

Forever  
Be My  
Always

**C.Z. REEVES**

# *Forever Be My Always*

**THE UNBREAKABLE SERIES  
BOOK ONE**



**C.Z. REEVES**

FOREVER BE MY ALWAYS  
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**Their past divided them. Fate reunites them. Will their love withstand another heartbreak and prove to be unbreakable?**

When the call brings news of his dad's terminal cancer diagnosis, Bryan leaves behind the grandiose life he has crafted in New York to support his parents. Jessamine Beach awaits, holding memories of her—the one he let slip away a decade ago, unaware of the lasting impact it would have. Amidst family responsibilities, Bryan is determined to stay focused, but fate has other plans. The return of Rebecca Cooper as his father's nurse uncovers buried unhealed wounds from the past that he was not ready to face.

Rebecca's life is not how she envisioned it at all. Does she seem happy? Sure! But she is a master at concealing her true feelings, enduring the pain silently. Every year, she tries to rush through the "anniversary" week that changed her life completely. They always say losses come in threes and ten years ago, her three greatest happened at the same time. Every time Rebecca turns around, everything is unraveling. Ok, she is unraveling...mostly because Bryan Kelley stepped back into my life, bringing all the passion and love she has been missing without him.

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For the super sensitive, imaginative girl  
who was always told she was too much,  
too loud, too emotional, too dramatic.

And for the woman who decided  
that she is just enough exactly how she is,  
full of life and love, full of beauty and power.

**NEVER FORGET HOW WILDLY  
CAPABLE YOU ARE.**

Dear Reader,

Forever Be My Always is a second-chance romance that includes themes of childhood trauma, teenage, and adult pregnancy, high-risk miscarriage, emotional and physical abuse (off page), and a cancer diagnosis resulting in death (on page).

If you are still interested in this story, grab your beverage of choice (wine for me), and a cozy blanket to enjoy Bryan & Rebecca's love story.

Thank you for being here & Happy Reading!

XO,

CZ

**Content Notes** — teenage pregnancy, miscarriage, physical, and emotional abuse, trauma, teenage, and adult pregnancy, adult pregnancy, cancer diagnosis resulting in death.

**Your mental health matters.**

**Please make it a priority.**



# Chapter 1

Rebecca



I roll my eyes when my phone pings. I enter the hospital through the employee entrance and take it out to read the messages while placing my bag on the table in the employee lounge.

**Jenny: Stop by the second-floor nurses' station before you leave tonight**

**Monica: Sending love and hugs your way today. Are we still on for breakfast tomorrow?**

Before I can reply, my phone pings again in my hand.

**Mom: Can you stop by the store on your way home for milk and bread? I'll stop by tomorrow to pick it up.**

Come to my house instead of going to the store, Mom. Makes total sense. I should just Venmo her the money or have it delivered to her.

**Andrew: Keep your head up today, Ace. The skies are blue on the other side of the clouds.**

I woke up solemnly, just like I do every year on this day. It still amazes me that Andrew and Monica remember today's significance, though they weren't a part of my life at the time, but my own mother completely ignores it.

In typical mom fashion, she came running into the hospital to save the

day when Bryan called her to tell her I was losing the twins a decade ago. Just think...I could have ten-year-old's right now. *What if?* To this day, we still haven't talked about the pregnancy, the miscarriage, or the breakup. All life-changing events for me and my mother ignores them as if they never happened.

I type out quick responses to each, and power off my phone, before sliding it into the pocket of my bag already in the locker. I have a few minutes before I need to go to the emergency room, so I check the second floor for my sister.

"Hi Rebecca," Dr. Morris whispers. Smiling, I continue down the hall to where my sister sits at a desk. When I reach her, Jenny stands with her arms open wide. I step into her hug and squeeze extra tight, savoring the warmth. As we pull apart, the tears in her eyes mirror mine as she hands me a vase full of white lilies. I search the bouquet for a note and open it to find two heart emojis. I turn the card between my fingers and whisper, "Every year the same thing."

"Think they are from him?"

"No. No, I don't."

Jenny gives me another quick hug, and I carry the vase to the emergency room nurses' station. Usually, I am on the oncology floor, but today I offered to help since the department was short-staffed. I need a busy day to distract my mind, so why not the emergency department?

Ten hours into my twelve-hour shift, I finally sit down to eat the meal Andrew had delivered four hours ago. I unwrap my sandwich to take a bite when a familiar voice says my name from behind me and my blood turns cold. I would know that voice anywhere. I turn to see Charlotte Kelley standing in front of the nurses' station, ringing her hands in worry.

"Mrs. Kelley - Hi! Is everything okay?"

She grimaces in response. "Not really. Could you page Dr. Dean Smith for me, please?"

"Yes, of course," I say, spinning to grab the radio from the counter.

I speak into the radio, "Dr. Dean Smith to ED NS 1", before turning to her to ask "What room are you in Mrs. Kelley? I'll send Dr. Smith in." She nods and whispers, "146" before turning and walking away.

I am staring at the spot where Mrs. Kelley was standing when Dr. Smith arrives and grabs the chart from the counter.

"Rebecca, are you ok? You look like you've seen a ghost?"

I blink a few times before meeting his gaze. “Yes doctor, I’m fine.”

“Are you comfortable accompanying me to see Mr. Kelley? I can arrange for another nurse from oncology if it’s a problem.”

I stammer, “No sir, I mean, yes sir, I can assist you today.”

As we walk down the hall, Dr. Smith gives me a summary of Mr. Kelley’s medical history. I enter the room, wash my hands, and step to the other side of the privacy curtain, taking a deep, calming breath. I’m met with the purest of blue eyes and I’m instantly brought back to the fierce blue eyes of Bryan Kelley.

My thoughts echo in my mind as I stare at Arthur Kelley...Brain Cancer...Mr. Kelley has brain cancer, stage three brain cancer. This kind, gentle giant has brain cancer. I run out of the room to clear my mind, but I’m assaulted with memories instead. I exhale a quivering breath, tears flooding my eyes. *All I can see is him. All I can feel is him. All I want is him. Blue eyes. Bryan. Proctor. New York. Room 146. Babies. Miscarriage. Blue eyes. Bryan.*



## ten years earlier

*“Okay, what we have to tell you is going to be a shock, but we have a plan, and we are really happy,” Bryan explained. He reached for my hand and interlocked our fingers in the living room of his childhood home.*

*My heart pounded, waiting for our parents to sit down before we began with our explanation. Bryan and I went to Jenny for advice on how to tell them and agreed that we should do it together, Bryan and I, with all three of them. Art, Lottie, and Mom hesitantly sat across the room from us on the couch with concern etched on their faces. Just last August, we were in a similar scene when Bryan and I told our parents we were accepting college offers in New York and moving in together. It’s funny to think about that now. We were so scared they would freak out. Bryan and I have been together for six years, so they expected moving in together to be the next step. I couldn’t imagine going to Proctor School of Music for the next four years without him and Bryan said he would get his finance degree from anywhere as long as he can play college ball and be with me.*

*Bryan guided me to the loveseat while thanking my mom for making the drive over. Always the epitome of a southern lady in our small coastal town, Mom stayed silent. I could practically hear her say, "If you can't say something nice, keep quiet." As expected, her eyes were full of anger as we sat tense and silent. If there was anything my mother hated the most, it was to be put "on blast" or "blindsided". Since she doesn't really pay much attention to me, everything is a surprise to her, leading to weeks of anger, yelling, and fighting behind closed doors.*

*"What is it, son?" Art asked as he placed his hand on Lottie's lap. I could feel Bryan tense beside me. I chuckled at his movement. He had absolutely nothing to be worried about...The Kelley's were the most understanding and loving family. I just wanted to get this over and deal with the anger from my mother.*

*Avoiding eye contact, I whispered, "I'm pregnant," my gaze fixed on the ceiling.*

## Chapter 2

### Rebecca



“T

hose flowers are lovely. Who are they for?” I turn to see Mrs. Kelley stepping up to me at the nurse’s station and gently touching the white petals of the lilies. I don’t know how long I have been standing there since I ran out of Mr. Kelley’s room.

“They arrived for Rebecca this morning,” Claire cheerfully answers. I close my eyes, hesitating to respond to either of them. Since our first day of orientation, Claire has inserted herself into most of my life. I’m sure she means well, but right now, I really need her to just butt out.

“They came today?” Mrs. Kelley asks, and I nod in response, meeting her light gray eyes. “I’m sure they mean a great deal to you then,” she continues. Unsure of how to reply to her, I simply loop her arm in mine and guide her back to room 146. Why would she remember the significance of today? I continue to grip her hand in support as Dr. Smith discusses treatment options with Mr. Kelley. I take in the small room and chuckle to myself, noticing how Arthur Kelley has his feet hanging awkwardly off the end of the bed because of his height. Charlotte looks up at me in curiosity. I’m sure wondering what I could laugh about right now. I adjust the footboard to align with the mattress.

“Thank you, Rebecca, much better” Mr. Kelley croaks. Once the treatment plan is written and all appointments are scheduled to begin the next

week, I provide the Kelley's with the discharge paperwork and step out of the room with Dr. Smith.

"Dr. Smith?" I need to grab his attention before he leaves for the oncology floor. He must have heard me because he stops walking and turns in the middle of the hallway to face me. "I'm sorry about earlier with Mr. Kelley. It won't happen again." A sudden rush of embarrassment fills me. Dr. Smith simply nods and turns towards the elevators. Personal matters never got in the way of work before, so he shouldn't be upset. Only time will tell. After shift change, I grab my bag and head home for some much-needed sleep.

My phone pings with a notification. I should really assign tones to my contacts and silence my mother. That would really help with my selective communication. I grab my phone on my way out of the kitchen with my bowl of popcorn and a bottle of water before checking the message.

**Andrew: Hey gorgeous**

**Rebecca: Hey stud**

**Andrew: Be ready in 10**

**Rebecca: That's not happening...I'm already in bed**

**Andrew: Be ready in 8**

It is exactly eight minutes later when I hear the front door open. Andrew is one of three people with a key to my place. The other two are working tonight, plus they would have made their presence known by now. Andrew leans against the door frame to my bedroom in a navy suit with a white-collared shirt, looking like he had just come from the office.

"Is this okay?" I ask as I smoothed the baby blue silk fabric of my dress over my stomach. I reach for my gold hoop earrings that he gave me for my birthday, but turn to him with a raised brow, awaiting an answer. The smile on his face says all I needed to know. I grab my nude clutch and stand directly in front of him.

"Ready?" he asks with an outstretched hand.

I take his hand in response, and we head to his car. "Where are we going?" I ask.

"That's for me to know and you to find out," he replies with a mischievous smile. I roll my eyes and watch the lights pass by, reflecting on the day. I still can't believe Mr. Kelley has cancer. I wonder how the family is taking the news. I wonder how Bryan is taking the news. I wonder how

Bryan is. I jump when my door opens. I am so lost in thought I didn't notice we even stopped.

"Luigi's? Are we celebrating something?" I ask Andrew as I take his hand and exit the car. Granddaddy used to bring me and Jenny here for every accomplishment, regardless of how small. When he passed away, we continued the tradition. The smell of garlic assaults my senses as we step into the restaurant, and I can't help but smile. So many significant memories are in these walls.

The host shows us to our table, and we sit before Andrew finally responds. "We are celebrating our eight years anniversary."

"Well, aren't you the charmer?" *Well, this is a first.* "You're a bit early, though."

"It's never too early to celebrate with you, Ace. Plus, I know today wasn't easy for you and I wanted to take your mind off things." Feeling my blush spread from my cheeks to my chest, I focus on adjusting my dress. Anything to avoid meeting his eyes. I wasn't ready to have this conversation, even with my best friend. The server approaches to take our orders and Andrew laughs as he orders my favorite appetizer and entrée. I've always loved how he does that.

Once he tastes the wine selection, Andrew stands and slides into the booth beside me. The back of my thighs are plastered to the vinyl covering, stopping this from being a smooth scene from the movies. After I readjust my dress, I place my right elbow on the table to turn toward him. He mirrors my position and reaches up to place a rogue curl behind my ear. "You're so beautiful, Bec."

I lean on my elbow and chew on my thumbnail, avoiding his eyes. I hate it when he gets like this. I know I'm pretty, but I'm far from beautiful. "Rebecca, you are the most beautiful woman I know. You have a sweet soul and a kind heart but this body." Leaning back, he holds my hand, trying to see as much as possible from the small booth. "This incredible body is a masterpiece." I drop his hand. It really is a shame he's only attracted to men. Unamused, I reach for my wineglass to drink away the day. Andrew rests his arm on the back of the booth and refills my glass after watching me drain the first. *I just want today to be over.* "Care to explain?" he asks, eyeing my second empty wine glass. Sometimes I hate how well he knows me.

"Lottie and Art came into the ED today. At first, I thought I could be professional and do what I do best." I whisper, spinning my wine glass

slowly. His hand skims my shoulder in support, and I take a haggard breath. “Especially for them. They have done so much for me, and I thought I could push my feelings to the side to help them, but I couldn’t.” Andrew looks at me, concerned. “Seeing Art laying there...just broke me.”

Andrew leans in and kisses the tears on my cheek. “That’s understandable, Bec. I only know what you’ve told me about them, but it’s obvious that the Kelley’s loved you. I’m sure they understood how hard it is to see them. Did they realize what today was?”

“No, I don’t think so. I’ve spent the last ten years avoiding them, and now he’s my patient.” Our eyes meet and I know Andrew can feel my worry. “I had a panic attack. I haven’t had one of those in years...”

Our food arrives, breaking our conversation. We eat in silence, but I am lost in my thoughts. Brain Cancer. Bryan Kelley will come here to see his dad at some point. What will I say when I see him? I should ask Dr. Smith to assign another nurse. It’s been a decade since we last spoke. Surely, he’ll be like a stranger to me now.

“Ace, stop planning for the worst. Just focus on right now.” *He’s right. Of course, he’s right.* We spend the rest of our meal and car ride home in a comfortable silence. That is what I love about being with Andrew. Safe to just be, without expectation, without worry or doubt. Once home, he steps into my kitchen to make our evening tea after locking the door for the night. I head to my room to change and get ready for bed as I hear a soft melody from the piano. Wearing my favorite silk pajamas, I curl up on the couch with my tea in hand while Andrew plays my favorite songs. I smile into my cup, feeling blessed to have this generous, gorgeous man in my life.



## Chapter 3

Bryan



I am in a daze, staring out the plane window. I cannot believe this is happening. My dad has cancer. Actual cancer. When Jake called me before sunrise, telling me Dad's first treatment was scheduled for today, I was immediately pissed. Every Sunday morning, we have a family "meeting". Those meetings kept Mom organized when we were in school. Now that we're all grown and half of us have moved away, it's not a meeting, but we still make use of that time to stay connected weekly. This past Sunday, Dad wasn't on the call and Mom said he wasn't feeling well. She completely left out the cancer diagnosis, conveniently. I still don't know how Jake found out, but those details aren't important right now. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I need to be strong for my family. Stay organized, keep everything together. Before the door closes, I quickly type out a message to my assistant.

**Bryan: Good morning, Lynn, I'm sorry to text you before working hours, but I'm boarding a plane and will be in the air when it would be appropriate. I had a family situation come up and I'll be unavailable this week. I'll touch base later to give you my availability, but I'll be working from Jessamine for a while.**

**Lynn: I didn't realize you had a family...**

**Bryan: HA. HA. Real funny.**

**Lynn: I'll clear your schedule and email you the forms I need signed this week.**

**Bryan: Got it, thanks Lynn**

As the plane ascends, I watch the sunrise illuminate the surrounding clouds. I wish I could just float away with them and forget about the shit show that I am about to walk into. I haven't been back to Jessamine Beach for longer than 16 hours in a decade. Wow, saying it like that makes me feel so old. When I packed up and moved to New York, I promised myself I would never spend more than the required holiday there. When I say holiday, I literally mean day. As in, I fly in on Christmas Eve at 5pm and leave Christmas Day after lunch. Some years I've flown the family to me or Emily's place so we could all be together just so I could avoid my hometown, avoid memories, avoid her.

I wait at the luggage claim, looking around, taking in the changes to the terminal since Christmas two years ago and chuckle at the newest addition, "Welcome to Jessamine Beach, Where the Sun Shines Into The Night!" This town always leaned on those cheesy slogans. I grab my phone and power it on.

**Emily: Text me when you land and I'll leave the house for pickup**

**Bryan: Here**

**Emily: See ya soon**

I walk out of the airport's automatic doors and see my baby sister running toward me. "Hey tater tot," I say as I wrap her in a hug. "Where's Matty and Jake?"

She curls into my arms. "Hey jerk. Jake flies in later tonight and Matt is at home, I assume. I haven't seen him yet."

We turn and begin walking to the parking lot of the small airport. "When did you get in?"

"I drove through the night and saw Daddy before he left for the hospital."

I stop walking, understanding what she just said. "What? Yesterday?"

Emily rolls her eyes. "Who do you think told Matt? I texted Mom yesterday asking how Dad's headache was since he missed Sunday's call. I guess I caught her in an emotional moment because she called me in tears, telling me the whole thing."

"You should have called."

"I know, I'm sorry. I was so focused on getting here, I didn't think to

call anyone. Matty called me, Twin-apathy.” I know there’s more to this story. It isn’t uncommon for Matt and Em to use their connection and leave the rest of us to figure the shit out. But it’s strange for Mom to keep us in the dark like this. When we get in the car, I can tell there’s something else on her mind.

“What else, Em?” I see her eyes go wide, but she stays quiet. “Spit it out, tater.”

She pulls into the driveway of our childhood home and steps out of the car. “Rebecca is his nurse,” she says quickly before rushing into the house, leaving me frozen in the driveway. Rebecca. That’s a name I wasn’t expecting to hear today.



## ten years earlier

*I stared at the clock, watching and waiting as the seconds went by...four... five...six. I never expected my senior year to end with my life feeling like it had been turned upside down. This was supposed to be the summer to remember, our last summer in our hometown before we moved to the big city, but instead of being at the bonfire celebrating with my girl, team, and friends, I was depressed at home. The front door slammed shut. I jerked my head up and Jake was standing in the foyer, panting.*

*“She’s back! What are you doing? Get up, dude!”*

*“What are you talking about Jake, who’s back?”*

*“I swear, you are so obtuse sometimes. Dammit, get up! Let’s go!”*

*As Jake threw my boots at me, I stood trying to catch them, and watched him run around the house, grabbing clothes, a charger, my laptop, and my jacket. It can’t be her. She would have called me by now if she came home.*

*“Jake, why are you frantic, man?” I asked my younger brother as he paraded from room to room. Jake had become my best friend. I don’t know when it happened, but I know Mom and Dad were relieved when they were no longer breaking up our arguments at the dinner table. Unluckily for them, it took my brother and me almost fifteen years to get along. I guess that’s what they get for having kids a year apart.*

*“Dude, she’s back. I was walking out of the hospital from my volunteer hours and Becca was walking in. Now, get your ass in gear and get in the*

truck!”

