.”

Despite all that was wrong, there was comfort in believing that. “I love you.”

He kissed her. “I love you, too.”

She glanced around the room again. “I don’t think I can stay here, Jagger.

I can't be in this place. There's too much here."

"Okay." He kissed her again. "We'll get a hotel room."

She exhaled another weary breath. "I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "Don't be."

Yet she was anyway. It was nearly midnight after an exceptionally long day. "Thank you, Jagger. For everything."

He shook his head again. "I don't want your thanks either. Just let me be here for you."

She closed her eyes. "I don't know how I'd get through this without you."

"Let's get a room. We need to get some sleep before we go back to the hospital."

She nodded, holding his hand as they walked through her father's home, grabbing their things and breathing in his cologne once more before they shut the door again.

## TWENTY-FOUR

“THERE’S NO CHANGE, MS. EVANS.”

“Thank you.” Grace hung up as she stood by the window in their hotel room, clutching her phone as she stared at her dad’s building five or six blocks in the distance—his living space lit up as if he were home instead of fighting for his life in the hospital across the river.

“What’s the word?” Jagger asked as he opened the lid on the to-go container of soup du jour he’d bought at the hotel restaurant as the place was closing up.

“There is no word. Nothing’s changed.”

He walked to where she stood, taking her phone, shoving it in his back pocket, then captured her hands in his. “‘No change’ isn’t them telling you he’s worse. He’s been through a lot, Grace. It’s going to take time. Probably a lot of time.”

She nodded, knowing that everything Jagger said was true. “He’s resting—sleeping to heal. I understand that. But seeing him like that... What if I don’t get a chance to fix things? What if the last things I said to him were all I get to say? They were awful, Jagger. *Awful.*”

“Nothing about that time was easy.”

This was also true, but it didn’t seem to matter. “I told him he was selfish.”

“He *was* selfish.”

She felt her brow furrow as she held his gaze.

“All of this is complicated, Grace. What’s happening right now doesn’t erase the past.”

She closed her eyes as she shook her head because Jagger’s logic didn’t

make her any less ashamed. “I told him Logan died because of him—that it was his fault Logan turned to the pills. To some degree, I think that’s true, but I never should have said it.”

Jagger sighed as he stared at her with compassion-filled eyes. “It’s complicated,” he repeated.

Her eyes filled as trickles of grief broke through the fog. “Those can’t be the last words.”

He wiped away the tear trailing down her cheek, cradling her face. “I’m sure they won’t be.”

She settled her hands around his forearms, clinging to his strength. “But we don’t know.”

He shook his head. “We don’t.”

“I hate this feeling,” she shuddered out. “Powerlessness. There’s nothing I can do to make this better.”

“You can take care of yourself.” He kissed her forehead. “Have something to eat.”

She wrinkled her nose at the idea, finding her stomach no less jittery as the hours passed.

“A couple bites of the soup.”

She shook her head. “I’m not hungry, Jagger.”

“All right. Let’s at least warm you up. Your hands are *freezing*. How about a shower?”

The idea of feeling warm again and being clean was slightly more appealing. “Okay.”

He pulled her phone from his pocket. “I’ll keep this here with me so you can try to relax for a few minutes.”

She nodded, even when they both knew relaxing wasn’t in the cards.

Walking to the bathroom, she kept the door ajar to listen for the phone as she stared at the massive glass shower stall for several seconds, unable to make herself move. Undressing, opening the door, turning on the faucet—they all felt like too much work.

“Gracie?”

“Hmm?”

Jagger peeked his head in. “Are you okay in here?”

She nodded again.

He opened the door wider. “Are you still planning to shower?”

“Yes.”

He sighed as he stepped into the glass partition, turning on the water. Then he pulled her sweater up and off, making her already-chilly body shiver before he made quick work of ridding her of her bra, jeans, and panties. “Warm up, Grace.”

She stepped under the spray, closing her eyes as the blessed warmth rained over her shoulders.

Seconds later, Jagger joined her. “Come here,” he murmured, pulling her against him.

She wrapped her arms around him, settling her head on his chest as the water continued its cascade.

“It’s okay,” he said next to her ear.

She shook her head. “It’s not.”

“Everything’s as okay as it can be at this moment. And that’s all we’ve got.”

She stared at the steam fogging up the glass. “I’m greedy. I want more than that.”

He opened the box of soap, rubbing the small bar along her back and shoulders. “He’s in great hands. He’s receiving the best care possible. We’re going to do all that we can to help him recover.”

She breathed in lavender as suds ran down her legs to the drain.

Jagger’s slippery palms moved to her hips and the sides of her waist. “When he sees that I’m back, he’ll be extra motivated to get better so he can chase my ass away from you.”

Her lips curved in a small smile. Only Jagger could make her smile at a time like this. “Or maybe he’ll finally realize he’s been wrong.”

“That’s *never* going to happen—or at least he’ll never admit it.”

She smiled again, looking at him now. “He has to know you’re good for me.”

“Probably not.” He kissed her nose as he moved to slide the bar over her breasts and stomach. “But he’ll learn to live with the fact that I’m not going anywhere this time.”

She stroked his cheek. “He’ll have to.”

Jagger reached for her hands, placing them against his chest, where his heart beat. “You’re warmer.”

She nodded. “Much. And cleaner too. Do you want me to wash your back?”

He shook his head as he began to wash himself. “I want you to let me

take care of you tonight.”

“You are taking care of me, which I appreciate. I know you don’t want me to thank you—”

“You’re right.” He kissed her nose again. “I don’t.”

She nodded, hoping he could sense her gratitude regardless. “We can get out if you want.”

He winced. “We could, but your face is a mess—mascara trails.”

She huffed out a quiet laugh. “I have makeup wipes in my bag that will do a much better job than that soap.”

“That’s a good thing.” He wiped at her cheeks with wet fingers. “You’re rocking the goth look pretty hard, but you’re still the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

She grinned, hugging him, certain she couldn’t love him more. “See? You’re good for me.”

He squeezed her back. “Damn straight.”

She kissed him. “Are you ready?”

“Sure.” He shut off the water as she grabbed the two plush towels off the heated bar.

“Here you go,” she said, handing him one.

He stepped out next to her. “Thanks.”

She wrapped herself in another layer of coziness. “This feels nice.”

“What about this robe?” He pulled the white Egyptian cotton off the hook on the door, enveloping her in softness, then snagged its mate for himself. “Nice.”

She hummed her approval as she tightened the tie around her waist. “Very.”

He opened the door. “Shall we?”

“Definitely.” She followed him into the main suite, grabbing a makeup wipe from her bag, then quickly removed the mess before she moisturized. Snagging her toothbrush and toothpaste, she headed toward the bathroom.

“Hold up,” Jagger said, stopping beside her with his big to-go carton.

She shook her head at the spoonful of soup he held up to her mouth. “I’m not hungry.”

“A couple of bites, Grace. It’s clam chowder, but it settles well.”

Seeing the worry in his eyes, she opened up, finding the creamy broth surprisingly soothing. “It’s good.”

“Award-winning,” he said, helping himself to another bite, then giving

her several more, trading bites until the carton's contents disappeared.

She pressed her hand to her stomach. "I think I might explode."

He tossed the items into the designated recycling bin. "Good. You can sleep off your full stomach."

Mostly, she wanted to return to the hospital, but Jagger needed a nap. "I'm going to brush my teeth first."

"I'll grab my toothbrush and join you."

They made quick work of brushing and heading for the bed.

Grace pulled back the covers. "I don't think I'll be able to sleep."

Jagger got in on his usual side, turning on the TV. "So, we'll just lie here for a little while."

She settled next to him, pulling the blankets over them.

He wrapped her up, cocooning her against him. "Let's make sure we keep you warm."

She rested her cheek against the smooth skin of his chest, breathing in lavender and Jagger. "Just for a couple of hours."

"Just for a couple of hours," he agreed, flipping through the channels, stopping on the weather forecast.

She stared at the screen as Jagger's hand slowly stroked along her back. Lying like this was everything comforting. Her life was falling apart again, yet her eyes grew heavy anyway.

"I love you, Gracie," he whispered.

She wanted to tell him she loved him too. That was her plan. But exhaustion snuck up to claim her before she could say a word.

Three and a half hours later, the phone rang on Jagger's nightstand, startling him out of a deep sleep.

Squinting in the bright light from the lamp he never got around to turning off, he reached over with his free arm, groping around until his hand made contact with the vibrating plastic, snatching up Grace's phone by the end of the second ring. "Yeah. Hello?"

"Jagger?"

He sat up, bringing Grace with him as the regret in Paul's voice registered through his sleepy fog. "What's going on?"

“It’s Steve,” Paul said, clearing away the emotion choking off his words. “He went into cardiac arrest. They worked on him for as long as they could, but he passed about five minutes ago.”

*Shit.* He stared at Grace as she sat farther up, blinking sleepy blue eyes at him, absently pulling the robe up her arm to settle the cotton back on her shoulder.

“Okay,” he said, reaching for her hand when she went still—when he knew the exact moment she understood what was happening.

“His body went through a lot,” Paul continued. “I think he fought for as long as he could.” Then Paul lost what was left of his composure. “Tell Grace I’m so sorry.”

“I will.” He hung up as Grace shook her head.

“Don’t tell me,” she whispered as the tears started falling. “Please don’t tell me.”

“Gracie—”

She pulled her hand free from his to cover her mouth as the first sob escaped.

“Gracie,” he said again, his heart breaking for her as he scooted closer, pulling her against him. “I’m so sorry, baby.”

She gripped herself against him as her body shook with each racking sob—as she cried so hard, she barely made a sound.

“Come here.” Picking her up and settling her on his lap, he rested his back against the headboard, holding her tight, desperate to take away her pain. “I’m right here,” he murmured against her hair. “I’m right here, Grace.”

She nestled her face into the crook of his neck, exhaling a shaky breath that turned into a moan as she gave in to another round of sorrow.

“Gracie,” he whispered, clenching his jaw. He’d held her while she’d cried before, but this was entirely different. Everything she’d bottled up over the last few hours—maybe even the last fifteen years—poured out in wave after wave of tears.

This was a grief with so many layers: loss after loss, conflicts and disillusionments, betrayals and regrets—an endless well of unresolved pain starting with her mother’s death. “Just keep holding on to me.”

She did, clinging with her arm hooked around him until she eventually stopped crying—until she stared listlessly at the wall with her head settled on his shoulder.

“We should have stayed at the hospital,” she finally said.

He shook his head as he kissed her forehead. “It wouldn’t have changed anything.”

“He would have known I was there.”

He stroked his fingers through her still slightly damp hair from their shower. “He knew you held his hand. He knew you were there to check on him.”

“I didn’t get to say goodbye.” Her voice broke. “I didn’t get to fix everything.”

“He was tired, Grace. His heart got too tired.”

She sniffled. “He’s really gone.”

He nodded, wanting to help her start accepting the truth. “He’s really gone.”

“I love him, Jagger.”

“He knows that, Grace.” He kissed her again. “He knows.”

“They’re all gone.”

He’d never known how to soothe that emptiness—her quiet longing for the life and family she’d had before an intoxicated bar patron got behind the wheel late one April night. “But I’m right here. We’re a family, Grace. I know it’s not the same...”

She looked up at him with *shattered* blue eyes that destroyed him. “It’s not the same, but it’s nice. It’s just what I need.” Her chin quivered. “I’m so glad you’re here, Jagger.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” He kissed her. “We’ll call Aunt Mags and Asa when you’re feeling up to it. More family.”

She blinked back tears. “I can’t— Everything feels so— I don’t know what to do.”

He’d never seen her so vulnerable. He’d never wanted to protect her more. “You stay right here in my arms, and we’ll figure out the rest together. Later.”

She settled back against him. “How did you know, Jagger—that I needed you to come home?”

He twirled a lock of her soft hair around his finger, finding himself unable to explain how he’d known even before he’d accepted his assignment in The Democratic Republic of the Congo that it would be his last—that he’d felt it in his bones that his next flight would be back to the United States and to Grace.

Somehow, her soul had called to his, and he’d been incapable of fighting

it any longer. “I told myself I was ready to be stateside again. Eight years gone was long enough. But mostly, I couldn’t be without you for another second.”

He kissed the top of her head. “I hope this works for you—us—because I’m never letting you go.”

She sighed as she rested her hand against his heart. “It works just fine.”

He held her for a long time, staring out the window, watching the sunrise, listening to her breathing steady out as she finally slept again.

Phone calls needed to be made. Aunt Mags and Christy would want to know as soon as possible. But he also wanted to talk to the police—to know everything they knew before the media storm.

Steve was gone now, but Grace still had a long life to live. She needed all the answers to heal and slowly move on.

## TWENTY-FIVE

THE WIND BLEW CHILLY IN THE OVERCAST SKY WHILE GRACE HELD JAGGER'S hand by her father's burial site. The priest spoke of everlasting life as Grace stared at the casket not far from where her mother and brother lay.

Soon her entire family would rest here—the people who had been her whole world as a thriving, happy girl. Now they were gone, and she would be forced to pick up the pieces all over again.

She leaned closer to Jagger—into his steady strength—even as well over two hundred people surrounded them in the solidarity of mourning.

The last five days had passed in a blur of condolences and media coverage—as the sports world and Doctor Steven Evans' famous patients and colleagues reeled from the shocking news of his tragic but heroic death.

The police had finished their investigation, not ticketing the driver who had clipped the bike rider or Betty Myers, the sixty-three-year-old grandmother of four who had accidentally taken her father's life.

The DA had decided against any charges when it was determined that Betty hadn't been speeding. Drugs and alcohol hadn't been factors either. Everything about that night had been brought about by a series of misfortunes and a cruel twist of fate.

Grace came to attention as the priest spoke his final words.

“Ready?” Jagger asked her, dressed in a black suit and tie and a long gray coat.

She nodded, walking with him to the casket in her simple black dress and peacoat, settling a white rose on top as Jagger did.

Stepping away from his gentle hold, she blinked back tears as she kissed the cold wood where her father lay. “Goodbye, Dad. I love you.”

She closed her eyes, letting her cheek rest against the smooth surface as she struggled with another wave of regret. There was so much more she wanted to say—so much more she needed to—but it was too late. It still hurt her heart to know there would never be a chance to apologize. There would never be an opportunity to start fresh.

“Gracie.” Jagger’s hand slid up and down her back before he reached out to her.

She grabbed hold, preparing herself for the onslaught of people wanting to share a final word with her.

She caught Aunt Maggie’s eye, nodding as she and Asa walked toward their car with Bea and her son close by. Christy, Mike, and Ben sent her a quick wave as they followed.

Thankful they understood that all of this had been too much, she tried to smile as Doctor Brianna Kimball walked her way with her NFL running back brother hobbling close by on his crutches.

“Grace.” Brianna stopped in front of her, hugging her. “I’m so sorry. Steve was such a good, *good* man.”

Grace returned Brianna’s embrace. Brianna had always been stunning with her shiny dark-brown hair, bold green eyes, and quick smiles. Today her flawless skin was damp with tears. “Thank you.”

Brianna eased away. “If there’s anything I can do or you *ever* need, please don’t hesitate to call. Steve was family.”

“I will.”

Brian stepped up next—the older, taller, masculine version of his sister, reaching out his hand to Jagger. “Jagger. It’s been a while. Steve said you were overseas.”

Jagger nodded, returning his handshake. “Brian.”

Brian gave his attention to Grace. “I’m sorry this is how we’re seeing each other again.”

How many times had she heard those exact words over the last couple of days? “I’m sorry, too.”

“Your dad was the best. *When* I take the field again—because I will—it’ll be because of Steve. I’m dedicating next season to him.”

Grace nodded, finding it easier to smile with the kind gesture. She’d met Brian and his sister a few times several years before when her dad had treated Brian’s first serious knee injury. “He’d love it.”

“I hope to see you at one of the games—you and Jagger. Don’t hesitate to

reach out if you want tickets.”

“I’ll be sure to give you a call. Thank you.”

Another man—in his early twenties and with a bruise on his chin—stopped before Grace, balancing on a pair of crutches and a brace on his knee with an older woman by his side.

Grace smiled, recognizing him from the few snippets of the news she hadn’t been able to avoid. “Hello.”

“Um, hey.” The guy cleared his throat as he adjusted his stance. “Uh, I’m Simon Walker. Dr. Evans, your dad, helped me. I’m the one who got hit on my bike.”

Grace nodded, not entirely sure what to say. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

Simon nodded this time. “I’ll never be able to thank him for what he did. I’m sorry everything turned out the way it did.”

The woman next to Simon stepped forward, touching Grace’s shoulder. “I’m Simon’s mom, Mary. We’re so grateful to Dr. Evans. We hope you find comfort in knowing that your father was a hero—that his selflessness saved my son.”

Grace nodded again as her eyes filled. “I do.”

“I know he gave up his life for me,” Simon spoke again as his voice cracked. “I’m going to work hard to make him proud—to make what he did worth it.”

“I’m sure you will.” Grace hugged him. “Thank you for coming today.”

Mary hugged Grace next. “God bless you and your family, Ms. Evans.”

Grace smiled as she stepped back. “Thank you.”

Simon and his mother walked away.

Grace looked at Jagger, struggling to keep it together.

“Do you want to go?”

She nodded. “But we can’t.”

“Yes, we can. People will understand. It’s whatever you need, Gracie.”

He’d said the same sentiments more times than she could count, being her constant support over the last few days.

She came to attention, feeling her shoulders stiffen as she made eye contact with Colonel Hinders. He was still big and broad but looked older, with wrinkles around his dark-green eyes. His once-black hair was entirely gray, along with his trademark mustache.

“Colonel Hinders,” Jagger said, shaking the man’s hand.

“Jagger. How’s retirement working out for you?”

Jagger nodded. "It's good to be home here with Grace."

Colonel Hinders gave his attention to Grace. "I'm sorry for your loss. Sue extends her sympathies. She wanted to be here today, but a little touch of the flu is keeping her away."

Grace nodded. "Thank you."

"I talked to Steve the day before his accident. I wish I had known it was for the last time... A damn good friend he was. I'm going to miss him."

Grace nodded again because she had no idea what to say to the man she'd loathed since Logan's passing. The colonel was one of her dad's oldest and closest friends. But he'd also jumped at the opportunity to whisk Jagger away all those years ago.

"I hope you'll give Sue my best," she said, then stepped away to give her attention to Paul and his family as they walked over to share their deepest sympathies.

Luckily, most everyone else had headed home.

## TWENTY-SIX

GRACE KEPT PACE WITH THE SATURDAY AFTERNOON TRAFFIC ON ROUTE 22 West as she drove closer to Wakeview—a journey she'd been certain she would never take again.

When she'd sped away from the mansion eight long years ago, she had no plans to ever return. But then she'd been blindsided when her father's attorney listed off the assets Doctor Steven Evans had left for his daughter in a trust.

"Good ol' exit 3-A," Jagger said in the passenger seat, his hands locked behind the headrest as she moved over a lane to take the off-ramp. "We've been down this road a few times."

"Today makes it one too many," she said as she picked up her speed again after taking a right, bringing them closer to a place she didn't want to be.

"We can turn around—go home."

She took her eyes off the road long enough to meet his gaze. "We're less than ten minutes away."

He shrugged. "We can do this today or never. The place is yours, Grace."

And she *hated* it. It had been a week and two days since Paul had called in the middle of the night with the news of her dad's passing. Shortly after the funeral, she'd heard from her father's attorney. *Nothing* had felt the same since.

She'd grown up with abundance and privilege. Her parents—mostly her mother—had raised her and her brother to respect their numerous advantages. Yet she'd been shocked by the degree of her father's wealth.

There were bank accounts, stocks and bonds, real estate investments, her

dad's shares of the orthopedic center, and the two new ventures he'd been financing with a group of doctors—a charitable hospital in the Central African Republic and another in Honduras.

Long ago, she'd been forced to create something new for herself. When she'd told her father to go to hell, her lifestyle had changed.

Independence and simplicity had served her well—had made her happy. Now she had millions, and everything was different again.

In her attempt to find some semblance of normalcy, she'd spent the last three days buried in her work at the shop, playing catch-up, avoiding the worst parts of her life until Jagger wandered over from the dojang with their dinner and a nightly reminder that she needed to eat. "I don't understand why he kept it."

Jagger shrugged. "It's the last place where you and Logan both lived. Maybe he couldn't let that go."

She sighed as she stopped at the red light, flipping on her blinker to take a left at the Sheraton Heights entrance.

"Hey," Jagger said as he sat up, nudging her chin until she looked at him. "You can flip a U-ey right here. Preston Valley's three hours away."

She swallowed because the idea was so tempting. "I want to get this over with." She still wasn't sure why she'd needed to come, but here they were.

"Whenever you're ready to go, just say the word, and we're gone."

She nodded, sending him a small smile as she touched his cheek. He'd been everything she'd needed over the last several days—sweet, patient, and supportive. "I'm sorry I've been grumpy this afternoon."

"You're entitled to a couple of bad days. Things have pretty much sucked for the last week."

How was this gorgeous, wonderful man hers? "Thank you for coming with me."

He snagged her hand, pressing a quick kiss to her knuckles. "We're in this together, remember?"

She nodded again, accelerating when the light turned green, taking them into the exclusive development they'd once called home.

Jagger whistled quietly through his teeth as they passed several massive houses nestled on manicured lawns. "Everything looks pretty similar except for the trees. They're so much taller."

"Mm-hmm," she responded, gripping the steering wheel tighter the closer they came to 1022 Sheraton Way.

Then she slowed, growing sick as she navigated the sharp curve in the road, flashing back to the desperate, hopeless moments when she'd nearly let her Audi fly over the hill.

"Sheraton Way," Jagger said when she turned down the next street—their street.

Moments later, she pulled into the driveway, parking where she always had in the big circular space.

Killing the engine, she stared at the rambling stone and glass house as Jagger did, then got out before she could change her mind.

"Grace," Jagger called as he shut his door.

Ignoring him, hurrying up the walkway, she got the key ready, shoving it into the lock.

"Gracie, wait." Jagger stopped her with a tug on her arm before she could open the door. "You're shaking."

Her heart was also thundering in her chest. "What are we doing? What am *I* doing? Why are we here?"

He shook his head as he shrugged. "My guess is you're searching for some peace."

"There's nothing peaceful about this place."

"There was a lot of good that happened here, Grace."

She knew that Jagger was right, but all she could remember were the worst moments of her past: the police knocking on the door to tell her she'd lost her brother, lashing out at her father—slapping him and spewing her hateful words as her life fell apart. "There was also a lot of bad. Let's just go inside."

He nodded, pushing open the door so she could step in first.

Immediately she stopped, blinking her shock as she glanced around the entryway, realizing everything looked exactly the same.

Her eyes stopped on the large mirror across the room—hers and Jagger's images reflecting back at them. They were eight years older. Everything had changed. But not here.

"Damn, this is weird."

"Yes," she said, heading for the grand staircase—the same route she'd taken her last night in the house.

She stopped in her bedroom doorway, surprised again that her space was exactly as it had been before the doorbell rang and nothing had ever been the same.

Some of hers and Jagger's neatly folded clothes sat on top of the dresser; boxes packed and labeled for Syracuse were tucked in the corner; her pictures and art still decorated the walls.

"It's frozen in time," Jagger said as he stepped up behind her.

She glanced toward the spot where an eight-by-ten picture frame had once been—the one now in her dad's condo on the fireplace. "I'd grabbed my stuff while he stood right here. I went to your room next, then I left. I slapped him across the face and told him he was dead to me."

"That was one awful night, Grace. This house is more than that."

"But that's all I can remember."

He took her hand, tugging her into her room, stopping by her pretty white desk. "We studied here. You made me believe I could be something while we sat in these chairs. I started falling in love with you right here, Grace."

She blinked back tears as she thought of a cocky teenage boy grinning his sexy grins while he constantly tipped back in his seat.

"And that bed. How many nights did we lie there, talking and dreaming about our future?"

"Too many to count."

"That's right. And what about the night you let me touch you? I gave you your first orgasm right there on that mattress."

He'd been patient for weeks, always taking things slow after their first kiss by her car. Then he'd opened up a whole new world to her when he'd slipped his hand into her panties—when he'd shown her what the gentle rub of his fingers could do to her sensitive skin. "That one's hard to forget."

"Damn straight. I can still hear those sexy little whimpers. I'm getting hard just thinking about it."

She couldn't help but grin as he did.

"There's *more*, Grace."

He moved them so they could look out the window to stare at the empty pool. "We swam there with our friends. Logan would cannonball right in front of your chair every chance he could get—pissed you off big-time."

She closed her eyes as she huffed out a quiet laugh. "He could be such a jerk."

He grinned again as he turned her to face him, hooking his fingers in the belt loops of her jeans, tugging her closer. "What about midnight ice cream sundaes and that time I put dish soap in the dishwasher?"

She full-out laughed when she remembered them frantically trying to

clean up the mountains of soapsuds on the slippery kitchen floor.

“God, I love that sound.” Chuckling, he settled his forehead against hers. “There was so much good here, Grace. Please don’t forget the good stuff.”

She nodded. “Thank you for helping me remember.”

He let his hands slide up and down the sides of her waist. “This was my first real home. I found you here. I’ll never forget the first day you walked in and introduced yourself. You were sun-kissed and gorgeous in your tank top and ripped jean shorts. Christ, Grace, you took my breath away.”

How did he always know just what to say? “That moment was mutual. Your hair was shaggier, and you were wearing your white muscle shirt with black athletic shorts. That was the first time I’d ever met a guy who made me think about something other than my camera.”

He grinned. “I’ve been hooked ever since.”

She smiled. “That’s another thing we have in common.”

Chuckling, he wrapped her up in a hug, kissing her. “I love seeing that smile on your face.”

“It feels good to smile again.” She kissed him back, locking her arms behind his neck. “Maybe this is why we came today. As soon as the lawyer told us that Dad still owned the property, I knew I had to come back.”

“One last time.”

She shrugged. “Will you be sad if this is the last time we come here? If we say goodbye and sell it?”

“I want you to do whatever feels right for you.”

She shook her head. “This place is as much yours as it is mine.”

He puffed out a breath as he looked around the room. “I don’t think it does us any good to hold on to it. I think I understand why your dad did, though.”

She nodded with a pang of sadness. “I love the memories we’ve made, but I want to move forward.”

He kissed her again. “I love that idea.”

“Should we take a last look around—grab anything extra special?”

He nodded. “Although, I’m not sure how we’ll fit your bed in the Sorento.”

Her brow furrowed as she sent him a puzzled smile. “What?”

“A lot of magic happened on that thing.”

She laughed. “If that’s your barometer for what’s coming with us, we’re going to have a problem. Magic happened all over this house, Jagger.”

He laughed this time. “My bed, the showers, couches, countertops, the pool, nearly every rug in this joint.”

Her smile was back. “And that’s the abbreviated version.”

He nodded. “But this is my favorite.”

“You really want to take my bed?”

He shook his head. “No, but I’d feel good about taking off your clothes right here. For old time’s sake.”

She rolled her eyes. “You really are a sentimental guy.”

He snagged her bottom lip with his teeth as he pulled at the snap on her jeans. “Mostly, I just want you in a place that was ours.”

Her heart melted as she hooked her arms tighter around him. “I can get behind that.”

“Good.” He kissed her, walking her backward to the bed. “That’s good,” he repeated as he pulled her shirt over her head and then pushed her so she fell back against the mattress.

She laughed.

He grinned. “Feel free to wait right there.”

She stared up at him as he took off his shirt, toed off his shoes, then pulled off her sneakers one by one. “I can’t think of any place else I’d rather be.”

He joined her on the mattress, settling himself on top of her. “How’s this?”

She moved her palms up the bumps and ridges of his muscular back. “Perfect.”

He went after the front clasp on her bra. “And this is okay, too?”

She hummed her pleasure when he palmed her breasts.

“Your skin’s always so *soft*, Gracie,” he whispered as he pressed kisses to her neck while he teased her nipples to points. “This feels right—making out in the first place we ever made out.”

She gave him a nudge, signaling him to reverse their positions.

Within seconds he was on his back.

“Is that what we’re doing?” Straddling him, she went after his ear with gentle nips of her teeth, then trailed open-mouthed kisses along his neck and chest. “Making out?”

He exhaled a breath as he closed his eyes. “I’d consider this a bit of a hybrid.”

She chuckled as she pulled at the snap on his jeans, then worked on the

zipper. “Breaking out the science vocabulary. This *is* like old times.”

He grinned one of his irresistible crooked grins as he skimmed his palms up the sides of her waist. “I don’t remember us getting a whole lot of studying done after things changed between us.”

“You may have a point there.”

He sat up, cupping her face in his hands, taking her deep with an eager kiss. “I can’t get enough of you. I’ve never been able to get enough of you, Grace.”

“Another thing we have in common.”

He moved his arm to hook her against him as he laid her back on the mattress. “We should ditch the rest of our clothes.”

“So, we’re done making out, then?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said as he kissed his way down her stomach, tugging her jeans down her legs. He stood long enough to take his off, sending his boxers to the floor with the denim. “Unless you have an objection.”

Her gaze wandered to his erection. “None at all.”

He settled on the bed again, kissing her knees and thighs, nipping at her through her panties.

She moaned, sliding her fingers through his hair, waiting for more as he made quick work of ridding her of her last scrap of skimpy clothing.

He pressed gentle kisses against her as he held her gaze. “The first time I tasted you—that happened here too.”

“I remember.” After her first orgasm, it hadn’t taken long for his fingers against her skin to transition to his mouth.

She pulled him closer as the breath of each word he spoke heated her up. “I’d never felt anything so good.”

He glided his tongue over her bud. “Sort of like this?”

Nodding, she snagged her lip with her teeth, whimpering when he suckled. “You were always so patient and gentle.”

He kissed her. “I wanted to be.”

She played her fingers through his hair again, eager for him to take her to exquisite places. “You made me feel beautiful and special, Jagger. Every time. That’s such a gift.”

“I wanted to do things differently with you. I wanted to do them right. You were the first girl who’d ever mattered. You’re the only one who’s ever mattered, Grace.”

Touched beyond measure, she smiled. “Be with me.”

“Definitely.” But he continued his work, moving his tongue in the quick rhythm that made her gasp—that made her call out when he brought her up fast with a rush of heat.

“Jagger.”

He wasted no time moving back up her body. “I didn’t want to leave you hanging.”

Grinning, she stroked his cheek. “Be with me,” she said again.

He entered her slowly, groaning as she moaned—as they began moving together.

They kept their pace slow as her mouth met his for each deep kiss. There was no hurry as his fingers clasped hers—as they stared into each other’s eyes.

She wrapped her legs around him, pushing him deeper when she started her climb. “Come with me,” she whispered, still holding his gaze.

Nodding, he captured her lips again, tangling his tongue with hers as their breathing began to change.

“I’m ready,” she gasped. “I’m ready, Jagger.”

He picked up his pace, thrusting harder, gripping her fingers tighter as he groaned.

She let herself go as he did, crying out with the next rush of pleasure.

“Gracie,” he said as he rested his head in the crook of her neck.

Staring up at the ceiling, she let her hands trail up and down his back. “Doing this here this last time feels right.”

He made a sound in his throat as he kissed her shoulder. “Definitely.”

She sighed as her gaze traveled around the room—where she’d lived such a huge part of her life.

Jagger lifted his head. “That’s quite a sigh. What are you thinking about?”

She shrugged as she exhaled another breath. “My parents were still building this place when my mom died.”

He nodded. “It still boggles my mind that they were building something this huge just so you and Logan could go to Sheraton Prep.”

“My mom wasn’t crazy about it, but Dad had his heart set on Logan and me attending his alma mater.”

“And I can see how it would’ve been difficult to feel comfortable in anything less than ten thousand square feet.”

She grinned as she gave his shoulder a shove. “You know my dad. He

liked to have the best. And this was an investment property for the Evans family's future."

He smiled back. "I remember."

Her smile faded. "Then she died, and everything went to hell."

He kissed her nose. "Yeah."

"We spent that summer with Aunt Maggie and Asa. We had no idea he'd sold our house in the suburbs, bought the condo in the city, and planned to bring us out here a year earlier than he'd promised Mom. When he enrolled us in the private middle school for our eighth-grade year, he promised to come home on the weekends, then mostly left us here with Bea."

Jagger rolled, reversing their positions so she lay on top of him. "That was bullshit—a dick move."

She nodded. Her dad was gone now, but the truth remained the truth. "We needed him, but I don't think he knew what to *do* with us without Mom. Dad grew up as an only child—had a nanny. He'd never been around kids before Logan and me."

She shrugged. "Sometimes I wonder what our life would have been like if she'd never decided to start back into event planning part-time. Who would Logan be right now if she hadn't taken on that wedding—if she would have been home safe with us instead of on the road at midnight?"

Jagger tucked her hair behind her ear as he continued to listen. "There's nothing wrong with wishing that things could be different."

"I'll never understand... They were so happy, but it was like he'd forgotten about her. My dad. Her pictures disappeared so quickly after she died, and he never talked about her. That fall, he brought Veronica out to meet us, which was the beginning of the end of his relationship with Logan."

Jagger fiddled with her fingers. "Thank God you guys had Bea, Aunt Mags, and Asa."

She nodded again. "And eventually you. I started hearing your name shortly after Logan signed up for taekwondo. You taking him under your wing meant so much to him, Jagger."

He shrugged. "We were fast friends—had a lot in common: a love of football and a deep appreciation for hot girls."

She grinned. "Sounds deep."

He chuckled. "It worked for us."

"It worked well for me, too, after Hal sent those videos of you running with the ball to my dad."

He shrugged again. “Logan made it easy to catch anything he threw my way. He made me look good.”

Logan had been an exceptionally talented quarterback, but Jagger’s abilities to read the field, create clutch plays, and run at remarkable speeds had never had anything to do with her brother. Jagger’s love and loyalty to his best friend had made him blind to those facts. “I’m just glad you moved in.”

“Me too. My entire life changed after that.”

She nodded, immediately growing sad that nothing had stayed as simple as the years they’d spent here before Logan’s injury.

His brow furrowed. “What’s wrong? What just happened?”

She shrugged. “Everything changed so quickly after Logan got hurt. Then after his death... Everything’s changing again.”

He rolled them a second time, staring down at her. “What do you mean?”

She blinked as her eyes grew teary. “I can’t stop thinking about the money—about how I don’t want it.”

He pursed his lips as he nodded.

She closed her eyes as she shook her head. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

He stroked her hair away from her forehead. “I want to understand. Talk to me.”

She sighed. “I imagine I sound ungrateful.”

He shook his head this time. “You’ve never been ungrateful a day in your life.”

She kissed him. “Thank you for saying that.”

“It’s true.” He pressed his lips to hers. “Tell me the rest.”

She exhaled another long breath. “My dad worked hard. He helped so many people. We had our problems, but he left me a legacy. Most people would kill to be in my position, but I like my life right now—or the life I had a week and three days ago when my dad was alive, and his money was still his.”

“You don’t sound ungrateful, Grace. You know what most people don’t—lots of cash doesn’t equate to happiness.”

She loved that he understood. Jagger had grown up with nothing, but he’d witnessed firsthand that money didn’t always make the problems disappear. Sometimes it made them worse. “I want my normal back—the normal I’ve built over the last eight years. The normal you and I are making together.”

“So do something with the money. Make donations. Create scholarships and grants in Steve’s name. Talk to the lawyer about unloading a serious chunk of change into the charitable hospitals or talk to the doctors about starting another one somewhere else in the world. Then forget about the rest.”

She frowned. “It’s not that simple.”

“Can’t it be?”

She opened her mouth to tell him no, but she closed it when she couldn’t see why not. “You’re okay with it—walking away from millions of dollars?”

“I just want you, Grace. The stuff we’ve always dreamed of together—even if the dream’s changed a bit.”

She closed her eyes as a huge weight lifted off her shoulders. “That sounds really good.”

He made a sound in his throat as he kissed her jaw. “Preston Valley’s our home base. We’ll travel occasionally, throw in a little freelancing on both our parts, then eventually add a couple of kids to the mix.”

New dreams sprinkled in with the old. She laughed, wrapping her arms around him. “Yes.”

His mouth moved to her ear. “Do you want to extend our trip down memory lane to the shower, or do you want to look around?”

She grinned as he met her gaze. “The shower’s tempting.” She pinched his butt. “But the shower works at home, too.”

“True.” He nipped her chin, then growled, nuzzling her neck in the way that tickled her.

“Jagger!” Squealing, laughing as she bucked about, she pushed at him. “Stop it!”

He nuzzled her again, laughing as he lifted his head to look at her.

Still grinning, she shoved at him. “I *hate* when you do that.”

Chuckling, he shook his head. “No, you don’t.”

She snagged her lip with her teeth because he wasn’t wrong. She loved it when he was silly and playful. “Maybe I hate it just a little.”

He kissed her. “I’m glad this happened—that we could lie here again and make this space something good to remember.”

She kissed him this time. “Me too. Let’s get up. I want to pack up some of the pictures in here before we look around.”

“How about I pack what you want to take while you look around?”

She frowned. “Are you sure?”

He nodded. “Definitely.”

## TWENTY-SEVEN

GRACE WANDERED THE MASSIVE HOUSE SHE'D ONCE CALLED HOME, STARTING in the kitchen. After her sexy little tryst upstairs, she needed a glass of water.

Quickly washing up the dish, she opened a drawer, automatically grabbing a towel. She paused because it felt so *normal*. Everything was where it had always been, yet nothing was the same.

Being back here again with Jagger had turned into a good thing. For years, she'd tried to forget about her life on Sheraton Way. The memories had been too painful. But today, when she left for the last time, she could do so with peace.

Even as she thought it, she couldn't ignore the deafening silence in a place that had always been so full of noise and fun.

Once upon a time, the Evans mansion had been the popular hangout spot for movie nights and pool parties. Bea had fed packs of hungry football boys over the years. Now all ten thousand square feet sat uninhabited and silent, except when the once-a-month cleaning crew came by to vacuum and chase away the dust.

Moving down the hallway, she stopped in the large game room, smiling as her gaze wandered over various pinball machines, then the ping pong table where *hundreds* of heated matches had been lost and won by Logan, Jagger, and dozens of their friends.

She snorted out a laugh when she spotted the crappy patch job Logan and Jagger had attempted to pull off after Tucker Winslow's elbow damaged the drywall after a particularly spirited victory dance their junior year.

Drinking in the good memories, she moved on, walking by Bea's old room. Then she stopped by her dad's office—where he'd spent most of his

time on his occasional trips back to Wakeview.

She sighed as her gaze wandered over his various trophies from his high school and college glory days. Sports had been his life—an expectation he'd unfairly passed on to his son.

Her father had always made it back for Friday night football games and Saturday afternoon marksmanship competitions during their appropriate seasons. Dinner at the country club typically followed as a family of three, plus Jagger. Otherwise, the good doctor tended to clinic business or dictated patient notes right there in his leather chair.

She exhaled another quiet breath as she stared at the papers stacked on the edge of the desk—the same papers she'd carelessly pushed to the floor in her frantic search for the colonel's address among her father's things.

Feeling the gloom and regrets creeping back, she gave the space a last look, then stepped away, heading for the rear staircase she'd rarely used.

She moved down the rambling hallway, taking only a moment to glance in each spare bedroom, pausing when she came to the attic door.

She opened it and flipped on the light, heading up the steps, chuckling as she remembered the tense moments when she and Jagger had stood in the dusty silence, half-naked with their clothes in their hands one unfortunate afternoon.

Her dad had made an unexpected trip home when she and Jagger had thought they had the place to themselves. When they heard her dad calling their names as he walked up the grand staircase, they'd booked it out of Jagger's room and hid in the only place they imagined he wouldn't go looking for them.

Laughing at the ridiculousness of it all, she stopped on the top stair, glancing around at the items that hadn't been used in decades.

Logan's old soccer nets and lacrosse gear, Grace's pottery wheel she'd lost interest in sometime in middle school.

She quickly walked around the space, making certain she wasn't leaving behind any long-lost treasures.

She stopped by the garment bag holding her old prom dresses, pausing with her hand on the zipper when she spotted the small stack of boxes in the corner.

Moving closer, she recognized Bea's handwriting as she read what each box contained in black permanent marker: *board games, golf gear, puzzles, Rose*

Grace frowned, surprised to see her mother's name.

Resituating the dust-laden boxes to get to the one she wanted, she eagerly tore at the tape, then lifted back the flaps, staring at a picture of her mom and dad in a pretty wooden frame.

Grace grinned at the wedding photo she remembered from her parents' bedroom in the suburbs. "You guys were so young. So gorgeous," she whispered. "I miss you like this. When everything was happy."

Setting it aside, Grace lifted a pink floral book, fanning through the pages of her mother's beautiful handwriting. "Your journals. How did I forget that you journaled?"

Every evening her mother had tucked herself in with a cup of tea and whatever book she was writing in at the time.