My back straightened at the sound of her name, and my heart sank. She’s back? I turned to the couch, throwing the cushions on the floor, searching for my phone. “Where is it?!” I couldn’t believe I missed her call. God, I’m so stupid. I turned as Jake stepped up behind me with my phone in his palm. Pressing the side button to view my lock screen for notifications, I let out a disappointed sigh. “I haven’t heard from her. I’m probably the last person she wants to see.”

Jake pushed my shoulders toward the door, grabbed the makeshift overnight bag, and locked the door behind us as we stepped off the porch. “Get in the truck, man. You don’t know that.”

The ride to the hospital was silent. It had been three weeks since the last time I saw her. Becca would have called or texted if she wanted to see me...if she forgave me. I have considered her my everything for six years. Well, her and football. Few nineteen-year-olds can say they found their soulmate at thirteen, but we did. I thought she felt the same way. Now, I don’t know. I didn’t think she would disappear without a word like she did after things got messy, either.

“I don’t know Jake.”

“You know nothing until you show up and find out.” The deafening silence caused my heart to drum faster. “Let me ask you something. If you walk into that hospital and go to her, what is the worst thing that could happen?”

I turned and watched the trees fly by, hoping he wouldn’t see the tears threatening to fall from my eyes. “She will tell me I ruined her life.”

“You’ve already heard that. So, if there’s nothing else stopping you, then get your ass out of my truck, and go find her,” he snapped, turning into the emergency room drop-off lane.

I jumped out of the truck, grabbed the bag from Jake’s hand, and gave a sharp nod of thanks. I felt scatterbrained as I reached the reception area. A throat cleared, and I looked up to the warm brown eyes of Jenny Cooper. I stared at her, unsure of what to say. Although they have different fathers and are six years apart, she and Becca share many similarities as sisters. Without a word, Jenny typed on her keyboard and handed me a printed-out tag. I nodded in acknowledgment, and she gave me an apologetic smile.

Visitor Pass  
Bryan Kelley

### *Room 146*

*Peeling the wax paper off the back, I placed the sticker on my chest and took a deep breath as I turned down the long hallway to room 146. “Here goes nothing.”*

## Chapter 4

### Rebecca



I turn the wand on the window blinds for a perfect view of the bright blue sky. There isn't a cloud in sight and the sun is shining brightly. I like to open the curtains and blinds in all the treatment rooms before the patients arrive. It's already a hard time for them and I want to ensure I'm in the right headspace and in the best mood possible to help them get through this day. Sunshine always helps lighten the mood. This room is my favorite, mostly because of the windows, but the furnishings create more of a living room atmosphere instead of a hospital room. Dr. Smith enters the room with a man I assume is the new attending. Claire texted me the details of his horrific first day yesterday. Thankfully, Dr. Smith is the kindest doctor and while he doesn't tolerate incompetence, he is a dedicated physician and will teach anyone willing to learn. I walk towards the entrance to meet them.

"Good morning, Rebecca." Dr. Smith greets me with a smile and extends his arm toward the man. "I'd like you to meet Dr. Robert Jones. He's the new resident attending and will be with us for his first round."

"Hello Dr. Jones, it's nice to meet you. Welcome." I smile toward him and audibly catch my breath when his green eyes meet mine.

His lips turn into a cocky smile, not missing my obvious reaction. "Thank you. It's great to meet you. I cannot wait to get to know you better." *Um, excuse me. Claire forgot to mention how ridiculously handsome he is.* I can feel the blush on my cheeks and turn toward the desk to hide away.

As the patients arrive, I give a report to the doctors, and I delegate a patient to each of us and explain the program to Dr. Jones. “Dr. Smith believes having one-on-one attention by a nurse or physician is the best care we can provide to the patient and their families, and I have to say I now agree with him.” I look up from the patient’s chart before passing it to Dr. Jones and see Dr. Smith staring at me, smiling. Our eyes lock and I mouth “what” to him, smiling. He winks before he spins on his heel to see a patient. *What is that about?*

I have been sitting with the Kelley’s all morning as Art is receiving his first chemotherapy treatment through the port in his chest. Charlotte is reading and Art is working on a crossword puzzle. I can tell by his expression he is getting restless and move to sit beside him. He smiles up at me, gesturing to his crossword puzzle in his outstretched hand. “Just like old times?” he asks.

Hesitating, I answer, “Yeah, okay, Mr. Kelley.”

“Young lady, now you know better. My name is Art to you.” I smile at the page as I find the next clue on the list and write in the answer before passing it to him. I watch him read the next line with a furrow brow. Memories of the summer before senior year flooding my mind.



## ten years earlier

*I knocked on the screen door of the Kelley’s home. Emily swung the door open. “Hey tater tot, what’s up?” I said as she wrapped me in a hug and pulled me into the house.*

*“Nothing much. I was hoping you’d help me with my recital song before Bryan got home.”*

*Lottie stepped into the room from the kitchen. “Emily, leave the girl alone. She just got home. Let her take a breather first.”*

*Home. This is home. He is my home.*

*Emily huffed, stomping her way to the living room, and I followed Lottie into the kitchen.*

*“What can I help with, Lottie?”*

*“Oh, nothing dear. I have everything underway. I may need help setting*

*the table, but Jake and Matty can handle that when they get home.”*

*Mr. and Mrs. Kelley were the only stable adults I knew and were my role models when it came to relationships and family. With Mama working two jobs and Jenny away at college, I would be home alone each night if I didn't come here. Thankfully, they have always welcomed me.*

*“Have you heard from the boys? Any idea when they'll be home?” she asked.*

*“No ma'am, but when I passed by, there weren't that many cars outside.” Bryan and his two younger brothers worked with their uncle and cousin at The Shop. Bryan really focused on car repairs with his uncle and the others work on large engines. “If you don't need me, I think I'll go find Em and help her with her song.”*

*“Thank you, Rebecca. I know she would appreciate that. Her brothers have been giving her a hard time about her practicing and I think she's been feeling self-conscious.”*

*“I remember the feeling all too well. It's hard to be fourteen with big dreams.” I smiled and gave a small wave as I left the kitchen and stepped into the living room. Emily was seated at the piano with a pencil in hand, scribbling on a small piece of paper. After a few seconds, she played again, and I took a seat to her left on the piano bench.*

*Emily and I were almost done making the edits to her piece when the side door opened, and I heard Jake and Matt enter. “I'll be right back. Keep going,” I whispered in Emily's ear. I turned on the bench to stand, but Bryan was already there, wrapping me in his arms and lifting me.*

*“Hey! How was your,” but before I could finish, his mouth was on mine stopping me. His pillowy lips gently moved across mine and he glided his tongue on my bottom lip, asking me to open for him. I tangled my fingers in his hair and deepened the kiss before Jake entered the room.*

*“Oh my god, dude! Get a damn room!” His baritone voice startled me, and I jerked away. Laughing, Bryan pulled me to his chest with his arms around my shoulders and his chin atop my head.*

*“Watch your mouth, son,” Art called after him. “You two knock it off,” he said, pointing at me and Bryan.*

*“Yes, sir,” we said in unison.*

*“I'm going to run upstairs and shower. You good here?” he asked, looking between me and Emily.*

*I smiled up at him, loving his concern for me, even surrounded by his*



family. “Absolutely,” I replied and returned to my seat beside Emily. We continued to practice playing the song she had written, and I began memorizing the lyrics. That summer, Emily was going to a music camp that had an end of the season concert. She wrote her first piece and asked me to come perform it with her. Of course, I immediately said yes.

*Summer Love*

*by Emily Kelley*

*(Verse 1) I met you at the beginning of summer.*

*When the days were long and warm,*

*We spend our time together.*

*Just running away from the norm*

*(Chorus) Summer love, it’s so sweet.*

*The time flies by so fast*

*But I’ll never forget the memories.*

*I hold on to make us last.*

*(Verse 2) We swim in the ocean.*

*And build sandcastles on the beach.*

*I wish time was moving in slow-motion.*

*As we sing songs under the stars,*

*(Chorus) Summer love, it’s so sweet.*

*The time flies by so fast*

*But I’ll never forget the memories.*

*I hold on to make us last.*

*(Bridge) Summertime has come to an end.*

*And it’s time to say goodbye,*

*But I’ll always be your friend.*

*(Chorus) Summer love, it’s so sweet.*

*The time flies by so fast*

*But I’ll never forget the memories,*

*I hold on to make us last.*

After dinner, the boys cleaned up, so Emily and I snuggled on the couch, sharing a blanket. Mr. Kelley was sitting in his reading chair beside me with a furrowed brow, tapping a pencil on a book. “Everything ok?” I asked him.

He startled out of his concentration. “Oh yes, sorry. I’m working on this crossword puzzle, but I’m stumped.”

I reached for the book and pencil. “Mind if I look?”

*“Have at it,” he replied as he handed me the book. Emily sat up and looked over my shoulder.*

*“5 Across?” I asked. Art nodded and Emily read out the clue “God of Music”. I wrote the answer, A P O L L O, and passed back the puzzle.*

*With his smile touching his eyes, Art congratulated me on breaking his rut. For the rest of the night, we continued passing the puzzle and answering every other clue. When Bryan sat between me and Emily on the couch, he placed my feet in his lap and joined the game we’d created. Like his father, Bryan’s furrowed brow made me smile. While he attempted to solve his clue, Bryan mindlessly rubbed my feet. I felt so loved by him. So cherished.*



Dr. Smith’s booming voice pulls me out of my daydream. “Rebecca, could you step over here and help me, please?” I jump up and head to the desk with a cloudy mind. “I’ll disconnect Mr. Kelley so you can get ready for tonight.”

“Tonight? What’s happening tonight?” Charlotte asks from behind me. I didn’t even notice she followed me over here. This is the first time she has spoken since they arrived today.

“Rebecca’s performing tonight at The Attic. She has the most amazing voice, Mrs. Kelley. You should hear her!” Claire adds as she bounces into the room. “Jenny said tickets are already sold out for tonight. Isn’t that great?”

“Yes, I’m sure she does,” Charlotte replies and pats my back before returning to her seat. I close my eyes and press the ball of my palms into my eyes. I could literally cringe right now. Of course, Charlotte Kelley knows I can sing. I trained her daughter and sang at every event she hosted when Bryan and I were together. There would be no way Claire would know all that, though, but I also didn’t care to fill her in on those details or open those old wounds.

“Thanks, y’all. I will head out then. See ya tonight,” I call out as I grab my water bottle and head for the locker room.

I don’t know how I expected today to go, but I am not entirely disappointed. The Kelley’s have every right to ask for another nurse, and to be honest, they have every reason to as well. Through my pregnancy and even the miscarriage, Bryan was beside me the whole time, well as much as I would let him. The day of the miscarriage, Bryan supported me the best way he knew how. He made sure I was safe and comfortable after I insisted on going home alone. I just kept pushing him away.

I knew then that our relationship was over, and I needed to get away. Once he left my porch, I called Jenny to come get me. I left a note for my mom that I left the state for “a while”. I still don’t know what she told Bryan while I was away, but he called relentlessly. In reality, it was only a week, but it was a really long, emotional week. I thought leaving town for a little bit was the best way to close the door on our relationship. I needed to clear my head and make sure I was thinking clearly, too. At that point in my life, ruining my relationship with Bryan also included the relationships I built with the rest of his family, and the rest of my life as I knew it.

# Chapter 5

Rebecca



**Andrew: I can't wait to see you tonight.**

**Rebecca: Why am I so nervous?**

**Andrew: Could it have anything to do with the sold-out show?**

**Rebecca: I still can't believe Jenny roped me into this...It's like glorified karaoke**

**Andrew: LOL maybe that's true, but it's a great way to pull talent out of the community**

**Rebecca: Oh yes, Jessamine Beach is the new LA.**

**Monica: Are you wearing the black dress tonight? I laid it on your bed this morning**

**Rebecca: Yes Monica. I'll wear a black dress**

**Monica: No, it needs to be the black dress**

**Jenny: wear what you want sis**

I roll my eyes and wipe the fog in the bathroom mirror. I feel so nervous and the only way to calm me down when I get like this is by taking a hot shower and drinking a cup of lavender tea. With my hair wrapped in a towel and one of my extra plush bath sheets wrapped around my torso, I head to the kitchen to grab my steeping tea and some hummus and chips.

Returning to the bathroom, I let both green towels fall to the ground and smile at my reflection in the mirror. I have always been self-conscious about my body, but today feels different as I shimmy into the dress Monica left for me. The dress hits my mid-thigh with a small slit on my left leg. The black

velvet hugs my curves in all the right places. I pin my hair up to expose my neck and apply bright red lipstick to finish the look. Walking out of the bathroom, I can't help but smile. Being on stage allows me to be someone else, channels another version of me, a better version of me. I haven't felt like myself for a long time, so pretending to be someone else is easy.

Every year, Jessamine High School hosts a charity event for the Cancer Center. Two years ago, it was a speed dating event and last year there was a date auction. This year, they are going all out though, and organized a spirit week of sorts at The Attic. Tonight is karaoke roulette and when the MC came down with the flu, Jenny called me to take his place. I agreed, not only to help my family but also because the game can be a lot of fun.

As I enter the bar through the red curtains, I'm surprised to see the decorating committee is still here, setting up the centerpieces and place settings. Most of the town will be here and Sam always wants to make an impression, so he enlists the help of the student council to fancy up the restaurant portion of The Attic.

"Wow, you look amazing!" Jenny says, coming through the kitchen doors.

"You sure do," Monica agrees with a sly smile. "You're going to turn heads tonight."

"I *should* want to dig into whatever scheme you're pulling right now, but I feel fabulous tonight and I will not let you or anyone else put a damper on my fabulousness!" I practically yell through the room as my phone pings in my hand and I check my message before turning backstage.

**Andrew: I had something come up at work and won't get there until after you're on stage already. Break a leg, babe.**

**Rebecca: No worries! I can't wait to see you <3**

**Andrew: Same Ace**

Within the hour, there are fifteen teenagers backstage, ready to start this game, and they packed the restaurant based on the sounds of it. I peek around the curtain and get a thumbs-up from Monica, who is running the lights tonight. I return her gesture to give her the green light. In her best announcer impersonation, Monica exclaims into the microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen, stand on your feet and put your hands together for our very own Rebecca Cooper!"

The curtain opens, and I step into center stage, waving to the crowd.

“Good evening, everyone! I am Rebecca, and I’ll be your host for tonight’s karaoke game. We’ve got a great night lined up.” The crowd cheers, “But first a thank you to our sponsor!” I turn to my right with a wide smile toward Dr. Smith as he stands.

Jenny texted us earlier, asking for this introduction to happen. Dr. Smith refuses to say anything but said he would stand to be acknowledged and I promised to make it short and sweet. *He truly is such a humble man.* I smile at Dr. Jones and Claire, who are sitting with him at the reserved table. A wave of jealousy coursing through my veins seeing Claire seated between them. He takes my outstretched hand, gently caressing my knuckles as I continue, “You give so selfishly to your patients and this community, Dr. Smith. Thank you for the difference you make in our lives and the lives of your patients.” Before I can pull away, Dr. Smith raises our hands and kisses the back of my hand. I tilt my head curiously, and he just smiles and turns back to his seat.

Remembering the audience, I step back into center stage and explain the rules for donating. This year, Andrew built an app that allows for songs and singers to be requested with a donation. When a song ends, we take the highest-bidding song and singer as our next performer.

“To start the night, Dr. Smith has the first choice. Dr. Smith?”

The crowd is roaring, and Sam is whooping from the bar when I turn to the monitor that displays the roulette results.

*“Does He Love You” The Cooper Sisters*

“Well, alright then! Jenny, come on up here, sis!” I say into the microphone.

Everyone is still clapping and going crazy as Jenny wipes her hands on a rag from working the bar and makes her way to the stage. I can’t stop myself from smiling and locking eyes with Dr. Smith. My heart skips a beat as he picks up his drink, smiling behind the rim of the glass.

“Alright, alright!” Jenny snaps into the microphone and points directly at Dr. Smith. “Only for the patients, this isn’t for you,” she laughs and turns pointedly at me before saying “Dibs on Reba”. The crowd goes wild at the playful bickering. After our performance, the donations flood in with requests. Two hours in and Sam calls for an intermission, *thankfully*.

I head backstage to tidy up where the volunteers are chilling between shows. I turn when a throat clears behind me to see Dr. Smith is standing there and my mouth goes dry. He is incredibly handsome every day, but

especially right now in these dark jeans and white button-down shirt. “I don’t think I’ve seen you in anything other than scrubs.” *Oh my god, I sound like an idiot.*

He hands me an ice-cold bottle of water and puts his hands in his pockets. “Thank you, Dr. Smith. I absolutely needed this,” I say before opening the bottle and taking a sip.

“We aren’t at work. Call me Dean,” he pauses. “You look incredible tonight, Rebecca.”

I playfully give a little curtsy before Claire and Dr. Jones approach. Claire grabs my shoulders and wraps me in an awkward hug. She releases me before I even put my hands on her back and Dr. Smith coughs, attempting to cover his laugh.

Dr. Jones takes a step towards me, extending his elbow to me, “Can I buy you a drink, Rebecca?” I turn to Dean and see the anger there but accept Dr. Jones’ offer anyway. *Ya snooze, ya loose.*

As we approach the bar, Andrew comes up and wraps me in his arms. I close my eyes and immediately feel grounded by his cedar scent. He slips his hands down my back and onto my hips before pulling back and placing a kiss on my forehead. “Andrew, I’d like you to meet Dr. Jones. He’s the new attending at the hospital.”

Andrew extends his arm between us to shake Dr. Jones’ hand. “Pleasure to meet you, Dr. Jones.”

“Please call me Robbie.” The two men make eye contact. I look between them, black to green eyes locked on each other. *I am interrupting an intimate moment.* I quietly excuse myself to the ladies’ room. At the sink, I readjust my hair and run my fingers over my dress again. I step back into the hallway and freeze. *Citrus and cedarwood.* The color draining from my face. *Citrus and cedarwood.* “Everything ok, Bec?” Jenny asks from behind me.