*Grace snuggled next to her mother and brother as all three lay in the king-size bed. Friday nights were the best nights—movie nights to kick off the weekend after a long week at school. "Mom, why do you do that?"*

*Mom paused with her pen on the page. "I like thinking about my life—about how lucky I am to have you and your brother. Your dad, too."*

*Grace sat farther up on Dad's side of the bed, eager for him to come home to join them. "So, you write it all down?"*

*Mom nodded as she smiled. "Someday, when I'm an old woman, I'll read everything I've written and live the best parts of my life all over again."*

Grace smiled sadly as she glanced at the box full of books her mother had never gotten the chance to read. She had just turned forty-two when the accident ended it all.

Putting the book and picture frame back, Grace hefted the box, bringing it down the stairs, eager to find Jagger and show him her discovery.

Jagger looked around the room he knew he would never see again as he put the last pictures Grace wanted to take with them into the box they found in her closet.

It was odd to be back at the mansion—to step back in time in the place that the secretly sentimental Dr. Evans hadn't been able to let go of.

Everything good in his life had started at 1022 Sheraton Way, then ended the night he'd left to pick up Logan.

But it was time to leave the past where it belonged. It was time for Grace and him to heal.

When Grace had said she wanted to come to Wakeview, he'd known she'd been searching for closure. As he stared at the clothes Grace had worn a lifetime ago, he realized he'd been searching for the same.

His gaze wandered from the bed where they'd made love for the final time to the white desk where he'd spent so many nights studying.

*Dumb's disappointing, Jagger.*

Grinning, he picked up the box and started toward Logan's room just down the hall.

His smile faded as he stopped in the doorway, studying the navy-blue walls in a space that was nearly empty.

His best friend had cleared out most of his stuff when Steve had kicked him out, then changed the locks.

Logan had left behind the things he no longer deemed important—the stuff that didn't matter to an angry addict who'd been pissed off at the world in general.

Jagger walked farther inside, studying the pictures from happier times: one of him, Logan, and Grace, grinning with their arms wrapped around each other's shoulders as they stood outside Aunt Maggie's place the summer before their senior year.

He moved on to the next: Logan and himself with some of their football buddies, hanging out in the pool after a game of water basketball.

Then he saw the shot Grace had framed—where he and Logan stood in navy-blue and white football gear, looking all serious and badass for the *Sports Illustrated* feature when they achieved three perfect seasons.

*The It Team: What It Takes To Be The Best In High School Football.*

*“You have to surround yourself with people who make you better—good people you can trust. That's my best friend, Jagger Tennyson—my ride or die. I know I can count on him on and off the field.”*

Jagger clenched his jaw, shaking his head as he read Logan's quote at the bottom right of the picture.

He and Logan had been ride or die up to the end—up until the fucking

drugs had destroyed them all.

“I miss you, man,” he muttered as he gathered all three frames, adding them to the box.

Ready to move on, he didn’t look back as he left behind what remained of Logan’s life, heading down the hall toward the rear staircase to find Grace.

He passed his old room, stopping dead in his tracks, then reversed his direction. “Holy shit.”

Everything was exactly as he’d left it: the pile of clothes on the edge of the bed, still waiting to be folded and packed; a pair of sneakers carelessly toed off in the corner.

He walked in, looking at the desk he’d rarely used, his bed made with the dark-green comforter he and Grace had occasionally slept under, and the mostly empty shelves where Grace had already grabbed everything he considered important.

“Jagger?” Grace called from somewhere close.

“In here.”

She stopped in the doorway, scanning the space while she held a box. Her white T-shirt was smeared with dirt. “He kept your room the same.”

“I *know*. I figured he would have burned it or exorcised it or something—whatever he had to do to get rid of any traces of me.”

She moved to stand next to him. “Maybe he knew he’d been wrong.”

Or maybe Steve hadn’t been able to spend another second in the mansion after he knew he’d lost his daughter too. “It’s hard to say.”

She rested her head on his shoulder, nuzzling her cheek against him. “I need to believe that he knew, Jagger.”

He hoped that was true. It didn’t change much, but it was a nice thought. He glanced at the box she carried, realizing she had dirt on her forehead too. “What have you been up to?”

“I was in the attic.”

“The attic,” he said as he nodded. “I can’t say I went up there much. Maybe never. Except for that one time.”

Grace laughed. “I didn’t go up there a whole lot either. That was Bea’s domain. But look what I found.” She turned her body so he could read the box.

“Rose.” He looked at her. “You found some of your mom’s stuff?”

She beamed as she nodded. “I guess I always thought Dad threw her stuff out, but Bea must have tucked these away during the move. It’s her journals.

I forgot she wrote in journals, Jagger. She told me once that she liked to write about the best parts of her life.”

He saw the excitement in her eyes. “That’s awesome that you have them.”

Another grin lit up her face. “She’s been gone so long—longer than she was mine. How lucky am I to have a piece of her back.”

Jagger kissed her. “I’m happy for you, Gracie.”

“Thanks.” She pressed her lips to his again. “What should we do next?”

He shrugged as he glanced at the box he’d set on the carpet next to him. “You tell me. Are you still looking around?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t see anything else I need to bring. We can go if you want.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded. “Since we’re here in Wakeview, do you want to drive to the other side of town? You can see your mother—maybe find your brother?”

He shook his head and picked up the box, ready to be finished with this town and everything in it as they moved to the hallway. “They don’t want to see me any more than I want to see them. They’re most likely in jail, anyway.”

She sighed. “Should we go, then?”

He looked in his room one last time. “Let’s go home.”

Four hours later, Grace stood in her office, taking the last of her mother’s journals from the box, adding them to the tall stack on her desk.

She sat down in her comfortable leather chair, delighted yet slightly overwhelmed by over a decade’s worth of books. Most of the journals were labeled with the date on each cover. Some years had more than two.

Arranging them from the year before Logan’s birth to the year of her mother’s death, she paused, nibbling her lip, wondering if reading them was the right thing to do.

“What are you up to in here?” Jagger asked as he walked up behind her, resting his hands on her shoulders.

“I’m trying to bring a little order to the chaos. I still have to go through the box you brought in from my old bedroom.”

“That’s a lot of journals.”

“Yes, it is. I’m trying to decide if I want to read from the oldest to the newest or vice versa, but maybe I shouldn’t read them at all.”

Jagger frowned. “I thought you were excited to dive in.”

“I am. I was.” She shrugged. “I was doing some thinking on the drive back. Those are my mother’s private thoughts. I feel like I’m invading her privacy.”

He nodded. “I can see that.”

“Maybe I’ll just pack them away again.” She sighed as she tilted her head, holding Jagger’s gaze. “But even as I say that, a selfish part of me wants to invade her privacy even if I feel guilty about it. I remember so much about my mom, but if she were still here, our relationship would be entirely different from when I was thirteen. There would be more complexities. More layers.”

“Let’s do this,” Jagger said as he pulled her to her feet, sat down in her chair, then tugged her down on his lap, settling his arms around her waist.

She hooked her arm around the back of his neck. “This is nice.”

He nodded, resting his forehead against hers. “I think you should read the journals.”

“You do?”

He nodded again. “There’s nothing selfish about what you’re doing. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to feel close to your mom. Give yourself the gift of knowing who she was.”

She exhaled a deep breath. “I need to think about it more, but not right now. My brain’s tired after today.”

He nuzzled her skin. “I was going to run to the grocery store and pick up some things.”

She stroked her fingers through his hair. “Like what?”

He shrugged. “Just some stuff. I’ve been looking at some recipes. I want to cook for you.”

Her heart melted as she sat back enough to hold his gaze. “That’s really sweet, Jagger.”

He jerked his shoulders again. “I’m handling dinner tonight.”

“And what are you making for us?”

“I was thinking about chicken pesto paninis with tons of mozzarella and maybe some French fries. We could do a salad too.”

Her heart went gooey all over again as he remembered one of her

favorites. “I love paninis.”

“I thought I’d heard a rumor about that.”

She smiled. “Do you want some company—at the store and in the kitchen?”

“I always want your company.”

“Ditto.” She kissed him. “We should get out of here, then.”

“Definitely.” In a lightning move, Jagger picked her up, spinning her once.

Her gasp turned into a laugh. “What are you *doing*?”

“Taking you to the grocery store.”

“But I should pick up my mess.”

He walked with her from the room, moving down the hallway toward the living room. “We’ll deal with it later. My mind’s on chicken paninis.”

Laughing again, she grabbed her purse off the island as they moved through the kitchen to the door. “I’m suddenly starving.”

“Then let’s get this show on the *road*. We have an insanely delicious dinner to make.”

## TWENTY-EIGHT

“HAVE A GOOD AFTERNOON,” GRACE SAID AS SHE SENT MRS. HARRISON ON her way with a gorgeous lavender and pale-pink Sweet Sixteen arrangement for her granddaughter’s special day.

Mrs. Harrison stopped by the door. “I will, honey. These flowers will be just the thing to set next to Emma’s cake. They’re stunning.”

“We’re glad you like them. Tell Emma happy birthday for us.”

Mrs. Harrison beamed. “I sure will.”

Grace waved when Mrs. Harrison walked outside into the chilly but sunny afternoon. Blowing out a breath as she looked at the clock, she stepped into the back, where Aunt Maggie and Jen worked on a final couple of orders for the last delivery run of the day.

Aunt Maggie looked up as she slid a grouping of red berries among the cheery sunflowers and orange roses she was making into a gorgeous arrangement. “Today turned into a busy one.”

Grace huffed out a laugh as she nodded. She hadn’t stopped moving since she stepped into the shop at seven thirty. Somehow it was already three fifteen. “I was thinking about a chai tea. I need a pick-me-up. Can I bring either of you anything?”

Jen turned with a long piece of pale-yellow ribbon in her hand, taking a moment to slide her strawberry-blond hair behind her ear. “I’ll take a small green tea and one of those huge M&M cookies.”

Maggie laughed. “I like the way Jen thinks. Go ahead and double that order.”

Grace grinned, knowing that Aunt Maggie would share half of her treat. “Consider it done. It’s the least I can do after all the craziness. I shouldn’t be

any more than ten or fifteen minutes. If you can listen for the door.”

“With the way things are going, you might have to make a run for it.” Aunt Maggie winked as she smiled again.

Grace chuckled. “You’re not *kidding*.”

Walking back out front, Grace put on her coat and grabbed her purse, then pushed through the door, keeping a quick pace as she headed toward Brew.

If she was lucky, things would settle down for the rest of the afternoon. She would grab drinks and snacks for her crew, then take ten or fifteen minutes to catch her breath in her office.

If she’d brought another one of her mother’s journals to pass the time, well...

Grace wrinkled her nose as she chuckled because it was safe to say she was obsessed. Over the last week, she’d hung on her mother’s every word, voraciously reading every free chance she could get.

Her initial reservations about picking up a volume and invading her mother’s privacy quickly vanished into delight as her mom brought so many memories back to life from a different perspective.

As Grace greedily read through each book, she learned that her mother hadn’t only written about the best parts of her life.

Rose Evans had been a strong, independent woman and an amazing mother, but she’d had her struggles and down days too.

Through the years, her parents had occasionally argued and had hard times. But more often than not, the Evans family’s life had been good.

Grace pulled open the door, stepping into the heavenly warmth and aromas at Brew.

“Hey, Grace,” the barista said as Grace approached the counter.

“Hi, Kelly.”

“What can I get you this afternoon?”

“The usual, please.”

“Am I adding a dark brew for Jagger?”

Grace shook her head. “Jagger’s at the dojang with Todd today. But Jen and Aunt Maggie are looking for a couple of your M&M cookies.”

Kelly winced. “We have a fresh batch in the oven now, but it’ll be a few minutes.”

Grace perked up. “That’s okay. I can wait.”

“Are you sure? It’ll probably be ten minutes. Maybe fifteen.”

“Yeah. Definitely. I actually have a book in my purse.”

Kelly smiled. “I’ll let you know when everything’s ready.”

“Thanks.”

Taking off her jacket as she walked to the quiet corner of the empty shop, she snagged a chair by the small fireplace before she texted Aunt Maggie.

*I’ll be about fifteen-or-so minutes. The cookies are in the oven.*

Aunt Maggie texted back. *Freshly baked cookies on a cold day. Even better.*

Grinning, Grace pulled her mother’s last journal from her purse, opening to where she’d left off late last night while Jagger had slept beside her.

Her smile faded as she stared at the date at the top of the page, realizing she only had one entry left.

It was tempting to wait until tonight when she could read her mother’s final thoughts in the privacy of her own home, but the first sentence caught her attention.

*It’s amazing how your world can change in an instant. Everything is one way one minute, and then it’s entirely different.*

*I’ve long since kissed Logan and Gracie goodnight—something so normal and comforting. I made them a taco bar for dinner tonight with all their favorite fixings.*

*More often than not, I can hardly breathe, but it felt vital to give them this last happy day before hard conversations will need to be had. I’m still trying to process that nothing will be the same after today.*

*It’s still shocking that everything about this morning was so ordinary. Stopping off at the grocery store isn’t supposed to ruin your life as you know it.*

*Grace has been talking about making the triple chocolate cake she saw online for days now. Since today was Bea’s day off, I thought it would be fun for the kids and me to tackle the project together. Logan isn’t much for baking these days but is certainly up for eating.*

*I’d only needed two things: cocoa powder and vanilla. When I walked down the baking aisle, I accidentally bumped into the woman in front of me.*

*When she turned, I was surprised to see that it was Jessica.*

*I’d expected a friendly conversation since we hadn’t spoken in a couple of years, but she only blinked as she stared at me.*

*And then I saw him in the cart—the blond little boy who looked to be about two, flipping through the pages of a cardboard dinosaur book.*

*I asked who the cutie was sitting in the back.*

*She told me he was her son.*

*I lost my breath when he glanced up, sending me a smile. He looked so much like Logan had at that age. He looked so much like Steve.*

*I don't know if I said anything else. I can't remember walking away from my cart, but somehow, I was in the car, driving toward the orthopedic center.*

*I interrupted Steve's meeting to tell my husband I saw Jessica with her little boy at the store. I mentioned that the child in her cart looked just like Logan.*

*Steve closed his eyes and shook his head. All he said was, "I'm so sorry, Rose."*

*There were a million things to say and nothing left to say as we stared at each other. After that, I left.*

*Steve's smart enough to know that he shouldn't bother coming home.*

*I don't know how I'll make it through the next couple of days, but after this wedding comes and goes, I'm packing up the kids. We're going home to Preston Valley.*

Grace rushed to her feet, pressing her hand to her chest as her heart beat too quickly.

"He cheated," she whispered, sinking back to her chair as her world started to crumble again.

"No," she said, shaking her head, hurriedly flipping through the mostly empty volume, looking for more words—for some other explanation. But her mother died the next night so nothing else was there.

She stared at her mother's handwriting, taking several deep breaths, still trying to believe what she'd just read.

It couldn't be true. It had to be a mistake. Her mom and dad had been happy. Their marriage had been strong—

"Grace, your order's ready," Kelly said, standing next to her with the teas in a carton and the cookies in a bag.

Grace put the journal away as she stood, forcing a smile as she took the to-go items. "Thanks."

"I called your name a couple of times, but you didn't hear me."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I was lost in my thoughts."

"Don't worry about it. Have a good rest of your day."

"Thank you. You too."

"Don't forget your jacket."

"Right." She huffed out a laugh as she snagged it, then hurried outside, savoring the chilly air on her cheeks as she tried to make the last few minutes make sense.

"It can't be right," she assured herself as she walked the half block to Simplicity, letting herself into the store where Aunt Maggie and Jen chatted with Mrs. Tillis, one of their best customers.

Grace set the goodies on the counter, making herself smile again. "I come bearing gifts."

Aunt Maggie frowned as she looked at her. "Are you okay, honey? You look a little pale."

She nodded, turning up the wattage of her smile. "It's been a long day. That's all."

"Why don't you bring your tea to your office and take a break. Or better yet, head on home. Asa can pick me up when he finishes with the deliveries."

Grace hesitated because Jen's shift ended in thirty minutes. She didn't like to leave Aunt Maggie at the shop alone. What if she fell and couldn't get to the phone? "That's all right. I have some paperwork—"

Aunt Maggie shook her head. "Didn't you mention that Jagger has an early night because Todd's handling the evening classes?"

"I did."

"Good. Go see him. I'm perfectly capable of locking up, Grace."

Recognizing that she had no choice, she nodded. "Okay. I guess I'll see everyone tomorrow."

She walked outside again, heading for her Sorento, slightly relieved that Aunt Maggie had bullied her out the door.

Jagger was more than likely home by now. She was eager to show him her mother's last entry—to see if her words left him with the same ugly impression. Because she desperately needed Jagger to tell her she had it all wrong.

Ten minutes later, Grace pulled into the driveway, relieved to see the Stingray parked in its usual spot.

She quickly grabbed her purse and hurried inside, only to frown as she hung up her jacket and tugged off her loafers in the quiet house.

Typically, Jagger cranked up the music while he got a head start on dinner prep when he had a night off from the dojang.

She glanced toward the kitchen as she moved through the living room, noting that he'd taken the homemade pizza dough out of the fridge, so where was he?

She opened her mouth to call his name but closed it as she slowed outside the office, realizing he was on the phone.

"That's not going to work," Jagger said in a voice tight with tension.

She poked her head in to make sure he was okay, trailing her gaze over strong, naked shoulders and the black sweatpants he wore as he sat with his back to her in the office chair, sliding his fingers through his damp hair.

"Forget it. I'm not taking assignments right now. Grace still needs me."

She stepped out of the room, pressing her lips together as she closed her eyes. This was exactly what she *didn't* want—Jagger putting his life on hold for her. She didn't want to hold him back with her endless issues and problems.

"You don't want me to tell you what you can do with your retainer fee or this job for that matter. Grace comes first. That's what I told you from the beginning. I'll let you know when she's ready for me to get back to work."

Jagger hung up, muttering a curse.

Waiting a moment before she knocked on the doorframe, Grace slapped a smile on her face as she walked in to join him. "Hey, handsome."

He swiveled in the chair, sending her a grin. "Hey, beautiful." He reached out his hand to her, pulling her down in his lap, hugging her.

She hummed in her throat as she returned his embrace, breathing in soap and Jagger. "You smell good."

"I was thinking the same thing about you." He kissed her. "You're home early."

She nodded. "Aunt Maggie told me to go home."

He frowned. "Is everything okay?"

She nodded again. "Everything's good."

He continued to hold her gaze, clearly not convinced.

"It was a super busy day, but everything's good, Jagger."

“Okay.”

She snuggled back against him. “It sounds like you were talking to Jason.”

He sighed. “Yeah.”

“You can take the job—”

He adamantly shook his head. “No.”

“Jagger—”

He shook his head again. “I’m not having this conversation.”

She sat up so their eyes met. “You’ve been my rock. Just like always. You’ve been everything I’ve needed over the last couple of weeks.”

“Good. You can count on more of the same.”

She studied the stubborn light in his eyes. “Jagger—”

“I *love* you.”

“I know you do. I love you, too. What’s going on?” Because he was rarely ever this agitated.

“Nothing’s more important than you—than us. I wasn’t there for you like I should have been after Logan. That’s never happening again.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“It doesn’t change the fact that I let you down—that I made the worst mistake of my life.”

She stroked his tense jaw, holding his gaze, needing him to see that she was okay. She needed him to know she was strong. “I want you to stop punishing yourself for something that can’t be undone.”

He swallowed as he shook his head.

“We can’t go back,” she reminded him.

“I’m well aware.”

Her fingers continued to soothe with gentle slides against his skin. “Losing my dad was awful, but I’m doing much better. Our trip to Wakeview really helped.” She kissed him. “I *want* you to get back to your work.”

“But I would have to leave tomorrow. I would have to go to California.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“Probably two or three days—four at the max.”

“Jagger, I want you to take this job. I have so much catch-up work at the shop... I’ll blink, and you’ll be home again.”

“Are you sure?”

She was sure she would be keeping the bombshell she found in her mother’s journal to herself for the time being. He wouldn’t go if he had any

idea that her life was a mess again. She nodded. “Definitely.”

“Will you have FaceTime dinners with me?”

She smiled. “Every night.”

He steamed out a breath.

“I’m good,” she whispered, touching her lips to his.

“I’ll let Jason know later.” He trailed kisses from her temple to her jaw. “I took the pizza dough out of the fridge when I got home.”

She trailed her hands along his arms. “I saw that.”

His lips found their way to her ear. “It’s probably still cold—not ready to be rolled out just yet.”

She smiled, understanding where this was going. “You’re probably right.”

“Can I take you to bed—get you all naked and crazy before we eat?”

Her lips curved again. “I’d like that.”

He stroked his fingers along her cheek, searching her gaze. “You’re sure you’re good?”

She nodded, aware that he knew her too well. He’d always been able to tell when things weren’t right in her world.

“We don’t have to have sex, Grace.”

“Yes, we do.” She nipped at his chin before she stood and grabbed his hand, determined to be in the moment. She only wanted to think about Jagger—not what she’d read in the journal.

He went after the buttons on her blouse as he walked her backward, stopping with her against the hallway wall. “We’ve got a lot of work to do—time to make up for. There are four potential days that I won’t be able to touch you.”

She rubbed her palm over his erection, eager to get lost in the heat they so easily brought to each other. “It seems like you’re ready.”

“Absolutely.” He devoured her mouth with a greedy kiss.

She tucked the latest round of shock and disillusionment away as she moaned, pulling him toward the bedroom.

## TWENTY-NINE

GRACE HURRIED THE LAST-MINUTE ARRANGEMENT OUT TO THE VAN, HANDING the pretty vase off to Asa as he finished securing the rest of the deliveries in place for travel. “Thanks for waiting.”

“A frantic call for a dozen red roses ten minutes before our last run of the day. Cooper must be in the doghouse for something.”

Grace laughed as Asa grinned. “I was thinking the same thing. Hopefully, you can help him smooth things over with Josey when you drop these off—use your Asa charm the way you have a knack for doing.”

He winked. “I’ll see what I can do. You’ve got the shop handled for the next little while?”

Grace nodded. Jen had left early to take the twins to the dentist, and Maggie was volunteering at a Rotary event for the rest of the afternoon. “I’ve got things covered.”

Asa headed for the driver’s seat. “Call if things change.”

“I will.” But instead of going inside, Grace followed him to the front of the van, seeing her chance to get some of the answers she desperately needed.

She’d lain awake for most of the night, unable to stop her mind from racing as the gravity of her mother’s last words truly sank in.

When Jagger had pressed his lips against hers for a goodbye kiss at four in the morning, she’d only been asleep for an hour.

“Asa, I’ve been reading my mom’s old journals. I found them when Jagger and I went back to the mansion last week.”

He opened the door. “Maggie mentioned something about that.”

She nodded as she licked her lips in the chilly air. “Do you remember Mom bringing someone with her to Preston Valley to help with some of the

bigger weddings when I was younger? I would have been about ten or eleven.”

He frowned, clearly contemplating, as he slowly shook his head. “No, I don’t think so.”

Grace struggled with a wave of frustration because Mom had mentioned bringing Jessica with her several times in the journals. “Nobody named Jessica?”

Asa’s frown returned. “Actually, now that you mention her name, yeah. The blond girl. Or maybe she was a brunette. I think she changed it from time to time.”

Grace beamed as she nodded because she remembered the same thing. “Yes. She watched Logan and me the summer Bea had to go to Washington to help her mother. She watched us a couple of times that fall too.”

Asa smiled. “I definitely remember her now. She was a nice kid—a hard worker.”

“I think she was nineteen or twenty,” Grace added, hoping to jog loose more memories.

Asa nodded with more certainty. “In college, if I remember right.”

Now they were getting somewhere. Because Mom had also mentioned that Jessica had been entering her sophomore year at Pittsburg State. “Do you happen to remember her last name?”

Asa immediately shook his head. “I have no idea. That would be a question for Maggie, especially since she undoubtedly paid her for her time.”

Grace smiled again, but she didn’t want to ask Aunt Maggie about any of this. She didn’t want to have to explain why she was sniffing around until she knew exactly what was what. The last thing Aunt Maggie needed was another stress-induced setback, especially if none of this turned out to be anything at all. “Yeah. Thanks, Asa.”

“Anytime.” He tossed her a wave as he got behind the wheel.

Hurrying up the ramp, Grace locked the back door behind her, then made her way to the front of the shop, more than a little relieved that no one was waiting to be helped.

The day had been busy, giving her little time to think, which had been perfect. Mostly, she wanted to forget about what she’d read and pretend that the life she remembered with her family had been as happy as she’d always thought it to be.

But her father had most likely cheated. Her dad had more than likely

fathered another child.

If that was true, she had another brother. The idea made her as sick as it did hopeful. If she had a sibling out there, she was going to find him.

Eager for more answers, she pulled her phone from her pocket, scrolling through her contacts, looking for Bea's number. She hesitated before she dialed, reaching out to the only woman who had known Rose Evans as well as Aunt Maggie had.

"Hello?"

"Bea, it's Grace."

"Sweetie, what a wonderful surprise. It's always a good day when I hear from you."

Grace's shoulders relaxed by degrees, treasuring the voice she'd known her entire life.

Bea had been hired to help at the house the year after her mom and dad had married and moved to the suburbs—when they'd both had thriving careers, but her mom had been eager to give hers up and start a family.

"Am I catching you at a bad time?"

"Not at all. I'm just making a pie. Apple, of course. I'm heading over to Jeremy's for dinner tonight."

Bea had always doted on her son. Jeremy had just graduated from college the year Bea had moved in to help full-time at the mansion. "Aren't they lucky?"

Bea laughed. "Emily has a choir performance at seven. She's a freshman this year if you can believe it. We'll eat first, then go over to the high school."

"That sounds lovely. Tell Emily I told her to break a leg."

"You know I will." Bea sighed. "When are you coming to visit? When do I get to see my girl?"

"Do you have any plans tomorrow?"

Bea laughed. "It sounds like I just might."

Grace smiled as she moved to lean against the front counter, staring out the window as people walked by. "We could go out for lunch. Anywhere you want."

"How about you drive on over this way? We'll eat in. I'll make that French onion soup you love so much."

"I don't want you going to any trouble."

"I like playing in the kitchen—fussing over my girl. You know that."

Bring Jagger, too, now that he's back. I'll make up a batch of his favorite brownies."

"I wish I could, but he's out of town for the next couple of days. He's doing some work in California."

"Well, I guess there will be more for you and me."

Grace smiled. "I'm looking forward to it."

"Should I expect you around twelve thirty?"

"I'll be there. What can I bring?"

"Only yourself."

"Let me know if you change your mind."

"I won't. Bye, honey."

"Bye." Ending the call, she glanced around the shop, struggling to click back to work mode.

"There's plenty to do," she reminded herself as her phone alerted her to a text.

*I finally made it back to my room. How are things in PA?*

Grace stared at Jagger's message before she replied. He had no idea how loaded his question was. *Things are good here. What about you?*

*Other than being too many miles away from you, I can't complain. Are we still on for FaceTime at 6? Your kitchen/my hotel room?*

*It's a date. I'm looking forward to hearing about your day.* Because she desperately wanted a break from thinking about her own.

*Gotta go for now. I love you.*

*I love you, too.*

Sliding her phone back into her pocket, she left it at that—and planned to for the next little while. Jagger had a job to do.

She'd handled her problems on her own for a long time. If and when she had something real to share about her father's affair and a potential long-lost brother, she would let him know then.

# THIRTY

GRACE PULLED UP BEHIND BEA'S COMPACT CAR IN THE DRIVEWAY, HATING that she was running almost fifteen minutes late. Typically, she arrived places early, but nothing was going right today.

The morning had been fraught with issues, starting with Brandon limping his way through his shift, telling her on more than one occasion that he was fine with the mildest of sprains. Aunt Maggie had been sniffing and sneezing, refusing to go home. And they'd had several extra arrangements to create after the computer temporarily crashed an hour before she left.

Hurrying out of the Sorento with a bouquet, Grace quickly headed up the stone path to the cute one-story house twenty minutes outside of Philly.

Bea opened the door before she could knock. "Grace." She wrapped her up in a hug. "It's so *good* to see you."

Grace returned her embrace, savoring the familiar vanilla scent on Bea's sweater. "It's good to see you too. I'm so sorry I'm late."

Bea was easily in her midseventies with more than a few wrinkles lining her pretty face. Barely five foot two and plump with friendly brown eyes, her once black hair was now silver and tied back in a bun.

"Don't worry, honey. You've had a long drive. Come on in and sit down at the table. Let's get you warmed up with some tea."

Grace followed Bea into the entryway, handing over the fall flowers she'd brought. "These are from me and Aunt Maggie."

Bea took them with a smile. "Aren't they just lovely? I see you added lilies. You know they're my favorite." She brought one of the white blooms to her nose, breathing deeply. "I'll put these in some water if you'll pour us both a nice hot cup."

Grace took off her coat, hanging it in the closet, struggling with a shiver, even when she wore a sweater and jeans. The day had turned out to be overcast and raw when the meteorologist had called for partly sunny skies. “Sure thing.”

Bea headed to the kitchen in the cozy open-concept space, adding water and then the flowers to a crystal vase. “I’m just so happy we could do this today. What a nice surprise.”

Grace moved to the table, pouring them tea from the pretty china pot where a gorgeous fall salad already waited. “I didn’t get much of a chance to talk to you at Dad’s funeral.”

Bea nodded with sorrow in her eyes as she brought two bowls of soup covered in croutons and melty cheese to set in front of them. “It was a tough day. Sit down, sweetie. Be comfortable.”

Grace sat, waiting for Bea to settle.

“Now tell me how you’ve been.”

Grace shrugged. “I’m all right. Mostly, I’m finding myself looking for answers.”

Bea nodded. “That makes a lot of sense. Your father’s passing was very unexpected—very tragic. He came by to take me out for dinner a couple of months ago.”

Grace picked up her cup, holding it in her chilly hands. “He did?”

Bea nodded again. “Your dad often checked up on me. He always took great care of me. When you went on your way and I retired, he bought me this house. He set me up with a generous monthly income for the remainder of my days.”

Grace smiled. “I know he loved you very much.”

“That he did.” Bea added a splash of milk to her cup. “He’d been about to head off to the new clinic in Africa. That was certainly a big passion of his.”

Grace swallowed because she’d had no idea. “I didn’t realize that was something he’d been interested in.”

“Oh, very much so. He’d mentioned that he planned to head over regularly to offer his expertise. There’s a lot of need over in that part of the world.”

Grace sighed. “Yes, there is.”

“I know you two had your troubles, but I also know he was very proud of you.”

Grace hoped that was true. “He and I left things on such bad terms. I

regret that I'll never be able to tell him how sorry I am."

"He had his regrets, honey. He told me once that your mom would have been so disappointed in him. She'd left him two happy, thriving, *wonderful* kids and he'd messed everything up."

Grace set down her cup, stirring her tea, struggling with a new wave of sadness. "I don't know what to say to that."

"You don't have to say anything at all. Your father was a good man, but he also had his flaws—just like the rest of us. We all have moments we wish we could do over or take back. I hope someday you'll be able to remember some of your better days together. I know he loved showing off your work in that magazine you freelance for."

Grace blinked, surprised again. "He subscribed to *Travel*?"

Bea nodded. "He brought over a copy when he was here, gushing over your pictures."

Grace found herself smiling, liking the idea. "Thank you for telling me."

"Of course."

They both sipped their tea before Grace set her cup down. "How are you doing?"

"My health is good for an old lady. Jeremy and his family are doing well. But I'm certainly grieving. Steve and you kids were such a big part of my life. And Rose, of course."

Grace covered Bea's hand. "I don't know what we would have done without you, especially after we lost Mom."

"It was always my pleasure to step in and help, not that I could ever take her place." Bea gave her a gentle squeeze. "Eat up your lunch and tell me what it's like to have Jagger back in your life. It was the best kind of shock to see him at the funeral."

Grace couldn't help but grin. "It's wonderful to have him home. Everything about our life together is so good. We're going to Montana soon for our first real vacation."

Bea smiled. "I knew he would be back. It was just a matter of time. I'm glad you found your way back to one another after all these years."

"Me too." She dug her spoon into the melted cheese, grabbing a crouton with a bite of the soup, blowing before she sampled. "It's as *amazing* as I remember."

Bea beamed. "I'll send you home with some of the extras. I'll pack up the cheese and croutons so you can make a proper lunch tomorrow."

“I won’t turn you down.”

Bea ate several bites of her own.

Grace set down her spoon, clearing her throat. “Bea, can I ask you a question about my parents?”

Bea set down her spoon. “Of course, sweetie.”

“Jagger and I went to the mansion last week. I was looking around and found Mom’s journals in the attic.”

“I forgot about those.”

“Me too.” She cleared her throat again. “Do you remember them being happy together? Mom and Dad?” That wasn’t exactly what she’d wanted to say, but it seemed better than blurting out what she’d read in her mother’s troubling last entry.

“More than they weren’t from what I saw during the years. Your mother always brought out your father’s softer side. She made him laugh. He loved her dearly. Our precious Rose.”

Grace couldn’t bring herself to ask if Bea thought her father could have been unfaithful. Bea had loved him like her own son. “Do you remember the summer you had to go to Washington? My mom had a college girl watch us. Jessica.”

Bea nodded as she sipped her tea. “She was a lovely young woman. Great with you kids. Quite a pretty one she was.”

Grace swallowed. “She was from the neighborhood, right? In the suburbs?”

“Yes. Just a block or two away. The Sawyer family, if I remember correctly.”

Grace perked up. “Jessica Sawyer?”

Bea nodded. “They were a lovely family—a little strict with their girls.”

Grace tucked her hair behind her ear. “Jessica had a little boy?”

Bea frowned. “No, I don’t think so. She was in college at the time. The family moved away the following spring. I didn’t see her again after that.”

“Oh.”

Bea looked at her now. “What has you thinking about Jessica?”

Grace shrugged. “I’d forgotten about her until I read about her in Mom’s journals. I remember her being a good babysitter, but I don’t remember much else.”

“Eat more of your soup, sweet girl. It’s cold out today.”

Grace nodded, deciding that she’d poked and prodded enough, but as she

occasionally sipped at her soup, she wondered about Jessica Sawyer from down the block.

Grace turned the key in the lock on the twentieth floor, taking a steadying breath as she stepped inside her father's condo.

Hesitating by the door, she debated whether to leave it ajar as her gaze tracked around the gloomy space on the cloudy afternoon.

She didn't want to be here. The night she'd walked down memory lane with Jagger had been bad enough. Today the cologne lingering in the air and unsettling silence left her eager to get home.

But she'd had to come after her lunch date with Bea—now that she had the name of her father's potential ex-lover. If there was another child in her father's life, there had to be documentation somewhere.

Ready to get her impromptu visit over with, she hurried down the hall to the office, making a beeline to the desk, leafing through her dad's bills and meal receipts.

She opened each of the drawers, looking through more of the same. When she found nothing there, she headed upstairs to the master suite.

Stopping in the doorway, she studied her dad's slacks neatly folded on the corner of the bed—his work pants he'd never gotten a chance to put away.

"I'm sorry I'm here like this. I'm sorry I'm invading your privacy." Because nothing about today's visit to the city felt the same as reading her mother's journals. "I have to know."

Struggling with a messy mix of grief and guilt, she moved to the closet, pulling down the two boxes on the shelf, finding several belts and old neckties.

"There's nothing," she whispered as she headed to the bedside table, opening the drawer, spotting a business card for Jericho, Cromwell, and Fitch.

She immediately stood straight. "Dennis. Why didn't I *think* of that?"

If her dad had another child, his attorney would surely know.

Pulling her phone from her back pocket, she dialed the number on the card.

"Jericho, Cromwell, and Fitch, how may I direct your call?"

“Good afternoon. This is Grace Evans for Dennis Fitch.”

“Please hold, Ms. Evans.”

“Thank you.”

She paced before the massive windows as the canned music played in her ear, eager for her answers. Yet, as one minute ticked into two, her stomach grew queasy.

“Grace. This is Dennis. I’m sorry I kept you waiting.”

She stopped moving, pressing her hand to her stomach as she stared out at the city. “It’s no problem.”

“What can I do for you this afternoon?”

How did she ask what she needed to know? ‘Hey, Dennis, did my dad have a love child?’

Cringing at the idea, she shook her head. “Um, I found some of my mother’s old journals at the Wakeview house. In her final entry, the day before her death, she mentioned that she saw a woman with a little boy—a little boy who looked just like Logan.”

The line stayed silent.

Grace cleared her throat. “I was wondering if you know about another child. Do you know if my father has another son?”

Dennis sighed. “Grace, I’m sure you’ve heard of attorney-client privilege —”

“Yes, I have. But my father’s no longer with us.”

“Unfortunately, this is true. It’s also unfortunate that this is a conversation I can’t have with you. Steve was a client for many, many years. I considered him a friend. Even after his death, I’m not allowed to divulge any conversations that were had in confidence.”

“Then you’re not denying it? My father had another child?”

“I didn’t say that. I shared the estate your father left in trust for his only living daughter. I’m afraid that’s all I can legally divulge.”

She turned away from the view as her frustration grew. “But my father had apologized to my mother. I may very well have another brother.”

“I’m sorry that I can’t help you, Grace. But please let me know how I can assist you with any questions or concerns you might have about the estate.”

She sighed. “Sure.”

“Goodbye, Grace.”

She didn’t bother returning the final pleasantries as she hung up, not entirely sure what to think.

Dennis hadn't confirmed that she had another brother, but he certainly hadn't gone out of his way to put her mind at ease.

She blew out a long breath as she looked at the ceiling. "This wasn't helpful at all."

Glancing around the room once more, she headed downstairs as quickly as she'd come, digging in her purse for the keys to lock up.

She reached for the doorknob as her phone alerted her to a text. Grabbing her phone from her pocket, she read Jagger's message.

*Hey, sexy.*

Not wasting another second, she stepped into the hall, securing the deadbolt before she responded.

*Hey, handsome. How's California?*

*Not too shabby, especially since I'm heading out on the first flight tomorrow. If all goes well, we'll be eating dinner together in person.*

She closed her eyes, relieved that he would be back soon—that she would finally be able to tell him everything and pick his brain. *That's great!*

*I'm going to get things finished up out here so I can get home to you. Are we still on for FaceTime at 6?*

She glanced at her watch, heading for the elevators. She needed to get on the road before the traffic became impossible. *I wouldn't miss it.*

*I miss you.*

She stepped into the elevator, pressing the button for the garage. *I miss you too. I love you.*

*I love you too.*

Shoving her phone away as the doors opened not far from where she parked her SUV, she quickly walked to the driver's side, eager to get back to Preston Valley for her FaceTime dinner and to put several miles between herself and her father's life.

# THIRTY-ONE

GRACE SAT ON THE LIVING ROOM FLOOR, WRITING ON A LONG SHEET OF THE craft paper she kept on hand for Braden's visits.

Braden's love for drawing was coming in handy as she added every date and occasion where Jessica Sawyer's name had appeared in her mother's journals.

Over the last three days, delving into her parents' lives had consumed her. Needing to discover the truth about her potential younger brother had taken on a life of its own.

Seconds after she ended her FaceTime dinner with Jagger last night, she'd grabbed all of her mother's journals, bookmarking dates and any mentions of her long-ago babysitter, plus any disagreements between her mom and dad.

At some point after midnight, she'd gone on the hunt for Braden's roll of paper in the guest room, deciding that writing the dates and corresponding information in a timeline format might give her a clearer picture of when everything had gone so wrong—when a potential brother may have been conceived.

Yawning, exhausted after little sleep and another long day at the shop, she gained her feet as she wore gray yoga pants and a comfy blue sweatshirt, standing over the compiled information, focusing on a time when her mother had been extra busy commuting from the suburbs to Preston Valley to help Aunt Maggie, and Jessica had been a regular in their lives.

"Is that when it happened?" she said in the quiet of the house, looking again at the time frame that seemed to make the most sense.

"It would've had to have been here," she mumbled to herself as she bent

down, circling a potential couple of dates with a red marker. “Right?”

She impatiently swiped at the hairs escaping her messy bun off her cheek. “Mom said the little boy looked to be about two. But what if he wasn’t?”

Sitting down as the doubts crept back in, she read through the pages of the journal again, making certain that she hadn’t missed anything.

Jagger took a left on Summer Street, smiling as the lights on in Grace’s house came into view.

The place looked warm and homey. The woman he loved was inside. Soon they would be eating dinner and the double-fudge brownies she’d mentioned she was making for dessert. They would enjoy some great conversation, then some even better sex. All in all, they were in for a perfect night.

Pulling into the driveway, he wasted little time grabbing his travel bag, their dinner, and the flowers he’d snagged at the grocery store—not as pretty as something he would have found at Simplicity, but it was about the gesture.

He walked up the path and inside, pausing in the doorway as he stared at Grace sitting on the floor, surrounded by long sheets of paper and her mother’s journals.

Her head whipped around. “Jagger.”

He set the food on the entryway table and his bag off to the side. “That’s me.”

She frowned as she looked at the clock before her eyes grew wide. “I completely lost track of time.” She stood, walking to him, wrapping him up in a hug. “I lost track of time,” she said again.

He held her close, breathing her in. “That’s okay.”

“I didn’t make your brownies.” She eased back enough to kiss him. “I’m so sorry.”

He frowned this time, studying her troubled eyes and the dark circles her concealer didn’t quite hide. “We’ll make them together another time.”

“I’m sorry,” she repeated.

“Don’t worry about it.” He looked toward the mess on the floor. “That looks like quite a project.”

She shrugged. “I’ve been looking into some things.”

Needing to touch her, he slid his hands up and down the sides of her waist. “That sounds intriguing.”

She jerked her shoulders again. “I found some stuff in my mom’s last journal. I think my dad might have cheated. I think I have another brother—”

His palms froze against her sweatshirt. “*What?*”

“I know.” She huffed out a breath as she shook her head, stepping away, pacing as she talked. “I went to Philly to talk to Bea. Then I went to Dad’s apartment. I called Dennis Fitch to ask him about it, but he wouldn’t tell me anything.”

The surprises kept coming. “You did all of this *today?*”

“Well, no. I found the entry on Monday. I asked Asa a few questions on Tuesday, but he couldn’t help me much. I went to Bea’s and to Philly yesterday, but I didn’t get a whole lot of information there either.”

He shook his head this time because he was certain he’d heard her wrong. “You’ve known about this since Monday?”

She nodded. “I’m not actually sure that this is anything at all. It seems like it is, but...”

He slid his fingers through his hair, more than a little shocked. “Are you *serious* right now? We’ve been talking on the phone for the last three days. We had dinner together every night.”

She winced. “I know. I just— It seems so unimaginable—so *ridiculous*. I didn’t want to mention it until I needed to. I didn’t want to bother you.”

“Bother me, damn it. Because it’s not a bother.” He walked to the counter, setting the flowers on the quartz, feeling the slow burn of his temper blooming to life.

“Jesus, Grace. Since when is this a thing? We used to talk about everything. You used to tell me everything.”

“Jagger—”

“I need a few minutes.” Mad in a way he’d never been—at least not at Grace, he headed for the door, grabbed his bag, then walked out.

Grace stared at the door, flinching when Jagger turned over his engine.

This wasn’t the way their evening was supposed to *go*.

She was supposed to have paid attention to the time and made Jagger his

favorite brownies. They were supposed to have eaten dinner while they discussed her mother's journal entry and concluded that it was all a big mistake. Then they were supposed to have moved on to the master suite so she could properly welcome him home. She'd even snagged some organic rose petals from the shop to run them a sexy second-dessert bath.

But Jagger definitely wasn't supposed to have left.

Grabbing her purse, she hurried for the door, needing to fix her mistake.

She'd never meant to make Jagger mad. This whole situation was a first for her—for both of them. She'd never lost her father to a tragic accident, then wondered if he'd fathered another child. She'd never kept such a big worry to herself—at least not from Jagger.

She and Jagger had argued before—of course, they had—but he'd never ever left before they worked stuff out.

Getting in her Kia, she drove the two miles to Todd's, letting her shoulders slightly relax when she spotted Jagger's Stingray.

Wasting no time, she ran up the steps to his apartment, giving a quick knock and turning the knob before he had a chance to decide if he would let her in.

She stepped inside the small efficiency space Jagger rarely used, watching as he pulled a long-sleeve T-shirt over his head.

He tossed her a glance from cool eyes as he toed off his dress shoes.

She swallowed because he'd never looked at her like that. "Can we talk?"

"I'm heading out for a run."

"Jagger, I'm sorry."

"I thought we were getting somewhere—that we'd moved past you not trusting me."

She blinked at him, shocked by his words. "I *do* trust you."

He went after the snap on his slacks. "No, you don't. Maybe you can't anymore."

"Jagger." She shook her head, growing slightly afraid of his dismissive tone—another thing that was new. "I didn't want to bother you with something so crazy—or at least I thought it was crazy. I didn't want to keep you from your job."

"So, you lied to me instead?"

Now she gaped. "I didn't *lie* to you. I was handling the situation on my own. I heard you tell Jason you weren't taking jobs because of me. I knew you wouldn't have gone if I'd told you about the journal."

“You’re damn straight I wouldn’t have gone.”

“But I wanted you to. You need to be happy too.”

“I *am* happy. How many times do I have to tell you that?”

“I’m not going to hold you back,” she said in a fierce whisper as her voice grew thick with emotion. Shaking her head again, she turned for the door.

“Grace.”

Ignoring him, she reached for the doorknob.

He snagged her by the arm. “Gracie.”

She turned. “What?”

He pulled her closer. “We’ve talked about this.”

She shrugged.

He tugged again, pulling her against him with his arm wrapped around her waist. “You’re not holding me back.”

She blinked as her eyes grew teary. “When you’re not doing your job because of me, I am.”

“You’re not holding me back,” he repeated, settling his forehead against hers.

She hesitantly rested her hands on his waist. “I was going to tell you everything when you got home, but you had a job to do. I understand that.”

“There’s *nothing* more important to me than you. *Nothing*. If there’s even a chance that your dad has another kid... Jesus, we’re actually having this conversation.”

She nodded. “I know. It’s nuts.”

He held her tighter. “Please don’t keep stuff from me, Gracie. Not the big things. Not the little things.”

She nodded again. “I’m sorry that I lied. That was never my intention. I trust you, Jagger. There’s no one I trust more. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

She pressed her lips to his. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” His mouth came back to hers. “It was a misunderstanding.”

“Please don’t walk away like that again. You’ve never walked out when we’ve had a disagreement.”

He hugged her. “I’m sorry.”

She closed her eyes as she settled her head against his chest, relieved that everything was okay again. “Can we get back to our evening?”

“I’d like that. You can fill me in on what’s been going on.”

## THIRTY-TWO

JAGGER SNUGGLED GRACE ON THE COUCH AS SHE SAT NESTLED IN THE V OF his legs—the spot where they’d chosen to eat their soggy restaurant sandwiches after they got back to her place.

Dirty dishes had been set aside, and a blanket kept them cozy as Grace rested her back against his chest while she laced her fingers with his.

“I wrote down the dates when Jessica was in our lives and where there appeared to be any overlapping issues between my parents. There was a block of time around Thanksgiving when Mom and Dad hadn’t seen each other much. Things had seemed a little strained between them.”

Jagger nuzzled his cheek against her temple, still surprised by what Grace had been up to over the past couple of days. It was *insane* that they were talking about this—Steve potentially having a secret child. “Just because they were having a rough patch doesn’t mean he was cheating on her.”

“I know.” She moved, adjusting to face him, sitting cross-legged between his thighs. “But Mom said the little boy looked so much like Logan. And Logan looked just like Dad. Plus, Dad apologized when Mom went to the office. Why would he apologize if there was nothing to be sorry for?”

Jagger bobbed his head from side to side. “These are all good points, but we’re missing *a lot* in this story. Your mom never got the chance to write anything further. It doesn’t seem like she got an actual explanation from your dad. Nothing was ever confirmed one way or the other.”

She wrinkled her nose. “That’s true.”

“We have a lot of coincidences that could add up to something suspicious because that’s the lens we’re using to look at them. I bet there are a lot of blond two-year-olds who resemble Logan.”

But as Grace had told him about her discoveries, several things were adding up to Grace having another brother.

“So, it’s probably nothing.”

He shook his head. “I didn’t say that. I think we need to continue gathering information.”

She sighed. “We need to find Jessica Sawyer.”

“Definitely. I also think we should discreetly talk to more of the people who knew your dad best. Bea didn’t seem to have much to say when you mentioned Jessica’s name. Certainly nothing negative. Not Asa, either.”

Grace nodded. “I can reach out to Paul, but they had more of a professional relationship.”

He tucked the loose strands escaping her messy bun behind her ear. “What about Colonel Hinders?”

Grace’s back snapped straight.

He captured her hands, playing with her fingers. “I know he’s not your favorite person, but he was your dad’s closest friend. Maybe your dad said something to him.”

She steamed out a long breath. “Sometimes I hate it when you have valid points.”

He grinned, nudging her face closer to his, kissing her lips. “I can talk to him if you’re uncomfortable with the situation.”

She shook her head as she locked her wrists around the back of his neck. “He’s not my favorite person, but I need to know the truth.”

He glanced at his watch. “It’s getting late, but we can try reaching out—do a conference call.”

She exhaled another long breath. “Okay.”

He reached for his phone on the coffee table, searching his contacts, quickly finding the number they were looking for. “Ready?”

She nodded. “If he knows, I want to know everything he does.”

He put the call through.

“Jagger,” the colonel’s voice boomed through the phone after the second ring. “It’s always good to hear from you.”

Jagger watched Grace’s shoulders stiffen as he put the colonel on speaker. “I have Grace here with me. I hope we’re not calling too late.”

“Not at all. Sue and I just finished our dinner. We were out and about this evening. What can I do for you kids?”

Grace cleared her throat. “I found some of my mother’s old journals at

the house in Wakeview. I have some questions about the past that I can't ask either of my parents. I know you talked to my dad regularly."

"I did. It's still hard to believe he's gone."

Jagger couldn't help but feel a wave of sympathy. It wasn't hard to hear the grief in the older man's voice. "Did Steve ever mention anything to you about Jessica, Grace and Logan's babysitter?"

"Jessica? No, I can't say that he did. I always thought Bea helped Rose and Steve."

"She did," Jagger added, not wanting to mention anything further when the colonel clearly had no idea. "Grace was just hoping to track Jessica down."

"I wish I could be more help."

"We appreciate you trying."

The colonel cleared his throat. "You know, Steve and I talked the day before he died."

Jagger nodded. "I remember you mentioning that."

"We did some talking about you, Jagger—about you being stateside again."

He and Grace looked at each other.

"Is that right," Jagger said.

"Steve had been in and out of the country for several weeks, so we hadn't had a chance to connect until our final conversation. I mentioned that you'd come by to pick up your car. We surmised that since your eyes have only ever been pointed in one direction, you would head up to Preston Valley to find Grace."

"You both knew me well," Jagger said, knowing the colonel had more to say.

"Steve asked me if I thought you were home for good. When I told him I imagined that to be the case, he sounded relieved. Pleased, even. He told me he'd been wrong to push you two apart. He said you were both good kids. He made a lot of mistakes, but he wanted you to be happy, Grace."

Grace rushed up to walk to the window, crossing her arms as she stared out.

"I know there has been a lot of bad blood," Colonel Hinders continued. "I know I've played a part in it. I thought you might like to know that Steve had wished he'd done things differently."

Jagger stood, walking up behind Grace, wrapping his arms around her

rigid body, kissing the top of her head. “It’s good to hear,” Jagger confirmed. “We appreciate you telling us.”

“I’m sorry I can’t be more help with the babysitter.”

“We figured it was a long shot but wanted to ask anyway.”

“You kids make sure you keep in touch.”

“We will. Thanks, Colonel Hinders.”

“Anytime. Bye, now.”

“Bye.” He pulled Grace closer as she quietly sniffled. “Will you look at me?”

She turned in his arms as tears trailed down her cheeks. “He knew we were together again.”

He nodded. “It sounds like he did.”

Her chin quivered as more tears fell. “He knew he’d been wrong. He could have come to us. He could have tried to fix things before it was too late. Why didn’t he try?”

He caught the next tear with his thumb as her new wave of grief broke his heart. “He was a proud man. Maybe he didn’t know how. I’m sure he thought he had more time.”

“I’ve been so *angry* at him.”

“The present doesn’t erase the past,” he reminded her.

She shut her eyes as she shook her head. “God, Jagger, everything’s such a mess.”

He stroked her soft skin. “Yeah, it is.”

She met his gaze again. “What if he cheated on my mom? What if I really do have a brother out there?”

“Then we’ll do our best to figure everything out.”

She impatiently swiped at her hair as she huffed out a breath. “All of this is coming at me so fast. I’m starting to realize I hardly knew my dad. He was never father of the year, but I thought he and my mom had a strong marriage.”

“It’s possible that they did. Nothing’s for sure at this point, Grace.”

She shook her head. “It’s more than just the journals and the potential adultery. I had no idea he was passionate about building charitable hospitals and helping overseas.”

He tucked her hair behind her ear as it fell against her cheek again. “You two hadn’t talked for a long time.”

“We were strangers. Colonel Hinders knew him better than I did. Bea,

too. *Everyone* knew him better than I did.”

He saw the agony in her big blue eyes—how clearly this was messing her up. “You knew the best and worst parts of your dad. I’ve seen the pictures of him carrying you or Logan around on his shoulders at the beach or him holding you two on his lap, grinning with you guys on Christmas mornings while you opened your gifts.”

“He was so rarely that man—or at least after Mom died.”

“Your dad had the capacity to be incredibly kind and generous. Steve was funny as hell. But he could also be a dick—the guy who put his own needs first.” He caressed her skin. “But he was your dad.”

She nodded as a tear trailed down her cheek. “I loved him.”

“He loved you too. You and Logan both.”

“He did. Not the way we needed him to, but he did.”

He kissed her, eager to soothe away the worst of her pain. “All of this has been a lot.”

She nodded, wiping away another tear.

“We’re not going to find any more answers tonight.”

“Unfortunately, I imagine you’re right.”

“What if we take that bath you mentioned during our crappy dinner?”

Her brow furrowed.

“Not a sexy bath, Grace. Let me hold you. Let me rub your shoulders and help you relax.” He pressed his lips to hers again. “Let’s lock up. Then we’ll go soak for a while.”

She nodded. “That sounds nice.”

Grace stared at the pale-pink petals floating on the water as she sat wrapped up with Jagger in the warmth and candlelight.

Quiet music played through the bathroom speakers as the delicate scents of vanilla and pumpkin spice filled the pretty space. Even as she tried to relax, she couldn’t stop her mind from racing.

The last couple of hours had been tough. First, her fight with Jagger, and then their shocking conversation with the colonel.

Her dad had known she and Jagger were together again. According to the colonel, he’d been pleased about the present and regretful about the past.

She sighed, still trying to make it all make sense.

“Your brain’s firing up again,” Jagger whispered next to her ear. “I can feel your body tensing up.”

She closed her eyes, pulling his arms tighter around her waist. “I’m sorry. I keep thinking about this entire mess, but I only want to think about you.”

He kissed her neck. “Does it help if I tell you that I love you?”

She smiled. “It does.”

His mouth brushed her skin again. “And what if I mention how good this feels—how I craved moments just like this so many times over the last few years.”

She turned to face him, hooking her legs around his waist as she settled on his lap. “You always know just what to say.”

His eyes tracked over her face as he slid his wet fingers along her jaw. “You’re so damn beautiful, Grace. Sometimes I’m still amazed I wake up with you every morning.”

Her gaze went soft as she stared into his. “You’re definitely a lucky guy. But I’m luckier.”

He sent her one of his crooked grins.

She let her fingers wander down his neck. “I’m sorry this has been a lame welcome home.”

“We’re naked together in the bathtub.” He shrugged as his excellent smile returned. “It hasn’t been all bad.”

“I love it when you smile at me like that.” She kissed the sides of his mouth. “You’re the most gorgeous man I’ve ever seen.”

He winked as he tossed up his chin—one of the cocky gestures she’d often seen in high school.

Without warning, she blinked as her eyes grew teary—as she mourned that nothing could stay as it had when Logan had been happy and healthy. When she’d been able to say that her dad had adored his wife during their happy marriage.

He frowned. “What just happened?”

She shook her head as she battled with waves of gratitude and regret. “I don’t know.”

“Come here,” he said as he wrapped her up in a hug.

She returned his embrace, wrapping her legs tighter around him as she settled her head on his shoulder, loving how right it felt when Jagger held her.

“We’ll get through this,” he murmured.

She nodded.

“I love you, Gracie.”

She kissed his shoulder, then his neck. “I love you, too.” She met his gaze as she felt his erection grow.

“Hey, he’s got a mind of his own. You’re naked, beautiful, and kissing me. Feel free to ignore him.”

She grinned. “I can’t remember if I took my pill this morning. I’m mostly sure I did yesterday, but I’m not positive either.” She winced as she snagged her lip in apology. “I’m afraid I’ve been distracted.”

His hands wandered to her hips, lifting her, sinking her onto him. “Tell me if this isn’t what you want.”

“It’s what I want,” she whispered. “I want you.”

He snagged her lip with his teeth. “I’m going to stare into your eyes while I make you come—while I fill you up.”

She moaned, not caring any more than he did that they weren’t being entirely careful.

He kissed her jaw as his palms slid down to her butt, helping her move slowly up and down.

She whimpered from the delicious friction of moving together—from how her nipples felt rubbing against the slippery skin of his chest. “You feel so good inside of me.”

His mouth captured hers for a deep kiss as he brought his fingers to her front, lazily teasing her.

She wrapped her arms around the back of his neck as each breath came faster—as her hips moved to the rhythm he set with the rubbing of his fingers.

“Jagger,” she shuddered, holding him tighter as her stomach quivered and her legs trembled, feeling herself on the edge.

He nipped at her chin as he added more pressure, sending her over.

She gasped, tipping her head back as she savored the rush of pleasure and heat, crying out, consumed by ecstasy.

Jagger groaned as he wrapped his arms tightly around her. “I love that sound.”

She urgently kissed him as she still trembled from the aftershocks of an excellent orgasm.

He moved her up and down, his breathing changing as he clenched his

jaw.

She pulled herself closer to him yet as they held each other's gazes—as she felt the next delicious build starting.

He kissed her until lips and tongues struggled to meet as they gasped. “Look at me, Gracie,” he choked out seconds before he thrust up, taking her over the edge, moaning as she did, jerking up several times as he filled her full as promised.

Mouths met again as they fought to catch their breath.

She stroked her fingers through his hair as they continued to stare at each other. “I guess we achieved a sexy bath after all.”

He chuckled. “I'm up for something like this whenever you want.”

She smiled. “But we should be more careful.”

He shrugged. “I'm game for babies whenever. If we just made one, I want to remember that I was staring into your eyes when we did.”

She let her forehead rest against his, touched by his words. “Are you saying you want to start trying?”

He slid his hands up and down her back. “Not yet, per se. Do you?”

She shrugged as she shook her head. “Six months ago, I would have said definitely no. Now that we're here like this again, I find myself thinking about it more often.”

“I won't be upset the day you tell me you're carrying our baby,” he said as he tucked her hair behind her ear. “Whether that's in a few weeks or in a year or two doesn't matter much to me. If you forget to take your pill occasionally, I'm more than willing to roll the dice and be okay with whatever the outcome is.”

She sighed, loving the idea of sharing such a miracle with the man she'd adored for nearly half her life. “When that day comes, will you hope for a son or a daughter?”

He shrugged. “I'll be happy with whatever. The baby will be ours. That's all that matters.”

She hummed in her throat. “That's a good answer.”

He smiled.

She reached for his hands, kissing them, staring at his raisin fingers. “We should probably get out.”

“That's not a half-bad idea.” He tugged on the drain, then stood, bringing her with him. “I think we should grab a couple of towels and do this all over again before we both fall asleep.”

She batted her lashes at him. “Yes, please.”

He set her on her feet on the bath mat. “We could always call out of work tomorrow and spend our Friday naked and sweaty.”

She grinned as she wrapped a towel around herself. “As much as that sounds amazing, I have to go into the shop. Work hasn’t had my full attention the last couple of days.”

He rubbed his towel up and down his chest. “No problem. We can do a naked, sweaty weekend.”

“But we have Fright Night on Saturday.”

He made a sound in his throat. “I guess we do.”

Jagger didn’t seem any more excited about the idea of getting dressed up than she did. “Unless we don’t go.”

“How about we play it by ear?”

“You’ve got yourself a deal.” Gaining her tiptoes, she nipped his bottom lip as her hands wandered to his butt. “I know we’re talking about naked and sweaty for this weekend, but I’m more interested in what you’ll do to me tonight.”

Grinning, he walked her backward from the room. “I can’t guarantee we’ll make it to the bed if you keep talking to me like that.”

She laughed as they picked up their pace, stopping by the mattress. She laughed again as they fell together to the sheets.

Grace sat in the desktop’s blue glow as she focused on her search in her office.

She’d dozed off for a couple of hours after she and Jagger had thoroughly exhausted each other, but she’d woken again, restless with her racing thoughts.

When she hadn’t been able to fall back to sleep, she’d gotten up to start searching for the only woman who could confirm or deny her mother’s long-ago suspicions.

“Here we go,” she whispered as she stopped to write down another Jessica Sawyer she found on the latest people search website she perused—this one with an *L* as her middle initial.

This Jessica Sawyer lived in State College, Pennsylvania, and fit the age

bracket Grace was working with for the woman who might be the mother of her potential brother.

Scrolling down, she found the other Jessica options to be in their early fifties or late sixties—definitely not who she was looking for.

Glancing down at her list, she sighed. “Eight.” There were so *many*. And that was just in Pennsylvania.

Closing her eyes, she shook her head. How would she ever track Jessica down?

“Gracie?” Jagger walked to the doorway in his boxers, yawning. “What are you doing?”

She shrugged. “Just some research.”

He moved to where she sat, resting his palms on her shoulders as he studied the names she’d written down.

“What if I can’t find her?” she asked, sliding her fingers through her hair in frustration. “What if she doesn’t even live in Pennsylvania anymore?”

He knelt next to her. “You need to get some sleep.”

She shook her head. “I need to *know*. Did he do it? Did he really cheat on my mom? Do I really have another brother out there?”

Jagger captured her hands, pressing a long kiss to her knuckles. “What if I call Jason in the morning? We can get his PI involved.”

She wanted to say no. She wanted to keep all of this quiet until she knew for sure. But she didn’t say anything as she held his gaze.

“He’s discreet. He’s also good. He can get you the answers you’re looking for a hell of a lot faster than you or I can.”

She blew out a breath, surprised that she continued to hesitate. “I need to know, but I’m afraid. All of this is still sinking in.”

“Of course you are. Of course it is. But if there’s a Jessica Sawyer out there who has a kid, and that kid is your brother, Rod will find them.”

She nodded as she closed her eyes. “Okay.”

He kissed her forehead. “Come back to bed with me, Gracie. You’re exhausted. You need to sleep. I’ll call first thing in the morning.”

“How long do you think it will take?”

He shook his head. “I have no idea. But I’ll make sure Jason and Rod understand this is a priority.”

“Thank you, Jagger.”

“I don’t want you thanking me. We’re a team.” He gained his feet, tugging on her hands. “Come on.”

She followed him to bed, snuggling up with him, staring into the dark, knowing it could be a long time before she had any of her answers.

# THIRTY-THREE

GRACE SAT AT THE EMPTY TABLE AT MYRA'S GOURMET, TYPING UP THE LAST of her notes after her two-thirty meeting.

The third weekend in June was officially booked with the Basha/Holmes wedding and reception. For almost an hour, Grace and the bride-to-be had talked bouquets, boutonnieres, arbor décor, and table flowers for the projected guest list of two hundred.

Simplicity's major events calendar was now completely full for the upcoming year. With every season that came and went, they booked up faster and faster.

Closing her laptop with a sense of satisfaction, she shoved her computer in her bag and put on her jacket before stepping outside into the chilly air.

Crossing the street at the crosswalk, she kept her pace steady on the four-block walk back to Simplicity, knowing that Jen needed to head out to pick up the twins in less than an hour.

"Gracie."

She glanced over her shoulder, stopping when Jagger jogged in her direction, looking gorgeous in dark wash jeans and a gray sweater peeking from the top of his black jacket. She smiled as he stopped in front of her.

"Hey, handsome."

He sent her a small smile. "Hey."

She needed no other words to read him perfectly as she held his gaze. Automatically, she pressed her hand to her stomach as it grew queasy. "Oh, God."

"Let's do this," he said, tugging her into the alleyway out of the occasional gust of wind.

“The PI found them.”

He nodded. “He did.”

“But it’s only been two days. I didn’t realize it would be so quick.” She paced away from him, too overcome with nerves to be still. “I thought this was what I *wanted*. I thought I needed to *know*.”

Jagger snagged her hand, pulling her back to him. “I can tuck the information away for another time, or I can delete it.”

The latter sounded perfect. She suddenly wanted to go back to the day they traveled to Wakeview and to have never gone up to the attic. But finding her mother’s journals—reading potentially hard truths—couldn’t be undone. “No. I need to know.”

“Rod called to give me the rundown before he sent me an email with the details. He couldn’t get out to the location and grab pictures due to his workload, but he was able to track down Jessica Sawyer and her son, Colton.”

“Colton,” she said, whispering her potential brother’s name. “And Rod’s sure this is them?”

Jagger nodded. “This Jessica—Jessica Caroline Sawyer—lived a couple of blocks from your family’s home in the suburbs.”

She swallowed, suddenly remembering riding bikes down the road with Logan and her mother, waving to her sometimes babysitter.

“She completed two years at Pittsburg State before she dropped out,” Jagger continued as he pulled his phone from his back pocket. “She worked at a car dealership in Drakesville for several years before she moved herself and Colton to Millsdale. She’s been working at a spa and boutique ever since.”

“You’re remembering all of this without even looking?”

He nodded as he pointed to his temple. “It’s a steel trap. Learning to memorize stuff quickly was an asset overseas. Being able to keep facts straight kept me alive.”

“Right.”

“Colton’s seventeen,” he went on. “He had a birthday on August ninth. He’s a junior at Millsdale High. He works at Mario’s Pizzeria and started another job a few months ago at Millsdale Automotive.”

Jagger accessed the email, holding his phone so they could both see the screen.

Grace read everything Jagger had just told her, then frowned as he

scrolled through the PI's notes. "It says Colton has been arrested."

Jagger nodded. "He was charged with simple assault in June."

She sighed as she looked at him, already weary that her possible brother was headed down the wrong path. "He's seventeen and has a record."

"That's true, but that appears to be his only brush with the law."

"That doesn't make me feel any better."

Jagger shrugged. "It's not great, but he's hardly a career criminal. Nothing really came of it—just a slap on the wrist. It was probably for a fight. A kid doing stupid kid shit."

Grace sighed again. "Hopefully, he's decided that the juvenile justice system isn't for him."

"Hopefully."

Grace scanned the list of addresses: the location of Jessica and Colton's two-bedroom apartment, Jessica's place of employment, plus the two places Colton worked as well. "They're only a couple of hours away—an hour outside of Philly."

She looked away from the information, staring down at the pavement. "He's been so close this whole time, and I had no idea."

Jagger shoved his phone in his back pocket, then captured her hands, holding her stare with compassion-filled eyes. "We could drive down that way tomorrow if you want. We can see what we see."

She nodded, trying her best to force a smile.

He brought her knuckles to his lips. "What's going on in that noggin of yours?"

She shrugged, attempting to properly put the messy mix of relief and fear into words. "This is supposed to be good. We found him, but I don't know..."

"Come here." He pulled her against him, wrapping her up in a hug.

She held on, cocooning herself in Jagger's warmth and the scent that was him.

"Whatever this is. However this plays out, it'll be okay," he said close to her ear.

She nodded.

"We'll get through everything together."

She nuzzled closer. "I love you, Jagger. So much."

"Right back at you."

She eased back enough to hold his gaze. "As much as I want to call it a

day and go home with you, I need to get back to the shop.”

He glanced at his watch. “It looks like you have about an hour left.”

She wrinkled her nose as she nodded, not entirely interested in running a business when everything felt so unsettled.

“Do you want some company? I can help you close things up.”

Typically, she handled closing alone, but today she didn’t want to. “That sounds nice.”

“What about dinner at home, a fire in the fireplace, and a movie on the couch?”

That sounded like heaven, but she frowned. “It’s Fright Night. I know you were excited to go.”

He shrugged. “My heart’s not really into it anymore.”

Getting dressed up and mingling with two hundred other people was the last thing on her mind. “Are you sure? I thought you wanted to kick Todd’s ass at the costume contest.”

He grinned. “*That* part is tempting, but I’d rather head to the store for whatever we need. Maybe we can break out the panini press.”

She batted her lashes. “You have my attention.”

He smiled again. “We could do turkey, ham, maybe some spinach and tomato, and tons of cheese. We can grab soup at the deli, too. I heard they have lobster bisque on the menu.”

A perfect cozy night with the man she loved. “That sounds amazing.”

“Then it’s a date.”

They clasped fingers and walked the rest of the way to the shop.

## THIRTY-FOUR

GRACE CLUTCHED HER HANDS IN HER LAP AS JAGGER DROVE THROUGH Millsdale's small downtown. She trailed her gaze over the charming yet ancient buildings, searching for their destination among the various restaurants and shops.

"This should be it," Jagger said as he slowed in front of Mario's Pizzeria, pulling into a metered space two spots down from the door.

Grace exhaled a long, slow breath as she focused on the big glass window, watching a young couple order at the counter. "Here we are."

Jagger engaged the parking brake as he let the engine idle. "They're definitely open, so that's good."

"Mm-hmm," she agreed, growing increasingly nauseous—just like she had when they stopped at Jessica and Colton's apartment, only to get no answer when they knocked on the door, and again when they drove by the small car dealership where Colton was also employed, finding it closed. The nervous anticipation—the having no idea what to expect—kept her on edge.

Jagger killed the engine, taking the keys from the ignition. "You've been quiet for the last little while. How are you holding up?"

She nodded. "I'm all right."

He sent her a small smile that let her know he didn't necessarily believe her as he captured her hand, nuzzling her fingers against his chin. "I can go in if you want—check things out."

"I'd like nothing more than to let you, but I have to do this. I need to go with you."

He kissed her knuckles. "He might not even be here, Gracie."

The idea was as appealing as it was horrible. She wanted to get a peek at

Colton as badly as she wanted to go home. “That’s true.”

He pressed his lips to her skin again. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

She shrugged. “That I’ve been obsessed with finding him for the last few days, but now that we’re here, I don’t know if I want all of this to have been a huge mistake or if I want to know that I have another brother.”

He nodded. “Everything about this is a lot. I don’t know how you couldn’t have mixed emotions. But no matter what we find today, I’m right here with you.”

She smiled, never treasuring his support more. “I know you are.”

“How about we get this over with and put you out of your misery.”

“*Please.*” She stopped him with her hand on his arm as he reached for the door handle. “Thank you, Jagger.”

He winked. “Anytime, baby.”

They both got out, meeting at the Stingray’s hood.

Jagger took her hand, lacing his fingers with hers. “Let’s do this.”

She nodded, ready to see what they would see.

Jagger pulled open the door, letting her walk in before him.

She stopped in her tracks, breathing in the scent of fresh pizza as she stared at the teenager taking another order at the counter. “Oh my God. Jagger.”

His grip tightened against her fingers. “Damn.”

She met Jagger’s gaze, recognizing the shock that she felt. “My mom was right. He looks so much like Logan.”

“I’d say we have our confirmation. No DNA test required. What do you want to do?”

She looked at the teenager again—her brother. He was about Logan’s height, but Colton didn’t share the same powerful athletic build their older brother had had. The dark-blond hair was spot-on, but Colton wasn’t as clean-cut as Logan had always been. He had a shaggier cut, long sideburns to go with a day or two’s growth of beard, and an earring in his left ear. But their facial features were nearly identical, except for the color of their eyes. Logan’s had been crystal blue like Grace’s—like their mother’s. Colton’s were brown.

Colton looked their way. “Can I help you guys?”

Grace glanced from Jagger back to Colton. “Yes.” She kept a death grip on Jagger’s hand as they walked to the counter.

Clearing her throat, she made herself smile. “Hi.”

Colton smiled back politely. “Hey. What can I get you today?”

“I don’t— I’m not sure—”

“We’ll take a large pizza,” Jagger said, wrapping his arm around Grace’s shoulders. “Pepperoni, green peppers, and onion on half. We’ll do sausage and jalapeño on the other half.”

Colton wrote their order on a pad of paper, glancing from Grace to Jagger a couple of times. “Anything to drink?”

“Just water,” Jagger said.

“Are you eating here?”

Grace nodded. “Please.”

“That’ll be twenty-one eighty.” Colton held her gaze as Jagger pulled out his credit card, tapping it against the machine.

“If you guys want to take a seat, I’ll bring your pizza out when it’s ready. Bottled waters are over there in the fridge.”

“Thanks,” she and Jagger said at the same time.

“I’ll grab our drinks,” Jagger suggested. “How about grabbing us a couple of seats?”

Grace snagged several napkins, then moved to one of the window tables where they had a view of Main Street and the counter. She sent Jagger a small smile when he set a water in front of her, then sat in the chair across from her. “Thanks.”

He captured her hands, sliding his thumbs along her knuckles. “How are you doing?”

She swallowed as she shrugged. “I’m still trying to take it all in. But that went better than I expected. Not that I expected much of anything. How are you?”

“Officially convinced.”

She smiled again. “I don’t know what to do now. Do we just eat and go?”

Jagger sighed as he looked out the window before he met her gaze again. “Ultimately, that’s up to you. But I’m not sure that saying something to him here is necessarily the best call. This isn’t a simple situation.”

She snagged her lip with her teeth as she shook her head. “No, it’s not.”

“Maybe we should go to the apartment again and try to talk to Jessica.”

She nodded. “It’s probably best if she talks to him first—if she explains that I’m hoping to have a chance to get to know him. On their terms, of course.” She glanced toward the counter, realizing that Colton was looking their way.

Colton looked down, fiddling with his phone at the empty counter.

Grace blew out a breath as she met Jagger's gaze again. "I don't know how much I'll be able to eat. You know I don't have much of an appetite when I'm nervous."

"So, we'll take a few bites and get the rest to go."

She opened her mouth to respond when Colton walked over with their pizza in a box, tossing it onto the table. "Feel free to take this to go."

Grace blinked up at him as he stared at her with heat in his eyes.

"I thought I recognized you. Both of you." Colton briefly looked at Jagger before his hostile gaze zeroed in on Grace again. "Steve's daughter and the football star. I've seen pictures of the good doctor with you both online. Dear old dad."

Grace's stomach clenched as she found herself caught off guard by just how angry he was. "I'm sorry if we surprised you. I wasn't sure what to do—how to introduce myself."

Colton tossed out a humorless laugh. "He's dead, so you decided to pop up. Better late than never, right?"

Grace flinched.

"Watch it," Jagger said in an unmistakable warning tone.

Colton seared Jagger with another scathing look before he held Grace's gaze. "Let's make sure this is a one-time thing." He gestured between the two of them. "I have no interest in knowing you. *Any* of you. We share some DNA, but you're nothing to me. Don't bother coming back again."

Colton walked off, then stopped, looking over his shoulder. "Oh, and don't worry. I didn't spit in that." He tossed his chin toward their pizza box.

Jagger stood. "Let's go."

Grace gained her feet, walking on watery legs to the exit as the other patrons at their tables looked at them.

She headed for the car, getting in the passenger side, holding Colton's glaring gaze through the restaurant glass as Jagger started the engine and backed out in the tense silence.

Jagger headed back toward the interstate, glancing at Grace as she gripped her arms across her chest and stared out her window.

As complicated, long-lost sibling experiences went, that had to be about as shitty as they got.

He clenched his jaw, thinking of how Colton had spoken to Grace. It had taken all his self-control not to stand up and shut the kid up. But Colton had said what he needed to say, and Grace officially had her answers.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

She shook her head. “But I’m fine.”

He raised his brow because they both knew she was the exact opposite of ‘fine.’ “No, you’re not.”

She shook her head again seconds before she covered her face with her hands and started crying.

“Fuck,” Jagger whispered as he quickly took a right into the tire and lube joint’s empty parking lot. “Grace.”

She kept her face covered as she sucked in several shuddering breaths.

Getting out, he walked to Grace’s side, opening her door. Reaching in to undo her safety belt, he pulled her out of her seat. “Let me hug you, Gracie.”

She wrapped herself around him, burying her face against his chest.

Exhaling a big sigh, he slid his hands up and down her back. “I’m sorry that sucked.”

“I never thought this would be easy, but I had no idea it would be like *that*. I think it’s safe to say that he knows—that he hates me.”

He rested his cheek against her hair, hurting for her. “He’s angry. He has a right to be. But not at you. Nothing about this situation is your fault.”

She eased back enough to look at him. “I have another brother. He’s alive. But I’ll never know him. How cruel is that?”

He wiped at her tears with his thumbs, wishing there was a way to make *anything* about this situation even remotely better. “That’s his choice. That’s his loss, Grace.”

She sniffled as another tear fell. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. He made himself perfectly clear. But how do I forget about him?”

“You don’t. But you move on. We keep moving forward. You work at the shop, and we go on our trip to Montana on Thursday. We have a damn good time. Maybe he’ll come around at some point.”

She nodded. “I hope he will.”

He kissed her. “What can we do to cheer you up? There are still plenty of hours left on our Sunday. How do you want to spend them?”

She shook her head as she shrugged. “I don’t know. I have no idea.”

“We could grab your camera. We could go somewhere, and you can take some pictures.”

She wrinkled her nose as she shook her head. “I’m not really in the mood for pictures.”

He hated seeing her so damn *sad*. Grace yearned for family. She’d always yearned for family. Aunt Maggie was her only living relative, but she had plenty of amazing friends. “Didn’t you say Christy and Mike were taking Brennan and some of his friends to the indoor water park this afternoon?”

She frowned. “Yes.”

“So, let’s grab our bathing suits and go crash the party.”

“You want to go hang out with a bunch of six-year-olds?”

He grinned. “I want to have fun with *you*. We’ll go on some slides, float on the lazy river—give Mike and Christy a hand. I remember that place having a hell of a chocolate milkshake.”

She closed her eyes as she laughed. “We haven’t been to the aqua park since high school.”

“Which is why we should *go*.”

“I guess that does sound kind of fun.”

“You’re damn right it does. I heard they added one of those surf pad things this last summer. All of the kids at the dojang assure me it’s ‘way cool.’ And that’s a direct quote.”

She grinned now. “This wasn’t how I saw our day playing out. At all. But I like it.”

He nuzzled his forehead against hers. “Stick with me, baby. I’m full of surprises.”

She chuckled. “I’ll text Christy on the way home and see if she wants us to bring anything.”

He held her gaze, relieved that she didn’t look quite so miserable anymore. “I’m slightly embarrassed to admit that I’m really looking forward to this.”

She laughed as she rolled her eyes. “Then let’s get going.”

He hurried around to his side, determined to keep the light in Grace’s eyes. Things weren’t working out as she’d hoped, but he and Grace were going to pick up the pieces and get back to the damn good life they were building.

## THIRTY-FIVE

JAGGER PULLED UP IN FRONT OF MARIO'S PIZZERIA, PARKING IN THE SAME metered spot he occupied yesterday.

He took off his seat belt and then killed the engine, staring at the kid through the restaurant window who'd told him and Grace to fuck off.

He'd planned to leave things the way they'd been left, but he'd watched Grace force too many smiles at the water park and then at dinner last night.

When they got out of bed this morning to start their day, she'd wrapped herself around him, telling him she needed a minute to hold on.

She was hurting—a consistent theme in her life when it came to matters with her father.

Steve had always been an excellent provider, but as a loving, supportive dad, he'd sucked ass. Even from the grave, he continued to bring his daughter pain.

Jagger sighed as he glanced at his watch, well aware that Grace's little brother should have been at school instead of slinging pizzas for minimum wage.

It was clear that Colton Sawyer had more in common with Logan than the Evans' good looks. Colton was making shitty life choices like his big brother had.

Getting out, he went inside, meeting Colton's gaze. On cue, he watched hostility fill the kid's brown eyes.

Colton shook his head, not bothering to hide his disgust. "And he's back. The football star."

Jagger walked up to the counter in the mostly empty restaurant. "My name's Jagger."

“I don’t care. *Jagger.*”

“Look, man. Grace doesn’t know I’m here. I’m not planning to harass you—”

“Yet here you are.”

“You made yourself perfectly clear,” Jagger continued, ignoring the kid’s nasty attitude. “But that doesn’t mean you’re not making a mistake. Grace had no idea you existed until last week.”

“Thanks for filling me in. That makes everything better.” Colton leaned his arms against the counter, his posture rigid with vile condemnation. “So, tell me this. Big sister’s swung by. You’re here again. Why hasn’t big brother stopped by to plead his case?”

Jagger ignored the embers of irritation, reminding himself that Colton was a stupid, pissed-off kid—something he had once been. “Because he’s dead.”

Colton stood straight again as he blinked his surprise. “Oh.”

“Apparently it’s been a while since you went hunting for information.”

Colton jerked his shoulders. “I looked Steve up after I found out who the asshole was that wanted nothing to do with me. I saw his perfect little family on Google Images and decided you could all fuck off.”

Jagger nodded, even when Colton clearly had it all wrong. “Steve’s family was far from perfect.”

“Yeah. Poor little rich kids,” Colton said as he touched his hand to his heart.

Jagger clenched his jaw, deciding it was time to get to the point. He only had so much patience. “From what I can tell, you’re short on family. Your life’s not exactly heading in an exciting direction—”

Colton scoffed out a laugh. “Fuck you, man. I’m doing just fine.”