I turn to her wide-eyed and whisper, “He’s here.”

## Chapter 6

### Bryan



As soon as I enter the crowded and noisy bar, I see her standing at the bar with two guys. Memories assault me as I take her in; her raven black hair is curled and cascading along her neck, her red lips, and bright eyes drawing me in. She's so beautiful, maybe even more so, and the short black dress she wears perfectly showcases her amazing legs. I take a step to the other side of Evelyn and extend my arm to her. "I can't believe Matt made me come tonight," she attempts to yell over the music.

"It's very 'Sweet Home Alabama' of you," I chuckle when she looks up at me in confusion, rubbing her bump. "You know the scene...Reese Witherspoon walks into her mother-in-law's bar and sees that one girl and saying something about having a baby in a bar."

"Ah yes, ok I remember now. Interesting choice in movies Bry. Lots of parallels to you."

"Yeah, maybe. But there won't be a reunion tonight," I reply as I lead her through the crowd to a table along the back wall. I sit facing the bar and watch as one guy places his hands on Rebecca's hips. My fists clench under the table, *unconscious reflex*. I've never seen either of these guys before, but that doesn't mean much, considering how long I've been gone. I pull my baseball hat lower to cover my eyes.

"Not sure that's going to help, bro," Matt says as he slaps my back and I shrug. He joins me and Evelyn at the small table. "How are you feeling, Ev?"



Of course, he is right. All it will take is one person to recognize me and all hell will break loose. I see Sam behind the bar, and I am certain he will make good on his promise to smash my face in if I give him the chance. I can't take my eyes off her. Rebecca looks so happy and smiling. I swear I can hear her laughter over the crowd. She glances around and turns to walk toward us. I turn my face, hoping my sudden movement doesn't catch her eye. Evelyn must notice my attempt, because she stands at the table and blocks any view Rebecca might have of me with her seven-month pregnant basketball-shaped belly. I place my head in my hands and exhale. *What am I doing?*

"Grow a pair and go talk to her," Emily whispers in my ear as she rounds the table to join us.

I bounce my leg under the table, my mind racing with what if's? *Fuck it.* "Be back." I jump up and head in the same direction as Becca. Scanning the faces as I pass, I slip into a hallway with only a men's and women's restroom. Figures, I waited too long and missed her. I headed back to the open room and skim through the crowd, searching for her. I fall back into my seat at the table, defeated and Matt passes me his whiskey. I fiddle with the flier on the table about some app, and Evelyn explains the event to me. It seems Rebecca has turned into quite a humanitarian. Emily slaps the side of my leg and points to the stage. I turn just in time to see Rebecca step center stage and can't stop the smile that covers my face. This is her element. Rebecca Cooper is made to be on a stage.

"Pining much?" Emily says before snatching my phone from my hand. I watch over her shoulder as she downloads the event app and puts in a request. "What's my limit?" she asks, tilting my phone toward her body to block my view.

"To hear you sing? \$500."

Emily squeals and submits the request. She stands, downs the rest of her drink, and walks toward the stage door. I watch Matt and Evelyn huddle together, laughing. I wonder why they never ended up together... or maybe they did, and now she's expecting my niece or nephew. I should ask him if this baby is his, if he's been hiding this relationship from all of us.

"Becca, it looks like we have one last request and an extremely generous donation that we simply cannot ignore!"

"Oh, this should be good," Matt laughs as he loosely wraps his arm around Evelyn's chair. Em steps on stage and starts jumping up and down in

excitement with Rebecca.

“I didn’t realize they were so close,” Evelyn says into Matt’s shoulder. I can’t hear his response to her, though I’m sure it was something snarky. Of course they are close, correction, were close. Rebecca was always with my family. Rebecca was my family. She and Emily have a special bond over their love for music. I swirl my beer on the table as the music begins. Is that “*Summer Love*”? *Dammit*. I shouldn’t have come tonight. This was a terrible idea. I turn in my chair, so my back is to the stage. Attempting to keep my breath even and keep the memories at bay, I count the bricks that make up the back wall. *Ten, eleven, twelve*. I can’t take it. I stand before the music ends and walk out the door as my phone pings.

**Matt: codes 01460**

**Bryan: thanks man**

I put my hands in the pocket of my jeans and start down the sidewalk to Matt’s house. I forgot how humid South Carolina summers are. It’s a rookie mistake to wear anything but shorts, even at night. Matt bought and renovated the old Harrison house a couple of years ago. I tried to convince him to flip it and sell it, but he said it was ‘magic’ and couldn’t give it up. Luckily, it is within walking distance of The Attic.

I step onto the wrap-around porch and make my way to the back door. Before typing in the code, I pause, turning to see the reflection of the moon bouncing off the waves. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath of the salty night air and count the waves crashing on the shore...*seven... eight... nine*.

## Chapter 7

### Rebecca



Before Jenny can reply, Sam is grasping my shoulders and guiding me backstage. The intermission is over. I clear my head with some deep breaths. I am imagining it. There's no way he's here. This is a sold-out show. If he is in town, he just got here. I must be imagining it. If he was in town, I would have seen him earlier today with his dad. He's not here.

I return to the stage, "So far, we've heard some great singing, but I know you can do even better Jessamine Beach! So, keep it up, don't be afraid to let loose, and let's have some fun." The crowd cheers again, and the energy in the room only grows as the night continues. People are singing their hearts out with the performers. The fourth glass of sangria may have been a factor, but I am having a blast and so is the audience.

"You were all amazing singers! Thank you all for coming out tonight!" I practically sing into the microphone and the crowd cheers.

Monica's voice booms over the speakers, "Actually, Becca, it looks like we have one last request and an extremely generous donation that we simply cannot ignore!" The crowd claps again. I turn to the monitor, halfway expecting this to be a joke, and someone requested the YMCA or something just as bizarre. My mouth falls open as I read "Summer Love" with Emily K. on the monitor and Emily Kelley steps on stage with me.

We both squeal in excitement, clapping hands and jumping up and down. "Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh," we chant in unison. The music

Emily wrote over a decade ago fills the room and we stand side by side, still holding onto each other but facing the crowd. Tears are in my eyes as I watch her sing. Joining in on the chorus, our voices harmonize through the rest of the song, highlighting the low notes she wrote specifically for me. When the song ends, I wrap my arms around her and kiss her cheek. I grasp her face in my palms and smile, “I’m so happy to see you, Em”.

Turning to the room, there is deafening applause, and we take a bow before she steps off the stage and disappears into the dark room. Emily is here. Arthur has cancer. *Citrus and cedarwood.*

Before anyone can catch up to me, I run out of the employee exit of The Attic. I jerk my heels off my feet and run away as fast as I can.

Tears streaming down my face, memories of the last time I saw him, the last day I could call him mine, tear me apart as I run.



## ten years earlier

*I stared at the popcorn ceiling of my hospital room searching for shapes or animals in the patterns. Bryan and I would lie on his bed talking and doing this for hours. Life was so much simpler and carefree then. “A snake,” I mumbled.*

*“What was that, Rebecca?” my mom asked from the chair, but I rolled my eyes in reply. I don’t know why she’s here. I never understood her protectiveness over us. No, this wasn’t protection, this was control. Mom had more than her fair share of terrible relationships and two of the worst ones resulted in her two darling daughters, Jenny and me. She stared at me with such anger and disappointment in her eyes. The same look she gave me since Bryan, and I met with her and the Kelley’s telling them about the pregnancy and our plans just two months ago...*

*A quick knock disrupts my thoughts as Dr. Josephine Morris pushed the door open. I attempted to sit up in the bed but struggled with this “one size fits most” paper gown. There’s really no point. I should have just laid here naked with how little this thing is covering my curves. Dr. Morris beamed as she glided into the room, welcoming us back for my follow-up visit. As the nurse asked every question about my body and how I’ve been feeling that week, Dr. Morris was feeling my stomach. I winced in pain, and she apologized as she moved to check my pelvis.*

*“Everything looks good here, Rebecca. We will have a lab technician come in to grab a quick blood sample so we can continue monitoring your levels. I want to see you again in five weeks. Remember to take your pain medicine for the next few weeks if you need it while your body continues to heal. You can resume physical and sexual activities after your next menstrual cycle,” she explained. At the mention of sex, Mom coughed, choking on her coffee, and glared at me.*

*We said our goodbyes and Mom motioned to the door as her phone vibrated. I was sure it was a very important phone call, far more important than being emotionally available to your daughter right now. I closed my eyes and let out a deep exhale of breath.*

*“Becca.”*

*I opened my eyes to see Bryan’s beautiful blue eyes scanning my body. What is he looking for? It’s not like you can see the wounds on the outside. I held up my hand to stop him from coming closer as he leaned in to give me a hug or a kiss. I’m not sure. I didn’t know what he was thinking even coming here.*

*“What are you doing here?” I tried to be as icy as I could be but, this is Bryan, my Bryan.*

*“I needed to see you.”*

*“I have nothing to say to you.” He continued to stare at me with a look of apprehension and I wondered what his end goal here is. This is Bryan. Everything is a calculated plan.*

*He stepped closer with his hand outstretched, but I raised my palm again. I could see how much it was hurting him not to touch me, but I couldn’t give in. If I felt the warmth of his hand on me, I’d melt to his touch. It was for the best. It had to be for the best. He sat in the chair my mom left and placed his head in his hands. I suddenly remembered I was in that ridiculous paper gown and yanked the sheet up to cover myself.*

*“You really shouldn’t be here, Bryan. You are moving in less than a week. Shouldn’t you be packing?” I rolled my eyes in disgust, not hiding the annoyance in my voice.*

*My phone pinged with a text from the table beside the chair. Bryan grabbed it and reached to hand it to me. As I moved my arm, the sheet fell to my waist, exposing the side of my hip and leg. I yanked on the sheet again to cover myself and continued fidgeting with it as I opened the incoming text.*

**Mom: I’m headed out on a work emergency. Jenny gets off in 2**

## **hours. Ride with her or get an Uber.**

*Just great. Thanks, Mom.*

*“Becca, stop pulling the sheet up. It’s just me! I’ve seen you in far less. Relax!” Bryan practically yelled. By mistake, my gaze met his when I looked up shocked at his tone. And finally, I saw it. We really made little sense. I was the “too big” chick with big boobs, and he was the football star stud with his rock-hard body, gorgeous smile, and dazzling eyes. How had I been so blind? We sat in silence, only breaking eye contact when the lab technician entered the room, took the vials needed, and handed me the discharge paperwork before exiting the room.*

*“Please step outside while I get dressed,” I whispered, knowing that he would have a quick wit reply. To my surprise, Bryan stood and stepped into the hallway while pulling the door closed behind him. Wow, I wasn’t expecting that.*

*I quickly pulled on my clothes and looked in the mirror as I ran my fingers through my hair. I was in awe of my body. The pregnancy was high-risk based on my weight, age, and carrying twins. I haven’t blamed myself or my body for the miscarriage that happened three weeks ago and was very surprised when my size twenty-two jeans fit again when just a month ago, they wouldn’t buckle.*

*I opened the hospital door with my bag on my shoulder and stepped toward the exit. We didn’t speak or make eye contact, but I heard Bryan’s footsteps behind me as I continued out the emergency room door. I made a sharp left toward the sidewalk that led me to the bookstore and could still hear him behind me. It wasn’t until we stopped at the pedestrian walkway on Main Street that he broke the painful silence between us.*

*“I’m sorry, Rebecca. I thought I turned down the acceptance from NYU two months ago when we found out. I still have the saved letter on my computer requesting a year’s deferment. I wanted us to get settled and you to begin classes at Proctor.” His voice sounded painful, but I continued staring at the pedestrian light, willing for it to change. He continued, “I don’t have plans to leave you or our babies.” He reached for my arm and successfully spun me toward him. “Becca, please, I’m begging you. Can we please talk about this?”*

*The streetlights illuminated as the sun continued to set, and the stars appeared. I closed my eyes to steady my breathing. I could hear waves*

*crashing in the distance along with Bryan's heavy breathing. I looked up at the sky, considering how to respond to this beautiful man standing in front of me. I didn't think he purposely meant to hurt me, but regardless, the damage was done. The babies were gone, and he could still live out our dream in NYC.*

*"Bryan, I need you to listen to me." I intertwined our fingers as I gazed into his fierce blue eyes. "It's okay. I forgive you." Bryan heaved a heavy breath of relief as he wrapped his arms around my waist and nuzzled his face in the crease of my neck. It felt so natural, so right.*

*Tears fell from my eyes as I continued, "I'm not angry at you or at myself. I don't know why the twins were taken from us, but it doesn't really matter at this point. What I know is you still have a great opportunity to attend NYU and play college ball. You need to take that opportunity and move on." I took a staggered inhale. "Without me."*

*He lifted his hands to hold my jaw and turned my face up to meet his. Using his thumbs to wipe the tears from my cheeks, his eyes searched mine. For the first time in our relationship, I did not know what he was thinking, but was certain he was feeling the same way about me. We had each changed more in the last few weeks than we had in the last six years. He dropped his hands from my face, grabbed my hand to intertwine our fingers again, and led me down the sidewalk toward my house. I didn't pull back from him and stayed silent until he stopped at the front steps of my childhood home.*

*"Can I see you before I leave?" he asked, turning toward me.*

*I gently placed my hands on his shoulders and stretched to my tiptoes to place a gentle kiss on his cheek. I whispered, "I don't think that's a good idea. Goodbye, Bryan."*

*I rushed up the three steps and opened the door before turning to see him exactly where I left him on the sidewalk, his hands in his pockets and a sad look in his eyes. I gave a soft wave before I closed the door and fell to the floor in tears. What did I just do?*

# Chapter 8

## Rebecca



I reach for my phone to silence the alarm but overestimate where I am in space and slide to the floor. “Oww!” Grabbing my phone, I realize it wasn’t my alarm that woke me up.

“Everything ok?” Andrew asks from the doorway.

I pull myself back onto my bed and unlock my phone to what seems like a thousand notifications. It looks like a combination of texts and missed calls from Monica, Jenny, and Andrew.

“I think so. Why are you here?”

Sitting on the edge of my bed, he gently moves the hair covering my face. “Because I want to be. You disappeared last night, and I was worried.” He pauses. “Where did you go, Rebecca?”

I lay back down and cover my head with the blanket in frustration. “It’s too early for this conversation,” I whine.

Andrew laughs, and I hear him leave the room. Still under the blanket, I unlock my phone again and open the group chat with Jenny and Monica.

**Jenny: I need you at the bar. Hurry up backstage**

**Monica: Tonight was AMAZING! I can’t wait to do it again!**

**@Rebecca why aren’t you answering your phone?**

**Andrew doesn’t know where you are, is everything ok?**

I close that message but before I can open the next, another text comes



in, followed by two more. This is a new group chat with Sam, Jenny, Monica, Andrew, and Dean.

**Andrew: Ace is awake and back to her dramatic self**

**Jenny: Make her runny eggs and a cup of tea. I'll be there with lunch at 1**

"I am not being dramatic!" I yell from under the covers. Andrew laughs from the kitchen, and I scroll to the top of the thread. He must not be too angry with me.

**Monica: ok let's split up. I got upstairs.**

**Sam: bar is clear**

**Jenny: all our cars are still here & she's not outside. @Rebecca where are you?!**

**@Dean what about the attending? Can you call him?**

**Andrew: @Jenny, already checked. Robbie hasn't seen her.**

**Dean: no one has seen her backstage since before the last song**

**Monica: bathrooms clear**

**Dean: mens is clear**

**Sam: kitchen is empty**

**@Jenny where are you?**

**Jenny: stairway**

**Dean: Got her. Taking her home now.**

**Andrew: Stay there until I get there.**

**Dean: I'm taking her home.**

**Andrew: I said stay there.**

**Jenny: OMG thank you!**

**Monica: @Dean we owe you one!**

**Sam: Thanks for finding our girl @Dean**

**Andrew: She's in bed now. I'll send an update when I have one.**

With my head hanging low and my robe wrapped tightly around me, I trudge into the kitchen. Andrew's eyes are burning my skin, but I can't bring myself to look at him. I am so embarrassed and can feel the threatening tears burning my eyes.

"Rebecca," he says finally. "What's wrong?"

I take a deep breath and sit on the barstool. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have run out like that last night. I just couldn't handle it. I'm not ready to face

him.”

Andrew leans his arms onto the countertop across from me. “You can handle anything.”

“No, I can’t, not this!” I yell, yanking my fingers through my knotted hair, “It’s been ten years, and ever since Art came to the hospital, I’ve had panic attacks anytime I *think* about him! What’s going to happen when I see him?”

Andrew circles the countertop and stands directly in front of me. I stare down at my hands in my lap, ashamed. With one finger under my chin, Andrew lifts my face to his and whispers, “That’s because you still love him, Ace.”

Tears fall from my eyes, and my chest tightens again. Andrew wraps his arms around me, and I wipe my face before explaining. “Before the second half of the show, I swore I smelled his cologne in the hallway. I convinced myself I was imagining it and there was no way he would be there, but then Emily came up on stage. I was so happy to see her last night.” I smiled, remembering the joy of singing with Emily last night. “I didn’t want to risk seeing him, so I ran.” Andrew nods in understanding.

“Why didn’t you just tell me?”

I look into his dark eyes, shaking my head. “I just needed to get away from there before I lost it. I didn’t mean to scare everyone. I don’t know how to deal with all of this,” I laugh softly, whispering, “I don’t even know if he was really there. Was he there?” I chew on my thumbnail, anxiously.

Andrew nods once and pulls me to my feet, guiding me to the couch. I sit cross-legged in the corner of the sectional and begin drinking the tea he made for me. “Once the crowd settled down after your duet with Emily, which was adorable by the way,” he smiles at me, squeezing my knee gently. “The bar was flooded with orders. We all pitched in and an hour had passed before we noticed you weren’t around. Jenny and Monica were running around searching and Monica organized a makeshift search party for you. Dean found you sitting on the porch of the library around the corner, and I brought you home.”

“Dean? Why did Dean find me?”

“He asked Jenny what was wrong and decided to help,” he shrugs. “Once I knew you weren’t backstage or in the restroom, I left looking for Bryan. He walked out during the last song, and I didn’t know if he...”

“Bryan wouldn’t,” I interrupt, but Andrew raises his hand to stop me,

shaking his head.

“I ran into Matt in the parking lot, and he said Bryan went home. I drove by The Kelley’s house but didn’t see anyone. I was on my way back when Dean found you.”

“So, he is here. Did anyone talk to him?” I couldn’t stop my voice from cracking with emotion.

“No. I think I saw him when he got up to leave. No one else mentioned seeing him.” He hesitates. “I also didn’t tell them. I didn’t want to create a scene, and knowing Sam’s thoughts on the man, it wasn’t a risk I wanted to take just yet.”

I throw my head back on the couch, groaning. He’s here. “I figured the family would come after Art’s diagnosis, but that doesn’t explain why he was there last night. Obviously, he saw me, who couldn’t have. Why would he come to my show? Lottie knew I was performing, Claire told her yesterday, so he walked into the Attic knowing I would be there and didn’t even try to talk to me.” My words sliced like a dagger through my heart.

Andrew stands and heads to the kitchen. Pulling out the ingredients for eggs and toast before replying, “It’s his loss, Ace. I know this isn’t the best time, but there’s something else I need to tell you about last night.”

I follow him into the kitchen and sit on the counter beside where he is preparing our breakfast. I lean forward to catch his eye, encouraging him to continue, but he won’t look at me.

“Robbie was here last night.”

“Dr. Jones was here? Why?” I am not sure how I feel about being around him and not remembering anything that happened.

Andrew turns to me, takes a deep breath, and says, “He was here with me.” He pauses. “We really hit it off last night and when I went looking for you, he came with me. He helped me get you in the house safely last night.”

A smile creeps onto my face. *Andrew and Dr. Jones, huh? Interesting pair, complete opposites, but I suppose that works for some.*

“So, you’re not mad?” He asks, watching me expectantly. “Ace, say something. You’re killing me!”

Grabbing his arm, I pull him toward me and wrap my arms around his neck. His hands land on my thighs and I lace my fingers into his hair at the base of his neck. “Why would I be mad? For one, I barely know Dr. Jones. He seems okay. If you’re happy, then I’m happy.”

Andrew drops his forehead to mine, and I close my eyes. “Thank you,”

he whispers.

“You don’t need to thank me. You’ve been my rock for so long. Andrew, you’re my best friend. I want you to be happy.”

“You know, he thought we were together.” Andrew chuckles and returns to the stovetop.

“He’s been hanging out with Claire. Of course, he does.” I laugh and shrug my shoulders. “She’s still mad at you for not bidding on her during last year’s gala. I don’t tell anyone we’re together, but I don’t correct them if they assume either.”

“I do the same, Ace. We’ve just always made sense, and that will not change. You’re still my number one girl. Let people talk. If they’re talking about us, then they are leaving someone else alone.”

Rolling my eyes, I reply. “Yeah, that’s one way to look at it.”

As he cooks, the tension between us eases. We eat breakfast and talk about last night’s event before I disappeared. By the end of the meal, we are both laughing and joking like normal. I give Andrew a kiss on the cheek as he leaves and return to the kitchen to clean up. Pulling out my phone, I text the new group chat.

**Rebecca: I am alive and well. Thanks for taking care of me, y’all.**

**You mean the mostest <3**

**Monica: <3**

**Sam: You have a lot of explaining to do young lady.....**

**Jenny: I second him**

**Rebecca: Everything’s good, promise**

It is just after four o’clock when Jenny leaves from our impromptu lunch date. We both cried when I told her about running into the Kelley’s at the hospital for the first time. Recalling my time with Art yesterday morning and the memories that engulfed me caused my soft cries to turn into full sobs. Jenny held me tight and rubbed my back while I let all of my emotions go. I can’t imagine she understood much of what I said, but she didn’t let go or question how I was feeling.

I am standing at the open door that Jenny walked out of when my phone pings from the counter. I grab it and a cup of tea before settling into my bed, emotionally exhausted.

**Dean: Hello**

**Rebecca: Hi Dr. Smith–Thank you for your help last night. I don’t**

**know what came over me.**

That's not entirely true, but I didn't know if I wanted to talk to him about it.

**Dean: Are you doing, okay?**

**Rebecca: Yes, thanks again for your help last night Dr. Smith**

**Dean: I already told you to call me Dean.**

**Rebecca: Okay, okay. I even changed your contact name to prevent it from happening again.**

**Dean: You think that's going to work? Lol**

**Rebecca: Probably not :P**

**Dean: You were brilliant last night.**

**Rebecca: I'm really sorry about everything**

**Dean: Rebecca, you have nothing to be sorry for. I don't know what happened and I don't expect you to tell me. I just wanted to know if you're ok and to tell you I couldn't take my eyes off you last night.**

**Rebecca: I'm good. I was directly in front of you the entire night**

**Dean: Yes, you were, and I had the best view of the entire room.**

**Rebecca: The room isn't that big. LOL everyone had the same view**

**Dean: Glad you're doing okay. I'll see you Monday?**

**Rebecca: Yep! I'll be in after my home visits**

**Dean: see you then**

My cheeks burn red. Am I blushing? Is he flirting with me? Was he flirting with me last night? I must be imagining this there's no way Dean would risk his career. I turn on the television for distraction and flip through the channels before landing on the design channel. The perfect distraction.

# Chapter 9

## Bryan



I run the four miles to my parent's house. Jessamine Beach doesn't have a gym that is open to the public. I make a mental note to talk to Coach about training at the high school while I am here. I stand in the kitchen of my childhood home, taking in the decor. Mom hasn't changed anything since we were growing up. I am making a cup of coffee when I hear footsteps on the stairs and turn to see my mom entering the kitchen with my dad behind her.

"Bryan, it's so good to see you!" Mom wraps her arm around me, never letting go of Dad's hand.

"Hey Mom," I whisper back.

"We're glad you're here, son," my dad mutters. I let go of Mom and reach to hug Dad, but hesitate. "It's ok, just watch the port on my left shoulder."

I gently envelope him in a hug. Growing up, Dad never hugged us like this, but I refuse to let that stop me now. "I'll be here for you every step, Dad. I'm not going anywhere."

My mom gasps and covers her open mouth with her hand. I didn't tell her my plans yesterday. "You're moving home? Are you sure you can do that?"

I release my dad and grasp his shoulders, steadying him on his feet. I take in the dark circles around his eyes and the shallowness of his cheeks. Have I really been that blind to not have seen this coming? Still holding onto

my dad and watching the joy in his eyes, I reply, “Of course, Mom. I’m a big kid now. I can do a lot of adult things.” We all laugh, and I help Dad take a seat at the counter. “Pancakes?” I ask, pointing at my dad before turning to the stove.

“Yes, but I need protein, too. My nurse said it will keep my strength up.”

I wondered how long this was going to take to come up. I guess only two days...I take a deep breath before telling him, “I have some protein powder in my bag. I can add it in and see if you like it. That will be the easiest way to add more protein to all your meals.”

I turn to where he and my mom sit at the counter. They are holding hands and watching me cautiously. “I know she’s your nurse Dad, you can say her name.”

Dad nods, not meeting my gaze.

“She’s been really great to us. She’s even stopped by a few times with dishes or to check Dad’s vitals since his treatment the other day.” Mom explains.

I step toward the kitchen island and prop my arms on the counter. “All I care about is you getting the best care. If that means Rebecca is involved, then I know you’re in the best of hands,” I whisper. I watched the worried look in my dad’s eyes fade. I hate that my past relationship caused him any concern, especially now that he’s fighting for his life.

“I’m proud of you, son,” Dad’s voice is barely a whisper, full of emotion. I watch him stand and cautiously walk to his favorite chair in the living room. It is hard seeing him like this, so fragile and small compared to the last time I saw him.

I am facing the stove and finishing up breakfast when I hear my brothers behind me. “Becca looked so hot the other night,” I hear Jake say.

My jaw clenches, and I glare at him over my shoulder. “How would you know? You weren’t there.”

“I know.” He shrugs. “Just wanted to see your reaction. Have you seen her yet?”

“Nah man, there’s no need.” I try to sound convincing. To be truthful, I need to see her. I haven’t been able to get her off my mind since I found out she is Dad’s nurse. Seeing her Saturday night didn’t help, either. I don’t know what I would even say to her. *Hey Becca, I’m sorry. I’m dumb. I love you still. I need you. Forgive me.* I can’t imagine that would go over well.

Jake slaps me hard on the shoulder, pulling me from my thoughts. “Well, you’re about to, so cut the puppy dog’s eyes.” *What? Shit.*

I shake my head and try to focus on finishing cooking for the family. What was breakfast for three quickly turned into brunch for six. I place the dishes of pancakes, eggs, and bacon on the table when I hear a soft knock on the front door.

“This should be interesting,” Jake grumbles before leaving the kitchen to help Evelyn to the table.

Emily swings the door open with Mom directly behind her. “Becca? We were expecting Dr. Smith.” My mom questions.

“Oh, I’m sorry Mrs. Kelley.” I can hear the panic in her voice. She’s scared. She’s scared to see me. I refuse to get in the way of my father’s care, even if that meant I need to leave. With my heart pounding, I storm out the side door, slamming it behind me.



# Chapter 10

## Rebecca



Charlotte and Emily turn around, and we all look toward the sound of a door slamming. “I didn’t realize Dr. Smith set this appointment when I was asked to stop by. I’ll head out and call him to come by,” I explain, concerned I was intruding.

“Don’t be silly, come in!” Emily pulls me toward her by my forearm.

As I enter the room, my eyes are immediately drawn to Art. He is sitting in his favorite old raggedy chair. “Let’s be honest, there isn’t much Dr. Smith can do for me that you can’t, my dear.” I smile at him before I crouch to be at eye level with my patient. His coloring is paler than I’d like. I turn to take in the rest of the room and am met with the eyes of every Kelley, except one. *Bryan.*

“I don’t know about all that, sir. Would you like to move somewhere more private?”

Before Art replies, Jake places his hand on my shoulder and says, “We will give you some privacy.” I nod. “And don’t worry about him,” he says, gesturing to the side door. Certain, he was referring to Bryan, but I didn’t get a look at who went out the door before it slammed. I am not here to see Bryan, though that would be a perk.

“Thanks, Jake,” I say before opening my bag and pulling out my stethoscope. “How are you feeling today, Art?”

After my assessment is complete, I make a quick call to Dr. Smith to

document Mr. Kelley's vitals. The call is quick, but Dr. Smith apologizes for the mix-up in scheduling. We still don't know how the miscommunication happened, but all patients are taken care of and that's the main priority.

"Dear, breakfast is ready. Would you like me to bring you a plate?" Charlotte asks.

"No, I'm good, I'll be right there," He replies. I stand and offer my hand to assist Art from the chair. I know it's very comfortable for him, but this chair is a nightmare to get up from, especially for him. We make our way around the furniture to the kitchen.

"Come on, Becca, I have your plate ready for you," Emily calls from the kitchen.

I settle Art into the seat at the head of the table before I respond, "Oh no, I couldn't intrude on this family time. I'll step outside and finish some documentation. Once you're done eating, Art, I'll start the IV."

The room grows quiet, but Jake broke the silence. "You know, he's out back."

"I'll just sit on the front porch, if that's ok?" I reply, turning to Charlotte. She nods in confirmation, and I excuse myself. I walk out to my Mustang to grab my water bottle and return to the rocking chair on the front porch to document my visit for Dr. Smith to sign off on.

**Rebecca: Hi, I just uploaded my documentation from today's visit. I think we need to adjust his treatment schedule. Let me know when you're free to discuss.**

**Dean: Thanks Rebecca, I'll always make myself free when you need me. Give me five.**

I watch the wind blow through the oak tree in the front yard. They propped the old tire swing on the side of the tree. I stand to see if the carvings Bryan did when we were fifteen are still there when my cell rang, interrupting me.

"Good afternoon, this is Rebecca."

"Hello Rebecca," my heart skips a beat at the sound of his voice. *Well, that's new.*

"Hi Dr. Smith, have you had the opportunity to review my notes yet?"

We speak for just a few moments about Mr. Kelley's vitals and the concerns I have after my assessment. Once we agree on the changes to the treatment plan, I stand to return inside just as Bryan rounds the corner of the

house. *Bryan*. I lock my eyes on him as he walks toward me.

“Thanks for taking care of this, Rebecca.”

“Sure, anytime Dr. Smith.” My reply is quick as I watch Bryan.

“Before you go, could we go to dinner together soon?” Bryan’s eyes dart up and lock onto mine, as if he heard Dr. Smith. *Those eyes that lock my heart, my soul*. My breath hitches. He looks as handsome as ever. “Rebecca, did you hear me?”

“I...I don’t know, Dr. Smith. Can we talk later?” I ask in a rushed tone.

“Yeah, sure.” He replies before wishing me a good day.

I end the call and place my phone in the pocket of my pink scrubs without breaking eye contact with Bryan. He stops at the bottom of the stairs to the porch, and I wait, unsure of what to say.

“Hi.” His voice is as deep and sultry as I remember.

“Hey Bryan,” I reply, pulling my notebook closer to my chest. “It’s been a long time.”

“Ten years.” *No shit*. He looks the same, but different, too.

“Ten years,” I agree.

We stand in silence, just gazing at each other. *We aren’t the same people anymore*.

He runs his hand through his blonde hair, making it even more disheveled and sexy. I can see the tension in his jaw and shoulders. I turn toward the house to head back inside but freeze when I hear him whisper, “Is he going to make it?”

I close my eyes. It was only a matter of time before someone in the family asked me this question. I just wasn’t expecting it to be from him. I hear him as he climbs the stairs and feel the heat of his body beside me. Slowly, I turn to face him and open my eyes to meet his gaze. I can’t stop my heart from pounding with his proximity. “We are doing everything we can,” I reply after taking a deep breath.

He takes a quick step closer to meeting me toe-to-toe and replies through his clenched teeth. “That’s a bullshit answer, Becca. You and I both know it.” The closer he comes, the more I ache to touch him, comfort him.

“I can’t give you anything else, Bryan,” I reply as calmly as I can. I know he is angry and in pain. I can feel it, but why can I feel it? I exhale slowly to calm my heart rate. “I wish I could make all this go away, but I can’t. All I can do is make sure your father receives everything he needs for his best chance.” I reach for the handle of the door, but Bryan pushes the door

closed with his arm and leans against it, caging me between him and the door. I feel his breath hit the back of my neck and goosebumps immediately cover my skin. I pull my arms tighter to my chest and close my eyes to focus. *This isn't about me. This isn't about us. He isn't here for me.*

“Please. I’m begging you, Becca.” He sounds so defeated. “Please, just give it to me straight. You can tell everyone else whatever it is they train you to say. But I...I need you to tell me the truth. Please.”

I slowly turn towards him, unsure of how close he is to me. I take a deep breath. *Citrus and cedarwood.* It has been ten years, but the pull toward him is the same as the first time we kissed, or said I love you, or said goodbye. I am thankful my arms are full, stopping me from reaching for him in comfort. Unable to meet his eyes, I look over his shoulder when I reply, “He is alive today. He is weaker than I would like after his last treatment, so Dr. Smith is changing the plan slightly. Take it day by day and make the time you have count.” I keep my gaze away from him. The burning of the threatening tears pooling in my eyes. *Do not look at him. He is not your responsibility. Do not give in to your memory of him. He's different, changed.* Eventually, Bryan drops his hand to the handle of the door and opens it for me.

# Chapter 11

Bryan



Following Becca through the front door of my parents' house, I close the door behind us as she walks over to my dad. He is back in his favorite chair and Mom is sitting on the couch beside him, watching me intently. I see Emily by the back door, using her pointer finger in the "come here" motion.

I step closer to Becca as she crouches on the floor at my dad's feet and ask softly, "Can I get you anything, Bec?" *Damn, she's even more beautiful. How is that possible?*

Her head spins toward me quickly before smiling at me. That smile, those eyes. How have I stayed away this long? "No, I'm good, thanks," she replies before turning back to my dad.

I walk through the room to the back door and outside to meet my siblings in the yard. They all watch me with curious looks as Evelyn passes me a glass of lemonade before I sit beside Emily on the bench. I still need to ask Matt about Evelyn and the baby. When I see Matt, she is always around. It's like he can't be away from her. *I was like that once.*

"So," Jake says, watching me expectantly.

"Give him a break. I don't think he's said more than 10 words to her," Emily defends.

"There's nothing to say," I reply, as I take a drink. "She's dad's nurse. We all know her. There's nothing else."

"Yeah... I don't believe that for a second," Jake chuckles, and I grab the

football from the shelf and throw it at his head. Laughing, Matt, Jake and I run into the yard to toss the ball around and Evelyn turns on some music. This is what I miss about home. I miss just shooting shit with my brothers and dad, practicing for the next game, and stealing glances at Becca as she laid in the sun with my mom and sister, talking or flipping through magazines. So much has changed since and there was so much more change coming with Dad being sick.

Everyone else heads inside and I hear Emily and Mom laughing in the kitchen. I lay on the lounge and watch the clouds float in the bright blue sky. What if the miscarriage didn't happen? I would be a dad. I would have ten-year-old twins. Would Rebecca and I still be together? Would I want to be married? Married to Rebecca? Yes. The answer has been and always will be yes.

My thoughts are silenced when I hear the piano from inside. I quietly get up from the lounge and step through the back door. Looking around the room, I only see Dad in his chair and Becca seated at the piano. The machine connected to Dad is steadily beeping and I can tell he is uncomfortable and in pain. I move toward him to see what I can do to help, but she begins to sing and I freeze, leaning against the wall. I watch as my first and only true love sings to my dad. The voice I fell in love with. The voice that started it all.

Mom steps beside me, and I wrap my arm around her petite frame. Dad lets out another groan and Becca turns to him but doesn't see us standing there. Her fingers float back to the piano, changing the song to "Home" by Michael Bublé. Dad immediately relaxes.

"Is that?" I ask quietly.

Mom nods, "from our anniversary party." My sweet Becca, always thinking of other's needs. She knows Dad needs this music to relax. Music connected to good memories.

When the song is ending, Mom moves from my side to Dad's and kisses his cheek while covering him with a blanket and sitting on the couch beside him. I want a love like theirs. My eyes are still on Mom when Rebecca stands and begins walking toward the kitchen. She pauses mid-step and blushes when she sees me leaning against the wall, my eyes glued to her. I push off the wall to walk into the kitchen with a stupid smile. Maybe I still have an effect on her. I hear her fall into step behind me and turn the kettle on. She sits silently at the kitchen island while I make her tea. Lavender and vanilla tea with a drizzle of honey mixed with a splash of lemonade. She seems

hesitant with me. I study her as I hold out the steaming mug to her. The ends of her dark hair are slightly curled and held back with a clip. Her cheeks with a slight blush, eyes bright and innocent. When her small hands gently cover mine to take the cup, a shock of electricity runs through my body. I need to get out of here before I regret this.