Jagger raised his brow. “A juvenile record and dream employment. Serving pizzas and washing cars at a dealership.”

Colton’s shoulders snapped straight as his eyes grew wide. “You checked me out?”

“You’re damn right. Do you think I would let you anywhere near Grace until I had some idea of who you are?”

Jagger pulled a business card out of his pocket that listed his name and cell phone number on it—discreet the way Jason Gray liked it. He set it on the counter. “Toss this or keep it. I won’t be back. I just hope you’ll give Grace a chance. She’s a hell of a woman to have in your corner.”

Jagger glanced again at the kid who looked so much like Logan, then turned and left. It was unlikely they would hear from him, but he'd done what he could.

Getting behind the wheel, he secured his safety belt, then reversed, eager to drive the two hours home to Grace. They had dinner to make and packing to do. They were heading to Montana in three days.

## THIRTY-SIX

JAGGER WALKED INTO THE BEDROOM, WEARING A PAIR OF RATTY GRAY SWEAT joggers as he carried a bag of travel snacks. “I grabbed the granola bars and mixed nuts. Do you want the apples, too?”

Fresh out of the shower, Grace glanced over her shoulder, wrapped in her dark-pink robe with her hair tied back in a messy bun. “It’s a six-hour flight, and our connection in Denver is tight. Snacks might be all that we have until we get to Bozeman.”

He nodded. “I’ll grab a couple for us.”

“Thanks.” She sent him a smile, then looked back at the list on her iPad. “Other than my camera equipment, I think we have everything.”

Unable to resist, he walked up behind her, wrapping his arms around her. No matter what she wore, Grace was sexy as hell. He breathed in the scent of soap and shampoo as he settled his cheek against hers. “I’m looking forward to tomorrow—to spending this next week with you.”

She hummed her agreement, leaning her weight against him as she set her iPad on the suitcase, then brought her hands up to rest on his forearms. “Our first real vacation without chaperones.”

He grinned. “They sort of cramped our style on our junior year trip to Europe.”

She turned her head to meet his eyes. “*Mostly* they did.”

He chuckled, knowing she remembered them sneaking into the hotel bathroom for a couple of quickies after her two roommates finally fell asleep.

“Those were good times.” Dropping the bag of snacks on top of their luggage, he moved his hands to palm her breasts. “Thinking about you pressing your face into my neck to stay quiet is getting me hot.”

Her breathing changed as she wiggled her ass against his erection. “That might be why I brought it up.”

He quickly untied the knot in the belt on her robe, tossing the entire thing away, sensing that Grace wasn’t looking for romance. “You’ve always been smart.”

She moaned, locking her arms around the back of his neck while he teased her nipples to points. “I certainly have my moments.”

Already revved high, forever turned on by Grace, he lowered his hand down to play. Rubbing, circling, invading sensitive skin, he loved the sound of each whimper and gasp—the way she grew wetter as she started to tremble.

“Right there. Right there. Keep doing that,” she begged. And then her arms pulled him closer as her thighs tightened before she froze, calling out as she went wild.

“Damn,” he murmured, waiting for her climax to ebb before he freed himself from his pants, then walked her to the bed, bending her over the mattress, yanking her hips up to enter her from behind.

He groaned, sinking deep, making certain each slow thrust hit her just right, *loving* her loud moans.

“Jagger,” she choked out, clutching at the sheets as she pulsed around him, orgasming again.

He moved to turn her over. “Come here,” he panted out, wrapping his arm around her waist, bringing her to the middle of the bed.

“Right now, Jagger,” she said with rosy cheeks and blue eyes glazed with passion.

He heard his primal groan as he shoved her knees to her shoulders, pushing himself deep into Grace’s tightness. “You feel so *good*, Gracie.”

“Fast,” she whispered. “Go fast.”

Nearly undone, he gave Grace what she wanted, pumping his hips like pistons, staring into her eyes.

And then she tipped her head back, calling his name.

With a final thrust, he followed, groaning loudly as he jerked with the power of his pleasure.

“Gracie,” he said, letting her legs go, settling his body on top of hers.

She hummed her satisfaction, kissing his neck as her arms came around his sweaty waist. “That was top-notch, Mr. Tennyson.”

He chuckled as he lifted his head to look at her. “I aim to please.”

Smiling, she kissed his lips. "Mission accomplished."

He brought his mouth back to hers, playing his tongue against hers, unwilling to take for granted that they were lying here like this. "There's more where that came from."

She raised her brow. "Oh, really?"

He rolled, bringing her with him to lie on top of him the way she always did. "The Energizer Bunny has nothing on me, baby."

She grinned. "I'm not sure I'll be able to walk to the plane if we keep this up."

He laughed, sliding his hands up and down her waist. "That's something we should keep in mind."

She nuzzled her forehead against his. "Definitely."

He glanced at the clock, realizing that it was nearly eleven. "I guess we should think about catching some Zs."

"We should." She kissed him. "But I'm going to ride you first."

He wiggled his brow. "Do what you must."

She laughed, nipping at his chin before she sat up. "Since we just did fast, I was thinking of going nice and slow."

He nodded, lacing their fingers. "It's good to cover all the bases."

They smiled at each other, then his phone started ringing.

Grace moved enough to look at the screen on the bedside table. "Millsdale Police Department?"

Jagger sat up, snagging the phone, keeping Grace close with his arm around her waist. "Hello?"

"Yes, hello. This is Officer Dean Mathis with the Millsdale Police Department. Is this Jagger Tennyson?"

He held Grace's gaze. "It is."

"Mr. Tennyson, we have Colton Sawyer down here with us. We haven't been able to reach his mother, so he asked us to call you. You're Colton's brother-in-law?"

He scratched at his jaw. "Uh, yeah. Close enough."

"I don't understand what that means, sir."

"Colton's sister is sitting right here next to me."

"Are the two of you able to come get him? Otherwise, we'll have to process him for placement."

Jagger held Grace's gaze, waiting for her to tell him what they were going to do.

She nodded as she got off the bed, heading for the dresser.

He rubbed at the back of his neck as the tension immediately set in. “Yeah, we can do that. Why is he there? What did he do?”

“We were called out to a party after a fight broke out. Witnesses are saying Colton was involved. He’s also been drinking.”

Jagger sighed, watching Grace put on a bra and panty set, then reach for a pair of jeans. “Grace and I live up in Preston Valley. We’re a couple of hours away from taking him off your hands.”

“That’s not a problem. He’ll be here when you get here.”

“Do me a favor, and don’t tell him we’re coming. Let him sweat for a bit.”

“I can do that. Thank you, Mr. Tennyson.”

“Sure thing.” He hung up, looking up to the ceiling, blowing out a long breath. “Why does this feel so familiar?”

Grace pulled a sweatshirt over her head. “He’s in trouble, Jagger.”

He got to his feet, heading toward the chest of drawers. How many times had they had the same conversation about Logan? “Yeah.”

She tugged the scrunchie from her hair, combing her fingers through all of the shiny blond. “They can’t get ahold of Jessica. We can’t just leave him there.”

He pulled on a pair of boxers. “We could.”

She frowned at him. “Jagger—”

“This is something you want to do—to get involved in? You want to head down this road again?”

“He’s my brother.”

“Technically, yes.”

She huffed out an irritated laugh. “Why are you acting like this?”

“Because the kid’s a punk. He basically told you to fuck off. I went to see him again on Monday to try to smooth things over—hence him knowing my phone number—and he was just as big of a dick.”

“We can’t just let him be there. We never left Logan—”

He stopped as he pulled on a pair of jeans. “Colton is *not* Logan.”

“I understand that.”

He held her gaze. “Do you?”

“Of course I do.”

“We’re most likely going to miss our trip. He’ll be our responsibility until we can track Jessica down.”

She stared at the floor, wrapping her arms around herself. “I know this isn’t fair. I understand what I’m asking of you. I want to go to Montana, too.”

And now he was the one being the dick. He walked to stand in front of her. “I’m sorry.” He captured her hands, kissing her knuckles when she said nothing. “Will you look at me?”

She met his gaze. “He’s my brother, Jagger. I can’t pretend he doesn’t exist the way my dad clearly did.”

He nodded. “I know. Let’s go pick him up.”

Grace walked into the small, no-frills police station with Jagger by her side, catching sight of Colton sitting next to one of the officers at a desk, sleeping with his face covered by his arms.

“Good morning,” the policewoman said, sitting at the front desk.

Grace smiled. “Good morning. I’m Grace Evans. We were called down here to pick up my brother, Colton Sawyer.”

“Colton Sawyer,” the officer called over her shoulder. “Rise and shine, buddy. Your sister’s here.”

Colton sat up, blinking his right eye. The one that wasn’t swollen shut.

Jagger exhaled a quiet sigh next to her. “I guess there’s no way to say he wasn’t fighting.”

The policewoman faced them again. “You’ll be taking Colton home with you?”

Grace nodded. “He’ll be staying with us until we can find Jessica. His mother.”

The woman nodded as she handed over a clipboard. “If you can fill out this paperwork, someone will be in touch with details about his hearing before the judge. The other boy’s family isn’t pressing charges for the fight, but because Colton is underage and under the influence, we’ll pass his file to the court intake officer and see what he wants to do.”

Grace swallowed, struggling to force another smile she didn’t feel. “Thank you.”

She filled in her address and phone number, then signed her name, taking responsibility for Colton’s care for the time being.

Colton walked over, wearing blue jeans and a white T-shirt under his

navy-blue jacket.

“Keep yourself out of trouble,” the woman said to Colton.

Colton rolled his good eye. “Whatever.”

“Try again,” Jagger said, clearly unamused.

“Sure.” Colton looked at the officer, tossing her a sarcastic smile. “I’ll do that.”

Grace tucked her hair behind her ear, not sure what to say to the kid who appeared to be hostile and rude to everyone. “Um, let’s go home.”

Colton walked out, following them to the Sorento, getting in the back seat.

She held Jagger’s gaze as he walked to the driver’s side. “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head. “We’re good.”

She continued to hold his stare because that wasn’t entirely true.

He winked, sending her a small smile. “We’re good.”

Getting in as Jagger did, she buckled her belt, then reached down for the instant freezer pack she’d snagged from the first aid kit in the laundry room closet—just in case.

Giving it a solid smack, she handed it to Colton as Jagger reversed from their spot and exited the parking lot. “Here. Put this on your eye.”

Colton took it. “Thanks.”

Grace studied his battered knuckles as he settled the ice pack in place. “We’ll get your hand cleaned up when we get to the house.”

Colton shook his head. “You guys can just drop me off at the apartment. I’m sure you know the address since you looked me up.”

Grace shook her head this time. “We told the officer we were taking you home with us.”

Colton sat back. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“We can turn around and bring you back to the police station,” Jagger added as he gained speed in the quiet downtown.

“Whatever,” Colton muttered as he closed his eyes.

“Where’s your mother?” Jagger asked next.

“Probably with her boyfriend. We don’t talk much.”

“We’ll get things figured out with her in the morning,” Grace assured.

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Grace turned to the front, staring out into the dark in the tense silence.

Jagger snagged her hand, gently squeezing as he took the on-ramp to the interstate.

Two hours passed in centuries before they eventually pulled into her driveway.

Grace looked behind her again, giving Colton's leg a gentle shake. "We're here."

Colton sat up, staring at the house. "This is it?"

"This is it," Grace said, getting out and glancing toward the pretty home she'd made. "We'll get you settled in."

Colton followed them up the walkway as Jagger unlocked the front door, letting Colton in first.

He turned a slow circle, nodding. "Nice place."

Grace sent him a small smile, trying to gauge if he meant it. "Thank you."

"It's not what I was expecting. I figured there would be more rooms—more square footage. I mean, you're loaded, right? Dr. Dad had to be worth a few million."

Jagger clenched his jaw as he took off his coat. "Your room's down the hall—second on the right. Feel free to close the door and stay there for the rest of the night."

Colton scoffed out a laugh as he headed in the direction Jagger had mentioned. "No problem."

Grace looked at Jagger, knowing she'd made a horrible mistake. "We should get some sleep."

Before Jagger could respond, she headed for the bedroom.

## THIRTY-SEVEN

GRACE HEADED TOWARD THE DRAWER TO GRAB A PAIR OF PAJAMAS BUT moved to the French doors instead. She walked outside into the cold, struggling not to burst into tears.

Sitting on the memorial bench under the maple tree, she stared up at the stars as she took several deep breaths.

The familiar heartsickness and stomachache were back—the fearful, helpless energy she hadn’t felt in years. Not since Logan had been alive.

Driving to Millsdale had been a terrible idea. Bringing Colton home to Preston Valley had been an even bigger mistake.

Jagger came out, sitting down, settling her favorite fleece blanket over them. “Hey.”

She tried to smile. “Hey.”

He hooked his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close and kissing her hair.

She nestled against him, breathing him in, savoring the warmth as she stared into the dark. “You were right. I look at Colton, and I see Logan. But he’s not. He’s his own person. He’s my brother, but he’s not. Logan was my brother, but by the end, he was just as much of a stranger as that boy is inside our house.”

Jagger sighed, wrapping her up tighter. “Grace—”

She shook her head, needing to finish—to say out loud all of her thoughts. “Over the last few days, I let myself create these fantasies about having with Colton what I’d had with Logan—*our* Logan before the injury and the drugs. But that’s not possible. Logan and I had each other our whole lives. Our bond was irreplaceable and something that can’t be duplicated.

And I wouldn't want to."

Jagger kissed her head again. "Everything about this situation is tough."

Her eyes watered as she sat up, looking at him. "I've been terribly selfish, and I'm sorry. We're going to miss our trip. I put him before us, and that never should have happened."

He skimmed his knuckles along her jaw. "We can still go to Montana, Grace. We just have to finagle some things."

She pulled away from his touch. "Please don't be kind when I don't deserve it. I messed up."

"Do you think it doesn't mess with my head when I look at him? You wanted to help him. How can I be pissed about that?"

She closed her eyes as she shook her head. Everything was so *complicated* again. "I see a kid who needs help. I see someone who's dealing with the aftermath of my father's carelessness. I don't think I can walk away from that."

Jagger nodded as he captured her hand. "I get it."

"But I don't know if I can do this again," she confessed in a whisper, losing her battle with her tears, never feeling more torn. "He's hateful and awful the way Logan became. I don't know if I can ride that roller coaster a second time."

Jagger gave her fingers a gentle squeeze. "I get that, too, but if this is something you want to take on, I'll be right by your side."

She sniffled as she wiped at her cheeks. "But you don't like him."

"I don't *know* him. But I see what you see—a kid in trouble. He's on a fast track to juvie or worse. I'm not sure I can walk away from that any more than you can."

"He seems determined to hate me—to hate us both. We might not be able to help him."

Jagger nodded. "That's true. He has to want to help himself. But we can try. We'll do what we can to help him together."

She swiped at her cheeks again. "What does that mean to you? What does that look like?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I guess it'll look like whatever it needs to look like."

"We have no idea where Jessica is. Colton's been arrested twice. Things don't seem to be going well in Millsdale."

"So maybe he stays here for a little while. For a fresh start. But he has to

go to school and get a job. He needs to stay out of trouble—to stop being an asshole.”

“That’s a lot to ask of you, Jagger. You were so good to Logan, even when he didn’t deserve it. You’ve always been so good to me. You really want to take this on?”

“There’s *nothing* I wouldn’t do for you. I *love* you, Gracie. I’m on board if you want to give this kid a chance.”

She wrapped her arms around him. “I don’t know what to do.”

He slid his hand up and down her side. “We’ll do what we always do—the only thing we can do. Take things one step at a time.”

She eased back again to hold his gaze. “We need to find Jessica. And I have to tell Aunt Maggie. I haven’t wanted to, but Colton’s *here*.”

“We’ll get everything figured out.”

She exhaled a long breath, trying to believe his reassurances. “You’re truly the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“Ditto, baby.” He touched her cheek. “You know, you apologized to me, but I have an apology I owe you.”

She frowned. “For what?”

“For going to see Colton without telling you. I know we don’t keep secrets from each other, but I also know how much all of this has been hurting you. I needed to try to do what I could to fix things.”

She leaned into his touch. “I appreciate the apology, but I’m not upset. You were trying to help me, Jagger.”

He nodded. “I was. I want to make this better for you.”

Her heart melted from the way he loved her so beautifully. “Thank you.”

He tucked her hair behind her ear. “How do you feel about trying to get some sleep?”

She nodded, growing tired as the worst of the emotional storm passed. “We can talk some more in the morning.” She rolled her eyes because it was already after four a.m.

Jagger stood, holding out his hand. “Come on.”

Moments later, Grace locked the door behind them, then walked to the hallway, noting that the light was still on in Colton’s room.

“Do you think we should check on him?”

Jagger shook his head, closing their door before he took off his jeans and shirt, tossing them on the stool in the corner. “Let’s let him be.”

Grace quickly changed into a pair of yoga pants and a sleep cami as

Jagger pulled back the covers and got into bed.

“Come lie down with me.”

She got in, settling beside him, sighing with her head on his shoulder.

“This feels good.”

He stroked his fingers along her arm. “Get some sleep.”

She nodded. “I’ll make us a nice breakfast when we get up. We can try to break the ice with your favorite French toast.”

“That sounds like a hell of an idea.”

It was the least she could do after she’d ruined their vacation. “I’m sorry again, Jagger. About Montana. About everything. I’ll see what I can do about our reservations after breakfast.”

She felt him shake his head. “It’s all going to work out. Get some sleep, Gracie.”

“I love you.”

He snuggled her closer as she turned on her side. “I love you too.”

# THIRTY-EIGHT

JAGGER OPENED HIS EYES WITH GRACE WRAPPED UP IN HIS ARMS AS HE stared at the sunlight shining through the windows.

They should have been out of the house hours ago to catch their Denver-based flight, but here they lay in Grace's bed in Preston Valley.

Determined to make the best of their mostly shitty situation, he nuzzled his face against Grace's soft neck, then kissed her skin as he wrapped his arms tighter around her when she stirred. "I have French toast on the brain. I'm pretty sure that's your fault."

"Mmm," she said as she rolled over to smile and kiss his lips.

He slid her hair back from her face, studying her sleepy blue eyes. "Morning."

Her smile returned. "Morning."

"How did you sleep?" He glanced at the bedside clock. "For six whole hours."

"Like a rock." She kissed him again. "I'm rested and ready to make your favorite French toast. With cinnamon apples, of course. We can also add eggs and bacon."

He groaned. "Now you're just trying to turn me on."

She laughed. "I'm always happy to turn you on."

He grinned as he moved to settle himself on top of her. "So, you're thinking like me—a quickie, then breakfast?"

She laughed again as she rolled her eyes. "Mostly, I was just thinking about breakfast."

Still smiling, he kissed her forehead, then her nose. "Hey, it's your loss."

She chuckled. "I agree. But I'll make it up to you later, handsome." Her

smile dimmed as she slid her fingers along his temple. “Now that it’s six hours later, how do you feel about our conversation—about helping Colton?”

He sighed, recognizing that the life they were building had the potential to change in a big way. But he wasn’t ready to turn his back on the lost, angry kid in the room across the hall. “I’m still on board. What about you?”

She nodded. “Me too.”

He opened his mouth to say something more when the quiet bump in the hallway and the shoes tiptoeing down the hall caught his attention. Hurrying out from beneath the covers, he moved to the door, already certain their guest was planning his escape.

Caring little that he only wore boxers, Jagger headed down the hallway as Colton’s hand reached for the front doorknob. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Colton whipped around with his eye looking worse than it had last night. “Home.”

Grace walked past Jagger, pulling a sweatshirt over her sleep top. “You must be hungry. I was going to make us some breakfast.”

Colton shrugged. “I’m good.”

Jagger clenched his jaw, growing annoyed. No vacation. Now, no French toast either. Enough was enough. “Go get in my car. The keys are in the bowl.”

Colton shook his head. “I’ll take an Uber.”

“I’m not making a request.”

The kid glared now. “I don’t have to listen to you.”

Jagger rubbed at his jaw, deciding how to play things. Colton had a hell of a chip on his shoulder—similar to the one he’d had before he met Master Isaac. It was doubtful ‘nice’ would get him very far. Kids like Colton didn’t trust ‘nice.’ “Yeah, you do. Grace signed her name to say she’s responsible for you. Plus, there’s the fact that I’m bigger than you.”

Colton yanked the keys out of the bowl. “Whatever, man.”

“And when I get outside, you better be there. If I have to come find you, it’s gonna piss me off.”

Colton muttered something about fucking off under his breath before he slammed the door closed behind him.

Jagger stared up at the ceiling as he blew out a breath. “I think we need a rain check on breakfast.”

Grace hurried over to him, settling her palm on his arm. “I’m so sorry,

Jagger.”

“Stop apologizing.” He captured her hands, kissing her knuckles in the way that he liked to do. “Colton and I are going to hang out for a while. We’ll probably be gone for most of the day.”

Grace frowned. “Where are you going?”

“On a field trip.”

Her frown deepened. “What does that mean?”

“It means we’re going to straighten some things out.” He kissed her lips this time. “I need to get dressed before he decides to steal my car.”

He went to the bedroom, pulling on the jeans he’d worn last night, then grabbed fresh socks and a shirt from the drawer. This wasn’t how he’d planned to spend the day, but he was following the hunch he’d toyed with in the wee hours of the morning, deciding that it still felt like a good idea.

He and Colton would come to an understanding before the day’s end.

When he walked back to the kitchen, Grace handed him a cup of coffee in a thermal mug. “Thanks.”

“I can make you guys toast for the road, but something else will take longer.”

He shook his head as he headed to the entryway for his sneakers. “We’ll grab something while we’re out.”

“I can have dinner ready when you get back.” She nibbled her lip. “Most teenagers like lasagna, right?”

“*You* like lasagna. *I* like lasagna. He can choke it down for all I care.”

She smiled. “I’ll see what I can do about our reservations and try to get in touch with Jessica, too.”

He put on his jacket, then kissed her again. “I wish I could be here with you for that.”

“I’ll be all right.”

He had no doubt that she would be. Grace had never been anything but strong. But he wanted to offer her support for the undoubtedly hard and awkward conversation she was bound to have. “We’ll be back later. As to whether he’ll be alive, that remains to be seen.”

She grinned. “Alive is always a good thing.”

His mouth met hers again before he opened the door. “I’ll text you when we’re on our way home.”

She stood in the doorway. “Okay.”

Walking to the car, he got in, quickly turning over the ignition. He backed

out, waving to Grace before he drove off.

Colton crossed his arms as he sat ramrod straight in his seat. “I don’t know why you didn’t just let me get an Uber.”

Jagger turned onto Main Street. “Because we’re not going to Millsdale.”

Colton looked at him. “Then where the hell are we going?”

“To give you an education.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means we’re going to Wakeview.”

Colton sat back with a huff. “What the hell’s in Wakeview? There’s nothing I need to see in Wakeview.”

“I guess we’ll see.” He turned on the music, not interested in listening to Colton bitch before he pulled into the local McDonald’s for burritos. They definitely weren’t Bea’s famous French toast with cinnamon apples and a side of bacon and eggs, but they would have to do.

Three hours later, Jagger drove through an area that was as hopeless as it had always been with its boarded-up houses, gang-tagged buildings, and trash-littered alleyways. He turned down a street he hadn’t been on in over a decade, hating the hell out of being there.

Colton sat up as he looked around. “What is this place? Why are we here?”

“Because I wanted to correct some of your ideas—most of your ideas—about who you think I am. Who you think Grace is.”

Jagger rolled to a stop in front of the small two-story shithole that looked just as run-down and depressing as it always had, but now there was an orange foreclosure notice taped to the door and an auction sign in the yard.

“I can see that my mother’s finally gotten her shit together.” He shook his head, mostly surprised that it had taken this long for the bank to finally take the house. “My guess is she’s back in jail instead of finding the next guy to pay her bills.”

Colton looked at him. “This is your place?”

He nodded, gesturing to the last name on the battered mailbox. “It was. Until Logan’s football coach saw Logan and me throwing the ball before the start of our sophomore year in high school. Steve came knocking on my door one afternoon—asked me if I wanted to play football for Sheraton Prep. He gave me an out, and you bet your ass I took it.”

Jagger accelerated again, tightening his grip on the wheel as two blocks turned into three, and he spotted the chain-link fence at the junkyard.

How many times had he seen this place in his nightmares?

Slowing, staring at the spot where he remembered carrying Logan out, he stopped.

Colton looked around. "Let me guess, you lived here, too."

Ignoring Colton's snarky comment, Jagger did his best to relax his shoulders. "That's where I found Logan the night he called me to come pick him up. They'd shot him, and I almost didn't answer the phone."

He clenched his jaw, barely able to tolerate remembering the worst night of his life as he sat idle in the car, mere steps from where it had all played out. "He was half-alive when I got him in the car. I'll never be sure, but I think he might've died where you're sitting."

Colton's good eye filled with horror as he blinked. "Why the hell did you keep the car?"

"Because I can't seem to get rid of it. Maybe it's because I love the damn thing. Maybe it's a punishment for not saving him. I'm not sure which. I imagine it's a bit of both."

Unable to be there any longer, he took off, heading toward the place that had changed his life for the better.

Fifteen minutes later, he turned onto Sheraton Way, then into the mansion's circular driveway, where a For Sale sign had been put in the yard.

Colton shook his head as he looked around. "This must be where Dr. Dad's millions went. It must have been super rough growing up here."

And there was the pissy sarcasm again. "Yeah, those poor little rich kids, right?"

Colton jerked his shoulders.

"Their mom died, and their dad dumped them off here to be raised by the housekeeper. Steve stayed in Philly in a condo, remarried a few months later, and rode Logan's ass until the kid couldn't breathe—until he decided that pain pills were the answer. Grace. The perpetual peacekeeper and the one who was constantly stuck in the middle. She's always just rolled with the punches. And she's had more than her fair share."

Colton shrugged again. "I guess we've all got our problems." But there was no derision in the words as he spoke them.

Jagger sensed that Colton was waking up to the fact that things weren't always as they appeared, especially when he'd gathered his facts from a couple of pictures he'd found on the internet. "Grace and Logan hardly had the perfect family. Steve was far from father of the year."

“At least he acknowledged them.”

Jagger nodded. “When it suited him. Steve was a hell of a doctor—world-renowned. Everyone got the best of him. Except for his kids. All three of them.”

Colton looked at him. “He means nothing to me.”

Jagger didn’t believe that. “You’re pissed at him. I get that. Or I get it as much as I can. I had daddy issues, too. Mine left when I was two, popped back up in my life when I was in third grade, bought me a bike and stuck around long enough for me to get my hopes up before he disappeared again. I haven’t seen him since.”

Colton had nothing to say about that.

“Steve could be a selfish dick,” Jagger continued. “There’s no doubt about it. He was careless with the people who needed him the most.”

Colton swallowed as he stared out the windshield.

“I guess my question to you is, will you do what your brother did? Are you going to let your anger at Steve and the world, in general, be the reason you spiral?”

Colton glared now. “I’m not Logan. I didn’t even know him.”

Jagger shrugged this time. “You didn’t know him, but you’re doing a hell of a job of following in his footsteps.”

Colton’s glare was back. “What the hell does that even *mean*? I got arrested for punching some dickwad in the face.”

“You’ve been arrested twice,” Jagger reminded him.

“So? I don’t take drugs. I don’t plan to get myself shot.”

Jagger ignored Colton’s comments. “Logan did his best to make Steve pay—and I guess in the end, he did. But he’s dead, so... Logan never had the chance to figure out that the only person he was destroying was himself. He hurt Steve. He devastated Grace. He messed me up pretty good too. But we’re still here, living. Maybe you won’t end up addicted to drugs and shot the way Logan did. But there’s prison. There’s living in squalor the way I did for half my life. Maybe you’ll have the chance to figure out what Logan couldn’t. You making a mess of your life to pay him back will only fuck you in the end.”

“I’m not Logan,” Colton muttered again.

“Things in Millsdale seem a little rough,” Jagger continued, getting straight to the point. “Maybe you might want to think about giving Preston Valley a shot. Living with me and Grace for a while.”

Colton huffed out a laugh. “So, I get arrested, and now I’m supposed to stay with you and Grace? You two can’t help me. I don’t even *know* you.”

Jagger shrugged. “So, you’ll get to know us. We’re willing to give it a try—to give you a fresh start if that’s what you and your mom want.”

“And what do you get out of it?”

“Honestly, not a whole damn lot. But family means everything to Grace, and Grace means everything to me. So, there you go.”

“I’m not Grace’s family.”

Jagger jerked his shoulders again. “We’re giving you a chance. You get to decide what you’ll do with it. But here’s a promise. Logan made Grace’s life a living hell during the last couple of years he was alive. The rehab. The relapses. The verbal abuse. When Logan died, it absolutely destroyed her. I seriously messed things up with her too. But I won’t let you hurt her that way. You’ll either get your shit together or you can be gone. Zero tolerance. That’s the bottom line. Again, you get to decide.”

Colton exhaled a quiet breath. “I don’t know.”

“You have time to think about it—until we track down your mom.” He turned over the ignition before he sent off a quick text.

*We’re heading home. We’ll see you right around six.*

He accelerated around the driveway. “But I have every intention of going home to eat. Grace is making lasagna. She’s a damn good cook.”

## THIRTY-NINE

GRACE CLOSED THE PANTRY DOOR, HAVING PUT AWAY THE LAST OF THE groceries after a quick run to the store. She glanced at the clock and then toward the darkening sky, calculating that the guys would be home in about two hours.

She'd spent most of the afternoon on her cell phone, being bounced from one customer service representative to another, while she unpacked hers and Jagger's suitcases, trying to clean up their travel mess.

After all was said and done, she and Jagger were out several hundred dollars, and rebooking fees would apply when they were eventually ready to head to Montana.

Jack, the editor at *Travel*, wasn't entirely excited about her last-minute change of plans, either. But the situation was what it was. Family would always come first. A concept her father had never understood.

"Lasagna. And a salad. Garlic bread, too," she muttered, heading for the refrigerator for the Italian sausage and ground beef, determined to have a delicious dinner ready when Jagger and Colton walked through the front door.

She moved to the cupboard for her biggest pan as someone knocked on the door.

Walking to the front window, she glanced out, not recognizing the blue Subaru in the driveway. "Who is it?"

"It's Jessica Sawyer."

Grace froze with her hand on the doorknob as her heart suddenly beat too quickly. She'd known this moment would come. It had been inevitable after she and Jagger had picked Colton up at the police station last night.

Taking a steadying breath, Grace opened the door, staring at the woman she hadn't seen in eighteen years.

Jessica's hair was a dark brown instead of the honey blond she'd colored it more often than not when she'd been twenty. She was still beautiful and petite and about the same height as Grace. Her son had inherited the color of her eyes.

"Grace." Jessica cleared her throat as she fiddled with her purse strap, her discomfort unmistakable. "You're all grown up."

Grace nodded, not entirely sure what to say. "Yes. Uh, come in."

Jessica shook her head. "I'm just looking for Colton."

"He's not here." She opened the door wider. "Jagger, my boyfriend, took him out for the day. They'll be gone for a couple of hours yet."

Jessica hesitantly stepped inside. "I got your address from the police department."

Grace shut them inside, not bothering to mention that she'd attempted to call her four times throughout the day, but she'd been immediately sent to voicemail, and Jessica's mailbox had been full. "That makes sense."

Jessica crossed her arms. "Thank you for picking Colton up. I saw their call come in last night—listened to their message—but I thought it would be better if he stayed put until I figured out what to do with him."

Grace studied Jessica as the woman shrugged her rigid shoulders, recognizing the frazzled hopelessness she felt herself when Logan's constant problems had become too much for her to handle. "How about a cup of tea?"

Jessica nodded. "Sure. Thank you."

Grace moved to the kitchen, putting the meat back in the refrigerator. Dinner would have to wait. "Make yourself comfortable."

"Thank you," Jessica said again.

Grace quickly heated water in the kettle and put mugs on a tray, along with honey, milk, and sugar. The assorted box of teas came next.

Pouring the hot water into the cups, she moved back to the living room, where Jessica sat on the edge of the middle couch cushion. "Your home is lovely."

"Thank you." Grace set the tray on the coffee table and sat in one of the two cozy chairs. "Help yourself. I have cookies, too, if you want."

Jessica shook her head as she randomly picked a tea bag, setting it in her steaming cup. "I'm at a loss for words. I have no idea what to say other than I'm sorry. About everything. This situation with Colton... I had no idea you

knew until the police officer told me Colton was with his sister, Grace, in Preston Valley. Your mother. Logan. Steve. You've dealt with so much loss."

Grace looked down at her cup, finding the current situation entirely strange. Everything had been so different when the woman sitting across from her had been a part of her life. Everyone had been healthy and alive. The Evans family had been happy and whole.

"I had no idea about Colton until I found my mother's journals a couple of weeks ago—when I realized my father had kept our home in Wakeview. He and I had a difficult relationship after Logan's death. We didn't talk."

Jessica closed her eyes. "That's a shame. You were always such a lovely family."

Grace nodded as she held her cup in her chilly hands. "I had thought we were."

Jessica looked down, stirring her tea with her spoon. "I can only imagine what you must think of me. There's no excuse for what I did, but what happened between Steve and me was one time. It was a terrible mistake on both of our parts."

Grace sipped her tea, not entirely sure what she was supposed to say to that.

"But I can't be sorry about Colton," Jessica added, looking at Grace. "He was the biggest of surprises, but he's been the light of my life. Or he was for a long time."

Grace set down her cup. "Did my father acknowledge him at all?"

Jessica shrugged. "My parents disapproved of my pregnancy, especially when I refused to name the father. I don't speak to them or my sister, so there hasn't been any family support there."

Grace nodded.

"I went to Steve when I was five months pregnant. He assured me he would take care of his responsibilities but couldn't play a role in Colton's life. He's always provided financially."

Grace pressed her lips together as she nodded again. She and Logan were handled the same way after their mother passed away. They'd been provided for. Generously. But the love and support they so desperately needed hadn't been available to them. "I'm sorry that was the case."

"I've always dealt with Steve's lawyer—"

Grace's eyes sharpened. "Dennis?"

Jessica nodded. "Yes. Dennis Fitch. His firm has taken care of the

monthly child support payments for Colton. Adjustments have occasionally been made for Colton's changing needs. But I've never taken advantage of Steve's wealth. I've only asked for what I needed for Colton. Even now with Steve's passing, Dennis has assured that Colton is taken care of and will be for the foreseeable future."

Grace wanted to shake her head, never more ashamed of her father. Colton had been nothing more than a responsibility—a transaction—that had needed to be taken care of. "He's had a rough time. Colton."

Jessica sighed as she nodded. "He's always been a good kid. He's smart. He's a gifted basketball player who also plays the guitar quite well. But the past couple of years have been hard."

"What do you think happened?"

"My longtime boyfriend and I broke up toward the end of Colton's eighth-grade year. He'd been in Colton's life for eight years. Marcus owned the car dealership I worked at. It became difficult for us to work together, so I decided Colton and I needed a fresh start. We moved to Millsdale the summer before his freshman year so I could take a job as an office manager at one of my good friend's salons."

"That sounds like a nice change," Grace offered, trying to be supportive where she could.

"I thought it would be. It seemed like we were starting to settle in, but that fall, Colton used my computer for a school project. He found an email from Dennis discussing child support for the upcoming year and realized who his father was. He changed after that. Our relationship changed after that. He grew angry. He stopped trying at school. The basketball coaches had been eager to welcome Colton to the team for the winter sports season. They had discussed putting him on varsity as a starter, but he refused to show up for practices."

Grace couldn't help but wonder if her dad's interests would have changed if he had known that his forgotten son had been a star athlete.

"Although, I must say things did get better for a little while," Jessica continued. "Colton met a girl early his sophomore year. Casey. He did much better in school while they were together, but they broke up this last summer. He's been off the rails since."

"That's really tough."

Jessica sighed. "I'd always told Colton I'd been young and in college when I got pregnant. I'd always let him assume that his father had been

young, too—that he hadn't been ready for the responsibilities.”

Jessica shrugged. “I think finding out about Steve amongst all of the changes was too much. Maybe things would have been different if Marcus and I had still been together. Perhaps we wouldn't be sitting here having this conversation if I hadn't taken him away from the home he'd grown up in and his core group of friends.”

Jessica was clearly a caring mother. It was easy to see that she'd been devoted to her son. “You did what you thought was best.”

Jessica shook her head. “I'm at the point where I don't know *what* to do. He doesn't listen to me. Our relationship is volatile at best. Marcus has tried to help a couple of times, but Colton is hanging out with bad influences. This is his second arrest. The judge was lenient last time, but I doubt that will be the case again.”

Grace picked up her cup, seeing her opportunity to test the waters for her and Jagger's idea. “How would you feel about giving Colton a fresh start here? Enrolling him in classes at the local high school? He could get a job and give basketball another shot if he wanted to.”

Jessica frowned. “That would be wonderful, but I'm not sure how realistic that sounds. It would take me a while to find a new job and housing. Colton doesn't have that kind of time to pull himself together.”

Jessica sighed. “In fact, my friend is opening a bigger salon and day spa in downtown Philly. She wants me to move and manage things there, but that doesn't seem like a good idea right now...”

Grace shook her head. “Colton could stay here with me and Jagger.”

Jessica shook her head this time. “But he doesn't know you.”

“That's true. But he could go to a really good school—meet a new group of kids. I run Simplicity with Aunt Maggie. He might be able to pick up some hours or help at the dojang where Jagger works part-time. If we can show the judge that he's working hard to change his ways, he or she might go easy on him again.”

Jessica's brow furrowed again. “Why would you do this?”

“Because he reminds me of Logan. It got to the point where there was nothing that I could do to help my brother. But I can try to help Colton.”

Jessica shook her head. “I don't know.”

‘I don't know’ wasn't a flat-out no. “I'm making lasagna for dinner. We can discuss everything with Jagger and Colton if you would like to stay. If this isn't an idea that makes you comfortable, I'll do what I can to offer my

support from a distance.”

“You’re so much like your mother. Kind and generous. I’ll never forgive myself for what I did to her. I can still see the look on her face when I ran into her at the grocery store—when she saw Colton.”

Grace stood, not interested in talking about the past—about how Jessica and her father had devastated her mother. Regrets changed nothing. They couldn’t go back. “Colton’s here. He’s my brother. He’s family. I’d like to have the chance to get to know him.”

Jessica nodded. “If I’m staying, I’d like to help.”

She walked with Jessica to the kitchen. “There’s a salad that needs to be made, too. The greens and other vegetables are in the fridge. I wasn’t sure what Colton liked. Feel free to use what you know you’ll both eat.”

Jessica held her gaze. “Thank you, Grace.”

“You’re welcome.” And then she moved into action, certain that dinner could still be ready by the time Jagger and Colton walked through the door.

Jagger took the final dish from the drying rack, using a towel to wipe away the last couple of drops of water.

When he and Grace had started cleaning up, a pile of pots, pans, and various other kitchen gadgets needed to be washed after she’d created one hell of an excellent meal.

After two changes of the dishwater and plenty of elbow grease, the kitchen was mostly tidy again.

Thirty minutes ago, Jessica and Colton had headed back to Millsdale for the night. But tomorrow, they would be back with Colton’s vehicle and whatever else he would need to feel at home for the next several months.

By the time the four of them had finished dinner, it had been decided that Colton would give life in Preston Valley a shot for a while. It had surprised Jagger some when Colton had told his mom that he wanted to be back first thing in the morning. For a kid who’d been ready to make his escape a few short hours ago, he’d done a hell of an about-face.

Grace rinsed out the dishcloth before she wiped down the counters. “I imagine it’ll be a while before we have a night like this again. Just the two of us.”

Jagger put away the large platter that had held the small mountain of insanely delicious garlic bread. “Not necessarily. Colton’s seventeen. He’ll be busy doing his own thing—working and whatnot. Hopefully, he’ll make some friends.”

Grace rinsed the suds down the sink, then wiped her hands dry. “That’s certainly the plan. I want him to be happy here.”

He hooked his arm around her waist, pulling her against him as he held her gaze. “You’re amazing. Not many people would do this.”

She locked her wrists at the back of his neck. “Thank you for saying so, but you’re amazing too. You’re always so willing to stand by my side.”

He began to move, swaying with her in a slow dance, forever savoring that he got to hold Grace. “Because I’m your number one fan.”

She grinned, following his lead. “It means more than you know.” She gained her tiptoes, kissing him. “So, where did you and Colton go today? I’m eager to hear about your field trip.”

He’d been waiting for the questions. It had only been a matter of time. He wasn’t looking forward to answering—to bringing up the place he and Grace had officially left behind just a couple of weeks ago. “To Wakeview.”

She frowned. “What did you guys do in Wakeview?”

“Took a tour. We went to my old place, which is up for auction, by the way. Then we swung by the mansion.”

There was no way he was telling her they’d taken a quick pause where Logan had mostly bled to death.

Concern filled her eyes. “I know your old home brings up a lot of stuff for you. How are you doing after that?”

He shrugged. “I’m all right.”

And that’s all he planned to say because he didn’t know how to tell her that it wasn’t his piece of shit house that had messed him up; it had been the junkyard and staring at a kid who was a near mirror image of his best friend.

“I wish I would have known. I could have come with you.”

He shook his head. That was *never* going to have happened. “I needed Colton to understand that your life and mine were never paved with roses. I have no plans to go back there again.”

“That couldn’t have been easy.”

“It was what it needed to be. And now it’s over.”

He kissed her, not wanting to talk about it anymore. Tomorrow he would go out for a run and clear his head, but for now, he wanted to focus on Grace.

“So, what should we do with our last teenagerless night?”

She groaned, letting her forehead rest against his chest. “As much as I want to suggest wild, mind-blowing sex wherever we want in the house, I have to talk to Aunt Maggie. I can’t avoid it any longer. Colton will be here tomorrow.”

He steamed out a quiet breath. “That’s kind of a thing, huh?”

She met his gaze again, wrinkling her nose as she nodded. “It’s a major thing.”

It amazed him in the worst way that Grace was *again* dealing with the aftermath of Steve’s messes. He had to believe that there would be an end to it all—that at some point they would just be able to live a happy life. “Are you up for a tagalong—some moral support?”

“Yes. I would appreciate it.”

He kissed her. “Then let’s go tell Aunt Mags about our new roommate.”

Grace’s stomach grew queasy as she pulled up to the curb in front of Aunt Maggie and Asa’s pretty old house. She puffed out a breath, keeping a firm grip on the steering wheel, as she looked at Jagger in the streetlight. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to *say* to not make this shocking.”

He took off his seat belt. “You’re just the messenger.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to stress her out. I don’t want her to have a setback.”

He captured her hand, gently squeezing. “It’ll be what it’s going to be, Grace. Aunt Mags is going to feel whatever she feels. We’ll handle whatever comes of it. I can help at the shop if she needs a couple of days.”

She sighed because as much as she wanted to run and hide, she also wanted to get telling Aunt Maggie over with. “I appreciate it, but I’m sure Jen and I will be fine.”

“Are you ready?” he asked, reaching for his door handle.

“No. But let’s do this anyway.”

Getting out, they headed for the door, giving a couple of knocks before Grace turned the doorknob she knew would be unlocked. “Aunt Maggie? Asa?”

Asa walked down the hallway from the kitchen that smelled like heavenly

roasted chicken, frowning as their eyes met. "I thought you two were in Montana."

Grace shrugged. "We had a change of plans."

Aunt Maggie followed Asa, walking with the aid of her cane down the hall. "Is everything all right? You two certainly don't look like you're here to tell us exciting news. Are you fighting?"

Jagger shook his head. "We're as good as ever."

Aunt Maggie looked from Jagger to Grace. "Are you moving? For Jagger's new job?"

Grace sighed. They were making this so much worse than it already was. "No, we're not moving. Can we sit at the table or in the living room?"

"Let's go to the table."

They followed Aunt Maggie and Asa to the formal dining room where Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners always took place.

"Do you guys need anything?" Asa asked.

"We're good," Grace said as they all sat down.

Aunt Maggie steepled her fingers. "Now, tell us what's going on."

Grace sighed. "As you know, I've been reading Mom's journals. In Mom's last entry, I found some unexpected information."

Aunt Maggie raised her brow. "Like what?"

Grace glanced at Jagger, then held Aunt Maggie's gaze. "Um, I have another brother."

Aunt Maggie's crystal-blue eyes grew huge. "What?"

Grace nodded, wanting to get it all out. "Dad had an affair. A one-time fling with Jessica Sawyer."

Aunt Maggie's eyes popped wide again. "The college *babysitter*?"

Grace nodded. "Yes."

Aunt Maggie looked at Asa, then at Jagger and Grace. "Are you sure about all of this?"

Grace nodded again. "Jagger and I met him. His name is Colton, and he's seventeen. He looks just like Logan."

Aunt Maggie glared at the ceiling. "Steven Evans, you're a dirty, disgusting dog." She closed her eyes as she hung her head. "Grace, I'm sorry I just said that."

Grace reached over, settling her hand over Aunt Maggie's. "I'm not offended. All of this has been a shock."

Aunt Maggie sighed. "Poor Rose. And Grace, I'm sorry your father didn't

know how to be what any of you needed.”

“I’m doing all right.” She looked at Jagger again. “There’s more that I need to tell you.”

“All right. It can’t be any bigger of a surprise than that.”

Grace slid her hair behind her ear. “Colton’s been in some trouble. He stayed with us last night after we picked him up at the Millsdale Police Department.”

Aunt Maggie closed her eyes again. “Dear God, it’s Logan all over again.”

Grace nibbled her lip, worried that this might be too much. “Not exactly. Colton has had some issues with fighting. He’s an angry kid but doesn’t appear to mess around with drugs. He needs love and support.”

Aunt Maggie clicked her tongue as she shook her head. “I imagine Steve was as careless with this boy as he was with you and Logan. And you, Jagger.”

Jagger sat up taller. “I’m tough as nails, Aunt Mags. Just like Grace.”

Aunt Maggie huffed out a laugh. “You always know how to make me smile.”

Jagger sent her one of his excellent grins. “I do what I can.”

Aunt Maggie rolled her eyes as she smiled. “Now, finish what you were saying, Grace.”

“We had dinner with Jessica and Colton tonight. We’ve all decided that Colton will stay with Jagger and me for a while. I need to help him, Aunt Maggie. I need to try.”

Aunt Maggie nodded. “Of course you do. I wouldn’t expect anything less from my sweet girl. When is he coming?”

“Tomorrow. Jessica and I are taking him to the high school to enroll him. Hopefully, they’ll let him start on Monday.”

Aunt Maggie steepled her fingers again. “You can bring him by the shop. I want to meet him.”

Grace shook her head. “I thought you might like some time to digest everything first.”

Aunt Maggie frowned. “I know my own mind, and I know that none of what’s happened is his fault. There’s been enough pain to go around this family for more than a few lifetimes. I can be the bigger person, too. If he’s looking for something to do while he’s settling in, we can put him to work. Goodness knows with the holidays coming, there’s plenty to do. Keeping him

busy will be good for him.”

Grace stood, walking around the table to wrap Aunt Maggie up in a hug. “Thank you. For being wonderful.”

Aunt Maggie returned her embrace. “Your mother would be incredibly proud of you, honey.”

“Thank you for saying so.”

Aunt Maggie patted her back. “I’ve never spoken truer words. Am I right, Asa?”

Asa nodded. “Indeed.”

Grace hugged him next. “You guys are the best.”

Asa hugged her back. “We’re always here for you guys. You know that.”

She kissed his cheek before she eased away to walk around the table again. “I do.”

Aunt Maggie changed how she sat to be more comfortable in her seat. “So, I take it you’ll use the next few days to get Colton settled in.”

Grace nodded. “But I can always come in if you and Jen need a hand.”

Aunt Maggie shook her head. “Take a couple of days, Grace. You’re supposed to be on vacation. Spend some time with your brother. Get to know each other.”

She nodded again. “Thank you.”

Aunt Maggie pushed back in her seat, clearly ready to get back to the dinner they had interrupted. “Go spend what’s left of your evening with Jagger. Parenting is going to keep you both busy.”

Jagger stood. “We’ll see you guys soon.”

Asa helped Maggie gain her feet and walk them to the door.

“Have a good night,” Aunt Maggie and Asa called.

Moments later, Grace waved as she sat in the passenger seat, exhaling a breath. “That went so much better than I was expecting.”

Jagger shrugged as he started the Sorento. “Aunt Mags and Asa are awesome.”

“They are.” She took his hand, kissing his fingers as she held his gaze in the dark. “You know, I’m feeling far more relaxed, and it’s still pretty early.”

He wiggled his brow. “I remember you mentioning something about wild sex. And wherever we wanted in the house.”

She grinned. “I did.”

He pulled away from the curb. “I say we hit every room. Where should we start?”

“Maybe the living room?”

He nodded. “Couch, chair, or floor? We’ll get to all three, but where first?”

She laughed, certain that he would deliver on his promise. “How about you decide? I’ll let you surprise me.”

“Oh, I’m gonna surprise you, baby.”

Butterflies rushed through her belly as he took his eyes off the road long enough to hold her gaze.

Within moments, he took a right onto Main Street. “We’ll make it up as we go along, but it’s a good thing we had a lot of carbs at dinner tonight. We’re definitely going to need them.”

She laughed again as they drove closer to home, more than ready to get crazy with Jagger.

# FORTY

GRACE HEADED TOWARD THE BEDROOM WITH A BASKET OF CLEAN LAUNDRY on her hip as she ran through her mental to-do list for the upcoming week.

She hadn't stepped foot in the shop for more than a handful of minutes over the last four days, which she already knew would cause her several headaches in the morning.

She'd done her best to take care of most things before she and Jagger were supposed to have left for Montana, but no matter how much she planned or prepared, it never took her long to find herself on the verge of being behind.

Simplicity's newest part-time hire started this week. Amanda needed to be trained for the seasonal Saturday afternoon shifts. Inventory needed to be taken, and orders would inevitably have to be made. Confirming upcoming holiday promotions was also a must.

She slowed in the hallway when she realized the light was on in the office. Peeking her head in the doorway, she watched as Colton picked up the different picture frames that had been tucked aside after her and Jagger's trip to Wakeview.

Nibbling her lip, she hesitated, then stepped into the room. Colton had been in Preston Valley for three full days—and he'd spent most of them in his new room.

Colton turned with a start. "Shit."

Grace winced, forever trying to find her footing with the stranger that was her brother. "Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"I was just looking," he said as he held up the *Sports Illustrated* picture of Jagger and Logan.

She smiled. "That's okay."

He studied the photo again. "Three perfect seasons is impressive."

She nodded, smiling again, slightly shocked that he was initiating a conversation. More often than not, he answered hers or Jagger's questions but didn't say much else. But she considered it a small victory that he'd been mostly polite since his trip to Wakeview with Jagger. "It was a pretty big deal. They were unstoppable."

"And neither of them played in college?"

Grace shook her head. "Logan got hurt in the championship game, and Jagger wasn't interested in playing college sports. *Sports Illustrated* actually took that picture a couple of days before the big game, which is a good thing since Logan ended up having surgery the morning after he separated his shoulder."

Colton nodded as he picked up the picture of herself, Jagger, and Logan with their arms wrapped around each other's shoulders in front of Aunt Maggie's house. "We look alike. Logan and me."

She swallowed, not exactly sure what to say, wanting to keep the mood light when everything about the current topic was heavy. "Yes. Quite a bit alike."

Colton met her gaze. "We look like him."

She nodded again, not missing the hints of displeasure in his tone.

His eyes wandered back to the picture. "So, Jagger lived with you guys, and you dated. Wasn't that like dating your brother or something?"

Grace laughed, recognizing that Colton was changing the subject. "It's safe to say that I've *never* had brotherly feelings toward Jagger. I had a crush from the first moment I saw him."

"If you guys have been together this whole time, why aren't you married or whatever?"

"Because we haven't been together. Jagger's only been home for a couple of months."

Colton frowned. "Where was he?"

"Overseas. He was gone for a long time. We hadn't spoken for eight years." She adjusted the laundry basket as she moved to lean her butt against the desk, eager to continue their conversation. Colton was curious, and she planned to answer any questions he had. "The night Logan died, my dad—*our* dad—blamed it all on Jagger."

Colton's brow creased again. "Why?"

“Because Jagger’s brother, Levi, supplied Logan with pills and whatever else he was addicted to. After Dad kicked Logan out, Logan moved in with Levi. They frequently got into trouble together.”

Colton’s frown was back. “But what does that have to do with Jagger?”

She shrugged as she shook her head. “Nothing. But Dad blamed him anyway. He told Jagger that he would cut me off and ruin my internship with *National Geographic* if Jagger had any further contact with me. Jagger left that night, joined the Army, and became a soldier in Delta Force.”

Colton raised his brow. “Jagger was Delta Force?”

Grace noted the way Colton perked up, recognizing genuine intrigue. “I take it you’ve heard of it?”

Colton nodded. “I did a report on the different military branches in eighth grade. Delta Force is badass.”

She huffed out a laugh. “Jagger’s pretty badass. You can ask him about Delta Force, but he doesn’t say much about it.” She wrinkled her nose at one of her secret frustrations. “He always tells me that what he did was top secret and leaves it at that.”

“So, the guy’s a black belt, was a member of Delta Force, and he flies off to do stuff for some mysterious security company?”

She nodded as she grinned. “He’s also incredibly smart—probably technically a genius.” She shrugged. “Like I said, badass.”

He nodded as he set the pictures back in the box.

The silence grew heavy between them as the props that had given them an opportunity to talk were put away. “So, tomorrow’s your first day of school. How do you feel about it?”

Colton jerked his shoulders. “It’s fine.”

And now they were heading back to the two-word answers he seemed to be so fond of.

“Um, I was going to put these towels in the bedroom. Then I was going to get some dinner ready. Macaroni and cheese. It’s one of Jagger’s favorites. He says it’s killer. Hopefully, you’ll like it too.”

Colton shrugged again. “I like macaroni and cheese.”

She glanced at the clock on the desk. “I’ve been stalling for as long as possible, hoping Jagger would be back from the gym to help me grate the cheese. It’s a bit of a process.”

“I can help, I guess.”

“That would be great. I’ll meet you in the kitchen in just a second.”

Colton headed for the door. “Sure.”

Grace sat in the silence, staring at the pictures as she snagged her lip and smiled. They’d officially achieved their first conversation that hadn’t been the forced, awkward interactions they endured during meals. Eager for another, she put the laundry basket on her bed and headed for the kitchen.

# FORTY-ONE

JAGGER GAVE HIS FIFTEEN MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS THE USUAL END-OF-class high fives before they headed for their socks, shoes, jackets, and waiting parents.

“I’ll see everyone on Saturday.” He raised his voice to be heard over the chatter and commotion as the kids got ready to go. “Make sure you’re practicing your *poomsaes*. Belt tests are coming up.”

He glanced toward the corner of the mats where Colton had already gotten to work with the disinfecting process at the far end of the room, liberally spraying the nontoxic cleaner on the surfaces.

Colton had turned into a lifesaver, helping with the evening classes for the last three days after Todd had come down with a nasty flu bug.

Jagger appreciated that Colton was sharp—that he’d only had to show him how to do things once. It had been a bonus that he’d been willing to jump right in and assist with several of the exercises and drills.

Jagger moved to grab his water bottle, watching as the pretty brunette that Grace had just hired walked Colton’s way as several of the families filed out.

It was no surprise. There was no denying that Colton was a damn good-looking kid. Between his decent basketball player’s build, broody vibe, and the remnants of a black eye, the girls had to be paying attention.

Colton stopped what he was doing.

“Colton, right?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“I’m Amanda Riley. We’re in English together.”

He nodded again. “You’re middle row, third seat back.”

She beamed, flashing him a look at her straight white teeth. “That’s me. I

didn't realize you worked here."

Colton shrugged. "I'm just helping out while Todd's sick."

"That's nice of you. I'm picking up my brother, Tommy." She gestured to the annoyed eighth grader waiting by the door.

Colton adjusted his stance. "Cool."

Amanda slid her long hair behind her ear as she peeked her big brown eyes up from under her long lashes. "Um, a group of us are talking about going to the arcade and then to Rafferty's Friday night. You should join us."

Colton nodded. "I can probably do that."

Amanda smiled again. "I usually drive over with Melanie, but she's going out of town to visit her grandpa. Maybe I could give you directions to my house. You could pick me up."

He nodded. "Sure."

She slid more of her hair behind her ear. "I guess I'll see you in English tomorrow."

"Yeah. See ya."

Jagger picked up the mop and headed over to wipe up the spray, waiting for the door to close behind Tommy and Amanda, the last family to leave. "Three days at school, and he's *already* a hit with the ladies."

Colton rolled his eyes, but he also smiled as he got back to spraying. "What the hell is Rafferty's?"

"It's a pizza joint out by the lake. The sausage and jalapeno slices are out of this world."

Colton shook his head. "Sausage and onion are where it's at."

Jagger paused with the mop, opening his mouth to say that those were Logan's favorite toppings too, but he got back to cleaning instead.

He glanced in Colton's direction, forever fascinated that Logan and Colton had never met, yet they were similar in so many ways. They had some of the same mannerisms, liked and disliked many of the same foods, and occasionally his voice sounded identical.

"So, it sounds like you've got yourself a date." Jagger pretended to sniffle as he wiped at his eyes, enjoying the hell out of giving Colton a bit of a hard time. "Grace will be so proud."

"It's not a date. We're going with a group."

Jagger shrugged. "Semantics."

"Whatever." But there was no heat behind the word as Colton moved to the next mat.

For the most part, the kid's shitty attitude had vanished. It appeared as though Colton had taken to heart the zero-tolerance warning.

"You know, Amanda is Grace's new hire at Simplicity. She'll be working Saturday afternoons until the wedding season picks up. This summer, she'll probably be full-time."

Colton paused before he continued his work.

Jagger grinned as he turned away to mop the next mat. "I thought Grace mentioned that you're working Saturday too."

"Yeah. So?"

"So, I'm glad you're settling in." He looked at Colton. "It's not easy being the new kid, especially when you look like Logan. Especially when the implications are more than clear."

Colton shrugged. "I see the glances and hear the whispers, but since I'm not looking to get arrested again, I ignore them."

Jagger nodded, liking his answer. He and Grace had heard a few whispers of their own and assumed the same had to be true for Colton. Since Colton appeared to be handling it well, he and Grace could officially cross that off the to-be-worried-about list. "Good."

"The cafeteria food's way better here," Colton added.

Jagger rolled his eyes. "That's profound—really important."

Colton grinned. "They sell those big cookies from Brew. The chocolate chip ones. They're warm and sort of gooey but crispy all at the same time."

Jagger nodded as he smiled. "Brew does make a damn good cookie."

"That's what *I'm* saying."

Jagger finished wiping up the spray on the last mat. "I'm ready to go home. I'm ready to *eat*. Grace is making tuna noodle casserole. And even though it sounds disgusting, I assure you it's insanely good."

Colton shrugged. "Grace is a good cook."

Jagger nodded, knowing that Grace would be thrilled that Colton thought so. "Damn right. I call dibs on any leftovers."

"Go for it. I'm not bringing something like that to school. Leftovers always stink. You open the lid on something like that, and it'll smell like fish and farts."

Jagger laughed. There was no denying that Colton was funny when he actually spoke more than a sentence at a time. "That would probably mess with your cool points."

Colton jerked his shoulders again.

“Let’s get out of here. Thanks for helping out for the last couple of days. Todd says the flu bug Andy brought home from playschool is no joke.”

“No problem.”

“I’ll spot you a couple of fifties for your non-date,” Jagger said as he grabbed his water bottle and phone, texting Grace. *We’re heading home.*

She texted back almost immediately. *I just pulled the casserole out of the oven, and the salad’s ready to go.*

He responded. *Can’t wait.*

Jagger stepped out with Colton, locking up. “Dinner’s ready. I’ll see you at home.”

“Yeah. I’ll be right behind you.”

Jagger got in the Stingray, watching Colton walk down the block toward his fancy white GMC Canyon—a far cry from Logan’s Porsche, but it was certainly nice enough.

Turning over the ignition and reversing from his spot, he nodded again. Having Colton staying with Grace and him wasn’t too bad. They had a long way to go before they were a big, happy family, but they were slowly finding their way.

## FORTY-TWO

GRACE ADDED ANOTHER WHITE MUM TO THE SIMPLE ARRANGEMENT HENRY Leary had personally picked out for his mother's thirtieth birthday.

The five-year-old had had ten dollars to spend from his piggy bank, which hadn't been much when it came to flowers, so Grace added a couple of peach roses and berries to give the arrangement the oomph it deserved for such a sweet gesture.

"Stephanie's going to be a happy mess when Asa drops those off," Aunt Maggie said as she put together a sunflower and burgundy rose arrangement—one of the last of the day before Asa began deliveries in thirty minutes.

Grace grinned, trying to ignore that Aunt Maggie's fingers were clumsy today. Her gait had been way off, too, making her cane a necessity whenever she needed to get around.

"Yes, she is. And Henry will be incredibly proud. Johnathan was trying to give him some hints when we looked at some flower options together yesterday, but Henry has a mind of his own."

Maggie laughed as she tucked some of Grace's extra peach berries into her arrangement. "It was lovely that Johnathan didn't steal Henry's thunder. He and Stephanie are great parents."

Grace added another branch of filler, then stepped back, making certain she'd achieved the balance she was looking for. "Yes, they are."

Maggie chuckled again. "Little Henry got quite a deal right there."

Grace wrinkled her nose as she snagged her lip, knowing they'd lost money instead of making it with Stephanie's birthday arrangement. "It pays to be five and adorable."

Aunt Maggie grinned. "That it does."

Colton walked from the front end of the store, wearing jeans and a navy-blue sweater. He'd pulled off edgy yet preppy with his black eye and designer clothing.

"How are things going out there?"

"Good. Pretty busy. I need to grab Mr. Pendleton's arrangement."

"Go for it."

Colton opened the walk-in door, pausing before he stepped in. "We've had five more orders for the Thanksgiving centerpieces. The one with the two candles seems to be the most popular."

Grace wiggled her brow, looking at Aunt Maggie as the door closed behind him. "That officially puts us over the two hundred and fifty mark for centerpieces."

Maggie nodded as she smiled. "I've got to hand it to you, Grace. Setting up those little tables and making the centerpiece options our window display was a great idea, honey. It's hard to walk by without stopping in."

Grace smiled mischievously as she wiggled her brow again. "I know."

Aunt Maggie laughed. "The Tuesday and Wednesday before Thanksgiving will be an all-hands-on-deck situation around here."

Grace nodded with feeling. "That's a definite. I've got everyone on the schedule. The kids can come in after school on Tuesday and work Wednesday afternoon. I'll see if Jagger can give us a hand, too. We'll order pizzas and make an event out of it."

Colton stepped out of the fridge, carrying the arrangement Maggie had put together a couple of hours ago, then walked out front. "Mr. Pendleton, I believe these are for you."

"Wow. This looks *great*," Mr. Pendleton said with delight.

"They really do," Amanda agreed. "Your wife will be *thrilled*, Mr. Pendleton."

"The flowers are definitely awesome," Colton went on. "I bet if you add a box of these chocolates, you'll be her hero for days."

"Definitely," Amanda piped up. "Especially when it's entirely unexpected. It's not even Valentine's Day. The assortment box is good, but the caramel-filled ones are to *die* for."

"Agreed," Colton threw in.

"All right. I'll take a box of the caramel ones. Just don't tell Mrs. Pendleton it was your idea," Mr. Pendleton joked.

Colton and Amanda laughed. "Our lips are sealed."

Aunt Maggie looked at Grace. “That boy’s an Evans indeed. Good-looking and has plenty of charm to go with it. Just like Logan. Just like Steve.”

Grace nodded. “When he actually talks, he’s very charming.”

“Things seem like they’re getting better. He’s more relaxed today than when I first met him.”

Grace nodded as she exhaled a breath. “It’s slow, but he’s coming around. He went to all his classes this week, which has Jessica relieved. He helped Jagger at the dojang and asked me what shoes he should wear to his group outing last night.”

“Give him space and patience, and he’ll be fine. He’s certainly doing a nice job here.”

“He and Amanda both,” she agreed.

Grace had spent the morning showing Colton and Amanda the ropes. It hadn’t taken her long to realize that both kids were quick to pick things up. After a couple of hours, she’d been able to head to the back to help Aunt Maggie with the arrangements.

Colton came to the back as Mr. Pendleton left. “Am I helping Asa with the deliveries today?”

Grace glanced at the clock. “We don’t have that many, so I think you’re off the hook this afternoon.”

“Cool. Amanda and I are talking about heading to Brew after our shift.”

“They make a darn good cookie,” Aunt Maggie said as she leaned across the table, reaching for the orange ribbon. She sat back, gasping as she grabbed for the table’s edge when she lost her balance.

Before Grace or Colton could react, Aunt Maggie fell to the floor with a loud thud.

Grace stared in horror at Aunt Maggie crumpled at her feet. “Aunt Maggie.” She fell to her knees while Maggie struggled to sit up. “Don’t do that. Don’t move.”

Colton rushed over, pulling the stool out of the way, then knelt as Aunt Maggie sat up on her butt. “Do you want me to call the ambulance?”

Grace nodded. “Yes—”

“No.” Maggie pushed back the sweater sleeve on her right arm, examining her elbow where a large bruise already bloomed. “Do *not* call the ambulance. I’m fine. I’m clumsy and pissed off.”

Grace held Aunt Maggie’s gaze, studying her crystal-blue eyes, looking

for signs of confusion. “Did you hit your head?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You landed hard on your hip.”

“I’m well aware.” She reached out her hands. “Colton, help me up.”

He looked at Grace.

“Your sister doesn’t make my decisions. Now, help me up, please.”

Colton nodded, gently helping Aunt Maggie to her feet, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. “How do you feel?”

“Embarrassed.”

Grace grabbed the stool, moving it for Maggie to sit down. “How’s your hip?”

“Bruised, I’m sure.”

Grace nibbled her lip, deciding if she should risk Aunt Maggie’s wrath and call Asa. “I imagine you don’t want me to drive you home so you can rest.”

Maggie adjusted herself on the seat. “You imagine correctly.” She snatched up the orange ribbon. “I need to finish my arrangement. This damn MS won’t be getting the better of me. Now, all of you get back to work,” she said as she glanced at Amanda standing in the doorway. “I’m not interested in being stared at.”

Grace nodded, glancing at the clock again, choosing not to make the call. Asa would be at the shop soon, anyway. “I’m going to head to the office for a few minutes and get the Instagram post up.”

“That sounds like a good idea. You know I’m not big on fussing.”

“I do.” Grace headed to the back, half closing the office door, leaning her butt against the desk as she covered her face with unsteady hands, taking several deep breaths.

She was doing *everything* she could to keep Aunt Maggie’s stress down. She’d streamlined the online ordering to make things as efficient as possible for the upcoming holiday season and beyond. They’d even changed some of their vendors for the absolute best quality flowers.

No matter what she did to keep Maggie’s life as relaxed as possible, it wasn’t helping. Aunt Maggie was declining quickly whether there was stress in her life or not.

Taking another deep breath, certain that the tears wouldn’t come, she dropped her hands, jumping when she realized Colton stood in the doorway, staring at her.

“Aunt Maggie seems okay,” he said.

She nodded, knowing he was trying to reassure her. “Yes, she seems to be.”

He stepped farther inside. “She needs a different stool, though. Something safer.”

Grace sighed. If only Colton knew how many *times* she’d broached the subject with Aunt Maggie. “She does, but she isn’t a big fan of accommodations.”

“I can see that. I wouldn’t like it if I woke up to realize I couldn’t do the things I’d always done. Accommodations are probably pretty confronting.”

She nodded, understanding that Colton’s heart was as big as his attitude had once been. Jessica had done a great job raising a caring, empathetic son. “It doesn’t seem fair, does it?”

He shook his head. “But that doesn’t mean she doesn’t need something safer.”

“If you have any ideas of how we can convince her, I’m all ears.”

“We could make it a gift—like something from you and me. The whole brother and sister thing. She won’t be able to say no.”

Grace narrowed her eyes as she slowly nodded. “That’s pretty sneaky.”

He shrugged. “Sort of.”

She smiled. “I like it.”

He smiled back. “She needs something with a back and armrests or whatever. So she can’t fall backward.”

Colton was right. Because falling sideways had been scary enough. “I’ll look for something tonight. I think we can get away with it if we give it to her at Christmas.”

Colton nodded. “Some lady—Mrs. Ward—wants a custom table arrangement for Thanksgiving.”

Grace rolled her eyes. Mrs. Ward was high-maintenance and always wanted something difficult. “Of course she does.”

“She was saying all these different flower names and showing us pictures from Pinterest. Amanda and I don’t know how to help her with that.”

Grace sighed as she stood, walking down the hall with him. “Let’s go make Mrs. Ward happy.”

## FORTY-THREE

JAGGER WALKED UP THE DRIVEWAY, ADJUSTING THE PAPER GROCERY BAG HE held in his arm as Colton stood with his head under the hood of his truck. “Car trouble?”

Colton stood straight with the oil dipstick in his hand. “No. I’m just checking my fluid levels before it gets too dark.” He put the dipstick back. “Grace said something about dinner, but she’s in the office working.”

“I’m taking care of dinner tonight.” He gestured to the bag he held. Grace had handled the majority of the cooking since Colton moved in. Whether she knew it or not, it was her night off.

Colton shut the hood. “Did Grace tell you that Aunt Maggie fell today?”

Jagger frowned. “No. We haven’t had much of a chance to talk. Is Aunt Mags okay?”

Colton nodded. “She lost her balance and fell off her stool. Mostly, she got pissed about it. But Grace went to her office after. I think she was trying not to cry.”

Jagger steamed out a breath. “Things are going downhill fast. It’s been pretty tough on Grace. She wants to be able to fix an unfixable situation. Aunt Mags and Asa have been a big support to her. They were there for her and Logan after they lost Rose. They helped her put her life back together after Logan died, and I left like a son of a bitch.”

Colton shook his head. “It was *his* fault. Steve’s.”

Jagger raised his brow, surprised by the sudden venom in Colton’s voice. But he was even more surprised that Colton seemed to know the story.

“Grace told me about it the other night.”

That was progress. Grace often avoided mentioning the past. If Grace and

Colton were talking about the tough stuff, that was good. “Some of it was Steve’s fault, but I never should have walked away.”

“He didn’t give you much of a choice. Anything bad in all our lives seems to circle back to him.”

Jagger shrugged because, to some degree, Colton spoke the truth. But he also knew he would never be able to forgive himself for leaving the way that he had.

Colton shoved his hands in his pockets as he shifted his stance. “We’re gifting Maggie a safer stool—Grace and me.”

“Oh yeah?” Jagger replied, recognizing that Colton wanted to change the subject.

Colton nodded. “Since Aunt Maggie isn’t a fan of accommodations—even when she needs them—I thought it seemed like a good idea.”

Jagger grinned as he nodded. “The whole brother-sister bonding thing. Smart kid.”

Colton shrugged. “Manipulation has its place.”

Jagger laughed. “I guess it does.” He glanced toward the house, eager to get inside to Grace. They hadn’t spent a lot of time together over the last week. “What are you up to tomorrow?”

“Homework.”

“I’m surprising Grace with a special day.” He’d been putting the plan in place between his classes and errands. Since Montana had been a bust, they would give tomorrow a try. “We’ll probably be gone for most of the afternoon.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“You’re pulling dinner duty with me tonight. I called Bea for her spaghetti and meatballs recipe. Grace needs a break. She’s been working her ass off.”

Colton frowned. “Why does she work so hard when she doesn’t have to?”

“You mean because of Steve’s money?”

Colton shrugged.

“Grace has never given a shit about the money. She’s happier making her own way.” The wind gusted as the sun sank closer to the horizon. “I’m going inside. It’s cold out here.”

Colton followed him up the walkway and through the front door. “How does this Bea woman have so many good recipes?”

Jagger set the bag on the entryway table to take off his jacket. “All I can

say is she's a culinary genius. Let's impress your sister with one of her favorite meals."

"I can do whatever. But I'm heading out at seven. I'm picking Amanda up. We're working on our papers together."

Jagger raised his brow. "And where is this happening?"

"At the library."

"The library closes at nine. So does most everything else around here. I'm sure I'll see you shortly after."

"Yeah. Fine. Whatever. It's not like we're parking somewhere and making out. We're just friends. And Amanda's watching her little sister in the morning, so she's not staying out late anyway."

"Okay. Sounds good." And it did. He was missing some alone time with Grace.

Three and a half hours later, Grace rested her back against Jagger's chest as they snuggled on the couch, cozy under a blanket while they watched Netflix in their pajamas.

He wrapped her up closer when she yawned for the third time. "Am I losing you here?"

She shook her head as she turned to meet his gaze. "I refuse to fall asleep before Colton gets home. I want to see how things went on his study date."

Jagger raised the remote to pause their show. "According to him, he and Amanda are just friends."

Grace frowned. "I don't know if I believe that. I got a vibe today at the shop. There was definitely some flirting going on."

He nodded. "Ditto on the vibe. I saw it myself Wednesday night."

Grace turned fully now, crisscrossing her legs in the V of his thighs. "I certainly wouldn't hate it if they decided to date. Amanda's super smart and kind. She's an excellent student, and I know she does a lot of volunteer work like her mom. She has a good head on her shoulders, and she's gorgeous. What's not to like?"

Jagger nodded. "It seems like it could be good for both of them. I just hope they take things slow when they decide to stop dancing around the 'we're just friends' thing. They're definitely on different playing fields."

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged. “Colton’s been around the block. I don’t get the same impression about Amanda.”

Grace’s frown returned. “How do you know?”

He jerked his shoulders again. “About Amanda, I don’t. But Colton had a serious girlfriend for a significant amount of time, and it doesn’t sound like he’s had a ton of supervision over the last couple of years.”

Grace made a sound in her throat as she clearly mulled over what he was saying.

“I just know you and I were serious,” he continued. “We had minimal supervision, and we had sex all the time.”

“This is very true.” She snagged her lip with her teeth. “I’m not sure what we should do. He’s a junior in high school, so he needs a little breathing room. But I also don’t want to give him too much freedom. Yet I also want him to feel respected—like he has a voice in his own life.”

He tucked her hair back behind her ear. “I guess we’ll keep an eye on things. We’ll talk to him about being safe if it seems like that’s a conversation we need to have.”

She nodded as she sighed. “You’re pretty great at this whole sort-of-parenting thing.”

He grinned. “We’re doing the advanced version. We blew past the diapers phase and moved straight into sex.”

“Lucky us,” she said before she yawned again.

He sighed as he studied her tired eyes. “You’re working too hard.”

She shrugged. “It’s a busy time of year with the holidays coming up.”

But it was more than that. As much as Grace was tired, he also knew she was worried. “And Aunt Mags’ fall is messing with you.”

She dropped her gaze, staring at his T-shirt.

He gently nudged at her chin until their eyes met.

Suddenly she blinked back tears. “She’s getting worse so quickly. She really needs the walker and a new stool, but she doesn’t want them, and I completely understand why. Every time she concedes to a new accommodation, she’s giving up another piece of who she used to be.”

He steamed out a breath as he wiped at the tears trailing down her cheeks, hating that this hurt her so much. “Everything about this situation sucks. It’s unfair that this is happening to such a great person.”

She nodded as another tear fell. “It’ll break her heart when she can’t work

at the shop anymore.”

“That seems like it’s a ways off.”

She sniffled. “I thought so, too, but the decline is coming full throttle. The last six months have been her worst yet.”

“But things could slow down again, right?”

She shrugged. “I imagine they could. I hope they do. I know she and Asa plan to talk to a new doctor down in Philly after Christmas.”

She wiped at her cheeks herself this time. “But I can’t stop thinking about the inevitable. At some point, she won’t be able to do it anymore. Maybe sooner rather than later. Simplicity has been such a huge part of her life for decades.”

He gently slid his hands from her shoulders to her elbows. “Let’s deal with today. Let’s see what the new doctor has to say next month.”

She nodded, but she pressed her hand to her stomach. “I keep seeing her fall. She just crashed to the floor. It could have been so much worse than a couple of bruises.”

“No broken bones is a win, Grace.”

“That’s true, but it’s bound to happen again. She’s so unstable.”

He settled his forehead against hers. “I’m sorry this is so hard. I’m sorry there isn’t more we can do to make this better.”

“Thank you.” She eased back, swiping at her cheeks for the final time. “Let’s talk about *anything* but my lack of control over Aunt Maggie’s health.”

He nodded. “How about we talk about tomorrow? I’m going to need a few hours of your time.” The plan had been to surprise her in the morning, but she needed something fun to think about now.

“For what?”

“For a staycation of sorts.”

She wiggled her brow. “I’m intrigued.”

“Good. Montana didn’t go quite as planned, so we’ll give a couple of Preston Valley’s finer locations a shot.”

“Are there any hints about these finer locations?”

“Nope.” He kissed her. “But we can watch more of our show while you try to figure it out.”

She laughed. “Don’t act like you know me.”

He grinned. “I might know you just a little.”

She turned around to settle back against him. “I’m ready.”

He raised the remote, pressing play. “Let the thinking begin.”

## FORTY-FOUR

GRACE LAY WITH HER EYES CLOSED, SAVORING THE SOOTHING MUSIC AND gentle touch of her massage therapist, while Jagger lay on the table next to hers as they enjoyed their ninety-minute couple's treatment.

The afternoon had been pure bliss—lunch at her favorite restaurant and now this. Jagger had made the day unforgettably sweet and ultra-relaxing with a blueberry pancake breakfast in bed and a bubble bath.

Debra, the massage therapist, made her final sweeping stroke along Grace's arm before she stepped back. "That concludes our session today," she said quietly.

Grace blinked her eyes open.

Debra smiled down at her in the dim light. "How was that?"

"Really nice."

"Good. I hope you'll take your time getting up. Feel free to use our bathroom to freshen up."

"Thank you."

"I'll step out now."

Grace smiled as Jagger's therapist repeated the same spiel to him.

The therapists stepped out together.

Jagger turned his head, looking at her with sleepy eyes and spiky hair.

"That was *awesome*."

She grinned, finding him irresistible. "Yes, it was. It's been a long time since I've felt so pampered."

"Maybe we could pay them to come back and do that again."

She chuckled as she reluctantly sat up, pulling the soft covers back.

Jagger raised his brow as he tracked his gaze down her panty-clad body.

“You’re looking pretty slick. Pretty sexy, too.”

She tucked the hair that escaped her ponytail behind her ear. “Thank you.”

He reached out his hand to her. “Why don’t you wander on over this way.”

Her grin returned as she shook her head. “People are having treatments in the next room.”

“We’ll be quiet.”

She laughed. “No, Jagger.”

Getting up, she headed toward the bathroom. Jagger caught her by the wrist before she’d taken two steps.

He wrapped his arms around her waist, fully aroused in his boxers. “You’re slippery.”

She closed her eyes, struggling with a whimper as his mouth moved along her neck and his hands wandered up to slide over her naked breasts. “Jagger, we can’t do this.”

“We don’t have to.” He slipped his hand beneath the elastic of her lacy thong, playing his fingers over her. “I don’t want to make you uncomfortable or anything.”

Her breathing came faster with his teasing. “You’re not.”

His fingers moved with firmer pressure. “I’ve had you a lot of different ways, but never after a massage.”

She turned to face him. “We shouldn’t.” But she didn’t stop him when he lifted her to sit on the edge of the massage table, dropped his boxers, pushed her panties to the side, then eased his way into her.

His eyes grew hot as he clenched his jaw and gripped her hips, moving slowly so the table didn’t squeak.

Her breath quaked in and out as she pulled his face closer, capturing his mouth, sliding her tongue against his.

Holding her gaze, he pushed himself deeper.

She tensed, on the edge.

“Are you going to come?” he whispered.

She nodded, holding him closer.

“Kiss me, Gracie,” he said as he pressed his mouth to hers when she gasped, swallowing the loudest of her quiet moans as she let herself go, trembling in his arms.

He snagged her bottom lip with his teeth, tugging gently as she fought for

her breath. “Damn, that’s hot.”

She locked her legs around him, pushing him deeper yet. “Fill me up,” she encouraged.

“I love it when you talk like that.” He settled his forehead against hers as he closed his eyes, and his breathing changed.

She watched as he jerked—as he blew out quaking breaths while she grew slippery.

He opened his eyes, staring into hers.

She kissed him. “I think we pulled off quiet.”

He grinned. “Like pros.”

She licked his bottom lip. “I like watching you let go.”

He brought his mouth to hers, teasing her tongue.

She eased back enough to hold his gaze. “Thank you for a fantastic day.”

“It’s not over yet.” He picked her up, bringing her to the small bathroom. “We should get dressed so we can get home. If Colton’s not there, I intend to take you to bed. I’m going to make you scream for me.”

Jagger walked with Grace up the front path to the doorway, slightly bummed that Colton’s truck was parked along the street. He’d envisioned Grace naked in their bed for the remainder of the afternoon, but making her breathless and crazy could wait a while longer.

She stopped with him at the door, touching her hand to his cheek. “Thank you, Jagger. Everything about today was truly perfect.”

He smiled, wrapping his arms around her waist, staring into her gorgeous eyes. “I’m happy you enjoyed it.”

She shook her head as she locked her wrists at the back of his neck. “That’s not a strong enough adjective.”

“Ooh, she’s breaking out the English vocab. You’re a hell of a sexy nerd, Ms. Evans.”

She grinned as she pulled herself closer so her body rubbed against his. “I’ll show you sexy. Later.”