“I’m headed out. Let me know if anything changes from what we talked about earlier.” I slide my business card to her on the counter and say goodbye to my parents before leaving. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath of the humid air and begin counting as I run home...ten... eleven... twelve. *That voice. That smile. Those eyes. I am a goner.*

# Chapter 12

## Rebecca



The halls of the oncology floor are abnormally quiet for the afternoon. I continue down the hall and peek into each room to see if anyone is there. After not seeing anyone, I turn the corner to head back to the nurse's station and collide with Dr. Jones.

"Oh my gosh Rebecca, I'm so sorry! Are you ok?"

Laughing, I reach up and straighten his glasses. "Yes, Dr. Jones, I'm good. Are you?"

"Yes." He turns to walk with me. "I'm actually glad I ran into you. Well, not literally run into you." He heaves a heavy sigh. "You know what I mean. Can we talk?"

"Yes, of course." I loop my arm through his as we continue walking to the nurse's station. I wonder if he's going to tell me about Andrew now or later. Maybe I shouldn't be touching him. Does he think I'm coming on to him? My cheeks blush at the thought.

"I'm really glad you're ok from the other night."

"Oh yeah, sorry about that! Andrew told me you helped him a great deal. Thank you."

Dr. Jones hesitates in his next step and his body tenses. "He did?"

I gently tug on his arm to encourage him to continue walking with me. "Yep. He told me he thought y'all really hit it off. Sorry, I hijacked your night with my shenanigans," I laugh, feel the tension in his arm release.



I let go of his arm when we get to the nurse's station and sit at the computer to check Dr. Smith's schedule.

"You're not mad?"

"No, of course not. Why would I be?" Damn, he's too handsome for his own good.

When he hesitates, I turn toward him. He genuinely looks confused. "I mean, aren't you with him?"

"With whom?" I jump, hearing Dr. Smith's voice from the other side of the desk.

I watch the tension in his neck return before he answers Dr. Smith. "Andrew."

Both men turn to look at me, waiting expectantly.

I laugh. "No, we aren't together. He is my person, but we aren't romantically involved." Dr. Jones blows out the breath he must have been holding and nods.

"Well, that's great to hear." Dr. Smith replies with a bright smile.

Dr. Jones excuses himself, promising to come see my next performance at the Attic.

"Thanks again for seeing Mr. Kelley yesterday. I do not know how it happened, but the patients' schedules got all jumbled."

I look up from the computer, smiling. "It's no problem." Dr. Smith is wearing his usual blue scrubs with his hair perfectly styled, looking like a dream.

"Are you going every day?" My eyes meet his. Should I admit this? Am I ready to admit this? When I don't answer immediately, he continues, "I noticed daily vitals in his record earlier."

I nod, "Mrs. Kelley isn't very comfortable with the port flushes yet so I stop by after his dose to do that. I check vitals and document them when I'm there." Standing, I reach for a cleaning cloth, attempting to avoid his reaction as I wipe down the counter space nervously. He knows there is a history between us. He has already said that, but I don't know how much he knows exactly.

"That's very generous of you," he whispers as he steps toward me and places a gentle hand on my arm. I turn to see his chocolate brown irises watching me, appraising me. "I know you would do that for any patient, but I can't help to think there is more to it," he admits.

I smile, hesitantly but as sweetly as possible. "Art and Charlotte have

done a lot for me. They feel like family.” It’s not exactly a lie. I know I am doing more for them, but they mean so much to me. The least I can do is help them this way.

He nods and runs his hand up my arm softly. “So their son isn’t giving you a hard time?”

Before I can stop myself, a laugh escapes my lips. “You mean Bryan? Definitely not. Consider it lucky if he speaks to me.” My eyes drop to the floor remembering the last time I saw him, leaning against the wall at his parents’ house with that panty melting smile and those eyes bright enough to light the night sky...

The intercom chimes, “Dr. Dean Smith to ED NS 2. Dr. Dean Smith to ED NS 2.”

“That’s his loss and hopefully my gain.” He turns to the elevator before I blink out of my thoughts, and he’s gone. Do I want it to be Dean’s gain? We work together. There has to be a rule about this. I haven’t been with anyone since *him*. I haven’t been even remotely attracted to anyone since him. Am I attracted to Dean? I should be. What’s there not to like? He’s handsome and generous. Mama would be happy he’s a doctor...My phone pings as I am walking to my car.

**Andrew: Hi Ace**

**Rebecca: Hey stud - I saw your man today**

**Andrew: Oh yeah? I saw yours too**

**Rebecca: I don’t have a man, asshole**

**Andrew: Dean seems to think otherwise**

**Rebecca: Wait, what? I’m leaving the hospital, meet me at the house**

My phone rings in my hand, and I smile when I see he is calling. His contact is a picture of the two of us from our trip last year to Aspen. As I drive home, I tell Andrew about my confrontation with Bryan (If you’d call it that) and my conversation with Robbie. I am pulling into the driveway when Andrew has to go but promises to text me what happened with Dean.

After my large glass of wine and a long bath, I sit at the piano in my white fluffy robe and begin to play. I didn’t realize it when I was younger, but music has always been my outlet. It’s the only way for me to express my emotions without hurting someone else. To me, my music is personal. It helps me heal and I just want to help others heal through it, too.

**Jenny: Oh seester**

**Rebecca: Yes dear**

**Jenny: Ready for your performance?**

**Monica: Can we do karaoke roulette again? no contestants, just you  
Becca**

**Rebecca: Yes I am finalizing my set now. Um, no thanks @Monica**

**Monica: aww man!**

**Jenny: Will you play a song for me to dedicate to Sam?**

**Monica: Well, isn't that just sweet?**

**Rebecca: sure! Send it over.**

**Jenny: Thinking Out Loud...**

My mouth goes dry.

**Jenny: If it's too much, I can pick another. I just thought I'd ask.**

**Rebecca: Not a problem! Can't wait!**

That's a lie. I absolutely can wait. I take a deep breath and add the song to my set list before sending the complete list over to Monica. She is working on the sound system with the new guy and always wants the songs a few days early. The goal is to always have tracks to sing to, otherwise, I'll play. I'm staring at the wall, lost in memories when my phone pings again.

**Andrew: Hey Ace - Sorry it took so long to get back to you. Dean came into the office this morning to see me. He's very confusing. He looked pissed but also brought me a coffee.**

**Rebecca: What did he want?**

**Andrew: He 'demanded' to know what we were, how long we'd been together, and what my plans were.**

**I think he was trying to scare me.**

**Rebecca: I can only imagine your face lol**

**Andrew: He seems serious about pursuing you.**

**He's pretty intense though. Bec, be careful.**

**Rebecca: He asked me to dinner the other day.**

**Andrew: Oh yeah? What did you say?**

**Rebecca: I asked him if we could talk about it later**

**Andrew: LOL smooth Ace, real smooth**

**Rebecca: Shut up! I was on the Kelley's porch and Bryan was walking up to me. I didn't know what to do!**

**Andrew: Did he say anything today?**

**Rebecca: No he hasn't brought it up again. Maybe he won't?**

**Andrew: Yeah, I doubt that sunshine.**

# Chapter 13

## Bryan



The waves crash along the shore, and the sun shines brightly as I run down the pier. Matt's house isn't far from here and it's one of the few places that isn't haunted with memories of her, of us. Dad used to bring us here fishing in the summer. I still don't know how he brought all four of us with his fishing gear here every weekend. We were hellions, but he was always so patient and kind. When I'm a dad, I hope to be just like that. I run back in a rush and shower at the house before Matt and I drive over to Mom and Dad's. I refuse to be the reason we are late.

"My boys!" Mom yells from the back door. We pull into the driveway and I jump out of the car in a panic.

"What's wrong? Is dad ok?" I yell as I run to her, panic filling me.

She opens her arms wide for a hug. "Yes, of course! I'm just glad you're both here." She holds her right arm out to bring Matt into our hug. I step back to make room and watch them together. Mom is small, petite, only 5'2". It is comical to watch her hug any of us. Emily is the shortest of us at 5'6" but the rest of us are over 6', even Dad. All of us took after Dad with our broad frames which explains why we all excelled in sports, Jake and I in football, Matt, and Emily in soccer.

"Breakfast is on the table. Make you a plate", she says as we walk into the house. I go to the kitchen and pour a cup of coffee.

"I actually have to run, ma. Just wanted to stop by and see Dad. Evelyn

said she'd be here at 9 to help you get Dad to his treatment." My eyes cut to Matt. He didn't mention this earlier.

"If it's too much for her, I'm sure Bryan can go with us," Dad interrupts. I nod and Dad continues, "I worry about her lifting too much when she's here. She should be resting. Your mother went on bed rest when she was six months pregnant with each of you."

"That's probably because you two make giant babies, Dad," Matt snickers.

I step into the office to handle some things I need to get to Lynn today and I jump up when the doorbell rings. What is wrong with me? I walk into the living room to see a very pregnant Evelyn has arrived, just as Matt said she would.

"Dad, I'd like to take you to your treatment today, if that's ok."

"Do you know where it is?"

"No, but I'm sure it won't be hard to find...Jessamine is only so big."

Mom and Dad watch me with furrowed eyebrows but stay silent. Evelyn breaks the silence. "We need to go to the hospital for his treatment. Dr. Smith doesn't have another office."

"And Rebecca's his only nurse." My mom adds.

Ah, everyone's behavior makes more sense now. I can do this. I can see her. It wasn't too awkward the last time. This is for Dad. She even told me to spend the time I still had with him.

"Is that a problem?" I ask, turning towards Dad. "For you, I mean?" His opinion is the only one that matters right now.

"Just don't start shit. She's been good to me."

"I don't plan on it, Dad...but if you think it's best for me to wait here, I'll do that."

"Come help me up, son. Let's go or we will be late."

I help Dad out of his chair and into the passenger seat of Mom's Ford Explorer. I start the car to keep it cool and turn back to help Mom and Evelyn, but Mom is locking the front door and coming my way. I open the door for her and help her into the back seat. After adjusting the driver's seat to accommodate my height, I drive to the hospital reminiscing with my dad as we pass town landmarks.

As I pull up to the outpatient center, I watch Rebecca step outside with a wheelchair and open the passenger door for my dad. "Good morning, Art! How are you feeling today?"

“Oh, I’m just fine, dear. Glad my son didn’t kill me on the way over.” He laughs, and she looks up at me smiling, her honey eyes bouncing with laughter.

“Well Art, out of everyone, I’d trust him the most,” she replies as she pulls Dad’s blanket from the floorboard and passes it to my mom, who is standing on the sidewalk beside the wheelchair.

She’d trust me the most, huh? Interesting.

She leans into the front seat and hands me a yellow slip of paper. Her expression turns somber. “Set this on your dash and park in the east lot, space 146.” Before I can respond, the passenger door closes, and she is pushing Dad into the hospital.

146. I drum my hands on the steering wheel. Why did it have to be 146? A text message pulls me out of my frozen daze, and I pull into the parking space before reading it.

**Mom: We are on the second floor. Dr. Jones will meet you at the elevator.**

**Bryan: Got it**

Just as Mom said, a doctor is waiting for me when I exit the elevator. I recognize him from the Attic the other night, “Dr. Jones, I presume?”

“Yes, Mr. Kelley. It’s nice to meet you.” He steps toward me to shake my hand. I follow as he leads me onto the oncology floor to a room called Studio D. I step into the door behind him. The room smells like home, peaceful, happy, warm vanilla and sunshine, like my Rebecca. The walls have huge windows, and the furniture is actual furniture, not a hospital bed or chair in sight. My eyes follow her beautiful voice to the opposite end of the room, where Dad sits in a recliner chair.

She glances at me quickly over her shoulder, “Glad you found us ok. Lottie went to talk to Dr. Smith. You can take a seat anywhere. Go ahead and get comfortable. You’ll be here for a while.”

I sit on the couch and silently watch her as she meticulously cleans Dad’s port and floats around the room, gathering what she needs. I can tell she loves her job. I can see it in her eyes and hear it in her voice. The love on her face is evident as she listens to my dad, her head tilted to the side in concentration. I open my laptop to attempt to work while I am here, but every time she moves, I can’t help but watch her. With each step she takes around the room, her hips sway gracefully and hold my attention.

“You better not let her catch you checking her out,” Dad whispers to me when Rebecca steps out of the room.

Before I can reply, the door opens and Mom, Rebecca, and another doctor step inside. He doesn't look that much older than me. Is he even qualified to be a doctor? I am immediately cognizant and defensive of his movements around Rebecca. Mom sits beside me on the couch and introduces me to Dr. Smith, my dad's oncologist. I stand, shake his hand, and exchange pleasantries. I watch Rebecca checking the bag hanging next to Dad and notice Dr. Smith watching me watch her. His mouth rises in a smirk. A streak of protectiveness flows through me. Back off, dude. She was mine first. I have no right to feel this way and have no idea what their connection is but damn, I'd love to put this dude in his place.

“Here ya go, Lottie.” Rebecca approaches the couch with a basket and hands my mom some cross-stitching and a bottle of water. I look up when she says my name and hands me an energy drink. “Unicorn, right?” I nod. She remembers my favorite energy drink.

Rebecca, Dr. Jones, and Dr. Smith come in and out of the room throughout the treatment to check on Dad. After sitting for three hours, I step out of the room and take a walk down the long hallway to stretch my legs. When I get back, Mom does the same. I settle back on the couch and am checking emails on my phone when Dad calls my name.

“What's up? Do you need something?”

“Come sit beside me,” he says and motions to the seat Rebecca was using earlier.

I sat in the chair and reach for his hand. “Bryan, I want you to be happy.”

I exhale hard. “I am happy, Dad. I'm glad I can be here with you.”

He shakes his head. “No, I mean truly happy.” He turns toward me again. “I learned a hard lesson a long time ago. I'm hoping I can teach it to you before you learn it the hard way.” I nod and Dad continues. “You were three, Jake was two, and your mom was pregnant with the twins. I was working long hours and came home exhausted every day. Soon I was coming home every day angry. You and Jake were fighting. The house wasn't clean. The bills weren't paid. Dinner wasn't cooked. It was a lot on your mom, and I was expecting her to take care of all the family. She was put on bed rest by the doctor because of the stress. And your mother, being who she is, felt bad about it. I take the blame for her feeling that way. I added more problems to



her than I should have. All I wanted was for us to be happy, but I actually made her, and ultimately myself, miserable. So, I had to figure it out. I stepped back from working so much and let the managers manage my staff. I signed you and Jake up for football to help get your energy out. Mom and I worked together to get the bills paid and set up on auto-draft. I had the time to take Mom to her appointments. We even made time to go on a date every once in a while.” He smiles at the memory, his blue eyes mirroring mine. “My point is happiness isn’t because you don’t have any problems. Happiness is because you learn how to deal with them.” He pauses, and we watch Rebecca and Mom walk in together, arms around each other. Those eyes, I get lost in those eyes. I must be smiling because Dad pokes the dimple in my cheek like he did when I was a kid. Laughing, he whispers, “Figure out the problem that’s stopping you and deal with it, son.”

“What’s so funny over here?” Rebecca asks as they approach. I stand from her seat and return to the couch, laughing and shaking my head.

“Oh, just giving my son some fatherly advice.”

“We all need your sage advice, Art,” Rebecca laughs, and my heart pounds as our eyes lock.

I didn’t notice Dr. Smith’s arrival until he places his hands on her shoulders and her back immediately stiffens. “I agree with Rebecca”.

She stands from the seat and steps toward me, sitting on the arm of the couch beside me. I got you, baby girl. I watch Dr. Smith as he follows her movements with his eyes and glare when his eyes meet mine. I lean forward, placing my arms on my knees. Back off, man. Dr. Smith turns his attention to my dad as he finishes his treatment, and they wrap up the session.

I am driving everyone home, acting on autopilot as my mind continues spiraling. She didn’t like him touching her, that was clear. But does he do that a lot? Did I misread her? Do I still know her well enough to read her? Are the two of them together? She came to my side when she had the rest of the room. That had to mean something. She wouldn’t have if they were together. Better question, why was I on defense immediately? I haven’t seen her in years, spoken to her even longer. She could be happily married for all I know. Who am I kidding? I know she’s not. And since when is Dad so observant and philosophical? What’s this problem he thinks is stopping my happiness?

That’s easy, the problem is me.

# Chapter 14

Rebecca



Generally speaking, most of my life fits into one of two categories, either everything is just peachy-keen and piecing together nicely or crumbling like a pie crust without butter. But these last few weeks, they don't fall into either. Mr. Kelley hasn't responded well to treatments. It breaks my heart to see him getting weaker every day and even harder to see the toll it's taking on Lottie. I haven't spoken with Bryan again, even though I'm at his parent's house daily. The siblings added me to their group chat. I can understand Evelyn being in the chat. She is practically an extension of Matt at this point, but me? That doesn't make sense.

**Emily: Hiya! I think Mom needs a break. Any ideas?**

**Jake: She isn't going to take a break. She won't even let us help Dad to bed.**

**Emily: My point exactly! Have you seen how tired she is though?**

**Evelyn: I can come sit with Art if you think that will help.**

**Emily: I think it might! Can you meet me over there tonight?**

**@Bryan can you come too?**

**Matt: Why him?**

**Emily: bc he's the fav, duh.**



**other than me of course**

**Jake: I'll ask her to come to dinner tomorrow**

**Matt: can you leave the fling of the week at home this time?**

**Jake: OMG she wasn't a fling!**

**Bryan: @Rebecca Do you have any suggestions to help us convince Mom to take a break and let us help?**

**Matt: grab some coconut pie on the way over, butter her up some**

**Rebecca: Is she letting any of you sit with him? Is she going to the store or anything?**

**Emily: Not that I've seen.**

**Jake: Me either**

**Matt: Nope**

**Bryan: Not while I'm there working during the day**

**Rebecca: It's really hard for one person to be a primary caregiver, especially since his side effects are progressively getting worse. I would get her talking, see if she'll admit that and then offer a solution. I'll be there after my shift. Let me know how I can help.**



When I pull into the Kelley's driveway after work, I'm surprised to see Bryan is on the porch alone. I put the car in park and begin gathering my things. My car door opens, and a surprised yelp escapes my lips. I cover my mouth, feeling slightly embarrassed but all that melts away when my eyes meet Bryan's and he smiles down at me, leaning down from the roof of my car.

"Hey Ace, let me grab that for you."

Now at eye level and only inches away, my heart is racing. *Citrus and cedarwood*. I am at a loss for words. I just watch him reach into my car, unfasten my seat belt, and take the bag and dessert plate from the seat beside me. Straightening to his full height again, he sets everything on the hood of the car before leaning down again. "Anything else you need?" I must be in shock because I can't form words and slowly shake my head "No" Stepping out of the car, Bryan closes the door behind me and I lock the car, following him to the side door. We are moving in slow-motion, savoring these quiet moments together. This closeness is magnetizing. I place my hand on his back and reach around him to pull the door open. Before he steps into the house, I can't help but extend my fingers to feel the muscles along his back through his shirt. He looks at me and leans slightly into my hand. I flex my

fingers, turning my nails toward his skin slightly. The playfulness in his eyes turning to molten lava at the contrast in touch.

“Becca! You’re here!” Emily yells as she comes down the stairs and interrupts our stare off.

Jake and Matt stand in the kitchen when Bryan and I enter. “Didn’t she say she was coming after work tonight?”

“Who cares? She brought cake, man,” Matt whispers in a hushed but stressed voice. *These boys*. Some things never change.

I stand at the entrance to the kitchen watching Emily and her brothers organize the platters along the counter. I feel Bryan’s warmth beside me, and he nudges my shoulder playfully when I look up at him. The moment our eyes connect, I smile at him. What I would do to reach out and run my fingers through the shadow of a beard on his handsome face, I clasp my hands behind my back and rock toe to heel on my feet. I watch as he trails his eyes from my hair to my face, holding my eye contact. The smile lines around his eyes, fading slightly as his eyes continue and pause at my mouth and again as his eyes lower down my body. My mouth goes dry when his smile turns into a smirk and his eyes meet mine again. Damn, that dimple makes me swoon. Noticing movement in the kitchen, I turn to see Bryan’s siblings, yes, all three of them, standing in the kitchen watching us check each other out. “That’s not creepy at all...” I roll my eyes and walk into the living room as they all laugh.

I stay in the living room with Art and Evelyn for the rest of the night. All the kids are in the kitchen with Charlotte, hopefully convincing her to take a break and allow someone to help. Art is very restless tonight and Evelyn, and I are taking turns calming him. I take requests on the piano from both of them while his IV runs and once his medication is done; I teach Evelyn how to disconnect the line and change the covering on Art’s port. I return to the piano and play softly while Evelyn sits on the floor reading a book aloud. Once Art is softly snoring, I cover him with a blanket and help Evelyn from the floor. “How far along are you?” I ask.

Evelyn rubs her round belly and smiles. “Seven months.”

We sit on the couch and chat quietly about her pregnancy and how she is feeling. I am surprised to learn that she is married, and her husband is deployed. “Oh, don’t laugh, but I honestly thought you are with Matt,” I confess.

She smiles and nods knowingly. “Matt and I have been friends since I

moved here in middle school. Not only was I the new kid in this small-town, but I was heavy for my age, too.”

“Trust me, I know all about how friendly kids are to the fat kids.” I laugh and jiggle my belly to stress my meaning.

“It was my second day at a new school when Matt just came up to me at lunch and said, ‘Hi, I’m Matthew, but you can call me Matty. I’m now your best friend.’ and well, it stuck.”

“Yep, that sounds like Matt.” I say with a chuckle.

She nods towards the kitchen behind me. “So how long are you and Bryan going to keep this dance going?” I shake my head and look away. Is it that obvious? How do I answer that? Is there anything going on with us? How can there be? He’s only been back for a month, and this is temporary. It’s been too long. Too much has changed.

“We have history,” I whisper, rubbing my sweating palms along my thighs. “It’s complicated.” Evelyn reaches for my hands and gives them a gentle squeeze in understanding.

“Becca, can you come with me, please?” Bryan asks from behind me. Standing from the couch, I let go of Evelyn’s hand, grab my things, and follow Bryan out the side door. How long was he standing there? Did he hear what I said to Evelyn? Why am I worried about it? I’m an adult and none of it was a lie.

He opens the tailgate of his dad’s old truck and motions for me to take a seat. I hop up and watch him pace back and forth a few times. He stops a few steps away from me and turns his face to the sky. His eyes are closed, and his hands are behind his head. He looks so stressed. “Mom agreed to help at the school a few days a week and do something fun on the weekends. We each are going to take a day, so she has at least four days.”

“That’s great,” my voice cracks, barely above a whisper. “What can I do?”

Bryan turns toward me quickly, shaking his head, and reaches for my hands in my lap. I let him hold my hands and watch as he gently runs his thumb over mine. “You’ve already done so much for us, Bec. I don’t know how I’ll ever thank you.”

“There’re no thanks needed, Bryan. I would do it anyway.” Oh...this man. How does he not know that I will do anything for him?

“Yeah. I know,” he chuckles and tilts my face up toward his, using his thumb. “That’s because you, my beautiful Becca, are amazing.” He moves

his hand to cradle my cheek, and I lean into his touch, closing my eyes. It feels so nice, so right to be held by him like this. He hums in pleasure as he uses his other hand to move my hair behind my shoulder and caress the side of my neck gently. I inhale sharply at his touch, but immediately relax into him. *Citrus and cedarwood*. This feels so natural for us.

I open my eyes to find his piercing blue irises lovingly watching me. Hesitantly, I reach out and grab a fistful of his shirt. I tug gently and close my eyes, hoping he feels this magnetic pull between us, too. Not a second passes before Bryan's lips are on mine. His pillowy lips gently moved across mine and he glides his tongue on my bottom lip, asking me to open for him, as he always had and I always did. My hands find their way over his firm chest to his hair, and I tangle my fingers in the blonde strands above his neck, pulling him to me. He wraps his hands around my hips and lifts me from the tailgate up to him. Wrapping my legs around his waist, I moan in our kiss.

Our tongues explore and taste, discovering each other again, but nothing has changed. Still my Bry. All thoughts leave my mind and his hands on my body light me up like fireworks in a darkened sky. His hands move to my ass and take a firm grip on me. I tremble under his touch. For the first time in a long time, I feel wanted...needed...safe. This kiss is a collision. Ten long years of pain, love, resentment, passion, and bitterness all unfurling in that moment. I slide my hands from his neck to his face and softly kiss him before pulling away. He leans his forehead on mine, our chests heaving in unison. I wiggle in his arms, and he puts me down softly, but still holds me close. I feel him watching me as I slide my hands down his chest and around his torso, giving him a tight hug. After one more deep breath, I step back. *Citrus and cedarwood*. Bryan's hands slide up my back and down my arms until we are holding hands. Whoa, that escalated quickly.

“Come to dinner with me tomorrow.”

“I don't know Bryan, who all is coming?”

He shakes his head. “Just us.”

I release his hands and take a step towards my car. “As friends?” Let's see if he remembers.

Bryan matches my step with a knowing smirk. “Would you like it to not be as friends?”

I smile playfully and shrug my shoulders in response. He does, he remembers. His wide smile makes my heart skip a beat, and he reaches for my hand again. “Ok,” I watch as he circles his thumb on my hand. “Rebecca,

will you go on a dinner date with me tomorrow?”

I take a deep breath, meet his hopeful eyes, and smile wickedly. “Dinner is a bit much. Lunch would be better, I think.” I can barely hold in my laugh. This is the same scene that played out when we were thirteen and he asked me on our first date.

I watch as he turns his handsome face to the sky, laughing loudly. “You’re going to make me fight for you all over again, aren’t you?” He pulls my hand to his lips and kisses my palm.

“I’ll meet you here at 12:30. See ya tomorrow, Bry.”

# Chapter 15

Bryan



I wake up with a new, determined attitude. Excited to get the day started and to see Becca soon, I fill my morning with mindless chores around the house. Evelyn and Matt walk through the back door as I am mopping the kitchen.

“What are you doing, man?”

“I’ve been here for a while now. I thought I’d pitch in with the cleaning.”

Evelyn laughs. “The cleaner will be here Thursday. If you’re too messy, I can call them and ask them to come more frequently.” She carries her bag to the table and lays out pink, white, and purple paint samples.

“Yeah, let’s do that. Obviously, my older brother thinks I live in a pigpen.”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that,” I huff. “I was just doing something constructive and thought I’d help. I didn’t realize you had a cleaner come in.”

“Of course, I do. Why did you choose to clean instead of work?”

I run my hand through my hair. “I can’t stop thinking about her. Work would just make it worse at this point.”

“Where are you taking her to lunch?” Evelyn asks me as she holds the paint swatches against some fabric.

I laugh nervously. “How did you know we were going to lunch?” I ask, leaning on the other side of the table.

Evelyn smiles but won’t look up at me. I turn to Matt for an answer and



he just shrugs. “Keys to the jeep are on the hook. I thought you could use wheels while you’re here.”

“Fine, don’t tell me. Thanks, man, I appreciate it. I’m gonna go get ready.”

After a quick shower, I finish getting ready and head to Mom’s house. I step into the house, but no one is around. Walking out the back door, I don’t see anyone in the yard either. I go back to the Jeep and pull out my phone to call Mom. Shit, why is my phone off? I hold down the power button and impatiently drum my fingers on the center console. A series of tones immediately flood in. Three missed calls, Mom, the hospital, and Rebecca. Checking nothing else, I dial Mom’s number. No answer. I dial Emily, no answer. I dial Jake since he should be with Dad. No answer. I put the Jeep in reverse and head towards the hospital before dialing Rebecca’s number.

“Hey Bryan, we’ve been trying to reach you.” Her voice sounds so small, almost defeated.

“What’s wrong?”

“Can you meet me at the hospital?”

“Tell me what’s wrong,” I snap.

“Just get here,” she snaps into the phone and hangs up.

Shit. Shit. Shit. I run every light and stop sign on my way to the hospital. I jump out as soon as the car is in park, running to the entrance. Jenny is standing at the reception desk, watching me approach. Before I can turn to go down the main hallway, she steps in front of me to block my path. I am seething. *You’re literally a foot shorter than me, woman. Do you really think I couldn’t move you? Especially right now.*

She points her finger up towards my face with anger written all over her features. “Let me make myself crystal clear here, Bryan. If you plan on coming back into her life, you better start healing some wounds and put the damn sledgehammer away.” Her eyes fill with tears as she continues, “She can’t take another heartbreak. She isn’t over the last one.” *The last one?* Before I can ask questions, Jenny slaps my chest, and I look down to see a visitor sticker where her hand hit me. *Déjà vu.* I nod and step around her, making my way to the elevator.

When the elevator doors open, Rebecca is standing there waiting for me. I freeze and take her in, all of her beauty on display. Her hair hangs halfway down her back in soft curls, and she is wearing a yellow sundress. We both are wearing similar outfits to what we wore on our first date, *cheesy of us.*

She was in a yellow dress, and I wore a blue button-down dress shirt and khakis. The buzzing of the elevator door breaks my focus, and I step off before the doors close again. Rebecca rushes toward me and hugs me. I wrap my arms around her and lean down to place a kiss on the top of her head. “What happened?” I whisper into her hair as I stroke her back.

She leans back to meet my gaze. “Jake called me when I was on my way to meet you. He said your dad tripped this morning over a rug and bumped his shoulder. They thought nothing of it, but a few hours later, your dad said he couldn’t feel his arm anymore. When I got there, we loaded your dad into my car and brought him here.” She takes a ragged breath, and a tear slips from her eye. I catch it with my thumb as she continues, “Jake said he’s been talking about the past all morning, but the stories never really made sense. I think he was hallucinating.”

I tighten my arms around her, leaning my chin on her head and closing my eyes. I love having her in my arms. We stand there holding each other until Mom calls out, “Oh Bryan, you’re here!” Becca pulls away quickly, wiping her eyes, and rushes off, avoiding eye contact with Mom. I watch as Dr. Smith reaches for her before she enters Dad’s room. I smile when she passes right by him without pause.

“Hey Mom, you ok?” I ask, pulling her into a side hug. She nods, and I give a soft smile to Emily, who wraps her arm in mine as we walk toward Dad’s room.

It is strange seeing Dad looking so helpless lying there. Becca is standing at the computer, typing. She shifts her gaze to mine when I walk into the room. We are like magnets. Evelyn is standing on the windowsill and Jake is sitting in the chair with his head in his hands. I place my hand on his shoulder, and he stands, catching me off-guard, and we stumble back as we hug. Through quiet sobs, Jake cries, “I’m so sorry, man. I don’t know what happened. I’m so sorry.” I look at Dad as I squeeze my brother, consoling him. He isn’t one to show emotion like this and we aren’t the hugging family, well the men aren’t.

“It’s gonna be ok, Jake. You did all you could.”

He chuckles, “Yeah, I called your girl.” *My girl.*

Our eyes meet across the room. “Well, she is amazing.”

Once Jake’s breathing evens out, he takes a step back and asks everyone if they want anything from downstairs. He needs a break from all this.

I turn to Evelyn. “You good?” I ask and gesture for her to take the open

seat.

“Yes,” she moves to sit and answers shyly. “I’ve never seen him like that.”

I lean on the windowsill beside the chair as we talk. “I can’t say I have much, either.”

Whispering, she asks, “Bryan, should I be here?”

Mom interrupts, “Of course you can be here. You have every right to be here. Just as much as anyone else.” She takes a step toward the chair, and I move to the end of the bed to make room in the cramped space. Mom holds Evelyn’s hand in hers and smiles down at her. “Evie, you have been a part of this family since Matty declared you his best friend.”

“Yeah, you’re stuck with us,” Matt calls as he walks into the room with Starbucks drinks for everyone.

Everyone laughs, and then Emily suggests, “Let’s go to the lounge to talk and let Dad get some rest.”

Evelyn, Matt, and Emily head out of the room. I give Dad a kiss on the forehead, then promise Mom I will be back soon. I step toward Rebecca, placing her Starbucks tea on the counter in front of her. “Will you be here when I get back?” I ask.

She turns toward me and hesitates. “I am working on getting someone to cover my shift in the ED tonight. If I can’t get it covered, I’ll be here until about 6.” I nod and look at the floor. “Thanks for the tea. You always know when I need it.”

I smile, “Gotta take care of my girl.” Taking her by the shoulders, I pull her to me and place a kiss on top of her head before heading to the lounge. *My girl. My beautiful girl. My sunshine. My Becca.*

I step into the lounge and freeze. The table is littered with maps and floor plans. Closing the door behind me, I take a seat and listen as Matt continues talking. “I can ask Becca to do a safety check on the houses to see which would be best for Dad, but I think it’s going to be the second one. It’s a single-story bungalow with large doorways, so if he needs a walker or wheelchair, it won’t be a problem.”

“A wheelchair?” Emily asks, “Don’t kill him off already.”

“God, Em, don’t be so dramatic! A wheelchair is not a death sentence. It’s inevitable. The bungalow is done, just needs furniture moved in.”

“It has to be safe for Dad,” Jake adds.

“Bry, could you ask Rebecca to do a safety check on the house for us?”

Matt asks.

“Yeah, of course, but I don’t know what’s going on.”

Matt takes a deep, calming breath. Emily pops up, flipping her red ponytail towards her twin. “Essentially, Matt bought the houses on his street and has been renovating all of them for us.”

“For us?” I clarify.

“One for each of us,” Jake adds.

I take a step towards the table to look at the map and floor plans. “I started it when you invested in my company,” Matt adds.

We spend the next two hours talking about each of the houses and deciding together, which would be the best for Mom and Dad. We know they will not willingly move their things. Emily is responsible for furnishing and designing their bungalow, as well as the basic household items for the other houses. The plan is for us to move in by the end of the week. We all say our goodbyes, with plans to meet up for breakfast tomorrow. Before heading out, I wrap Matt in a hug. “I’m proud of you, Matty.”

I return to Dad’s room and convince Mom to go home and get some rest, promising to call her with any changes. I scroll through the TV channels until Dad wakes up asking for water. We sit together and finish a crossword puzzle until he falls back to sleep. I’m moving to Jessamine Beach. I need to call Lynn and have a moving company pack up my house and ship everything here. So many thoughts flood my mind that I can’t think about just one thing. Just after 7 pm, the door opens, and Rebecca walks inside with her arms full. I jump up to help her with the bags. “Hey Ace.”

She won’t meet my eyes and steps around me into the room. “How is he?” she asks before typing something on the computer in the corner.

“He seems to be ok. He woke up for a while, and I could get him to eat some soup. We did a crossword and then he went back to sleep about an hour ago.” I study her expression. She furrows her brows as she reads something on the screen. She has changed from her sundress to yoga pants that hug her curves perfectly and a cut-off hoodie. Her hair is still curled but pulled back into a ponytail. Our eyes lock over the computer screen for just a second before she looks away.

“I stopped by Matt’s place and got you a change of clothes and toiletries. Your laptop and chargers are in the back of the bag.”

I need her to look at me. I need to know if she feels this between us, too. I need her. She has been the only constant since I got here. She has been my

only constant since I was a teenager. Guess I'll put all my cards on the table. "Thank you, Rebecca," I say confidently, knowing it would break the silent treatment she is giving me. And just like that, her head snaps up and holds my gaze. Years ago, she asked me to never use her full name, saying "It's too formal of a name for someone that loves me." *Unconditionally. I love you unconditionally.*

I feel her eyes watching me as I open the takeout bags she brought. "What did you bring? It smells amazing." I pull out the containers of sushi and hibachi and place them on the tray table, arranging a setting for each of us.

Becca types something quickly and turns off the computer. "Oh, I got this for you. I'm gonna head out."

"Are you working tonight?"

"No. Call me if anything changes or if you have questions. Good night." She turns to head to the door.

I jump up from my seat and grab her hand to stop her. "Please stay, Becca." I hesitate and hold her gaze, pleading. "I need you to stay, please."

Without a word, Becca closes the door and steps back into the room.

# Chapter 16

## Rebecca



I sit on the stool across from Bryan. “I really appreciate you grabbing dinner and my things. How much do I owe you?”

“Don’t insult me, Bryan.” I roll my eyes. The audacity of this man.

“That’s never my intention, but I was hoping to buy *you* lunch today, not the other way around.”

We finish our meal in silence. A part of me wants to be uncomfortable here with him, but it is the opposite. I am drawn to him, and that scares me. I clear the tray and take the trash to the employee lounge to prevent any smells. Grabbing a few drinks, I return to Art’s room but hesitate at the door when I see Bryan on the phone. He looks up and waves me in when he sees me waiting.