He groaned as he kissed her, taking her deep with a slide of his tongue, snagging her bottom lip with his teeth as he eased away, *wanting* her, even when he’d just had her. “Later can be such an ugly word.”

She laughed as she turned the doorknob.

They stepped inside, both of them stopping as Steve's voice carried down the hallway, then Logan's.

Jagger frowned as he and Grace stared at each other. "What the hell?"

She shook her head, clearly having no better idea than he did, as she moved toward the voices coming from the office.

Following closely behind, he stopped in the doorway next to Grace, watching a long-ago private football practice on the large desktop screen, where Hal called out plays to Jagger and Logan while Steve filmed.

"West right slot eight three X bingo," Hal yelled.

Logan chucked the football, and Jagger ran down the field like the turf was on fire behind him to meet the ball where it was supposed to be. He booked it back up the field ten yards to dive for a good catch when Logan underthrew the play.

"Jagger was right where he needed to be," Steve said behind the camera.

Logan turned his head, and his crystal-blue eyes stared into the camera lens while he still wore his pads and helmet. "My arm's tired. Practice was over an hour ago."

"Jagger has probably sweated off five pounds, but he's saving your game."

Logan's gaze grew cool as he turned away. "Call another play, Hal, so we can get out of here. I have this thing called homework that I need to do."

Hal called the same play.

Logan threw a perfect ball, and Jagger caught it, bringing it into the endzone.

Steve gave a hoot of appreciation. "That's the effort you need to bring, Logan. Every. Single. Time. That's what champions are made of."

Logan pulled off his helmet, revealing sweat-soaked blond hair. "Yeah. Got it. I'm done."

Jagger came jogging over with his helmet in his hand, looking just as soaked and exhausted in his practice gear, fist-bumping Logan. "Forty-five yards, man. Giving me the good stuff with your pads still on."

"The I-formation needs some work before Friday," Steve added. "Hal was talking to Coach Brighton about it. I'm sure it will come up at practice tomorrow."

Logan exchanged a glance with Jagger before they walked toward the locker room where their friends and teammates had long since showered and

left.

Colton paused the video, doing a double take and jumping as he glanced over his shoulder. “Shit, you guys scared me.”

“Sorry,” Grace said as she stepped farther into the room.

Colton swiveled in the chair to face them. “I was over at Aunt Maggie’s, helping her and Asa move a couple of the bookshelves in one of the old guest rooms—the one Logan usually slept in. Aunt Maggie said I could take some of his stuff.”

Grace nodded. “I think that’s great. I want you to know who Logan was.”

Colton turned to look at the screen again. “It was never enough. Even when Logan made the plays, Steve didn’t let up.”

Jagger sighed, easily remembering how tense Logan became every time Steve attended a practice. “No, he didn’t.”

Colton ejected the disc from the drive. “You were good. But so was he.”

Jagger nodded. “Logan made me better.”

Colton shook his head. “You made each other better. But he hated it—being there.”

Jagger shook his head this time. “Logan liked football just fine when Steve stayed in Philly.” He wished that Colton could have seen how much fun they’d had more often than not. It wasn’t until Thursday afternoons that Logan hated to play—when Steve came in for practices and the Friday night games.

Colton turned to face them again. “What did he want to be? Because a football player wasn’t it.”

“He wasn’t entirely sure,” Grace told him. “But he always had an easy way with just about everyone. You remind me a lot of Logan in that way.”

Colton stood. “You know, I was always pissed that I meant nothing to him. That I was just Dr. Dad’s mistake. But it’s starting to click that I was the lucky one.” He grabbed his water glass off the coaster. “I’m going to finish my paper.”

Grace sighed as Colton walked into the hallway. “I’m sorry, Colton. That he couldn’t be someone you could count on.”

Colton stopped and turned. “I’m not sorry that I didn’t know him. I spent so much time hating all of you when I should have been feeling sorry instead. I’ll see you at dinner.”

Jagger waited for Colton’s door to close before he looked at Grace, slightly shaken after they’d unexpectedly taken a walk down memory lane. It

had been odd to see Logan again—to hear his voice.

Logan had been healthy and thriving in the footage—just a few weeks before their final game. Before all their lives had changed. “I didn’t expect to come home to that.”

She shook her head. “He seems to have a soft spot for Logan. He’s protective of him if that makes any sense.”

He nodded. “They look a lot alike. They sound a lot alike. The big brother he never got the chance to know.”

“I think he’s mad at my dad—*our* dad—for Logan.”

Jagger pulled her close, knowing she was just as shaken. “I think he’s mad at Steve for all of us. He’s lived with a lot of illusions. He’s quickly seeing the truth for what it was and is.”

She wrapped herself around him, settling her cheek on his chest. “My dad left so much pain behind. But he also left me another brother. I know it hurt my mom, but I’m glad Colton’s here.”

He returned her embrace, perfectly understanding Grace’s sentiments. “The one and only time your dad’s selfishness worked out for the better. Plus, all those nights he stayed in Philly so you could sneak into my bed. That worked out pretty well too.”

She chuckled as she hugged him harder, then met his gaze. “I don’t want Colton to hate him. He wasn’t all bad. Dad had a way with people, too—not just Logan. But he’s not ready to hear that.”

He nodded his agreement. “He probably won’t ever be able to see Steve the way you did. He never had the opportunity to experience your dad’s softer side. To know how funny he was.”

“Yeah.” She sighed as she settled her forehead against his chest. “I don’t want to think about the past anymore. Seeing that was more than enough.”

He eased her back to look at him again, well aware that the happiness they’d walked through the door with had dimmed a little. “We could always wash off the worst of this massage oil that feels pretty gross now that it’s all said and done.”

She sent him a wry smile. “Or we can take care of a few things to get ready for this next week.”

He shrugged. “We could, but that doesn’t sound like as much fun.”

She grinned. “No, it doesn’t. I will concede to a shower before we fold laundry and make dinner.”

He scooped her up, making a beeline for the master bedroom. “Done.”

He grinned as she laughed. He'd be damned if they wouldn't take back every ounce of the happiness their relaxing day had brought them.

# FORTY-FIVE

GRACE SANG ALONG WITH HER FAVORITE PLAYLIST AS SHE LIT THE CANDLES on the mantle. She gave her hips a little shimmy as she glanced toward the window, thrilled to see that it was still snowing.

All in all, the day had shaped up to be perfect. The forecast was calling for two to four inches before the small storm passed. It had been her scheduled afternoon to leave the shop at one, and Jagger had taken the morning classes at the dojang so he could enjoy a couple of nights at home now that Todd was feeling better.

Grabbing a couple of the board games from the cabinet, she looked at the clock, eager to share one of her favorite traditions with Colton.

With the games on the coffee table and everything else in place, she headed for the kitchen with hot cocoa on her mind.

Just then, Jagger walked through the door with Colton following behind. “Honey, we’re home.”

She grinned, hurrying his way, throwing her arms around him. “It’s *snowing*.”

Jagger chuckled as he returned her embrace, kissing her. “One of your favorite things.”

“Mmm,” she agreed, holding him tighter as she stared into his eyes.

Colton frowned as he looked at them. “Haven’t you lived in Pennsylvania your whole life?”

She laughed. “I have. But there’s something magical about the first snowfall. Everything’s so pretty and fresh. My mom loved it as much as I do, so we made it a celebration of sorts.”

Jagger pressed his mouth to hers for a second time. “It’s an occasion.”

Grace laughed again. "It is. The candles are lit, and the games are on the coffee table. I was just about to make us some hot cocoa. And I picked up some of the chocolate chip cookies you guys like at Brew."

Colton perked up. "Cool."

Jagger eased away to take off his jacket. "I'll get a fire going."

She nodded, deeply appreciating that he'd always been so willing to honor her need to celebrate one of her favorite memories she'd shared with her mom. "That sounds great."

But Jagger pulled her back against him, staring into her eyes. "Happy first snow, Gracie."

Her heart melted as she realized this moment meant just as much to him. It had been a long time since the first snow had made her happy instead of sad. "Thank you."

He rested his forehead against hers. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

Colton hefted his backpack farther up on his shoulder. "I'm going to bring my stuff down to my room so I don't have to stand here awkwardly."

She and Jagger grinned at each other as he walked off.

"It's been a minute since we've done something like this," he said, dancing with her in a slow circle the way he sometimes did.

"It has."

"Consider me your date for every first snow celebration from now on."

She smiled again as she nodded. "Okay."

He captured her lips in a slow kiss.

Closing her eyes, she got lost in the tender heat, loving the start of their special afternoon.

"Ugh, you *guys*," Colton said, walking back.

Jagger tossed Colton a baleful look. "Don't shit on tradition, kid. It's important to your sister."

Colton rolled his eyes. "I have no problem with tradition. I just don't want to watch you guys make out."

"Get used to it," Jagger said, pressing another kiss to her lips before he eased away, heading for the fireplace.

Grace looked at Colton, smiling. "Will you grab the marshmallows from the pantry? I'll get the hot cocoa started."

"Sure."

Twenty minutes later, they sat around the coffee table with snacks and

drinks, playing Sorry.

Jagger already had two of his blue pieces in the safe zone as he picked up a card, sending Colton's only red piece back to his zone.

Colton frowned as he chewed a bite of his second massive cookie. "What the hell, man? Why don't you ever send Grace back?"

"Because I'm in love with her."

Grace picked up a card, wincing as she looked at Jagger, sending one of his two pieces back to Start. "Sorry."

Colton laughed one of his rare big laughs as Jagger narrowed his eyes at her. "Where's the loyalty?"

She grinned. "Colton's only piece is already put back. But I would have picked you anyway because you're winning."

Jagger huffed out a pained laugh. "I almost forgot about your competitive streak. She's not afraid to be merciless," he told Colton.

Grace's grin returned. "I like to win."

Colton hooted out another laugh as he picked up a card, then shook his head when he didn't get anything that would move him out of his home base. "Nothing."

Jagger picked up, moving his only piece toward Grace's territory. "I'm coming for you, Evans."

Colton laughed again. "I guess love's a fickle thing in this house."

Grace smiled as she looked at her grinning brother while Jagger chuckled. Their first snowfall game afternoon was a success. All three of them were having fun. She'd yearned for moments just like this for such a long time, with the love of her life and her brother. Not Logan, but it was wonderful to have Colton in their lives.

"How was school today?" she asked.

Colton shrugged. "Not too bad. I got an A on that English paper."

Grace smiled. "That's great, Colton. Your hard work is paying off."

He jerked his shoulders again. "It wasn't that hard."

"You're settling in and getting your shit done," Jagger added. "You're turning things around. Keep it up."

Colton nodded as he took another bite of his cookie. "That's the plan."

Grace picked up her mug now that most of the marshmallows had melted into her drink. "You know, you're allowed to invite your friends over. You study at the library a lot, but this is your home, too."

"Yeah, maybe I will sometime." Colton adjusted his butt on the pillow he

sat on. “I guess I should tell you I’m taking Amanda to the movies Friday night.”

Jagger raised his brow. “The same Amanda who’s just your friend?”

Colton’s shoulders moved again. “I guess it’s more than that.”

Jagger broke his cookie in half. “You guys are together a lot. Do we need to talk about sex?”

Colton stared at him with horror in his eyes. “No, we absolutely don’t.”

Jagger bit into the cookie. “The only ones allowed to make babies around here are me and Grace.”

Colton sat farther up. “You guys want a baby?”

Grace looked at Jagger. “It’s been a topic of conversation.”

“Whenever it happens, it happens,” Jagger added. “But we have jobs, insurance, a house. Security and stability.”

“I’m not interested in making a kid. Not anytime soon. Plus, Amanda’s never been with anyone. I’m not pressuring her into doing anything she’s not ready for. We’re taking things slow.”

Jagger nodded. “Those are good answers. But if that’s a step you two end up taking, you can talk to us.”

“We just want you both to be safe,” Grace added, impressed at how accurately Jagger had pegged things during their conversation the other night.

Colton picked up his half-empty mug. “Got it. Now, can we please talk about something else?”

Jagger opened his mouth to say something as his phone rang. He picked it up, glancing at the screen. “It’s Jason.”

Grace wrinkled her nose. “I guess you’re leaving.”

“You’re probably right. But I’m not leaving tonight.” He winked at her as he stood up. “I’ll be right back.”

Jagger put his phone on silent as he walked back to the living room, where Colton and Grace had abandoned the floor to sit on the couch while they chatted.

He stared at Colton as the kid grinned when Grace said something that amused him. Even after two weeks of living together, it still took him by surprise to see Logan so clearly in Colton’s face.

Grace stopped talking as she looked his way, smiling as she reached for his hand. “So, when do you head out?”

He sighed as he laced their fingers, loathing that he had to go anywhere at all. He wanted more nights exactly like this. Fires in the fireplace and time with Grace. It was turning out that having Colton around worked just fine, too. “Monday morning. But I’ll be back on a four-thirty flight Tuesday afternoon. I need to go to DC again.”

Grace nodded. “Two days isn’t so bad.”

He sat on the cushion beside her, hooking his arm around her shoulders. “I know you were counting on my help with the centerpieces on Tuesday. Unfortunately, this trip can’t be avoided.”

She shook her head as she settled against him. “We’ve got it covered.”

He hated that this wasn’t the first time he’d bowed out of a prior commitment. Luckily, Grace was understanding. “I’ll be there for the duration on Wednesday. I promise.”

“Me and Amanda will be there right after school on Tuesday and all day on Wednesday,” Colton reminded Jagger.

“And Brandon’s helping out on Wednesday afternoon. Everything’s good,” Grace assured.

Colton moved to sit on the floor again. “Do you really only work two days a week each month?”

Jagger shrugged. “Sometimes it’s three or four. Five tops.”

Colton shook his head. “That’s crazy. And you make good money?”

Jagger nodded, having no issues with being honest about his income. “It’s certainly not bad. About fifty grand.”

Colton’s eyes grew huge. “A *month*?”

Jagger nodded again. “It pays to be highly specialized.”

Colton settled his elbows on the coffee table, clearly intrigued. “So, like, what will you do while you’re down in DC?”

Jagger snuggled Grace closer, always eager to have her by his side. “For this trip, I’ll run the routes the client will take at the same time of day the client will take them. I’ll be looking for locations where a security team might have a hard time maneuvering if they need a quick exit. If I see something that looks like it could be an issue, I’ll find routes that will provide a better outcome.”

“Huh,” Colton said, going after another cookie on the plate. “So, you just drive around?”

“For a lot of it. I also go to the locations where the client has meetings and hotel accommodations and look for weaknesses in building security. Since this guy’s a high-profile VIP, I’ll also inspect some target areas close by where someone who’s motivated to cause problems could.”

“So, you’re troubleshooting.”

Jagger struggled with a smile, sensing Colton’s disappointment in his job. “Pretty much. What I do now is pretty low-key, which is how I like it. Looking over your shoulder every day gets old.”

“No kidding. Or I would *assume* it gets old,” Colton quickly clarified as he shrugged. “Was that how it was when you were in Delta Force?”

Jagger shrugged. “I spent most of my time in locations where I didn’t belong. More often than not, it’s a fatal place to be. That’s all I’m going to say.”

“Huh,” Colton said again. “Getting a job like yours is probably pretty difficult.”

Jagger bobbed his head from side to side. “Not many people have the skill sets I do. But even if you don’t have my type of training, the security sector can be very lucrative.”

“Not if you have a criminal record, which I do. Sometimes I think about a career in intelligence or becoming a PI, but I don’t think it’s in the cards.”

Jagger frowned, not liking that Colton sounded so defeated. “You’ve been in a couple of fights. Hopefully, the latest was your last.”

Colton nodded. “That’s the plan. But I don’t like that we haven’t heard anything from the court. I don’t know if that’s a good or bad thing. I know my mom’s tried to call for an update, but no one’s gotten back to her. I don’t want to end up in juvie.”

Jagger shrugged, not quite as concerned. “I imagine they have bigger fish to fry than a kid who had a couple of drinks and got disorderly. The other kid’s parents didn’t even press charges.”

“We can talk to the lawyer about making sure they dismiss your case and also about getting your record expunged,” Grace suggested. “You’re doing really well here. A couple of mistakes shouldn’t keep you from pursuing what you want in the future.”

Colton shrugged. “Lawyers are expensive.”

“Yeah, but I’m loaded, so it’s not a problem.”

Colton grinned as he looked at her.

She smiled back. “The money is yours, too. He was your father, too.”

His smile vanished. “I don’t want anything that was his.”

Grace nodded. “I get that. It’s important that I make my own way, too. A lot of the money that was put into trust has been donated for various scholarships and to the hospitals where Dad was volunteering overseas.”

Colton blinked, clearly surprised. “Most of it’s *gone*?”

She winced as she nodded again. “I’m afraid so. I would have talked to you about it before Jagger and I moved forward with the decision, but I hadn’t read far enough into my mother’s journals yet.”

Colton shrugged. “I’m not mad that you gave most of it away. It sounds like it went to good causes.”

Grace nodded again. “That was certainly our intent. But there will be the proceeds from the mansion, and eventually, we’ll need to sell his condo and car in the city. The three of us can decide what to do with that money together.”

Colton shook his head. “You guys can do whatever. I truly don’t want it.”

Jagger reached for the last of his cookie. “The way I see it, what’s left no longer has anything to do with Steve. You both have a right to the hurt and anger he’s caused. You also have a right to use the financial gain to your advantage.” He looked at Colton. “Why wouldn’t you want a clean slate when Steve’s lawyer can make it all go away with a couple of phone calls?”

Colton stared down at the floor. “That seems like rich people bullshit. Do something wrong and Daddy makes it all disappear.”

“Yeah, it does. If this is something you want to move forward with, it’s not an open invitation to be a punk. It’s a one-time pass for a couple of mess-ups. It’s not a bad deal.”

Colton sighed. “I guess we could talk to the guy.”

Grace beamed. “We can call him tomorrow after school and see what he can do. Then we’ll talk to your mom.”

Colton nodded. “Sure.”

Grace moved to the floor, kneeling by the half-finished board game. “As fun as this was, we need to get ready for tomorrow, and I need to put some time into figuring out my grocery list for Thanksgiving. I have to go shopping before the chaos descends upon us on Tuesday.”

Jagger knelt to help clean up. “Asa and Aunt Mags take care of the ham and turkey. Grace makes several sides and a couple of the pies—or so I’ve been told. Things have changed a bit over the last eight years.”

She nodded. “It’s a big day at Aunt Maggie and Asa’s. Christy and Gabby

bring their families—their mom and dad, too. And Ben usually comes.”

Colton frowned as he looked at Grace. “Didn’t you and the chiropractor date?”

She sighed. “Small towns are *awesome*. The gossip mill never stops.”

Colton smiled. “I’ve heard some things.”

“We went out a couple of times. Then Jagger came home.”

Colton winced. “That’s awkward.”

“Not really,” Jagger chimed in. “It all worked out. Ben and Grace are still friends, and he tolerates me, which I can live with because I got the girl.”

Grace smiled as she rolled her eyes and stood with the games. “What’s your mom doing for Thanksgiving?”

Colton shrugged. “We’re still not talking much—mostly just a few texts here and there. But I assume she’s packing since she’s taking that job in Philly. She’ll probably hang out with her new boyfriend.”

Grace’s brow furrowed. “She knows she can come to Preston Valley, right?”

Colton adamantly shook his head. “That’s weird.”

Jagger looked at him. “We ate a meal together just fine.”

“That was one thing. Aunt Maggie’s been cool about everything. I don’t want to rub my mother in her face. She and Dr. Dad cheated on her sister.”

Grace sighed. “Things are what they are. We’re all grown up enough to deal with it. We’re not excluding anyone, especially on a holiday. Your mom can bring her boyfriend.”

“No. He’s a tool.”

Grace’s frown returned. “Is he unkind to you? To your mother?”

Colton shook his head. “It’s nothing like that. He’s this stuffy business guy with no sense of humor. He lives down in Philly. I can’t figure out what she sees in him.”

Grace put the games back in the cabinet, then looked at him. “When you tell your mother about your A, I hope you’ll invite them.”

Colton sent her a pained look.

“Or don’t,” Jagger chimed in. “It’s your Thanksgiving too. But you only get one mom, and from what I can tell, she’s been pretty damn good to you.”

Colton narrowed his eyes. “You’re an expert in that psychological operations stuff, aren’t you? Where they teach you to brainwash people and bend them to your will and whatnot?”

He’d become an expert in any and all operational tactics that got the

government the information they needed. But he smiled slyly. “I’m unable to confirm or deny your questions.”

Grace laughed as Colton grinned.

Jagger wrapped his arm around Grace. “Let’s get to that Thanksgiving list before we make dinner. I’ll use my mind tricks to get a chocolate silk pie added to the menu.” He kissed her temple as they walked away.

## FORTY-SIX

GRACE MOVED FROM THE PROCESSING ROOM TO THE FRONT OF THE STORE, where Amanda and Colton held down the fort after sending Jen home twenty minutes ago. School had finished for the day, and the holiday break had officially begun for the kids in Preston Valley.

For most of the day, Grace had had her hands full as she and Aunt Maggie created an assembly line of sorts to get a solid start on the centerpieces and arrangements that needed to be made. “Did we get any final orders?”

“A couple more,” Amanda said, handing over the paperwork, looking professional and pretty in stylish jeans and a sweater.

Grace glanced at the sheet. “The two-candle centerpiece is certainly the winner. I’ll have to keep that in mind for next year.”

Amanda nodded. “It’s definitely popular. I think it beat the other options by seventy percent.”

Grace raised her brow. She hadn’t had a chance to sit down and run all the numbers. Mostly, she was in survival mode. “Huh.”

Amanda glanced at the clock. “We’re not taking any more orders at this point, right?”

Grace shook her head. “Customers are welcome to the create-your-own section right out here and the arrangements we have in the fridge, but our inventory is tight.”

“And delivery starts at two thirty tomorrow?” Colton confirmed as he hung up the phone, looking handsome in dark wash jeans and a blue plaid button-down that covered his white T-shirt. “We’ve had a couple of people asking.”

“We’ll deliver in three waves. At nine, noon, and two thirty. Anyone who ordered vase arrangements and the floral cornucopias will see their delivery at nine. There will be several two-candle centerpieces going out then, too, but please don’t mention that. I’d rather people expect those at the noon and two-thirty deliveries and be surprised if they show up early.”

“Under-promise and over-deliver,” Amanda piped up.

Grace beamed, thrilled that Amanda seemed to have a head for business. “Exactly.”

Colton lifted the pink sheets where he’d taken messages. “I’ll call these people back to let them...”

Grace and Amanda looked to Simplicity’s picture window as Colton trailed off, staring outside.

Two men, whom she pegged to be in their early to midtwenties, stood on the sidewalk, waving to Colton.

Grace frowned. “You know them?”

Colton nodded, setting the pad of paper back on the counter. “Yeah, I’ll be right back.”

Grace looked at Amanda. “Do you know them?”

Amanda shook her head. “I’ve never seen them before.”

Grace forced a smile for Amanda, not so sure she liked watching Colton exchanging intricate handshakes with the men outside. “Uh, can you take these order sheets back to Aunt Maggie? And if you can set her up with another dozen boxes of the white candles, too, that would be great.”

Amanda took the sheet. “Definitely.”

Grace pretended to work as her gaze wandered to the window, watching as Colton spoke to the two men who screamed trouble.

It wasn’t necessarily that one of the guy’s hoodies said *GIVER OF ZERO FUCKS* in bold white font or that the other had skeletons and other creepy tattoos on every square inch of his exposed skin. It was their overall vibe.

She recognized bad news when she saw it. Her older brother had made her wary and wise to the rougher side of life. Before his death, Logan had become the type of bad influence Jessica wanted to keep Colton away from.

The man with the tattoos and shaved head did most of the talking while Colton nodded and occasionally smiled.

Grace steamed out a breath because nothing about this seemed good.

Colton was doing so well here in Preston Valley. His grades were excellent, and he was going to school every day. He was making new friends

and seemed excited about his future after Dennis Fitch had told them last Friday afternoon that he would make sure Colton's current case disappeared and he would also expedite the expungement of his record. The last thing he needed was old acquaintances popping back up in his life.

Everything about the current situation felt sickeningly familiar. Logan had had the friends he'd grown up with—the ones who had made his life better. And then there was the group who had actively helped him spiral.

Every time Logan had started to turn things around, the scum would return to pull him back down. She wasn't about to let that happen to Colton.

She moved to find out what was going on as Colton knuckle-bumped both men, then turned and came back inside. "Is everything okay?"

Colton nodded. "Yeah."

She held his gaze before he looked down. "Who are they?"

"Just a couple of guys I know from Millsdale." He met her gaze again. "Everything's good, Grace."

She nodded, wanting to believe him, eager to ask more questions. But she didn't want to push. Colton was starting to relax. His guard was mostly down around her and Jagger. "Okay. I'm going to get back to work."

"I'll call those customers."

"Thanks." She looked toward the window again, making certain that the men were gone, then went to help Aunt Maggie, glancing at the wall clock, relieved that Jagger would be home in just a couple more hours.

She'd promised Jagger she wouldn't keep little or big things from him. And something about those two men reappearing in Colton's life felt big.

Jagger switched the paper bag that held the dinner for three to his opposite arm as he adjusted his keys in his hand. Before he could get the key in the lock, Grace opened the door.

She smiled, wearing black yoga pants and one of his old gray sweatshirts. She'd pulled her hair back in a high ponytail. "Hey, stranger."

He grinned, staring at the person he loved most in the world. "Hey, beautiful."

She moved to let him in and shut the door behind him.

Setting the bag on the table, he dropped his carry-on and coat to the floor,

then wrapped her up in a hug, kissing the top of her head. “I *missed* you.”

She returned his embrace, holding on tight. “I missed you, too.”

He eased her back enough to stare into her big blue eyes. “Where’s Colton?”

“In his room.”

“How was today?”

“*Busy*. But we got a great head start. We should have half the orders ready for the nine o’clock delivery tomorrow.”

“That’s great.” But he held her gaze because he knew she had more to tell him. “What’s going on?”

She sighed. “You know me too well.”

He tucked the loose strands of her hair behind her ear. “What’s up, Gracie?”

She sighed again. “Colton had a couple of visitors today. At the shop. They talked outside, so I have no idea what was said, but I didn’t like it.”

He frowned. “Who were they?”

She shrugged. “He didn’t say. Just that he knew them from Millsdale. I didn’t want to push too much since he’s finally starting to open up. But they’re trouble. They reminded me a lot of Logan’s old friends—and not the ones from Sheraton Prep.”

Jagger blew out a breath, wanting to change out of his slacks and button-down, but he wanted to know what was going on with Colton more. “Okay. Let’s have some dinner and see what’s what.”

She settled a halting hand on his arm before he could move. “But don’t push, Jagger.”

“I won’t,” he said as he started toward the kitchen.

“Wait.” She closed the distance between them, wrapping her arms around the back of his neck as she stood on her tiptoes, kissing him. “Thank you for grabbing dinner.”

He pulled her mouth back to his, forever craving her taste. “You’re welcome.”

She pressed her lips to his again. “I wish I could just say welcome home. This is the second time you’ve come back to complications.”

He rested his forehead against hers. “We’ll get stuff figured out.”

“Ugh,” Colton said as he moved down the hall. “I thought I heard your voice. Why am I not surprised to see you two hanging all over each other?”

Jagger eased away. “How about you grab the bag over on the entryway

table, and I'll get some plates?"

Colton changed directions, heading for the bag instead of the kitchen. "Sure."

"I made a salad to go with dinner," Grace said as she walked to the fridge. "And what does everyone want to drink?"

"I'm good with water," Jagger said.

"Me, too," Colton added.

Minutes later, they sat at the table, silently eating the thick sandwiches and truffle potato chips he'd grabbed at Myra's Gourmet.

"I heard you playing the guitar," Grace finally said to Colton. "You're very good."

He shrugged. "I haven't played for a while, so I'm a little rusty."

Grace raised her brow. "If that's rusty, I'm looking forward to hearing you at your best because I couldn't tell."

"Thanks."

"So, it sounds like it's been busy around here," Jagger said as he reached for the salad dressing, ready to move past the small talk and steer their conversation to where he and Grace wanted it to go. "What's been going on while I've been gone?"

Colton looked from Jagger to Grace as he chewed, then put down his half-eaten roast beef sandwich. "I assume you told Jagger about my friends."

"Grace and I tell each other everything," Jagger said before Grace could say anything, recognizing Colton's slightly defensive tone.

"Your mom had mentioned that she was worried about your friend group in Millsdale." Grace shrugged. "You're doing really well here. I don't want that to change."

"Today was no big deal. They're just some guys I know. They heard I was living up here and tracked me down to say hello."

Jagger stared at Colton, not entirely believing him. "A two-hour drive for a quick hello. Those are dedicated friends."

Colton shrugged. "I worked with them at the car dealership. They were grabbing some auto parts for the garage. We hung out sometimes, but I'm not interested in continuing any sort of friendship. It'll be fine if I never see them again."

Jagger picked up the other half of his turkey sandwich, one hundred percent sure Colton was telling the truth. "So, they won't be regulars here in Preston Valley?"

Colton shook his head. “I like things here just the way they are. I told them I’d come to say hello the next time I was in town, but I didn’t mean it. I don’t see myself heading back to Millsdale anytime soon. Mom’s coming here for Thanksgiving. Then she’s moving to Philly. There’s no real reason to head that way again.”

Jagger exchanged a look with Grace, tossing her a wink and a smile. She smiled back, clearly relaxing some.

Colton pulled his salad bowl closer as he looked at them. “Amanda might come over for dessert at Aunt Maggie’s if that’s okay. Her parents already said yes.”

Grace smiled at Colton. “We would love to have her.”

Jagger nodded his satisfaction because everything was good, which worked just fine for him. He could do without the stress and worry he remembered Logan bringing to their lives with his constant issues and problems. Colton had had his fair share of crap, but he seemed determined to turn his life around. They couldn’t ask for more than that.

“The more, the merrier,” he said, looking forward to helping Grace and Aunt Mags at the shop tomorrow, then enjoying Thanksgiving Day with his family.

## FORTY-SEVEN

GRACE SAT NEXT TO JAGGER ON THE COUCH IN THE FAMILY ROOM, SLIGHTLY sleepy and entirely relaxed as she watched Aunt Maggie, Asa, Colton, and Amanda playing Parchisi at the card table that had held dozens of side dishes during the afternoon.

Aunt Maggie and Asa's old house was mostly quiet now that everyone had left after a loud and busy day. All in all, everything had gone perfectly as family and friends gathered around the massive Thanksgiving table to enjoy a delicious meal.

Jessica had brought Tad, her boyfriend, which had worked out fine. Colton introduced Amanda to the group as they sat down again to enjoy a myriad of different desserts. But the best part of all had been Jagger sitting in the seat next to hers—something he hadn't done in so long.

She sighed as he hooked his arm tighter around her shoulders, pulling her closer.

He kissed the top of her head. "What are you thinking about?"

She lifted her cheek off his chest, meeting his gaze. "About how lucky I am. About how happy I am that you're sitting here with me."

He made a sound in his throat as he nodded. "That's been my favorite part. Waking up next to you, helping you in the kitchen. Sitting next to you while we enjoyed a hell of a good meal."

"And things weren't too awkward with Jessica here."

Jagger shook his head. "Aunt Mags is a class act. Just like her niece."

Grace grinned. "I'm glad that you think so."

"I know so." Jagger sighed as he crossed his ankles on the coffee table. "You know, we have the next three days off. With Todd and Ruby off to the

city with the kids and Aunt Mags closing the shop for a much-deserved break, we can pretty much do anything.”

Grace wrinkled her nose. “Sort of.”

“Inventory,” he said, beating her to it.

She nodded, wrinkling her nose again. “I was thinking about taking care of it tomorrow—just getting it over with so we’ll be ready for business on Monday morning. That way, we can do whatever we want Saturday and Sunday.”

He nodded. “That sounds like a solid plan. I can take care of the groceries and all the other whatnots while you’re counting all of the things.”

She smiled, loving that she had the support of such a wonderful partner. “That would be great. Colton mentioned something about wanting to help when Aunt Maggie and I were talking in the kitchen. Amanda’s doing Black Friday with her mom and aunt in Philly, so his day is free.”

Jagger raised his brow. “I say let him help. It’ll be good for him.”

“I was thinking that, too. Plus, we’ll get done much faster.”

“It sounds like we have a plan. What are you thinking about for Saturday? What should we do?”

She exhaled a breath as she rested back against the cushion again. “I think we should start by lying around in bed all morning.”

He wiggled his brow. “I can get behind that idea.”

She laughed. “Then I was thinking about heading out to take some pictures when it warms up a little.”

He nodded as he captured her hand, playing with her fingers. “It’s been a while since you’ve had a chance to get out your camera.”

“Mm-hmm. We could catch a movie after if you want.”

Sure.” He laced their fingers. “Is the Christmas tree on the agenda?”

“That’s next weekend.” She winced as she shook her head, realizing she sounded bossy. “Or that’s when I usually do it. Typically, after the Thanksgiving rush and Thanksgiving Day, I need a little break before moving on to the next holiday.”

He nodded. “I get it. Next weekend sounds perfect.”

She smiled, loving that this was her reality. Not even four months ago, she would never have believed that she could have this again—that life could be this good. “Our first Christmas together in such a long time. And now we have Colton with us, too.”

“It’s going to be a great one.”

She nodded because she planned to do it up big. “We can drive to the farm and pick out our tree.”

“Damn right. We’re sawing that thing down ourselves. And we’re introducing Colton to those homemade cider donuts they sell.”

She grinned as she nodded, remembering how they’d always come to Preston Valley to help Aunt Maggie and Asa with the Yuletide festivities—tree choosing, cutting, decorating, music, and treats. Now it was their turn to add to the tradition. “I was thinking of Friday afternoon for the tree. I always volunteer at the Toys for Tots fair, which is next Saturday.”

“Sign me up to join you for both.”

She nodded. “Okay.” She looked toward the table again as everyone laughed at something Colton said, and her smile returned. “This is good, Jagger. Things are good.”

He nodded. “We’re finding our way.”

She closed her eyes for the briefest of seconds, treasuring the feel of Jagger’s tough body settled against hers and the sounds of family in the next room. It had been a rough few months, but things were finally settling down.

She met his gaze again. “I’m looking forward to the next couple of days.”

“Ditto, baby.” He pulled her mouth to his. “Happy Thanksgiving, Gracie.”

She smiled. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

# FORTY-EIGHT

JAGGER WALKED TOWARD HIS CAR WITH A BAG OF GRACE'S FAVORITE croissants from Yum, the always-bustling bakery on Seventh Street. He glanced toward the overcast sky as the wind kicked up, smelling the impending snow in the air.

The forecast was calling for one to three inches overnight, which would be great for Grace's pictures tomorrow afternoon.

Everything was on track for a relaxing next couple of days. The grocery shopping had been done. The laundry had been washed and folded. The bathrooms were clean. And tomorrow's breakfast was officially taken care of.

He nearly stopped as he stepped off the sidewalk, noting the navy-blue Buick he'd seen twice throughout the day, parked two spaces down from the Stingray as he reached for the door handle on the busy street.

His shoulders automatically tensed in a way that they hadn't since he'd been overseas—since he'd constantly been on guard. He knew when someone was watching him. His life had depended on it.

He noted a male driver and passenger, both wearing winter hats and jackets, fiddling with their phones as he casually looked around before getting behind the wheel.

Turning over his engine, he quickly backed out in the break in traffic, waiting to see if the LeSabre followed.

The vehicle backed up moments later, staying two car lengths behind him.

"Who the fuck are you?" he muttered, accelerating as he glanced in the rear and side mirrors while he drove through two green lights.

He'd made enemies over the years. As far as he knew, they had no idea

who he really was or how to find him. But nothing was impossible.

He slowed, noting that the vehicle pulled into another parking spot on Second Street as he kept driving, checking for any further signs that he had a tail.

When he was certain he was no longer being followed, he took the long way around town to be sure no one picked him up again.

“Nothing,” he said, suddenly wondering if he was being paranoid. He’d relaxed a lot since he’d come home, but he doubted the low-grade need to always look over his shoulder would ever go away. But he also *knew* when someone was keeping an eye on him.

Eager to make his way back to Main Street to check on Colton and Grace, he eventually found a parallel parking spot halfway down the block from Simplicity.

Waiting another couple of minutes, he constantly checked his mirrors before getting out and crossing the street, scanning the area, not seeing or feeling anything out of the ordinary.

He walked closer to the shop, watching Grace and Colton, both dressed down in jeans and sweatshirts, talking at the front counter as she pointed to whatever she was showing him on her laptop.

Grace glanced up, grinning as their eyes met.

He smiled, tossing up a wave.

Grace moved to the door to unlock it for him. “Hey there, handsome.”

He kissed her as he stepped inside. “Hey.”

She locked the door behind him. “We’re just about finished. We need a few more minutes.”

“Take your time.” He looked at Colton. “Are you bored yet?”

Colton shrugged. “I wouldn’t want to do this every month the way Grace does, but it’s not the worst thing.”

Grace laughed. “I can see that I’ve impressed you with my work.”

Colton jerked his shoulders again. “We’ve spent most of the day counting stuff.”

Grace grinned. “It’s my most dreaded task, but it has to be done.”

Colton stuffed his hands in his pockets. “We should go out for an early dinner since we’re almost finished. Amanda’s mom and dad said that sushi place is good.”

Jagger nodded, liking the idea of letting someone else handle the dinner prep and cleanup for the night. He couldn’t think of a better way to start their

relaxing weekend. "I can get behind sushi."

Grace shrugged this time. "Sure."

Jagger glanced toward the big window as a movement caught his eye. He did a double take, noting the Buick pulling into the newly empty spot next to Grace's Sorento as the streetlamps kicked on in the fading outside light.

The tension was back, tightening his shoulders and his stomach. "I'll be right back," he said, heading to the processing room, then out the alleyway door.

It was time to figure out what the hell was going on. Someone was following him, but they were sloppy as fuck, which didn't add up to the sophisticated people he'd dealt with overseas.

Walking behind the cars parked along the street, he wasted no time with his approach, yanking open the LeSabre's back left door. He got in, wrapping the seat belt around the driver's neck and headrest as he sent the palm of his right hand into the passenger's throat, making the guy crumple forward, gagging and coughing as he fought to breathe.

"Who the fuck are you?" Jagger said through clenched teeth, directing his attention back to the driver. "Why are you following me?"

"I'm no one," the driver said.

Jagger tightened the seat belt until the guy coughed and gasped. "That answer's not going to work for me."

"Colton." The guy choked out. "We're here for Colton."

He tightened the belt again for good measure as the guy clawed at his neck with fingers tatted up with crossbones and snakes. "Why?"

"Because he owes us a ride," he fought to say.

"He owes you nothing." He tightened the seat belt again. "Here's how things are going to work. You're going to tell whoever Colton has a debt to that it's been settled. You're going to get the hell out of here and not come back. If I see you anywhere near my family again, I swear to God you're dead."

Jagger glanced to his right as the passenger inched his left arm toward something to the side of the console.

Jagger quickly stood on his knee in the back seat, using his new leverage to grab the guy by the back of the neck and slam his face into the guy's knees as he dove farther forward to snatch up the pistol on the passenger side floor.

The passenger moaned as he sat up with blood spurting from his nose. "You fucking broke my *nose*."

“Who the fuck are you, man?” the driver said with his hands up as Jagger slid the rack back and held the barrel against the driver’s temple.

“The only thing you need to worry about is getting the hell out of here before I make you both disappear. And I promise I’ll find you if you ever contact Colton again.”

He got out, stepping aside as they peeled out of their spot.

Jagger released the magazine, putting the clip in his pocket as he dismantled the pistol in seconds, letting the pieces drop to the street before he kicked them into the sewer.

He glanced up, realizing that Grace and Colton were staring at him through the picture window. “Damn,” he whispered as he held Grace’s huge blue eyes.

He waited for Grace to let him back inside, staring at her clutching Colton’s hand. “Let’s get home. We obviously have a lot to talk about.”

Grace nodded. “I’ll just—I need to lock up.”

“I’ll follow you and Colton back to the house.”

Grace nodded again. “Sure.” She let her brother go, reaching for her purse and laptop with unsteady hands, then walked out, waiting for them to step out before she secured the lock.

“I’ll be right behind you.”

“Okay,” she said as Colton walked to his pickup parked next to Grace’s Sorento, still not saying anything.

Sushi had been forgotten as Jagger, Grace, and Colton sat around the kitchen table. No one had said much, as Grace made everyone a cup of tea before they took their usual seats.

He’d wanted answers immediately, but he’d watched Grace’s jerky movements as she’d hurried around the kitchen, gathering tea bags and honey, recognizing that she’d needed a few moments to steady out after the troubling developments over the last twenty minutes.

Jagger didn’t touch the steaming drink as his eyes wandered from Grace’s uneasy gaze to Colton’s, eager to get straight to the point. “I think the obvious question here is, what the hell’s going on? And we want the truth this time. All of it.”