“Em, that’s fine. I trust your judgment.” I move to Art’s side to check his vitals and feel Bryan’s eyes watching me. “Why are you asking me this? Didn’t you go to school for interior design?” He pauses and laughs softly. “Brown...blue... yellow... just nothing nautical or country. Yeah, ok, thanks Em.” Before I can ask him what was going on, Dr. Jones and Dr. Smith come into the room. It’s none of my business, anyway.

“Hi Mr. Kelley, is Mrs. Kelley here?” Dr. Smith asks, looking around the room, pausing when he sees me.

“No sir, I sent her home to get some rest.”

Dr. Smith nods and steps beside the computer to read what Dr. Jones is

reviewing. “Everything looks good. If this continues, we can discharge him tomorrow.”

Bryan doesn’t respond or ask questions, simply nods. “Are you planning on changing his treatments, Dr. Smith?” I ask for him.

He takes a step closer to me, leaning into my side slightly, and gently touches my forearm. Dipping his nose into my hair, he says, “Rebecca, you aren’t on the clock. I told you to call me Dean. I’ll see you tomorrow night,” he whispers into my ear before leaving the room.

I roll my eyes and widen my eyes to Dr. Jones, who just laughs. What was that? “To answer your question, there will be no change to the treatment plan right now. I’ll be around all night. Page me if something comes up, sunshine.”

I nod my head and avoid the glare coming from Bryan. Once Dr. Jones leaves the room, I busy myself with pulling in a more comfortable chair and getting bedding together for Bryan. When there is nothing else I can do, I curl up in the chair beside Art and open the coloring pages app on my phone.

“What’s happening tomorrow night?”

I smile but keep my attention on my screen. I knew he wouldn’t let it go. “How long have you been sitting on that question?”

“Don’t be coy, Becca. Answer the question.”

My phone pings in my hand.

**Andrew: Robbie said you’re still at the hospital with Art. Do you need me to bring anything?**

**Rebecca: No thanks, I ran home earlier and got some things**

**Andrew: What about Bryan? Does he need anything?**

**Rebecca: I got his things too**

**Andrew: Of course you did. Y’all need to lock yourselves in a room and work all this out.**

**Rebecca: Work all what out?**

**Andrew: +Robbie**

**@Robbie Do you agree there is major sexual tension between B2?**

**Rebecca: B2?**

**Andrew: That’s the code name Jenny gave you and Bryan**

**Rebecca: Why do you need a code name?**

**Robbie: Hunny, they’ve been talking about you two lovebirds for days now...**

**Andrew: I can feel the sexual tension from here and I haven't even been in the same room.**

**Rebecca: whatever. It's not sexual tension**

**Andrew: Sure, Ace**

**Robbie: I saw the way he watched Dean whisper into your ear earlier, he def wants to fuck you**

**Rebecca: OMG stop!**

I reach to grab a water bottle, completely distracted by my phone. I look up to find Bryan staring at me and we locked eyes. He stands, slowly walks toward me, and pulls me to my feet gently. I place my hands on his arms and his hands land just above my hips. I am lost in the depths of his eyes. As clear and pure as a river, but fierce as the waves of the ocean. He smiles down at me, and I can feel my heart pounding in my ears. Memories of what used to be flood my mind, when I felt loved and adored by him. He used to make me feel like I was the only person in the world. I can't keep doing this to myself. He isn't here for me. When I try to pull away slowly, Bryan's hands tighten on my hips, pulling me closer and his hands moving behind my back. Then he leans in and kisses me.

At that moment, I forget all the doubts, all the questions, worries. I forget everything. His kiss is soft and gentle. I close my eyes, wrap my arms around his neck, and begin floating on air. Bryan turns us around and sits in my chair, pulling me into his lap, and breaks our kiss. I try to pull myself up to actually sit on the arm of the chair, not wanting him to feel all of my weight. When he realizes what I am doing, he glares at me and pulls me onto his thigh, holding me there. I tent my legs over his and I place my feet on the other arm of the chair. He rests his left hand near my ankles and uses his right to rub my back softly, playing with the ends of my ponytail. I curl into him, and we sit silently, listening to the rhythmic beeping of machines until we both fall asleep.



# Chapter 17

Bryan



A sunbeam shines through the curtain of my dad's hospital room when I wake up. I instinctively tighten my arms around Rebecca as she sleeps soundly against my chest. I look toward Dad, who is still sleeping. I smile, savoring the feeling of her warm body against mine. She is so beautiful. Damn, I miss her with me like this.

I am twirling her hair around my finger gently when she shifts in my lap. She peaks her eyes open. "Good morning", she says in a soft voice. I smile and reluctantly release my hold as she stretches her legs and arms out. "Did he wake up during the night?" she asks me as she settles back against my chest.

"If he did, I didn't hear him." I run my fingertips along her forehead, moving the escape pieces of hair away from her face. "You know, you didn't have to stay last night."

She nods, and I watch her cuddle under my arm more with a Cheshire cat grin. "I wanted to."

Wow, this girl. I lean down until we are cheek to cheek, turning slightly. I kiss the small space just behind her ear. "I'm really glad you did."

Reluctantly, I sit up when there is a knock at the door. Becca attempts to stand, but I hold her in my lap as Evelyn and Matt step into the room.

"Morning jerks," Matt chuckles as he hands us each a Starbucks cup and stands by Dad's bed on the other side of the room.

“How can you be so charming but so annoying at the same time?” Becca asks him pointedly while blowing into her cup.

Matt shrugs, “It’s a gift,” and we all laugh, including dad.

Before Becca can try to stand again, I wrap my arm around her waist and whisper into her ear, “I know you want to get up and check on my dad, but I need you to give me a minute and hand me a blanket discreetly when you move.” She turns to me with a puzzled look, her eyes searching mine. I watch her expression as I shift her in my lap slightly, allowing her to feel my hard length press against her ass.

Becca stays in my lap as I ask, but turns back to join in on the conversation with my dad. I sit silently and halfway listen, lost in my own thoughts. She had no response. No smile. No lust in her eyes. Not even a slight blush, no acknowledgment of my physical response to her.

“You should have seen him,” Evelyn laugh pulls my attention to the conversation between her and Dad “Matty had every piece laid out on the floor and was trying to match each screw to each hole. I wish I could have gotten a picture of him!”

“When was this?”

“This morning,” Matt answers with a half-smile.

“What was it you were building? Did you cut the wood right?”

“Dad, I’m not about to build a baby crib.” Becca immediately stiffens. Shit. “It was delivered yesterday, and I wanted to see it in the room,” Matt explains, pulling his phone out of his pocket. “Here’s a picture of it after. I think the walnut really compliments the yellow walls,” he continues, passing his phone to Dad.

I gently pick Becca up from my lap, place her in my seat. I can feel her eyes on me, but I won’t look at her. I can’t. Not right now. We aren’t ready to talk about this. I’m not ready to talk about this. I walk out of the room without saying a word. That should have been me. I should have been putting a crib together. Walking down the hall, I count the tiles along the wall. Thirteen...fourteen... fifteen. My phone vibrates in my pocket.

**Emily: Where are you? I need a ride to breakfast.**

**Bryan: I’m walking outside**

**Emily: Becca’s looking for you**

I sit on the bench and put my head in my hands. Shit. I can’t fuck this up. It hasn’t even started and I’m already walking away.

“Can I join you?”

Without looking up, I slide to one side of the bench and make room for my mom to sit beside me. Her small hand runs over the center of my back. “Evelyn said you walked out when Matt was talking about the crib,” she hesitates. “It’s been ten years, Bryan. It’s time you talk about it.”

“I know Mom,” I mutter.

“Don’t be so down.” She pulls my arm from my knee to see my face. “Dad said you and Rebecca spent a lot of time together last night.”

I groan and reply with more anger than I intend to, “None of this makes any sense. She just feels so right. Everything with her feels right. I know the miscarriage or the breakup still shouldn’t upset me. But I walked out when things got hard and I ruined it, ruined us. I know it’s been ten years, but it still affects me, Mom!” I stand abruptly and start walking toward the parking lot, fuming in anger. Shit. I’m just fucking everything up today.

**Bryan: I’m not coming to breakfast. I’ll catch you later**

**Jake: Are you coming out with us tonight?**

**Bryan: Not likely**

**Matt: party pooper**

**Bryan: @Matt will you apologize to Evelyn for me? I wasn’t trying to be rude**

**Matt: don’t sweat it**

**Emily: Why are we apologizing to Evie?**

**Bryan: because I’m a dumbass**

**Jake: could’ve told you that**

I freeze in the middle of the sidewalk and turn around to see Mom sitting where I left her, watching me concerned. Shit, I can’t dump my issues on her. I’m in this god-forsaken town to support her and Dad. I run to her and wrap her in my arms. “I’m sorry, Mom. I shouldn’t have freaked out on you.”

“You don’t need to apologize to me,” she whispers and squeezes me hard before pulling away.

“You didn’t ruin anything, Bryan.”

“Yeah, I did, ma.”

“How so?”

I run my hands through my hair and turn my face to the sky. Just get it out. Just say it. Own it. “I’ve known since I was thirteen who I wanted to marry. You know I saved every penny I made to buy an engagement ring,

and I knew I was going to propose before we left for school. We had everything all figured out. We knew where we were going to school, we knew where we would live, and I knew how I would support us. The pregnancy threw a hiccup in those plans, but I still knew where we would live and how I would support us. Nothing changed for me.” I plop onto the bench, feeling defeated. “Everything just happened so fast. One day, we were happy and planning a future together and the next, we were fighting about where we were going to live.” My chest tightens and I can feel tears burning my cheeks as I kick at the ground. “Mom, she gave up her dream of going to Proctor to have *my* babies. I made her feel like I would not be there for her and that she couldn’t count on me.” Meeting her eyes, I see the confusion. “She turned down her spot because I forgot to send my deferment letter to NYU. She thought she was going to have to do it alone.”

“Hunny, I don’t”

“No Mom!” I cut her off before she can argue with me. “I fucked this up. I fucked up her life, her dreams.” Mom stands beside me and strokes my back as I steady my breathing. “She miscarried on the day she found out I didn’t send my deferment letter,” I whisper.

“That was a coincidence.”

“In one day, I lost my babies and the girl I’ve always loved. I fucked up. I caused stress. I am the reason she didn’t go to Proctor. I am the reason she lost the twins. I am the reason she didn’t move to New York. I’m the common denominator. The worst part is I was so ashamed and hurt that I didn’t even fight for her when she told me to leave without her.”

“Oh honey, have you been carrying this weight by yourself all these years?”

I shrug. “I saw a therapist after college, but I can’t change the truth, Mom.”

“Have you talked to Rebecca about any of this?”

“No, I lost that privilege when I left.”

Mom gives me her knowing smile. “Maybe you’ll have the opportunity before you head home.” *Doubtful.*

I stand and loop Mom’s arm into the hook of mine. “Let’s go see Dad.” How would I tell her any of this? She’s moved on, that’s apparent.

# Chapter 18

## Rebecca



The door opens and Matt and Evelyn walk into the room. “Morning jerks,” he says as he hands me a tea from Starbucks. It amazes me how attentive the men in this family are...how does he remember my tea order?

“How can you be so charming but so annoying at the same time?” I jokingly ask.

Matt shrugs, “It’s a gift.” Of the Kelley kids, Matt is the most arrogant, but not negatively, in a super confident but annoying way. Art begins to move slightly in the bed, and I realize he woke up when they came into the room. Slightly embarrassed I am still sitting in Bryan’s lap, I shift to stand, but Bryan wraps his arm around my waist, holding me to him. I spent the night in his arms in this ridiculously uncomfortable chair, but that was the best sleep I have had in years.

Still lost in the memories of last night, Bryan pulls me closer and whispers, “I know you want to get up and check on my dad, but I need you to give me a minute and hand me a blanket discreetly when you move.” I quickly turn to him, confused. *Discreet?* I see nothing in his eyes that gives away his meaning, but he moves me in his lap until I can feel his hard dick press against me. I turn to listen to Evelyn and Matt. That is just a physical reaction. This isn’t because he’s attracted to me. He’s dealing with a lot right now...this has nothing to do with me.

I sip my tea and watch as Evelyn and Matt detail their morning to Art,

“Dad, I’m not about to build a baby crib.” *What?* I freeze in place as I listen, steadying my breath. “It was delivered yesterday, and I wanted to see it in the room.” No. Not now. I can’t hear this right now. “Here’s a picture of it after. I think the walnut really compliments the yellow walls,” he continues, passing his phone to Art.

*Babies. Room 146. Miscarriage.* I feel my heart pounding in my ears and panic fills me. *Proctor. New York.* Before I can control the anxiety, Bryan stands, lifting me with him and places me in the chair. Tears sting my eyes as I watch him step out the door. *Bryan. My Bryan. Walking away. Again.*

The room falls silent. I can feel three pairs of eyes watching me. “Rebecca,” Evelyn says softly, “I’m so sorry, that was so insensitive of us. Please forgive me.”

I walk to the other side of the room and hug her where she sits in the chair. Pulling back, I hold on to her hands. “No ma’am. Don’t you dare apologize. This is an exciting time for you, and you have every right to enjoy it. I’m excited to hear about it.” I look up at Matt and visibly see him relax when our eyes meet. The door opens, and I turn quickly, hoping it is Bryan.

“Good morning Mr. Kelley! Woah, I’m sorry I didn’t realize you had guests.” Claire says as she bounces into the room.

“It’s ok, we can step out,” Matt says as he gestures to Evelyn. They say their goodbyes to Art and step into the hall.

After updating Claire about Mr. Kelley’s progress, she measures his vital signs. She explains his discharge instructions, and I speak up, clarifying a few things for him. I wish I could do more for him. I can see how overwhelmed he is listening to her. I reach for his hand. “I’ll help any way I can, Art.”

He smiles, “Thank you, dear.”

“Oh my god, why can’t he just answer his phone!” We all turn to see Emily walking into the room typing on her phone, obviously annoyed.

“Anyway, I’ll be back in a few hours with your signed discharge paperwork and your medications. I’m just waiting for Dr. Smith to come in.” Claire explains before she leaves the room.

“Good morning, Daddy, how are you today?” I watch Emily circle the bed and lean over to hug Art.

“I’m doing ok, honey. Don’t you worry your pretty little head about me.”

“Hey Bec, I’m glad you’re here. Can we talk for a sec?”

“Yeah, of course. Let’s go to the lounge. Art, I’ll bring you back a coffee.”

I follow Emily out of the room and use my ID to open the employee lounge. They designed the room for the staff to have a relaxing place in the event they had to stay the night. The plus gray sectional has blankets folded along the back. The kitchen is always stocked with drinks and snacks. I walk into the kitchen and start making coffee. “Want a bagel, Em?”

“No, I’m good. I’m meeting my brothers for breakfast.” Emily replies as she frantically types on her phone.

I place the bagel into the toaster. “What did you want to talk to me about? Coffee?”

“Ah, yes. Thanks. Did Bryan talk to you about the houses?”

I shake my head as I take a seat at the table.

“Ok, so in a nutshell, we’re worried about Mom and Dad. He isn’t safe in that house, and it’s too far away for Matt to really help.” I nod in agreement, but Emily’s phone trills to life.

“Yo,” she answers, placing the phone on speaker. “You’re on speaker and Bec’s here.”

“You’re at the hospital?” Matt asks.

“Yep, in the lounge.”

“No, we’re in the lounge and you definitely aren’t here.”

I laugh, “The employee lounge, Matty. I’ll open the door for you. It’s between 2146 and 2148.”

I prop the lounge door open as Emily continues her question. “Basically, Matt bought all the houses on his street and he’s renovated each of them.”

“Wow! That’s amazing! I didn’t realize Matt was still flipping houses.”

“I guess when he bought the Harrison House, Bryan spotted him with the money, and he grew the business from there. That meant he bought the rest of the street,” she explained as Evelyn and Matt walk into the lounge, closing the door behind them.

“He invested in your company?” I ask, genuinely surprised.

“Sure, why not?”

“That doesn’t matter and isn’t what I want to talk to you about. Matt is giving each of us a house. We are moving in really soon, but we need you.”

My mouth falls open, and I stare at Emily in shock. Matt laughs and pushes my jaw to close it. “How can I help?”

“Could you do a safety check on the houses and tell us which would be best for Dad?” she quickly added, “We think we know which one but want your opinion.”

“He didn’t ask her?” Matt whispers to Emily.

“Looks like he didn’t, dumbass,” Evelyn laughs. “Emily and I went shopping yesterday to buy furnishings for each house, so everyone has the basics.”

“Yeah, of course. I’ll look.”

“Really? You don’t mind?” Matt asks.

Emily pushes his shoulder. “Just because Bryan is an ass doesn’t mean she doesn’t like us.”

I laugh, such typical behavior for these siblings. “I can stop by tonight before my set. Does that work?” Emily nods. I can see the uncertainty on their faces. “It’s ok y’all, nothing has changed.” I stand from the table and begin clearing my breakfast. “I’m actually going to head out and try to find him before I head home.”

“Thanks, Becca,” Matt stands and wraps me in his arms. “I really appreciate all you’ve done for my dad and now for us.”

“It’s no problem, Matty. Could you take this to your dad?” I hand him the coffee I promised Art.

“Yeah, sure thing.”

I give Evelyn and Emily hugs before stepping out of the room and promising to stop by this afternoon. I make my way through the oncology floor, searching for Bryan. After looking around the first floor and ED, I run into my sister at the nursing station.

“You look like hell.”

I laugh, “Gee thanks, sis. It’s been a long night.”

“How’s Art?”

I update Jenny on Art’s issues from yesterday and the plans the kids made for them to move closer to Matt. Jenny stops in the middle of the ED room entrance. “Matt. Matthew Kelley. Matty.” I smile at her shocked expression. “Matty bought four houses for his family?”

“He’s a pretty sentimental guy, Jenny.”

“I never thought I’d see the day.” We step outside and begin walking down the path that leads to the employee parking lot.

“Maybe it is Art’s diagnosis?” I suggest, shrugging.

I am clearing the fog from my sunglasses when I hear his frustrated



voice and I freeze. Jenny turns, reaches for my hand, and we watch each other as we listen.