Colton nodded. “Those guys, Jimmy and Greg, they *do* work at the car dealership where I was washing cars.”

“These are the same guys that were here the other day?”

Colton nodded again. “Jimmy, the guy with all the tattoos, does some of Ray’s mechanic work. Greg does other stuff.”

“Why is a mechanic telling me you owe him a ride?”

Colton blew out a long, quiet breath as he fiddled with the paper tab on his tea bag. “Because Ray runs a chop shop in the autobody shop. At night.”

Jagger closed his eyes as he rubbed at the tension knotting the back of his neck. This just kept getting better and better. “And how involved in this chop shop were you?”

“I wasn’t.” Colton looked from Grace to Jagger as he adamantly shook his head. “I had no idea anything was going on when I took the job. I know Jimmy from school. He graduated a couple of years ago. We played basketball at the park sometimes. He put in a good word with Ray when I mentioned that I was looking for more work—something other than just the pizza place.”

Colton slid unsteady fingers through his hair. “Ray’s a fucking pillar of the *community*. Everyone in Millsdale knows who he is. My mom was *glad* when I told her I would be washing cars for him. I’d been working there for a couple of months before I started noticing that things seemed off.”

“Like what?” Jagger wanted to know.

“Like I rarely ever saw Jimmy there during a shift, but he’d regularly pull his truck into the garage when the shop closed for the night. I asked him about it once—just giving him a hard time. He told me he was fixing his truck off the clock. I believed him until I started noticing that Ray’s tow truck guy was picking up totaled vehicles and putting them in the fenced-in yard behind the shop. A couple of days later, a car or truck of the same make and model would always be sitting in one of the bays.”

Jagger sighed. “They’re re-venning them.”

Colton nodded. “Yeah.”

Grace frowned. “I don’t know what that is.”

Jagger looked at her. “The VIN is a vehicle’s identification number.”

She nodded. “I know that part.”

“They’re bringing in totaled vehicles,” he continued to explain. “Then they’re stealing cars of the same make and model. They’re taking the VIN from the totaled car and using it on the stolen vehicle.”

Grace's frown reappeared. "Why?"

"Because a stolen car's VIN would be flagged as stolen, but a totaled car's number is simply out of commission. Nothing would alert the authorities to be suspicious because they would never be looking for a totaled car's VIN to be there. They're most likely shipping the vehicles overseas. To places like Ghana, where there's a huge market for stolen vehicles. Nothing can be done once the car clears customs with the counterfeit VIN."

Grace nodded. "That's horribly smart."

Jagger sighed again because it was also sophisticated. Colton's old friends were mixed up with big players. "How did they realize you'd caught on?"

"One day, I went in early before the dealership opened—before my shift started. I wanted to wash my truck. When I drove around back, I saw the car brought in the day before being put up on a flatbed. It had a different license plate, and the rims had been changed out for something less expensive from the shop. When I saw the original wheels tucked away in the corner of the garage, I knew that my suspicions were right. I tried to quit at the end of my shift. I told Ray that school and two jobs were too much."

"What happened?" Jagger wanted to know.

"Jimmy came by the apartment that night. He told me he would see me at the shop the next day. I knew they would probably kill me if I didn't show up."

"Oh, God," Grace whispered as she clutched her mug.

"After that, they stopped trying to hide what was happening," Colton continued. "I guess they thought that the more I knew, the more stuck I was."

Jagger nodded. "I'd say that's about right."

"The night I got arrested, I was supposed to have gone to Philly with Greg. Jimmy and Ray thought I should help Greg boost a car."

"So, Greg steals the cars?"

Colton nodded. "Yeah."

Jagger nodded again because Ray and his buddies had wanted Colton in deep. "You're not likely to say much if you're an accessory to grand theft auto and an auto theft ring."

Colton shook his head. "I didn't meet Greg where I was supposed to. I went to a party instead, had a few drinks, and got into it with Casey's new boyfriend. I was relieved when the cops showed up. I was even more relieved when my mom didn't answer her phone and they called you. When you guys

brought me up here, I was two hours away from Millsdale. I was two hours away from *them*. It gave me some breathing room—a chance to think.”

Jagger thought back to the night when they all decided that Colton should give living in Preston Valley a shot while they ate their lasagna dinner. Colton’s sudden about-face and desire to move in with two strangers now made perfect sense.

Colton rubbed at his temples. “I don’t know how they found me up here. I was hoping that after a while, they would just forget about me. But when they came by on Wednesday, they reminded me I owed them a ride. I told them that I couldn’t get away right now. I mentioned that I’d gotten arrested—that Mom had sent me up here to stay with you two and how you were keeping me on a tight leash. They seemed fine with it when they left. I don’t know why they came back today.”

Jagger scooted his chair farther in, ready for more answers. Because unlike Colton’s naivete, he knew this wasn’t going away. “I need to know everything you do if I’m going to help you fix this. Names. Who does what. Etcetera, etcetera. I bought you some time by scaring the shit out of them tonight, but I don’t know how long it’ll stay that way. It’s clear they don’t call the shots.”

Colton shook his head as he shrugged. “I don’t know all that much.”

“You’ll tell me what you do, and I’ll take it from there. We’ll sit down first thing tomorrow morning and get things figured out.”

Colton settled his elbows on the table, then rested his forehead in his palms. “Maybe I should just leave. That had been my plan the day you took me to Wakeview.”

“Where were you going to go?” Grace asked.

Colton shrugged. “I have no idea. The plan was to get on a bus and see where I ended up.”

Jagger clenched his jaw as he exchanged a glance with Grace. “That sounds like a fast way to end up in a really bad situation.”

Colton lifted his head to look at him. “I’d say I’m already in one of those.”

Jagger shook his head because Colton had no idea how much worse it could get. He played at being street smart and tough, but under it all, he was just a scared seventeen-year-old who’d been pissed at the father who’d abandoned him. “You’re a good-looking kid who would eventually run out of money. Don’t think for a second that you wouldn’t get pimped out when you

found yourself living on the streets.”

Colton swallowed as he held Jagger’s gaze.

Jagger saw the fear in Colton’s eyes, which was exactly what he wanted. “Running away just brings more problems. Trust me, I know. But you didn’t do anything wrong. I can help you fix this.”

“Please don’t leave.” Grace settled her hand on Colton’s shoulder. “I don’t want to wake up one of these mornings and realize you’re gone. We love having you here. You’re building a life here. You’re my brother, and I don’t want you to go.”

Colton nodded as he held Grace’s gaze.

“Look at me.”

Colton’s eyes met Jagger’s next.

“I’m asking you to trust that I’ll take care of this.”

Colton nodded for the second time.

“If you see them around again, I want to know. Immediately. I mean it, Colton.”

“I’ll tell you.”

“That goes for you, too,” Jagger said to Grace.

She nodded as she clutched her hands around her mug again.

Colton stood. “I’m not hungry. I’m going to bed.” He looked at Grace. “I promise I’ll be here when you wake up in the morning.”

Grace sent him a small smile. “Thank you.”

Colton disappeared down the hall.

Grace got to her feet. “I’m going to take a shower,” she said as she walked away.

“Son of a bitch,” Jagger muttered as he sat in the heavy silence.

Grace hurried to the bathroom, craving the warmth and peace she always found in the shower. For just a few minutes, she wanted a break from her problems.

She yanked her sweatshirt over her head, then unsnapped the front clasp on her bra as she closed her eyes, huffing out a humorless laugh.

Wasn’t it only yesterday that she’d foolishly let herself believe that life was finally settling down again? Hadn’t she shared a wonderful meal with

family and friends, then talked about a relaxing weekend with Jagger?

But that wasn't to be. Everything was a huge mess again. The status quo of late. But somehow, things were worse than ever. Colton was in danger, and Jagger...

She pulled at the snap and unzipped her jeans, taking her panties with them as she let them fall to the floor, remembering how cold his eyes had been—how fast he'd moved as he wrapped the seat belt around the man's neck and mostly knocked the other unconscious with a vicious blow to the throat.

She'd been curious about Jagger's mysterious life. She'd been fascinated by his secret career. But tonight, she'd gotten a firsthand look at the violence and danger he often alluded to but so rarely spoke of. Tonight she saw for herself who Jagger had been overseas.

She turned on the water, thinking of how different he'd been when he first came home—of how he'd had an unfamiliar edge. Jagger had been a stranger.

"Hey," he said as he walked in behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist as he closed the door with a kick of his foot. "Are you okay?"

She nodded as she stood stiff, studying them in the mirror. He was so much bigger than her—so much more powerful with all his muscles and strength. "Yes."

He pressed a trail of kisses down her neck as he nuzzled her closer.

She brought her palms up to rest on his forearms. "You're always so gentle with me. You were a different person in that car."

He sighed as he turned her to face him, sliding his hands down her arms. "They were following me. They were threatening my family. At that moment, I was who I needed to be. But I'm still me, Grace."

She stared into his kind eyes as she lifted her hand, trailing her fingers along his cheek.

"I'm still me," he said quietly.

She nodded. "I know you are."

He pulled her closer, settling his forehead against hers. "I scared you. I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"I love you, Gracie."

"I love you, too." She closed her eyes, exhaling an unsteady breath as she suddenly struggled not to cry. "Why is everything always falling apart?"

He shook his head. “I don’t know. Go ahead and get in the shower. You have goosebumps.”

She stepped into the steamy warmth, watching him pull off his shirt. His jeans and boxers landed on the bath mat before he joined her.

“Come here,” he said, pulling her back against him as the water rained over their bodies. “It’s going to be okay.”

She shook her head because nothing about his reassurances felt true. “How many times have you told me that over the last couple of months? How does everything keep getting worse?”

“Grace—”

She felt her tears mix with the splashes of water on her cheeks. “We were finding our way with Colton. He was settling in. Now there’s this. What are we going to do, Jagger?”

“Colton’s going to tell me what he knows. Then I’ll talk to Jason and some of the guys on his team.” He brought her hands to his lips, pressing a long kiss to her knuckles. “I’m going to take care of this.”

She sniffled. “What does that mean? What does that look like?”

He gave a slight shake of his head as he shrugged. “I’m not entirely sure yet.”

“Shouldn’t we just go to the police?”

He shook his head more adamantly this time. “The last thing we want is to put Colton in the position of becoming some sort of informant. I’m going to handle this quietly.”

“How can I help?”

“You can’t. I want you to stay far away from this.”

She frowned as she pulled out of his embrace. “Why is it that when everything starts falling apart, I lose my choices? How can you expect me to sit back and do nothing?”

“This is *dangerous*, Grace.” He pulled her back, cradling her face in his hands as hints of the fierceness she saw before filled his eyes. “These people aren’t fucking around. This Ray guy’s in deep. This is organized crime.”

She sighed, well aware of how bad the situation was. And she was afraid. “I’m worried about Colton. I’m worried about you. I love you both.”

“Trust me to fix this, Gracie. Trust me to help him the way I couldn’t help Logan.”

She frowned as she shook her head, growing more afraid of just how determined he was, knowing he would stop at nothing to make this go away.

“This has nothing to do with Logan, Jagger.”

“I couldn’t help him. I couldn’t save him, no matter how hard I tried. But I’m not a twenty-year-old kid this time. Logan’s problems were always bigger than us. There was always so little we could do. But I’ve dealt with people so much worse than the ones who are fucking with Colton.”

“Jagger—”

He shook his head. “I’m ending this, Grace. For Colton. For all of us. Then we’re moving on with our lives. Trust me to do that.”

She nodded because she had no choice. She wanted to tell him they would find another way—that all of this was too perilous. But Colton needed the help that only Jagger could give him. “Okay.”

He kissed her. “Let’s wash up. We need to eat something. I’ll make us all some eggs.”

She kissed him, wanting back the blissful normal they’d all enjoyed yesterday. “I’ll help.”

## FORTY-NINE

JAGGER SAT IN HIS RENTAL CAR, TIGHTENING HIS FOCUS ON THE LONG-RANGE lens as he snapped several pictures in the dark. He watched in semi-fascination as Greg quickly boosted a Luxury Edition Escalade.

There was no doubt that the guy was bad news, but he was also one hell of a car thief. He'd disarmed the vehicle and hopped in the driver's seat in less than thirty seconds.

Greg wasted no time backing out of his latest victim's driveway, keeping the headlights off as he followed his lookout crew through the upscale Philly neighborhood.

Jagger waited several seconds before he turned over his engine, then drove to the opposite entrance, pulling onto the main road behind the unsuspecting group.

For nearly a week, he'd spent the majority of his days and nights doing much of the same. His new routine consisted of regularly meeting with Jason's Philly-based PI or switching out his rental cars and parking in various locations to learn how Millsdale Automotive ran their end of the car theft ring while also operating a legitimate and thriving business.

He'd followed Ray's guys to Philly, Maryland, New York, and New Jersey, observing and documenting them picking up totaled vehicles at auction, then bringing them back to Millsdale before boosting vehicles of the same make and model a day or two later.

The re-vinned vehicles were dropped off at a rendezvous point in a shithole neighborhood in downtown Philly, where they were loaded into shipping containers, then brought to the massive New Jersey port to be sent overseas.

Jagger followed the group onto the interstate, continuing northbound toward Preston Valley when they eventually took the Millsdale exit.

He knew the process they would follow from that point forward: drop the Escalade off at the shop where Jimmy would disable the vehicle's GPS, swap out any expensive custom accessories that Ray would fence for himself, then re-vin the vehicle before the flatbed showed up while the cops were occupied with the morning shift change in the small town.

It had been risky when Jagger set out on foot to get close enough to the garage to snap the pictures he'd needed the night before, but the goldmine of proof he'd gathered had been worth it.

For the most part, he had what he needed. The Millsdale crew had officially been caught red-handed, even if they didn't know it. But he wanted more—something undeniably huge—so Colton could be finished with these assholes for good.

He yawned, pressing harder on the gas pedal, watching the miles tick by until he eventually pulled into Grace's driveway ninety minutes later.

Getting out with his borrowed camera equipment, he signaled to one of Jason's guys in the car across the street that he was good to leave as he walked up the path to the front door.

Letting himself inside, he was careful to be quiet as he set down his stuff, then moved through the house, stopping by the bed as he stripped down to his boxers and slipped under the covers.

Grace stirred. "You're home."

He pulled her against him, wrapping her up, savoring the warmth and softness of her skin. "Go back to sleep."

She rolled over instead, staring into his eyes. "I'm not missing my chance to see you. To talk to you."

For the last six days, he'd been gone more than not, sleeping for short snaps in hotels. Nothing about their current situation had been like his typical business trips. There had been no FaceTime dinners or casual conversations. Communication with Grace had been spotty at best while he gathered information and she readied Simplicity for the Christmas season rush.

To keep things simple and explanations to a minimum, he, Grace, and Colton had agreed to tell family and friends that he'd been called away for an extended work trip.

He kissed her as he slid his hand up and down the side of her waist. "I'm right here. I'm home for the next couple of days."

“Thank goodness,” she said, sending him a small smile. “I’ve missed you.”

He smiled back. “I’ve missed you, too.”

She stroked her fingers along his cheek. “You look tired.”

He shrugged because he’d been tired before. But getting Colton out of this mess was more important than resting for a full eight hours. Keeping Ray’s goons off Colton’s ass wouldn’t last forever—at least not yet. “I’m okay.”

“How are things going?”

He captured her hand, kissing her fingers. “I’m getting a lot of the information we need. It shouldn’t be much longer.”

She sent him another smile. “Good.”

He tucked her hair behind her ear. “How are things here?”

She shrugged. “We’re hanging in there. But Colton’s looking out the windows a lot—here and at the shop.”

“Someone’s outside watching you guys at all times.”

She nodded. “He knows. We both do. But he’s been pretty quiet. I think last week really shook him up.”

He sighed. “It’s all going to work out.”

She nodded again. “I think tomorrow will be good for him. I know he’s looking forward to picking out the Christmas tree after school. Amanda’s coming over to help us decorate.”

Jagger was looking forward to their plans, too. He was craving a normal evening. But mostly, he needed Grace. “We’re going to have an excellent Friday night.”

She nodded as she smiled. “Things are running smoothly at the shop, so I’m taking tomorrow off.”

He wiggled his brow. “We’ll have the house to ourselves for most of the day.”

She grinned. “We will. After I ravish you, I want to head to the deli for some fresh meats and cheeses. I’m going to make us a big charcuterie board.”

He raised his brow. “With some of that insanely delicious pepperoni?”

She chuckled. “Of course. And those chocolate-covered almonds, too.”

He nodded. “Hell yeah.”

She grinned again. “I also need to get a new tree skirt. Something extra pretty. I want everything to be perfect.”

“Count me in for all of it.”

She kissed him, letting her lips linger against his. “Welcome home.”

“Thanks,” he said, fighting back a yawn.

Her mouth met his again. “Snuggle up with me for a little while.”

“There’s no place I’d rather be.”

She rolled back over, and he pulled her closer, tucking his face against her neck the way he always did. His plan had been to savor this rare moment with Grace, but he fell instantly asleep.

Jagger blinked his eyes open in the blinding sunshine when he heard footsteps on the hardwood floor. Rolling over, he frowned, realizing Grace was already dressed in light-pink yoga pants and a white sweatshirt.

She winced as she stood just outside the master bathroom. “I’m sorry. I was trying to be quiet.”

He sat up, glancing at the bedside clock, shocked to see it was just past nine. “How did I not hear you get up?”

She smiled as she walked over, sitting next to him on the edge of the bed. “You’re *exhausted*, Jagger.”

“I imagine Colton left for school a while ago.”

She nodded. “With one of Jason’s guys following behind.”

He scrubbed his hands over his face, finding that he still wasn’t entirely awake. “I wanted to say hello to the kid. I’ve barely seen him all week.”

“You’ll see him this afternoon. Let me get you a cup of coffee,” she said as she moved to stand.

He snagged her hand. “I don’t want a cup of coffee.” In a lightning move, he tossed back the covers, then picked her up, laying her under him on the center of the mattress. “I want you.”

She grinned as she stared at him, tracing her fingers along his beard. “You’re handsome. Even when you need a trim.”

He bobbed his head from side to side. “My grooming habits haven’t been a high priority lately.”

Her smile was back. “I understand.”

He pressed kisses along her jaw, loving how soft her skin was and how good she smelled. “It’s been a lot of days since I’ve had a chance to touch you.”

She hummed in her throat as she slid her palms up his back. “I’m well aware.”

He lifted his head to hold her gaze. “We should probably do something about that.”

She nipped his bottom lip with her teeth as she wiggled her hips to tease his erection. “Definitely.”

He groaned as he kissed her, taking her deep, ready to eat her alive. Just then, his stomach growled loudly.

Grace pressed her hand to his shoulder as she frowned. “Jagger, you’re hungry.”

He nodded as he went after her neck. “I’m hungry for you.”

She laughed as she pushed at his shoulder again. “Let me make you some breakfast. An omelet or something.”

He shook his head as his hand snuck beneath her sweatshirt to unsnap the front clasp on her bra so he could caress her nipples to points. “I can live without food. You, however...”

She laughed again. “You need energy, Jagger. Trust me.”

He raised his brow as he stared at the promise in her eyes. “Maybe breakfast isn’t a half-bad idea.”

She pinched his ass. “We’ll pick things up after we get something in your stomach.”

“Okay,” he conceded as he moved so she could sit up and fix her bra. It had been a couple of days since he’d eaten anything decent. Mostly he’d been living on fast food.

Getting out of bed as Grace did, he pulled her back against him, wrapping his arms around her in a hug. “Let me hold you for a minute.”

She sighed as she returned his embrace. “I want more mornings like this.”

He slid his hand up and down her back. “Soon.”

She stood on her tiptoes, kissing him. “Let me make you something delicious.”

“You’re something delicious,” he said, bringing his mouth back to hers as his phone started ringing.

Frowning, he glanced at his screen on the bedside table and groaned as the PI’s number popped up.

Grace wrinkled her nose as she clearly saw the same thing he did. “How about you get that, and I’ll get some bacon started?”

“Thanks.” More than a little annoyed, he snatched up the phone. How

hard was it to get *one* uninterrupted morning with Grace? “Hey, Rod, what’s up?”

“Hey, man. I’m sorry to call. I know you’re taking a couple of days off, but we’ve had some developments.”

“Like what?”

“As you know, I’ve had a couple of my people asking around. About twenty minutes ago, one of them finally got back to me. My guy says Jimmy’s been back and forth to Philly more than usual over the last two days.”

Jagger nodded as he started making the bed, knowing that Jimmy did most of Ray’s dirty work. Ray was too smart to be seen anywhere that might compromise his pillar-of-the-community status. “Why do you think that is?”

“The rumor is something big is in the works, and it’s going down soon. My guy said everybody’s been pretty tight-lipped about whatever it is, but last night, Jimmy mentioned something about going shopping today.”

Jagger frowned as he pulled the comforter back into place. “Shopping for what?”

“That’s why I’m calling. I have no idea. But my guy got the impression that it has nothing to do with Christmas presents. I’m running surveillance here at the dealership, which means I’m not following Jimmy. I can’t be in two places at once.”

Jagger clenched his jaw as he stared at the ceiling, well aware of what Rod was saying. With this new development, they needed eyes on both targets.

“You said you wanted something big,” Rod continued. “You said you wanted Ray afraid by the time you were finished with him. Whatever’s going down might be it.”

“Fuck,” Jagger whispered, scratching restlessly at his unkempt beard because Rod was right.

But that didn’t mean that this entire situation didn’t suck. Because as much as he wanted to nail Ray’s balls to the wall, he also wanted to make love to the woman he adored, then run errands with her on her rare weekday off.

He’d spotted the wreath on the front door and pretty red poinsettia on the dining room table as he walked to the bedroom late last night. Every day he was gone, he was missing out on the good stuff—all of the things he’d craved to be a part of after so many years away.

“I’m on my way,” he said as he shook his head, bad-temperedly tossing the pillows back in place. “If I’m lucky, I can make it to Millsdale before Jimmy gets his ass out of bed. I’ll give you a call later.”

Hanging up, he hurried to his drawers for a change of clothes, smelling the scent of bacon as he pulled on clean jeans and a long-sleeve shirt. “Damn it.”

Making quick work of applying deodorant and brushing his teeth, he moved down the hall, stopping as Grace hummed in the kitchen while she chopped a section of red pepper. “Gracie.”

She turned with a smile on her gorgeous face before it faded. “You’re leaving.”

He sighed as he nodded, recognizing the disappointment in her eyes. “Rod got some intel that something big’s about to go down.”

She exhaled a breath. “Okay.”

He walked to where she stood, capturing her hand, kissing her knuckles. “If this was for anyone other than Colton...”

She nodded. “I know. Do you think you’ll be gone all day?”

He glanced at the clock, knowing she was asking about this evening’s festivities. “Colton and Amanda finish school at three?”

She nodded again. “The plan is to head to the tree farm at four.”

“Let’s play it safe and say I’ll meet you there. You might have to get started without me. I have no idea what I’m walking into today.”

“Just be safe,” she said as she handed him a piece of toast that she’d already taken a bite of. “Your new lame breakfast.”

He pulled her against him for a quick hug. “I’m sorry, Gracie. I wanted to take you to bed and run errands with you. I wanted to spend the day together.”

“Next time.” She kissed him. “I’ll see you in a little while.”

“Okay.” He kissed her again, then grabbed Ray’s camera bag on the way out the door, jogging to the car, needing to get down to Millsdale. Because he had every intention of figuring out what was going on *and* being home in time to make it to the farm.

Three hours later, Jagger clenched his jaw as he sat in his latest rental car half

a block from Jimmy's place, still waiting for the punk to get his ass moving.

"Let's go," he muttered, glancing at his watch, steaming out a breath, knowing that if something didn't happen soon, he wouldn't just be late; he would miss the farm altogether.

Just then, Jimmy appeared from his small one-story house with Greg. They'd cleaned up, wearing nice jeans and sweaters under winter jackets instead of their usual ultra-relaxed garb, getting into Greg's red Jeep Rubicon.

"Here we go," Jagger said, waiting for the vehicle to head through the stop sign up the road before he started tailing them.

When they were fifteen miles outside of downtown Philly, he pulled into a fast-food joint across the street from a Mercedes-Benz dealership, where Jimmy and Greg got out to walk around the lot, looking at various cars.

Jagger narrowed his eyes, trying to figure out their game as he noted the time on the dashboard clock. Picking up his phone, he sent off a text to Grace.

*I'm running more behind than I want to be. I'm currently just outside of Philly. Something's developing down here on this end. There's a good chance I won't be able to help pick out the tree.*

Grace typed back. *We can push things back a little if you want.*

Jagger kept an eye on Jimmy and Greg as Jimmy spoke to a salesman as if he were interested in purchasing a vehicle while Greg headed for the dealership. "What are you two up to?"

*Nah, don't let me hold you up. I want you guys to have fun. I'm not sure how long I'll be, but I'll be home as soon as I can.*

*Be safe,* Grace typed.

*I will. I love you.*

*I love you too.*

He put down his phone, grabbed the camera from the front seat, and zoomed in, snapping pictures, only to set the camera down thirty minutes later to tail Greg and Jimmy to the Range Rover dealership up the street.

Picking up the camera again, he documented Jimmy and Greg following the same procedure, knowing in his bones that whatever Jimmy and Greg were up to had everything to do with whatever would eventually go down. Because nothing about Jimmy and Greg's car shopping made any sense. Ray could get them whatever inventory they wanted at Millsdale Automotive.

# FIFTY

GRACE'S EYES WANDERED TO THE CLOCK AS SHE SELECTED THE CHRISTMAS Classics station on Spotify. She turned the music up while Colton and Amanda worked as a team to string the lights around the massive tree.

It was possible that she, Colton, and Amanda might have gotten carried away as they carefully selected the perfect blue spruce at the farm, but Grace didn't regret it one bit.

This was the first time in a long time that she'd gone big. Over the last several years, she'd picked out a small coffee table tree, finding that the joy and fun of Christmas had vanished the same year that Jagger did.

But everything was different now as her brother laughed at something Amanda said while they struggled to untangle a knot in the strand of white lights.

Glancing at the clock again, Grace realized she'd lost another ten minutes as Colton and Amanda nearly finished their task.

She hesitated as she grabbed the two full boxes of the ornaments she'd purchased over the last eight years. During every Christmas season, she'd added to her collection, tucking them away for a moment just like this. Now she hoped Jagger would be home in time to help hang them on the tree.

She'd been looking forward to this night since she and Jagger had spoken about it on Thanksgiving. If she was honest, she'd been craving this fun-filled evening for nearly a decade. But now they would have to see if it came to fruition.

The morning had started out with such *promise* when Jagger had woken in their bed. When she'd headed to the kitchen to make his breakfast, she'd anticipated an opportunity to spend some much-needed time together. It had

been *days* since they'd seen each other.

Shortly after Jagger had gotten the information he'd needed from Colton last Saturday morning, he'd mostly been gone, except for the two hours he'd been home Tuesday evening for a quick dinner. Otherwise, they'd communicated by an occasional text, much like they had today.

Colton's gaze wandered her way, and she smiled, making sure it was bright, knowing that he was watching her.

Her brother had constantly been on edge, always looking over his shoulder, heading to the shop directly after school to keep an eye on her, she knew, while Jagger was away.

Jagger had hired people to discreetly watch them both on the days and nights he was gone, but Colton was wound tight nonetheless.

But tonight, Colton had let his guard down as they selected their tree and cut it down. He and Amanda had easily eaten a half dozen of the warm apple cider donuts Jagger had talked about. Colton had laughed more than ever as they fought to secure the eight-foot monster of a tree on top of the Sorento. They'd been home for almost an hour, and he still seemed relaxed. She'd be *damned* if her melancholy mood would bring the troubled light back to his eyes.

She brought the boxes to the coffee table, removing the lids. "I've got the garland and the ornaments for when we're ready."

Colton frowned. "Where's Jagger?"

"He's on his way, but he wants us to get started," she fibbed because the truth was, she hadn't heard from him in close to two hours, not since he'd texted her while they were at the farm, letting her know that he would be a bit longer yet.

But as time ticked by, she grew impatient to hear his Stingray pull into the driveway. "If you guys want to work on the garland, I'll grab the charcuterie board and make us some hot cocoa. And I picked up more of your favorite cookies at Brew."

Colton held her gaze as he nodded. "Sure, that sounds good."

"Great." She shot him another bright smile. "Just give me a few minutes, and we'll get to the main event."

She turned away, walking to the kitchen, quietly sighing as she noted it was just past six. "Where *are* you?" she whispered, focusing on the ingredients she needed for their hot drinks instead of her disappointment.

Jagger quickly pulled into the driveway, then jogged up the walkway, hating that he was incredibly late.

It was just past seven thirty as he twisted his key in the lock and opened the door, stepping into the glow of white Christmas lights brightening the beautifully decorated tree.

As he took off his jacket, his gaze wandered from the gorgeous tree skirt Grace had bought at some point during the day to the large charcuterie board in the center of the coffee table, noting the crackers and grapes and the six or seven slices of his favorite pepperoni that hadn't been eaten.

The noise of Colton and Amanda laughing as they fought to pull the gigantic beanbag from his bedroom down the hallway filled the space as Perry Como's "There's No Place" played through the speakers.

Without warning, Colton tackled Amanda to the bag, creating another round of laughter from them both before he moved in for a kiss.

Colton paused and lifted his head as Amanda pushed at his shoulder and rushed to her feet when they realized they weren't alone.

Unconcerned about Colton and Amanda's flirty roughhousing, Jagger tossed his jacket on the arm of the couch. "I'm late."

Colton nodded as he stood. "But you're in time for the movie."

Jagger frowned as he glanced around, looking toward the dark master bedroom—the only other place Grace could be. "Where's your sister?"

"She's putting the last of the boxes back in the garage."

"I'll give her a hand," he said as he headed for the laundry room, opening the door to the garage.

Grace stood straight from putting a box in the plastic bin, meeting his gaze as she sent him a small smile. "Hey."

"Hey," he said, recognizing the guarded hurt she tried to hide. But her big blue eyes gave her away.

He sighed as he walked down the steps, painfully aware that he'd broken his word again. "The tree looks great, Gracie."

She nodded as she turned to get back to her project, putting the lid on one of the bins. "Colton and Amanda did a great job. They had fun."

He stopped before her, gently tugging her arm until she faced him. "What about you?"

She nodded again as she forced another smile. "It was nice."

He clenched his jaw, understanding that she was trying to be a good sport, but nothing about him missing tonight was okay. Christmas had always been Grace's favorite holiday. And this Christmas was even more special after his time overseas. "I'm sorry I missed everything, Grace."

"I understand," she said as she shrugged. "It's fine." But she didn't meet his gaze as she told him so.

"Will you look at me?"

"Just leave it *alone*, Jagger," she said as she turned away again.

He turned her back before she could grab the next box. "Don't do that thing where you pretend stuff's okay. Because it's not."

She blinked as her eyes grew teary. "What do you want me to say? That I'm frustrated and disappointed? Am I supposed to tell you that I'm mad?"

"Yes."

She huffed out a humorless laugh. "What good does that do? What does it change? You're helping my brother, so it hardly seems fair to be upset with you—"

"But you are."

She nodded as a tear trailed down her cheek. "But I shouldn't be. I know you were looking forward to tonight, too."

He nodded. "I was. There's nothing I wanted more than to be here with you and Colton, but I also couldn't ignore a lead."

She sniffled as she wiped her cheek. "And that's why I don't want to be mad. None of this is your fault."

"That doesn't mean it doesn't suck."

She jerked her shoulders. "We'll decorate the tree together next year."

He pulled her against him, wrapping her up in a hug. "I'm sorry, Gracie."

She stood stiff in his arms for the briefest of seconds before she returned his embrace. "I know you have a job to do. I know all of this is for Colton."

He held her tighter, sliding his hand up and down her back. "You're always stuck in the middle. Constantly, Grace."

"I'll get over it." She eased back, wiping at her cheek again. "We should get inside so we can start the movie. Colton and Amanda picked *Elf*."

"That's a good one."

She nodded as she started toward the stairs. "It is—"

He snagged her hand before she could walk up the first step, aware that the air wasn't entirely clear between them. "I'm home tomorrow. All day. I promise."

“Yeah, but I’m not. I’m working at the shop.”

He pulled her back against him, needing to hold her. “But we’re doing the Toys for Tots fair tomorrow night, right?”

She nodded. “That’s the plan.”

“We’ll have some fun helping the kids. Together.”

She sighed, locking her wrists at the back of his neck. “That sounds good.”

He tucked her hair behind her ear. “This is almost over.”

Or he needed to believe that was true. Because even though he knew Jimmy and Greg’s shopping trip had been a load of bullshit, he also had no idea what to make of it. When he’d stopped in Millsdale to show Rod the pictures he’d captured throughout the afternoon, the PI had been at a loss too.

She nodded.

“I’m sorry, Gracie. Truly.” He kissed her. “Are we good?”

She brought her lips back to his. “We’re good.”

“Give me a minute to change into something comfortable. I’ll meet you at the couch, so we can snuggle up and enjoy the movie.”

“It’s a date.” She smiled, capturing his hand as they started up the steps. “I’ll make everyone some popcorn.”

## FIFTY-ONE

GRACE PRINTED OUT HER FINAL INVOICE BEFORE SHE SHUT DOWN Simplicity's front counter computer. After a long day of preparing dozens of table arrangements for three different Christmas parties, plus handling the everyday orders and deliveries, she was eager to get home. She and Jagger had a date tonight, and they were going to enjoy it.

It was true that she'd been upset last night when he didn't make it home in time to help them with the tree, but today had been a new day, and this evening was full of its own possibilities.

Giving the shop a final once-over, she shut off the lights in the processing room, then locked up as dusk settled over Preston Valley.

Getting in the Sorrento, she turned over the engine, backing up on the quieter than normal Main Street, starting the few blocks home.

A quick shower was a must because she intended to end her evening in bed with Jagger.

That had been the plan last night, too, but she and Jagger had woken up still snuggled on the couch when they heard the alarm going off in the bedroom early this morning.

They were both tired—burning the candle at both ends. But the next little while was just for them.

Pulling up in the driveway, she smiled as Jagger's Stingray sat parked in its usual space, and the huge tree glowed beautifully in the big picture window.

"Things are good," she whispered. Because, for the most part, they were.

Hurrying up the walkway, she stepped inside as Colton put on his jacket. He looked handsome in black ripped jeans and another one of his preferred

plaid button-downs, covering a white T-shirt.

“Are you meeting up with Amanda?”

He zipped up. “Yeah, she’s picking me up. We’re grabbing some pizza with friends, then hanging out at the fair. Amanda told her mom we’d help with a couple of the booths since she’s the chairperson for the whole thing.”

Grace beamed, loving that Colton seemed mostly relaxed again—that he was eager to get back to the new life he was creating. “That’s great. Jagger and I shouldn’t be too far behind you. I want a shower and to change.”

“I’m sure I’ll see you around.”

“Have fun.”

“You, too.” He opened the door and was gone just as quickly when Amanda pulled up in front of the house.

She sighed, moving down to the office where the light was on.

Jagger clicked to a screen saver on his laptop as he turned his head, grinning as he sat at the desk. “Welcome home, beautiful.”

Her heart melted as she walked to where he sat, finding him sexy and gorgeous in jeans and a black sweater. “You got a haircut today.”

He nodded. “And I trimmed my beard.” He lifted his chin, turning his head from side to side.

“I like it.” She stroked her fingers along his jaw. “You look like you’re ready for the fair.”

“You better believe it,” he said, pulling her mouth down to his. “Tonight’s ours, baby.”

She hummed in her throat as she kissed him again. “I’m going to shower really quick. Give me fifteen minutes, and we can go.”

He winked. “Sure thing.”

She sent him a grin, then headed for the master bathroom, ready for a great night with the man she loved most in the world.

“Unbelievable,” Jagger muttered with a shake of his head as he rewatched the news footage Rod had sent over ten minutes ago via a link.

He’d been out and about for most of the day, Christmas shopping and enjoying a grueling workout at the gym, oblivious to what had transpired while he and Grace had accidentally slept on the couch all night.

He glanced at his phone as it started to ring, putting Jason on speaker while Grace showered down the hall.

It had been tempting to follow her to the bathroom and get them both off while they were naked and wet, but he wasn't looking for a quickie with Grace. When he took her to bed later tonight, he intended to make up for a week of lonely nights.

"I take it Rod sent you the link too," Jagger said, already knowing that's why his boss was calling.

"I can't *believe* how all of this is going down. Your timing yesterday was perfect. Fucking *epic*. Those shots you took were the money shots, man."

Jagger grinned. "If I'm being honest, I couldn't figure out what the hell was going on when I was tailing Jimmy and Greg. I should have known they were casing both places."

"You have to be one of the luckiest bastards I know."

Jagger chuckled, hitting replay on the surveillance footage that had been released to the media via the police, where a group of car thieves dressed in hoodies and jeans hopped out of the back of a rental truck in the wee hours of the morning. Ten masked men descended on the Mercedes dealership lot while another broke into the building to destroy the key safe.

Within moments, the most expensive cars were driven down the street and out of the cameras' views, where they undoubtedly disappeared into shipping containers after their GPS devices were disabled. The same events played out at the Range Rover dealership an hour later.

According to the newscaster, law enforcement was optimistic that they would track down the dozen stolen vehicles, but it was highly likely they were already on their way to West Africa on a freighter.

"It's a damn good thing Rod called me when he did," Jagger said. "His informant came through for us big-time."

"It seems like you have everything you need to wrap things up for the kid."

Ultimately, Jason was right, even if there were more players Jagger wanted to take down. Because there was no way Ray's people had pulled off a heist like the one he'd just witnessed without help. But he had enough to keep Colton safe, which was good enough for him. "I'll pay Ray a visit first thing Monday morning."

"You've put together one hell of a damning packet. I imagine good ol' Ray will be shitting himself before he gets through half of what you have."

“That’s the plan.” Because Colton would forever be one of Ray’s loose ends until this was finally finished.

“You’re good, Tennyson. Truly the best I’ve ever had on my payroll.”

“Rod was an integral part of this operation,” Jagger reminded Jason.

“Don’t play modest with me. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again. If you ever change your mind and want back in on the regular contracts, all you have to do is call. I *still* have people asking for you. We’re waiting for you to come to your senses and get your ass back in the game.”

Jagger rolled his eyes as he rubbed at his jaw, listening to the same old spiel. “I’m not doing regular contracts. Grace and I are talking about starting a family.”

Jason puffed out a pained laugh. “Don’t *say* shit like that to me because it’s a damn shame, man. A fucking waste of everything you’re good at.”

“Says the eternal bachelor.”

“You’re damn straight. You can’t tell me you hated everything about your life overseas—that you didn’t love the hell out of that trip we took to Barcelona to meet up with our top client last year. The nightlife was *fire*.”

Jagger laughed, remembering how he’d had to mostly carry Jason back to his hotel room after his boss had gotten supremely drunk. “Those ladies drank you under the table. They *owned* you.”

“Says you.”

“Yeah, the sober one who actually remembers.” Jagger chuckled as he shook his head. “I won’t deny that there weren’t some excellent perks to the job—that we didn’t have some damn good times.”

“And you’re giving it up. Say goodbye to your freedom, man, because there’s no turning back once you and your lady decide to pop out a kid.”

Jagger turned in his seat, realizing Grace was standing in the doorway, looking gorgeous in snug jeans and a stylish red and white sweater. She’d pushed her hair back with a black headband that accentuated big blue eyes full of hurt.

Walking in, she yanked up her camera bag, then turned and left.

“I’ve gotta go,” he said, hanging up and rushing after her as he shoved his phone away. “Grace—”

She put on her black peacoat, tossing him a cool gaze. “I’m heading out.”

He took a step toward her. “I’m coming with you.”

“How about you don’t.” Opening the door, she closed it with a sharp snap and was gone.

Jagger paid his entrance fee at the doors of the high school gym, hoping that an hour had been enough time for Grace to cool off.

Grace rarely got super pissed, but tonight she'd had every right to be. She'd walked in on a conversation that had sounded like he was second-guessing his decision to give up his overseas life. But that was the farthest thing from the truth.

Eager to find her, he navigated around several young families, spotting Grace among the crowds and the numerous activity booths. She held her camera, crouching down to snap a picture of a toddler walking around with more of the chocolate cupcake he was eating smeared on his face than was making it into his mouth.

The toddler's mother said something to Grace, making her smile. But it wasn't her real smile—not her gorgeous grin that she often flashed when all was right with her world.

Because he hadn't just made Grace angry, he'd also made her sad.

She stood, walking to Santa's workshop, where Ben, dressed up to play the man in red, sat on an ornate throne, holding a five- or six-year-old little girl on his lap.

Grace put the camera in front of her face, snapping a picture of Christy dressed in a green elf's costume, donning red striped tights and curly-tipped shoes.

Suddenly, Christy walked forward, grabbing Grace's hand as she said something, pulling her toward Santa's throne as the little girl vacated her spot on Ben's thigh.

Christy tugged her friend on Ben's lap as she spoke to Grace.

Ben wrapped his arm around Grace's waist, saying something that made her laugh—the kind of laugh Jagger hadn't heard in a while.

Moments later, Grace stood as Ben did, hugging him before she and her two friends walked off to make their way through the crowd to join Brennan and Mike at the cookie-decorating table.

Brennan waved Grace over to look at his creation.

She knelt at his side, grinning with bright eyes as she nodded enthusiastically at whatever he was telling her.

“Fuck,” Jagger muttered, knowing that if he walked to where Grace spoke to Brennan, her smile would disappear. He would ruin her night all over

again.

Turning around, he headed for the door, wanting her to have fun. No one deserved it more than she did.

When she got home, they were going to talk. He wasn't about to lose the most important person in his life. They'd worked too damn hard over the last couple of months to get back to where they'd been.

# FIFTY-TWO

GRACE DROVE TOWARD THE HOUSE WITH COLTON IN HER PASSENGER SEAT after Amanda had been asked to take her little sister home early. “I’m sorry your night got cut short.”

Colton shrugged. “I’m fine with it. Britney definitely wasn’t feeling good.”

Grace winced, remembering how the little girl had cried in Amanda’s arms as she and Colton walked Amanda to her car. “Five iced cookies for a four-year-old is probably pushing the limit.”

Colton nodded. “I thought Britney was going to puke when Amanda was buckling her into her car seat. I held my breath the entire time. I really thought Amanda was going to wear it.”

Grace laughed. “Hopefully, they made it home without any issues.”

“They did. Amanda texted me a few minutes ago. Britney’s already tucked in with a trash can by the bed.”

“That’s good.”

Colton got more comfortable in his seat. “So, where’s Jagger? I thought you two were coming to the fair together.”

She felt her smile dim as she thought of Jagger’s conversation with his boss. Their chummy reminiscing and Jason’s warnings to Jagger about losing his freedom when she and him “popped out a kid” had taken her completely by surprise.

Not all that long ago, Jagger had assured her that he didn’t want to live the overseas lifestyle anymore, but as she’d taken her pictures at the fair tonight, it had been hard not to wonder if he’d changed his mind.

“He ended up having something else to do,” she fibbed.

“You guys are fighting. Because of me.”

Grace adamantly shook her head as she took her eyes off the road long enough to look at her brother. “No—”

Colton huffed out an unamused laugh. “One of the things I like best about being here with you and Jagger is that you don’t bullshit me. You don’t treat me like I’m some stupid kid. You two were just fine before Jimmy and Greg showed up at the shop.”

She sighed because that was true. But it also wasn’t that simple. Especially after what she’d heard tonight. “All right. We had a fight. But it’s not because of you. Things are hard all the way around right now.”

“Which *is* because of me.”

She shook her head again. “Nothing that’s going on is your fault. You took a job to make some extra money. You didn’t ask to get caught up in a car theft ring.”

“No, I didn’t.” He sat back in his seat. “All of this sucks.”

She nodded as she turned onto Summer Street. “It does. But that doesn’t mean it’s your fault.”

“Well, I hope you guys can fix things. You and Jagger are good together. Someday when I’m old like the two of you, I want a relationship like you guys have.”

She huffed out a laugh as she pulled into the driveway. “I think there was a compliment in there somewhere.”

He smiled at her.

She smiled back, aware that he was teasing her, trying to cheer her up. “We’re not that old.”

He shrugged. “You’re almost thirty.”

She held his gaze. “Which isn’t old.”

He jerked his shoulders again. “It’s practically middle age.”

She wanted to smile again as her eyes wandered to the Christmas tree still glowing in the window, but her stomach grew queasy instead. “Jagger and I are going to be fine. It’s just a rough patch,” she said mostly to herself as she and Colton got out of the Sorento.

Jagger looked up from his seat on the couch as Colton and Grace walked

through the front door. He dropped his feet from the coffee table as he raised the remote, shutting off the TV.

Colton looked from Jagger to Grace. "I'm going to bed."

Jagger nodded as he stood, aware that Colton was bowing out of the evening, even when it was barely nine thirty.

"Good night," he and Grace said as Colton disappeared down the hall.

Tension hung heavy in the room while Grace put her coat away in the closet.

"Can we talk?" he asked, not quite sure how to navigate their current situation. Grace had never been upset enough to walk out on him before.

She turned, holding his stare as she closed the distance between them, stopping in front of him.

He exhaled a long breath as another wave of guilt ate at him. "I hate that your eyes look like that because of me. Guarded. Sad."

She dropped her gaze, staring at the floor as she sniffled.

"Gracie." He captured her hand, tugging her closer. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head.

He stroked his finger along her jaw, gently nudging her chin until their eyes met. "I'm sorry."

She exhaled a shaky breath. "Are you unhappy?"

"No." He sighed as he sat on the couch, tugging her down to his lap, *loathing* that they were back here again.

He'd worked so damn *hard* over the last three months to show her that the life they were building was everything he needed. But a few careless words spoken on speakerphone had rightfully made her question where they stood. "You heard a seriously shitty conversation."

She huffed out a breath. "Yes, I did."

He hooked his arm around her hips, pulling her closer. "I wish I hadn't turned in the chair when I did because you would have heard me tell Jason that my life has only gotten better since I've come home. I don't feel like I'm giving up *anything*, especially not my freedom. I *want* the marriage and babies package with you, Grace."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Gracie. I'm exactly where I want to be."

She nodded as she swiped at the tear on her cheek.

"I don't like that this is the second night things haven't been great between us."

“I don’t like it either.” She swiped at her cheek again. “I’m sorry I walked out on you.”

He shrugged because he only had himself to blame. “I came to the fair a while ago, but I knew that sticking around wasn’t what you needed. I saw you with Ben—the way he made you laugh. I didn’t like that either.”

“He’s my friend, Jagger. He and Christy knew I was upset.”

He nodded. “I never want to not be what you need. I’m supposed to make your life better.”

She hugged him. “You *do*.”

He let himself relax a little as he returned her embrace. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

He eased her back, needing her to see the truth of his words as he spoke. “I *love* the life we’re making together. I love everything about us.”

“I do, too.”

“Nothing’s changed, Grace. Not even Jason. He’s still an idiot.”

She laughed as he grinned.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated.

“We’re good.” She moved to straddle him, holding his stare as she stroked his cheek. “I miss you. I miss spending time with you.”

He slid his palms up and down the sides of her waist. “Ditto.”

“I want to feel close to you.”

Needing the same thing she did, he wasted no time capturing her lips in a hungry kiss.

She made a sound in her throat as her mouth parted, meeting the slide of his tongue as he gripped her hips, tugging her closer, grinding himself against her.

She moaned as she locked her arms around the back of his neck. “I want you.”

Just as eager to be with Grace, he stood, carrying her down the hall, kicking the door closed. He set her on her feet, sliding the headband from her hair before he pulled her sweater over her head.

Making quick work of ridding her of her bra, he pulled his sweater up and off, craving to feel her soft skin pressed against his as he wrapped her in a gentle embrace.

“Mmm,” she said as she scattered kisses along his neck and chest, lingering over his heart as her hands went after the snap and zipper on his jeans.

“Slow,” he whispered, stopping her movements as he took back the lead, unsnapping and unzipping her pants, pulling them down her legs as he dropped to his knees, taking her panties with them.

“Nice and slow,” he repeated, kissing his way up her thighs, spreading her legs wider as he moved his mouth to focus on slippery, swollen skin.

Her fingers wandered from his ears to tense in his hair as his tongue went to work with teasing flicks. Bringing his finger up, he invaded her with slow thrusts.

Her head fell back as she whimpered. “Keep doing that.”

He groaned as she tensed and grew wetter.

“Yes, Jagger,” she chanted while her hips started to jerk as each breath came faster. And then she froze on a sharp gasp, letting herself go with a quiet cry.

He kept her revved high, suckling harder, moving his finger faster, patiently waiting for her to finish her fall before he stood, capturing her mouth for another deep kiss.

“I want to be with you,” she said before she attacked his mouth again, still hot and frenzied from her orgasm. “Right now, I want to be with you.”

Desperate to sink himself into Grace, he rid himself of the rest of his clothes. Lifting her into his arms, he pushed himself into silky heat, groaning as she whimpered.

“Damn, that feels good,” he said through clenched teeth. Because a week without being inside Grace had been seven days too long.

“Lie down with me,” she choked out. “I want to feel you on top of me.”

He brought her with him to the center of the mattress, settling between her legs as he captured her hands, lacing their fingers, holding her gaze as he lazily pumped, letting them both build gradually.

“Come with me,” Grace fought to say as she locked her legs around his waist.

He picked up his pace as she teetered on the edge.

“Now,” she said in a gasping pant as she tipped her head back, bringing him with her as she pulsed around him.

He groaned with his explosion, thrusting deeper, loving how Grace shuddered and clung as she struggled to keep her moans quiet.

“Damn,” he said again as he collapsed, trying to catch his breath.

“So good,” Grace said several seconds later, tracing her fingers down his spine.

He lifted his head from the crook of her neck. “I was thinking the same thing.”

She grinned.

Smiling back, he studied her rosy cheeks and swollen lips. “This is a hell of a way to end the evening.”

Her fingers started their journey back up his spine. “Agreed.”

“I’m just sorry things didn’t start out better.”

She shook her head. “We’re here together. That’s all that matters.”

He nodded before he kissed her forehead and then her nose. “Hopefully, we have tomorrow, too. I’m not sure what the plan is, but I want to spend it with you.”

“Since it’s Sunday, I think we should be lazy.”

“And do a lot more of this.”

She smiled again. “Naturally. But we can’t have sex all day.”

“I’m willing to try.”

She rolled her eyes as she laughed, giving his ass a pinch. “I imagine you are.”

He grinned. “I’m game for whatever.”

“Does that include baking?”

He nodded. “Sure.”

“We can make Christmas cookies. Bea’s sugar cookies, for sure.”

He perked up. “The ones with that insanely good icing?”

She nodded.

“Yes.” He groaned. “I haven’t had one of Bea’s cookies in such a *long* time.”

She laughed. “I guess it’s a good thing you came home.”

“Definitely.”

Her fingers moved to trace his bottom lip. “I figure we can make a few different types of cookies. You can bring some to Todd at the dojang, and I’ll share some at the shop.”

He kissed her and rolled them over, so she rested on his chest. “I just want to be with you. I’ve missed you, Gracie.”

Her eyes went soft. “I’ve missed you too.”

He brought his mouth back to hers. “Let me be with you again.”

She nodded as she held his gaze.

He rolled them back over, kissing her as he pushed himself into her, neither of them in any hurry to do anything but enjoy that they were finally

together after too many days apart.

## FIFTY-THREE

CHRISTMAS MUSIC PLAYED THROUGH THE SPEAKERS AS SNOW FELL FROM THE sky while Grace pulled a batch of peanut butter cookies from the oven. “These need the Kisses right away.”

Jagger popped another chocolate candy into his mouth as he nodded. “I’m ready to rock and roll. I’ve got most of them unwrapped.”

Grace set the cookie sheet on the trivet next to him, frowning when she noticed the bowl of Kisses had significantly diminished. “Those are for the cookies,” she reminded him with a poke of her finger to his belly.

He grinned. “Hey, you put me in charge of a project where I’m doomed to fail. You *know* I have no self-control when it comes to these things.”

She rolled her eyes and chuckled, standing on her tiptoes to kiss him as they wore bum-around-the-house clothes. She’d chosen black yoga pants and one of Jagger’s old sweatshirts. He’d grabbed his old gray joggers and a ratty T-shirt. “They taste just as good on the cookies.”

He hooked his arm around her waist. “There’s a chance I may have counted out how many we’ll need. If I’m right, twenty-four cookies still need to bake. I made sure to keep twenty-six Kisses. Just in case.”

She laughed as she hugged him, loving *everything* about their wonderfully simple day. Life felt good again—perfectly right. Or it did where she and Jagger were concerned.

They’d lain around for a lazy morning in bed, making love before a sexy shower, then worked together to prepare Jagger’s favorite French toast with cinnamon apples and a side of bacon and eggs.

Not long after, they’d snuggled by the fire, playing several rounds of Uno with Colton before he went to his room to finish his homework. Minutes

later, she and Jagger returned to the kitchen to start the cookie-baking bonanza.

Bea's famous iced sugar cookies had been baked and frosted. Peanut butter blossoms were well underway. Chocolate chip/M&M cookies were slated for next.

"But I am slowing down," Jagger informed her as he slid his hands up and down her back. "I think I feel a sugar crash coming on."

Grace shook her head as she grinned. "Hopefully, we can finish this before you fall asleep on the couch."

"Consider it done."

"And you need to save room for pot roast and mashed potatoes."

He groaned as he settled his forehead against hers. "You spoil me with delicious food and amazing sex."

She laughed as she eased away. "Let's finish this, or dinner won't be happening until super late."

"We don't want that," Jagger said as he got to work, pushing chocolate candies into the center of each cookie.

Colton wandered down the hall, dressed in sweatpants and a white T-shirt. "It smells *awesome* in here."

"That's because your sister's awesome in the kitchen."

Colton eyed the various decorated sugar cookies still on the cooling racks, waiting to be put in the festive tins Grace had bought the other day. "Can I have one?"

"Of course," Grace said as she scooped more peanut butter dough onto a fresh cookie sheet. "Have as many as you want."

Jagger frowned. "Let's not get carried away. These peanut butter blossoms are good, too."

Grace laughed as she noted the possessive light in Jagger's eyes. "Jagger's feeling protective of his favorite cookie."

"You're damn straight. I was deprived for eight years."

Colton grinned as he picked up one of the tree-shaped treats she'd iced a pretty green, biting in. "Wow," he said over his mouthful as he nodded. "Wow."

Jagger narrowed his eyes. "I see we'll be fighting over those."

"Heck, yeah, we will. These are *great*."

Grace beamed, loving that Colton loved almost everything she made. "They're Bea's recipe."

He paused with his next bite. “When am I going to meet her? She can be my adopt-a-grandma or something.”

Grace and Jagger laughed.

“I know she would be thrilled to meet you and be your adopt-a-grandma,” Grace said as she popped the next two cookie sheets into the oven and set the timer.

Colton bit in again. “We should make that happen. Grandmas love to bake stuff for their grandkids.”

Grace cringed at the mountain of dishes piled up in the sink before she turned away to focus on their conversation. “I always see Bea a couple of days before Christmas. She’ll be thrilled to have you and Jagger come with me this year.”

Colton nodded. “Sure. Sounds good.”

“She makes an insane Yule log every year,” Jagger informed Colton. “Or she did.”

“She still does,” Grace confirmed.

“Yes,” Jagger said before he walked over to bump Colton out of the way as he grabbed for another sugar cookie. “You’ll spoil your dinner.”

Colton bumped him back as he reached again. “I’ve only had one.”

Jagger grabbed Colton’s arm. “One is a good number.”

Colton laughed, snatching up one of the star-shaped options with his other hand. “Get out of here, man.” He chuckled as he bit in.

Grace glanced from Jagger to her brother as the two grinned at each other. This was her life, and they were hers. Sighing her happiness, she turned when the timer beeped again.

Jagger sat in front of his laptop in the office, confirming that he had everything he needed for his trip to Millsdale in the morning.

He burped as he absently rubbed at his stomach, still feeling uncomfortably full after a day of eating too much good food.

Everything about his Sunday with Grace had been perfect. Lots of relaxation and fun had been exactly what he, Grace, and Colton had needed.

His relationship with Grace felt good again—solid and strong like they had always been. After he and Ray came to an understanding tomorrow, days

like today would be their normal again.

He sat up, clicking to his screen saver when he heard footsteps in the hallway. Glancing over his shoulder, he smiled as Grace knocked on the doorframe. “There she is.”

She walked up behind him, leaning forward as she wrapped her arms around him. “Here I am.” She kissed his cheek. “What are you up to in here?”

“Crossing my t’s and dotting my i’s. I’m heading down to Millsdale tomorrow.”

Her arms grew rigid as she stood straight. “I didn’t realize that was happening.”

He nodded, hearing the fear in her voice. “Ray has no idea I’m coming.”

She crossed her arms now. “But he’s dangerous. They’re dangerous.”

“Come here,” he said, pulling her around to sit on his lap, wrapping her up. “I’m ending this for good. After tomorrow, we won’t have to look over our shoulders anymore.”

Her eyes were still full of worry as she held his gaze. “Are you sure?”

He nodded. “As sure as I can be. The information Rod helped me gather is good. Plus, I used to eat guys like Ray for breakfast. In the big scheme of things, he’s small-time.”

She exhaled a quiet sigh as she nodded. “Promise you’ll be safe.”

He kissed her. “Always. We have a life to get back to.”

She pressed her lips to his this time before she stood. “I’ll let you get back to what you’re doing.”

“I shouldn’t be much longer. We probably have time for a movie or something.”

“If you’re up for it, I was thinking of something different.” She sent him a smile as she snagged her lip with her teeth. “Colton went over to Amanda’s for a while.”

He immediately *craved* Grace. “Hell yeah, baby. Give me ten minutes, and I’m all yours.”

“Sounds good. I’ll get a fire going in the living room.”

He wiggled his brow. “I’m going to get *your* fire going.”

She laughed as she walked away.

He grinned before it faded as he got the completed files ready to send off to Jason and Rod—his insurance policy if anything went wrong.

Grabbing the four dozen pictures he’d printed over the last week, he put

them in a yellow envelope. “You’re done, motherfucker,” he muttered as he secured the envelope’s clasp.

Quickly closing his laptop, he headed for the living room, eager to heat Grace up as promised. It had been a while since they’d been free to get crazy in an empty house.

## FIFTY-FOUR

JAGGER WALKED AROUND MILLSDALE AUTOMOTIVE'S SMALLER CAR LOT, taking a few minutes to check out a couple of the higher-end vehicles.

He'd chosen to wear black jeans and a cream-colored sweater with one of his nicer jackets. The perfect outfit for a potential paying customer—business casual and harmless.

After another moment of perusing, he took off his sunglasses and headed inside, where Ray met him at the door, flashing a friendly smile.

“Good morning.” He held out his hand. “I’m Ray Killinger, the owner here at Millsdale Automotive.”

Jagger returned Ray’s handshake, smiling back at the clean-cut fifty-something man. “Good morning.”

“How can I help you today? We’ve got a lot of great cars out on our lot.”

Jagger nodded as he looked toward Ray’s inventory again. “Yes, you do. But I’m hoping I can show you a couple of things I brought along with me.”

Ray glanced at the yellow envelope Jagger wiggled in his hand. “Absolutely. Building something custom is a great way to go—something I can certainly help you with. Come on back to my office. Can I get you a cup of coffee or bottled water?”

Jagger shook his head. “I’m all set, but thanks.”

“All right, then. Let’s see what we can do for you.”

Jagger followed Ray to the windowed space overlooking the showroom, taking his seat, setting the envelope on Ray’s desk as Ray sat down. “I’ll let you take a look at what I’ve got,” he said, pushing the envelope across the tidy desk.

“Sure thing.” Ray picked it up with a smile. “This is heavier than I was

expecting.”

Jagger smiled with a shrug. “I’m incredibly thorough.”

Ray laughed. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Jagger’s lips curved again. “I couldn’t agree more.”

Ray unfastened the clasp and reached in, pulling out dozens of eight-by-ten pictures. His eyes grew huge as he swallowed, flipping through the images. “What the hell is this?”

Jagger folded his hands, watching with satisfaction as sweat started to bead along Ray’s forehead. “This is me telling you that you’re going to leave Colton Sawyer alone.”

Ray’s hands trembled now as he kept flipping, stopping on the photos of Jimmy and Greg casing the dealerships Friday afternoon. “Are you a cop or something?”

Jagger shook his head. “I’m just a concerned citizen who isn’t going to let you fuck around with a seventeen-year-old kid.”

Ray looked at him now. “You’re the guy from the flower shop. The one who broke Greg’s nose.”

Jagger shrugged, pleased that Ray had made the connection. “You keep your guys out of Preston Valley. You keep them far away from Colton and his family and friends.”

Jagger sat up now, leaning closer. “Because here’s the deal, Ray. These pictures are between you, me, and a couple of my very discreet friends. But if anything should ever happen to me, Colton, or any of the people he loves, I *promise* those will end up in hands you don’t want them to.”

Wanting to send his point home, Jagger grabbed his phone from his back pocket, finding the picture he’d gone searching for in the old iPhone 5s Grace had packed away in the box all those years ago.

He’d been eighteen in the shot—a quick snap of Jagger and his golf partner at Sheraton Country Club’s two-day tournament Steve had mostly insisted he and Logan play in.

Jagger showed Ray the screen. “I’m sure you know who that guy is.” He pointed to his partner with his thumb.

Ray shook his head. “I have no idea.”

Jagger blinked as if he was surprised. “You’re unfamiliar with Jose Lopez, Pennsylvania’s Attorney General?”

Ray swallowed again as sweat dribbled down his temples.

Jagger chuckled as he shook his head—as if they were having the most

casual of conversations. “This was a long time ago. I haven’t played golf with Jose since, but I guarantee he remembers the three holes in one I shot over those two days.”

Jagger smiled again. “I have a knack for stuff like that—hitting my shots. We won the whole tournament—set a couple of records, too. And I figure that was a good thing because Jose’s a competitive bastard. It’s safe to say that once he sinks his teeth into something, he’s gotta win.”

Jagger put his phone away. “I feel pretty confident that Jose has never heard of Millsdale Automotive. Let’s make sure it stays that way.”

Ray said nothing as his pulse pounded visibly in his neck.

“So, you’re going to leave Colton alone, and I’m going to forget about this whole thing. Do we understand each other, Ray?”

Ray adamantly nodded.

“That’s good.” Jagger gained his feet. “You go ahead and have a great day. And don’t forget to shred those pictures. You and a couple of your boys would be looking at a *minimum* of fifteen years.”

He walked out, putting his sunglasses back on, ready to get home.

Getting behind the wheel of the car he’d rented—just to play it safe—he turned over the ignition and tossed up a wave to Ray as the man watched him reverse and head for the exit.

“And that’s how you do it,” he muttered with a grin as he gained speed in the downtown traffic.

It felt good to know that the worst was over—that they could all finally relax. Because there was no way in *hell* Ray or his punks would bother Colton again.

He had wanted Ray shitting in his pants by the time he had finished with him, and that’s exactly what he’d gotten.

Grace brought out Dr. Hammond’s lavender and white floral arrangement from the back. “I hope this is what you had in mind.”

Dr. Hammond gasped as she pressed her hand to her heart. “It’s *gorgeous*. The white roses and carnations. The lavender alstroemerias. All of Lily’s favorites for her twenty-first birthday.”

Grace smiled, always loving when her customers were happy. “Make sure

you tell Lily she has great taste in flowers. It's a beautiful arrangement. Perfect to surprise her with on your lunch date."

Dr. Hammond beamed. "I'll tell her you think so. Thank you so much, Grace. Please thank Maggie, too."

"I'll be sure to when she gets back," she said as she rang up the extra-large arrangement. "Today's the Rotary Christmas luncheon."

Dr. Hammond tapped her card against the screen. "I was supposed to go to that, but Lily's special day is the priority."

Grace nodded as Colton walked through the door after a half-day of school.

"Hey," he said to Grace as he unzipped his winter jacket.

Dr. Hammond blinked as she looked from Colton to Grace. It was clear Dr. Hammond didn't keep up with the Preston Valley gossip mill. Apparently, she had no idea that Steve Evans had fathered another son when he stepped out on his wife.

"Dr. Hammond, this is my brother, Colton. He lives with Jagger and me. He's a junior at the high school."

Dr. Hammond smiled. "It's very nice to meet you, Colton."

Colton nodded. "It's nice to meet you, too."

"Dr. Hammond has been my dentist since I moved back to Preston Valley," Grace explained. "She grew up with Aunt Maggie and my mom."

"I did. I was a couple of years younger than Rose." Dr. Hammond smiled again as she picked up the arrangement. "I'll see you two again soon. And happy holidays if I don't see you before then."

"Happy holidays," Grace said before she wrinkled her nose at Colton as Dr. Hammond left. "I'm sure that won't happen forever."

Colton shrugged. "I look a lot like Logan."

She nodded, aware that Colton had no problem admitting that he resembled their big brother, but he rarely mentioned their father. "Yes, but that must not be fun."

He jerked his shoulders again. "After the shock wears off, people seem to be cool with it." He glanced toward the window, scanning the street the way he had all last week. "Have you heard anything from Jagger?"

She shook her head, knowing Colton was just as anxious for an update on how things were going down in Millsdale. She'd been watching the clock since Jagger left early this morning. "No, but I'm sure everything's fine."

Or she hoped that was true. But she wouldn't be able to relax until he

came home safe.

Just then, Jagger walked up the sidewalk and through the door.

Grace moved around the counter, hurrying into his arms, closing her eyes as she breathed him in. “You’re back.”

He returned her embrace, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “Here I am.”

She stood on her tiptoes, kissing his lips. “Welcome home.”

He smiled as he winked. “Thanks.”

Colton moved closer to where they stood. “So, how did things go?”

Jagger nodded as he hooked his arm around Grace’s waist, keeping her by his side. “Really good. You shouldn’t have any further issues. I want you to tell me if that’s not the case, but Ray’s not a stupid man.”

Colton’s shoulders visibly relaxed as he exhaled a quiet breath. “Thanks, man.”

“No problem.”

Jagger and Colton exchanged a fist bump.

“Do we get any details?” Colton wanted to know.

Jagger shook his head. “The less you know, the better. But I feel confident that we can get back to our lives.”

Even as Jagger said so, Grace struggled to believe everything was okay again. “It doesn’t seem like it should be that simple.”

Jagger shrugged. “Mostly, it is. Ray and I came to an understanding. But Colton should stay out of Millsdale. That’s not a place you should go back to.”

Colton nodded again. “Mom’s moved all her stuff into her new place, so that shouldn’t be a problem. She starts her new job next week, I think.”

Grace nodded. “That’s good.”

Colton shoved his hands in his pockets as his gaze dropped to the floor. “So, I guess I’ll probably be moving to Philly, too, at some point.”

Grace frowned as she exchanged a glance with Jagger, caught off guard by the change in subject. “Why?”

Colton shrugged. “The lawyer’s taking care of my legal stuff, and Jagger took care of Ray.”

Any sense of relief suddenly vanished as her stomach sank. “But I thought you were staying here with us. You’re doing so well in school. You have a job and friends and Amanda.”

“It doesn’t make sense to leave that behind,” Jagger added.

Colton jerked his shoulders again. “I guess I don’t know how long you guys want me to stay.”

“We thought you were sticking around through your senior year.” Jagger gave Colton a gentle shove to the shoulder. “Until you head off to college. But only if you want.”

Colton nodded as he looked at them again, tossing them a smile. “I can probably manage that.”

Grace held Jagger closer, realizing Colton didn’t want to go any more than she or Jagger wanted him to.

Colton glanced toward the clock. “You know, we never got around to that sushi dinner. We could grab some for lunch.”

Grace opened her mouth to remind Colton she was the only one at the shop for the next couple of hours, but she said, “Sure. Let me tape a note to the door. I’ll let customers know that I’ll be back at one.”

She quickly wrote the note, grabbed her jacket, and locked up, heading down the sidewalk with Colton and Jagger.

Colton’s cell phone rang as Jagger hooked his arm around Grace’s waist. Colton pulled it from his back pocket, glancing at the screen. “It’s Amanda.”

Colton answered. “Hey. I’m about to have lunch with my sister and Jagger. Can I call you later?”

Grace’s gaze whipped to Jagger’s when Colton called her his sister.

Jagger winked as he grinned, wrapping his arm tighter around her.

She smiled back, resting her head against his shoulder, grateful for everything about her life.

The last few months had been rocky and rough, but Jagger woke up next to her every morning, and her brother was safe as he walked by their side.

She’d yearned for the love of her life for eight long years. She’d weaved dreams of how everything might be if he ever came home. But nothing she’d imagined could ever compare to the magic that she lived.

Jagger opened the door for them as they stopped at the restaurant. “Let’s get our sushi on.”

“Bring on the California rolls,” she said, stepping in behind Colton, taking Jagger’s hand as they waited to be seated.

# FIFTY-FIVE

SIX WEEKS LATER

Jagger glanced up from the disarray on the bed when Grace walked in from the hallway. “Hey, beautiful.”

She smiled as she kept moving in his direction, carrying a wooden frame in her hand. “Hey.”

He snagged her wrist when she stopped before him, pulling her closer, kissing her after a long day apart. “How was the trip to Philly?”

She hooked her free arm around his waist. “Pretty good. How were Saturday classes at the dojang?”

“Not bad,” he said as he kissed her again, never able to get enough of her taste. “What have you got there?”

She flipped the frame around so he could see the eleven-by-fourteen shot of Steve grinning as he cut through a ribbon with five other doctors at the newly constructed hospital in the Central African Republic.

Jagger nodded, seeing how truly happy Steve had been at that moment. “That’s a great shot.”

Grace smiled, studying the image as he did. “Colton and I decided that we should bring it home with us. He conceded that it’s pretty cool that our dad liked helping overseas.”

Her smile faded as she slid her finger along the glass, tracing her father’s cheek. “And this is how I want to remember him—his capacity to be incredibly kind and generous. He gave up his life for someone else. He

enjoyed volunteering his time to make other people's lives better."

"That's really nice, Grace."

She nodded as her eyes grew teary, and her voice grew quiet with emotion. "He was a good man."

Taking the picture and setting it on the bed, he wrapped her up, holding her tight as she clung to him. "He was."

Time ticked by before she sighed, burrowing her face against his neck. "You always make me feel better."

He exhaled a quiet breath as he rubbed his hand up and down her back. "I'm sorry I couldn't be there with you guys today."

She shook her head as she eased back enough to hold his gaze. "Todd needed your help, and I'm glad Colton and I had the chance to go together. He got to see that there was a different side to our dad, and I got to say my final goodbyes. I made sure we grabbed those pictures from the mantle since we won't be going back."

He stroked his knuckles along her cheek. "That was a good thought."

She nodded. "I'd say we're officially ready to put the condo on the market. It doesn't make sense to hold on to it any longer."

"I know that's not an easy decision to make."

She shook her head. "But I want to move forward. I want all three of us to move forward."

"That sounds good, Gracie."

She kissed him before she eased back again, keeping her arm hooked around his waist as she looked at the bed. "I see you've made a huge dent in the packing while we've been gone."

He shrugged as he glanced at the clothes he'd washed and left folded on the comforter and the toiletries that still needed to be organized and dealt with. "Mostly, I made a mess, but everything's here and ready for the suitcases, thanks to your list on the iPad. I figured you would want to deal with your camera equipment, so I left that stuff alone."

"Thank you for doing this, Jagger."

"Hey, it's Montana or bust."

She nodded as excitement filled her eyes. "Tomorrow."

"For real this time."

They grinned at each other as Colton walked in with his black duffel bag slung over his shoulder. "I'm heading over to Aunt Maggie and Asa's. I'll see you guys in a few days."

Grace nodded. "Do you have everything?"

Colton shrugged. "I think so, but I know where the house is if I don't."

Grace wrinkled her nose. "You make a good point."

Colton smiled. "My mom texted while I was packing. She's coming up tomorrow to take me and Amanda out for lunch and a movie."

Grace beamed. "That's great. I'm glad things seem easier between you guys."

He nodded. "Amanda was thinking we could take Mom to that brunch place since it'll be Sunday and all."

Grace walked to Colton, hugging him. "Amanda's a keeper. Tell your mom we'll plan to get together for dinner when we get back. Have a great time while we're gone."

Colton hugged her back. "I will. You guys have fun, too."

"Don't forget you have Jason's number if there are any problems," Jagger said as he moved to where Colton and Grace stood, extending his hand to fist-bump Colton's. "But I don't think you will."

Colton shook his head. "Nobody's contacted me, and I haven't seen anyone hanging around."

Jagger nodded, content that Ray seemed intelligent enough to stick to the agreement. "Jason's number is just a precaution, but I truly believe we're done with all that."

Colton nodded this time. "I'm heading out. Aunt Maggie and Asa invited Amanda over for dinner."

"Bye," Grace called down the hall as her cell phone started to ring. Pulling the phone from her pocket, she frowned as she looked at the screen. "It's Marjorie Nickels. The principal at the high school."

Jagger raised his brow. "I'm going to strangle that kid if we have to miss Montana again."

"Colton hasn't mentioned anything about being in trouble." She held up her finger as she answered. "Hello?"

She shook her head, giving Jagger the thumbs-up to let him know things were good before her frown returned. "I'm sorry to hear that. I hope you'll keep me in mind if things change. Thank you for letting me know. Bye, Marjorie."

Jagger held her gaze. "What's up?"

"They're canceling the photography class I was going to teach. They've had to make budget cuts for the next school year."

He hated seeing the disappointment in her eyes. “I’m sorry, Gracie. That sucks.”

She nodded. “I was excited to give teaching a shot. Jen’s starting full-time when the twins go to kindergarten this fall, so there was wiggle room in my schedule.” She shrugged. “Maybe some other time.”

“Maybe,” he said, watching her move to the bed to start packing, overcome by a staggering wave of love for the beautiful woman he’d adored for nearly half his life.

Grace was everything good about his world. As long as they were together, things could only get better. “Since Jen’s starting full-time in a few months, maybe we could start working on our family.”

Her head whipped around, and she held his gaze. “What does that mean when you say that?”

He stuffed his hands in his pockets as he casually shrugged. “Watching you hold Gabby and Jerrod’s new baby girl when we all got together on Christmas Day... It’s had me thinking.”

She dropped the shirt she held. “You want to start trying?”

He nodded. “What about you?” But he saw the answer in her eyes as her face lit up with a grin.

She laughed as she rushed into his arms. “A baby, Jagger. *Our* baby.”

He hugged her back. “If that’s what you want.”

She laughed again. “Yes, Jagger.”

“So, it’s decided. We’re officially doing this?”

She nodded enthusiastically.

He leaned forward, picking up her pack of birth control pills on the bed. “Are we bringing these to Montana or leaving them here?”

She snatched them from his hand, tossing them in the trash can. “Leave them.”

He laughed.

She grinned. “But it might not happen right away. It might take a couple of months for my body to find a new normal.”

He shrugged. “When it happens, it happens. But I’m up for *lots* of trying.”

She laughed again.

He settled his forehead against hers, taking in the moment—savoring how good life was. “You know, if we’re doing the baby thing, you should probably think about marrying me too.”

Her eyes went soft. “You want to get married?”

He reached for his wallet in his back pocket, pulling out the silver quarter-carat diamond ring he’d been carrying around for more than eight years. “I’ve wanted to marry you for a long damn time.”

Her eyes darted from the ring to his gaze. “It’s beautiful.”

He raised his brow because that was hardly true. “It’s not much. I saved for this for months. I was going to give it to you on our first night in our new apartment up in Syracuse.”

She took a step back, clearly stunned. “You were going to propose?”

He nodded as he captured her hand. “You deserve so much more than this. I want to give you something as gorgeous as you are, but maybe this can be a holder ring until we get back from Montana.”

She shook her head as tears filled her eyes. “I love this, Jagger. I want this. It’s perfect.”

He kept her hand in his as he held her gaze, kneeling on one knee. “Let me at least get this part right.”

She smiled.

“You make me better. You make me happy. I’ve loved you since the first moment I saw you, and I will for the rest of my life. Marry me, Gracie. Be mine.”

Her tears fell now as she nodded. “I’ve always been yours, Jagger.”

He slid the simple ring on her finger, then gained his feet, kissing her. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

He kissed her again. “We’re newly engaged and making babies. This is going to be one hell of a vacation.”

She nodded as she grinned, locking her arms around the back of his neck. “But we should probably start celebrating here.”

He wiggled his brow as he danced with her in a slow circle. “The bed’s a mess.”

“I’m game for the floor if you are.”

“Hell yeah, baby. Let’s get crazy.”

He grinned when Grace laughed as he pulled her down to the rug with him.

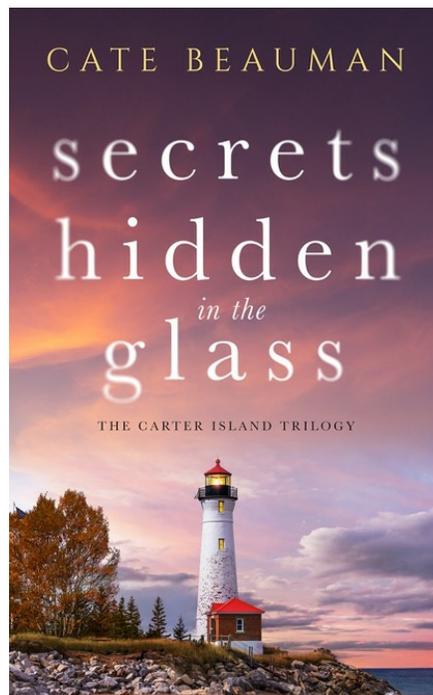
**The End**

### **Three Siblings. One Year. Everything Changes.**

Stained glass artist Callie Davis is in desperate need of a vacation. Burnt out and on the edge of a nervous breakdown, she yearns for lazy days and solitude. But then she meets gorgeous Sheriff Nate Carter.

Nate and Callie's relationship quickly heats up until Callie starts remembering secrets from her past that have the potential to rip apart their lives.

**Click here to enjoy [Secrets Hidden In The Glass](#), book one of *The Carter Island Trilogy*.**



### **Chapter One**

*Hartford, Connecticut*  
*July 1995*

Callie stood next to the grease-smudged door, sucking her thumb and

clutching Emily Dolly close in the crook of her arm. Tinny music played through cheap speakers as she stared at the big man sitting in a booth across the room, snoring with his chin touching his chest while the food on his plate went cold. Glancing around at empty tables and chairs, Callie recognized that she was in a restaurant. Mommy took her out to eat sometimes, but she'd never been to this place before. She flinched and her gaze flew to a set of metallic doors when a woman with bold red hair pushed them open and walked from the kitchen.

The woman stopped abruptly and rolled her eyes as she looked toward the man, who sounded like a pig. "Good grief, I need to get off this midnight shift." The woman shook her head, grabbing a washcloth from a bucket, then wiped down the long counter top. Her dangling hoop earrings caught in the light while she hummed along with the radio and wiggled her hips in the pink skirt she wore. After tossing the cloth back into the bucket, she picked up a stack of menus and turned, gasping when she made eye contact with Callie. "Dear God in heaven," she said as her free hand flew to her chest. "You scared me half to death."

Callie gripped Emily Dolly tighter and stepped back, bumping into the cool glass.

The woman frowned as her gaze tracked around the room. She set the menus on a table, walked over, and crouched down in front of Callie. "Sweetie, are you alone?"

Callie tried to move farther away but there was nowhere left to go.

"You don't have to be afraid of me." She smiled and stroked her fingers down a lock of Callie's long blond hair. "I work here."

Callie stared into the woman's green eyes while her stomach twisted and turned and felt yucky.

"Let's see if I can find your mommy." The woman gained her feet and walked down a short hallway, opening a door. "Hello?" She moved a few steps and turned another doorknob, doing the same thing. "Hello?"

The woman came back and pushed through the door Callie stood by, letting in the sounds of the cars driving by as she walked off into the dark. Moments later, she came back inside, hurrying over to the man in the corner, shoving on his arm. "Hey." She did it again. "Hey, you."

The man snorted as his eyes flew open. "Jeez, lady. What the hell?"

"Is that your little girl?" The waitress pointed in Callie's direction.

The man turned his head, looking at Callie. "No, that's not my little girl."

The woman's hand ended up on her hip. "Did you see her come in with anyone?"

He stared at Callie a second longer and shook his head. "I'm seeing her for the first time right now."

"Well, where did she come from?"

He shrugged. "Beats me."

The waitress walked back to Callie, crouched down again, and sent her another warm smile. "Can you talk?"

Callie nodded.

"What's your name, pretty girl?"

She took her thumb out of her mouth. "Callie."

"Do you know how old you are?"

She nodded again.

"How old?"

"Four."

"Where's your mommy, sweetie?"

Callie's breath shuddered in and out when her tummy felt yucky all over again. "I don't know."

"How did you get here?"

She blinked rapidly, and tears trailed down her cheeks. "I don't know."

"Oh, good heavens." The woman picked her up and hugged her close. "Everything's going to be all right." She walked toward the metallic doors and pushed her way into the big kitchen. "Earl, call the police. I think we have an abandoned child on our hands."

***Continue reading [Secrets Hidden In The Glass.](#)***

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Until next time,

A handwritten signature in a cursive script that reads "Cate".

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Cate Beaman is the multi-award-winning, international bestselling author of *The Bodyguards Of L.A. County* series and *The Carter Island Trilogy*. She currently lives in North Carolina and is a proud wife and mom of two boys and a Saint Bernard, Jack.

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