“I’ve known since I was thirteen who I wanted to marry. You know I saved every penny I made to buy an engagement ring, and I knew I was going to propose before we left for school. We had everything all figured out. We knew where we were going to school, we knew where we would live, and I knew how I would support us. The pregnancy threw a hiccup in those plans, but I still knew where we would live and how I would support us. Nothing changed for me. Everything just happened so fast. One day, we were happy and planning a future together and the next, we were fighting about where we were going to live.” I squeeze Jenny’s hand, tears falling freely. “Mom, she gave up her dream of going to Proctor to have *my* babies. I made her feel like I would not be there for her and that she couldn’t count on me. She turned down her spot because I forgot to send my deferment letter to NYU. She thought she was going to have to do it alone.”

My heart is pounding in my ears. I can no longer see my sister in front of me with my blurred vision.

“Honey...I don’t,”

“No, Mom! I fucked this up. I fucked up her life, her dreams.” Bryan pauses and whispers something we can’t hear.

“That was a coincidence.”

“In one day, I lost my babies and the girl I’ve always loved.” I gasp. Jenny pulls me into a tight hug as we continue to listen. “I fucked up. I caused stress. I am the reason she didn’t go to Proctor.” Anxiety fills me and my head is shaking. This isn’t happening. “I am the reason she lost the twins. I am the reason she didn’t move to New York. I’m the common denominator.”

“Come on, let’s go,” Jenny whispers and she drags me further down the path.

“The worst part is I was so ashamed and hurt that I didn’t even fight for her when she told me to leave without her. I just did it.” I gasp and run toward the parking lot, anxiety and betrayal filling me. *Proctor. New York. Miscarriage. Twins. Bryan.*

# Chapter 19

## Rebecca



The ride home is a blur. Not exactly safe on my part. Jenny tried to convince me to ride with her, but I need to be alone. He didn't fight for me. He didn't fight for us. As soon as I put the car in park, I lean my head back on the headrest and my door opens abruptly. Before I know what is happening, Andrew is pulling me from the car, Robbie behind him, and getting my bag out of the back seat. My feet never touch the ground. My best friend lifts me directly into his arms, and I wrap my legs around his waist. Burying my face in his neck, I let the tears flow. Sam and Jenny are waiting for us at my front door.

"Hey, Ace," Sam's voice is almost too soft to hear. I peek through my fingers to Sam's kind eyes, watching me.

Andrew carries me to my bathroom as Jenny is starting the water for a shower. These two know exactly what I need. Andrew helps me undress and I step into the shower. I inhale the steam from the piping hot water and let go, let go of everything I have held back. *He left me. He left us. He gave up. He gave up on me. Proctor. I was supposed to be a musician, not a nurse. I was supposed to be in New York, not Jessamine. He left me. He gave up on me. He gave up on us.* My mind floods with suppressed memories and my heart aches for what could have been. I cry so hard; I'm only gasping for air. I feel dizzy and my legs tingle. Losing their strength, I fall to the tub floor.

Andrew jumps, pulling the curtain to check on me. He readjusts the

shower curtain and my body as if I am taking a bath. The steady stream of the water pounds on the wall above my head, cascading over my shoulders and my body. I turn toward Andrew when he sits on the floor beside the tub and reaches for my hand. I try to focus on the figure eights he draws on the back of my hand with his fingertips. My chest tightens and I press my palm to the center of my chest. Taking a deep breath, I stare into his dark brown eyes, grounding me to the present. *Focus on right now.*

I reach up, turn off the shower, and stand to dry off. Andrew hands me my plush powder blue towels and robe. Standing behind me at the sink, Andrew brushes my hair and puts it into a long braid. I look at him in the mirror. “Thank you.” Turning me toward him, Andrew wraps his arms around my shoulders and hugs me. I am thankful he doesn’t expect anything more from me. *I can’t do more right now.*

I walk into the kitchen to make some tea. Andrew follows behind me and am surprised to see everyone is still here. Robbie hands me my favorite teacup with an apologetic smile. I watch as Andrew moves beside him and wraps his arm around his back. *I love that they found each other.* They covered the countertop in to-go boxes, and Sam set up a station to make plates for everyone. I continue through the kitchen into the living room and sit beside Jenny on the couch. With my feet wrapped under me, I lean into my sister, and she plays with the end of my braid.

I am thankful no one brings up Bryan or what we overheard. I am not expecting anyone to be here, but I am so glad to be surrounded by my people right now. As we are finishing our plates, I clear the kitchen and turn to the room. “I need to go get ready for tonight.”

“We can reschedule, Bec,” Jenny

“I will call someone else to cover tonight.” Sam agrees.

I turn to find Andrew. Meeting his gaze, he answers the question I am silently asking, “If you need this, then you should do it.”

A sea of worried responses, “But Becca”, come from Robbie, Sam, and Jenny.

“Guys, I’m not canceling. Tonight means too much. We are celebrating the Attic and I want to be there tonight. If it’s too much, I’ll let you know.”

Robbie reaches for my hand, kissing my cheek in goodbye. “I’ll see you tonight, Sunshine.”

Jenny wraps her arms around my middle from behind and places her chin on my shoulder, hugging me. “You don’t have to be so strong right

now.”

Sam wraps both of us in his massive arms. “Just let me know when you’re ready for me to bash his face in.” He’s as cool as a cucumber with his promise. Jenny laughs at his reaction. “What?” he asks, kissing her forehead. “I’ve been waiting a really long time...just saying, I’m ready.” I roll my eyes as I pull from their grasp gently. We say our goodbyes, leaving me and Andrew alone.

We stand in the kitchen, watching each other. *What would I do without him?*

“Do you want to be hugged, heard, or helped?”

“That’s very insightful of you, Mr. Jefferson.” I blow off his question and walk toward my bedroom. Andrew follows me into the room and watches as I go through my dresser, looking for an outfit. I feel him staring at me and look up to confirm he is sitting on my bed watching me.

“What?”

“I said, do you want to be hugged, heard, or helped?”

I huff in defeat, plopping on the edge of the bed beside him. “Well, I’ll never turn down a hug. There isn’t much to say. And there’s nothing you can do to help.”

He stands and moves between my knees. Gently taking my face in his hands, he turns me to look at him. “That’s where you’re wrong, Ace. I think there is a lot to say. You are just afraid to admit it out loud.”

I don’t reply. He’s right. He leans down to kiss my forehead and moves to the desk chair on the other side of the room. I pick imaginary lint from my robe. “I’m just really confused,” I confess. “When I’m with him, I feel like... like I’m home. Everything is so comfortable and peaceful and right. He has remembered so many specifics about me, about us and taken initiative to show me he remembered them.” I look up to see him smiling at me. “When he touches me or kisses me, I feel so cherished, so loved.”

“He still loves you.”

“Then why did he give up?” I whisper. “Where has he been all this time? It took his dad’s terminal diagnosis to bring him back here. And even then, he didn’t know if I would be around.”

Andrew shrugs. “I don’t know Ace. I don’t know Bryan yet and what I know about him, I don’t love.” I laugh at his snide comment. *That is true.* “What I do know is...These last few weeks you’ve been the happiest I’ve ever seen you.”

“I’ve felt the happiest I have felt since we...,” I hesitate, trying not to cry again. “Since we decided to keep the babies and make it work in New York.” My phone pings from my bag and Andrew passes it to me before stepping into my closet.

**Charlotte: Hi honey. We just got home. Dr. Smith said his next medicine isn’t until tomorrow and he would come to do it at 10 am.**

**Rebecca: Glad you got home safely. How’s Art feeling?**

**Charlotte: He’s tired but glad to be in his chair again.**

**Rebecca: I’m sure he missed it! I’ll touch base with Dr. Smith and I’ll see you tomorrow morning.**

**Charlotte: Break a leg tonight. Wish I could be there to see you perform again.**

**Rebecca: Love you**

**Charlotte: I love you, honey, you mean so much to me.**

Shit. I shouldn’t have sent that. I exhale in frustration and Andrew looks at me, confused, as he lays clothes on the bed. I shake my head and my phone vibrates again in my hand. This time it is the group chat with the Kelley kids and Evelyn.

**Jake: @Becca let me know when you’ll be at Matt’s**

**Emily: Dude - that sounded rude**

**Rebecca: I’ll be headed that way in about an hour.**

**Jake: So sorry, please forgive me.**

**Dear Rebecca, Please let me know when you plan on arriving at Matthew’s abode. I would like to speak with you in private.**

The next series of texts are emojis and GIFs laughing at Jake’s silliness, and I can’t help but smile at their craziness. “What’s so funny?” Andrew asks. I passed him my phone while I finish getting dressed. I decide on my black acid wash cut-off jean shorts and a graphic tee, but also grab my purple sundress for tonight’s performance. “They are all a little weird.” He jokes as we lock the front door to leave.

“The best people are,” Bryan says, and I freeze. Andrew instinctively wraps his arm around my shoulder as we turn to face Bryan standing on the sidewalk outside my home.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“You said you were headed to Matt’s. I thought I could give you a ride.” I watch his jaw tighten when Andrew rubs his hand down my arm.

“We’re actually headed there now, together,” Andrew replies. “I don’t believe we’ve officially met yet. It’s nice to meet you, Bryan. I’ve heard a lot about you.” Neither man move to greet each other. Bryan’s blue eyes are like laser beams where Andrew touches my skin.

“Interesting. I have heard nothing about you.” Bryan deadpans.

“Maybe that has something to do with you being gone for ten years,” I reply before pulling from Andrew and walking around Bryan to Andrew’s car.

I hear Andrew chuckle, but don’t catch what he says to Bryan as we walk past. Andrew opens my door, and I slide inside with my eyes on Bryan, still standing on my porch. *Why did he just show up here? How does he know where I live?*

# Chapter 20

Bryan



I pull into the driveway of my new house minutes after leaving Becca's place. I slam my hand on the steering wheel. Fuck. That did not go how I wanted it to. So much for apologizing to her. Who the fuck is this guy?

I walk up to Matt's house and open the door to find everyone sitting at the dinner table. Becca is sitting across from Jake and between that guy and Emily. "Each house is very different, but if you can help us pick the best one for Dad, we can all go there and we don't have to worry about him coming to us," Matt explains.

"Yeah, sure. That's no problem," Becca replies and turns to look at that guy.

"There's something else," Jake adds, and I freeze. We didn't talk about anything else. "We know Dad doesn't have much time and we want him to be as comfortable as possible. It seems that is only with you around. I'd like to hire you as a personal caregiver, just name your price," Evelyn gasps in shock.

"I can't...Jake," Becca says.

"You didn't think to talk to us about this?" My voice booms through the room, startling everyone.

"You don't have to hire me," Becca replies softly.

"I insist."

Emily reaches out and holds Becca's hand. "He told us today he feels

safest with you,” she whispers. I watch for Becca’s reaction. She’s nervous and hesitant.

“What do you think, Andrew?” Matt asks. *Andrew...the dude has a name.*

“I know Becca will make the right choice, and I know I’ll support her any way she needs.” She turns to smile at him. Not exactly intimate, but her smile belongs to me. *What the actual hell is happening to me? Since when am I jealous of strangers? She just spent the entire night wrapped tightly in my arms. That meant something. It has to mean something.*

“I want to stay with him. Is there another bedroom in the house you were thinking of?”

Everyone agrees to tour the houses and stands to file outside. Instead of following them to the bungalow we decided would be the best for Dad, I walk out the back door and down the dock to the shore. Sitting on the wet sand, I tent my arms over my knees and close my eyes. The sun warms my skin as memories flood my thoughts.



## ten years earlier

*The sun was setting over the ocean, casting a golden glow on the sand and water. Becca and I were dancing on the beach, our bodies moving in perfect sync to the music playing from the restaurant patio. The waves crashed gently against the shore, and the sand was warm between our barefoot toes. I held her close and sang softly in her ear. We told our parents yesterday about the babies and our plans to move to New York together. I was so happy, my heart beaming, and couldn’t help the smile that was glued to my face. We danced to our song until the last note played and held hands as we walked to the shoreline. Instinctively, Becca rubbed her small baby bump. I haven’t asked her if I could yet, but I loved watching her do it. The sun was just below the horizon, and the sky was a blend of purple and pink hues. We stood there, wrapped in each other’s arms.*

“Do you still love me even though I’m the size of a whale and will only



get bigger?”

“Bec, stop.” I replied and kneeled on the sand in front of her, holding her hands. “You are the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen. Knowing you’re growing our babies in your body just makes you sexier.” I gave her a sly smile and hesitated before I kissed her growing bump, gently caressing her smooth skin. I hope they take after her. When I stood, I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her. It was a slow kiss, long, tender, and time stood still. “I love you, Becca Cooper, and I always will.”



“Can I join you?” Her melodic voice startles me, pulling me back to the present.

I turn toward her, blinded by the afternoon sun behind her. “Sure.”

I watch as she faces the waves and sits cross-legged in the sand. My mouthwatering at her thighs peeking beneath her shorts. I exhale a heavy breath. “What did you think of the house?” She hasn’t looked at me, likely still upset about earlier today when I stormed out of the hospital room.

“The bungalow will be the best for him, and there’s an extra bedroom that I can stay in.”

“Becca, no one expects you to move in.” I reach for her but pause before my hand touches her skin.

“I know, but I want to do this.” She turns and her eyes meet mine.

I nod and passively run my fingers through the sand under my legs. She is so incredible. After everything I have done, all the pain I have caused her, she still puts my family’s needs above her own.

We sit in silence. “So, Andrew, huh?”

“What about him?”

“How long?”

“We met when I was 20. We went to college together.”

I nod, refusing to look in her direction. Of course, she found someone else. *Fuck, I’m stupid to think I had a chance with her.* “I’m happy you found someone.”

She laughs, “It’s not like that, Bryan.”

“Not like what?”

“What you’re thinking...”

“And what am I thinking, Becca?” I look at her, waiting. *Do I affect her the way she does me?* “Are you with him?”

“Not romantically.”

“Have you ever been with him?”

“We are together a lot,” she smiles. *Her and that smart mouth.*

Ok. I can play too. “Have you kissed him?”

She shrugs, “A time or two.”

“Which is it?”

“What?” she asks, finally meeting my eyes.

“One time or two?” I really try hard not to smile, but I fail miserably.

“Does it really matter?”

“No, not really,” I shrug.

“Bryan, you are so confusing.”

I bump shoulders with her playfully. “I think the word you are looking for is captivating.”

She throws her head back and laughs. I smile and watch her gorgeous face illuminate in the golden sun, and her eyes twinkle with joy. She turns to me, still smiling, “I need to get going. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

I stand and offer my hand to help her up, which she takes. A jolt of electricity runs up my arm when our hands touch. We both pause before I take a step closer, placing a soft kiss on her forehead. Without another word, she turns, and I watch as she walks back to the house.

# Chapter 21

## Rebecca



I sit at the vanity, staring at myself in the mirror. My hair is up in a bun with curled pieces framing my face. My eyes are red, and my skin is blotchy from crying. I press the palm of my hands into my eyes. He really thinks he caused the miscarriage. A soft knock at the door pulls me from my thoughts. Using the mirror in front of me, I watch Jenny and Monica walk into the dressing room of The Attic. Sam expanded his office suite and made this space when I began consistently performing here last year. It made coming straight from the hospital much easier.

“Hey, y’all.”

I lean forward to put more concealer under my eyes. Monica closes the door behind them as Jenny spins me in the chair to face her.

“You don’t have to do this.” I see my pain and fury reflected in my sister’s eyes.

“I know I don’t. I’ll be ok, though.”

“Andrew thinks she will too,” Monica adds, defending me. I turn myself back to the mirror and continue applying my makeup.

“I don’t care what Andrew thinks!” Jenny paces the room. “I care that I saw you lose your shit this morning. I care he stepped back in your life acting like there are no consequences.” Her chest heaves with emotion until she throws her hands up, defeated. “I care that you’ve been the happiest I’ve seen you in ten years and I know it’s because of him.”

“I’ll be ok, Jenny. Don’t worry about me.”

Monica opens the door to a delivery woman with a bouquet of lilies. *I didn’t even hear a knock.* “Expecting something?” Monica practically sings.

Jenny looks at me with panic in her eyes as she opens the card. “To the most beautiful flower in my life. Best of luck tonight. - Dean.”

“Dean?” I ask as she passes me the card. *The most beautiful flower in my life.* “I guess...I should say thank you.” I hesitate before unlocking my phone.

I opened the search party group text and send a picture of the bouquet and card, hoping Dean wouldn’t make this awkward.

**Rebecca: Thank you @Dean for the beautiful flowers!**

**Andrew: Isn’t it bad luck to wish a performer luck on the day of a performance?**

**Dean: Is it? Crap, I’m sorry Rebecca. I hope they brought a smile to your face.**

**Monica: Oh, they definitely got a reaction from our leading lady tonight.**

“Monica!” Jenny and I squeal in unison just as Andrew and Sam come in through the adjoining office laughing.

“Let’s go, Ace,” Andrew says, and I reach for his extended hand.

“Sam, can you put the flowers on the floor? The women’s restroom?” I ask before Andrew pulls me into the hall toward the stage doors.

“Or the trash,” Andrew smirks knowingly.

“It was a gracious gesture...”

“Oh sure, for his mom. But not for someone he is interested in, and absolutely not for you.”

I peeked around the curtain to see the room filled with people. “Any thoughts on why he picked lilies?”

“Because of your last delivery? Unlikely, he knows the meaning behind them if he chose them.”

“I better get out there,” I whisper, gesturing to the stage.

Andrew grabs my shoulders and searches my eyes, looking for any doubt. “Ok, I’ll let you perform tonight, but if you even hesitate at any point, you leave the stage. Do you understand?”

I jerk from his grasp. “You’ll let me? No one *lets* me do anything!” I yell and storm around the curtain. *Asshat.*

“Good evening, Jessamine Beach! How are we on this lovely evening?”

I say directly into the microphone as the crowd settles into seats. I see Robbie at a table in front and center, Andrew joining him from backstage.

“Tonight begins our month-long anniversary party for The Attic! Let’s give it up for Sam and Jenny!” The crowd cheers, whooping, and hollering toward the bar. “Thank you both for creating a safe space for our community and for letting me crash your stage a few times a month!”

Monica joins me on stage, handing me a bottle of water for the microphone. “Okay, guys. Here’s the deal...Tonight is the Becca Cooper show,” I cough on my drink and am surrounded by deafening applause. Over everyone, I can hear Matt and Emily’s voices. I shield my eyes from the overhead lights, searching for their unmistakable features, bright red hair. “Next week starts our themed nights and I expect each of you to show up in your best 90s get up!” Monica continues explaining the month-long events to the audience as I search the familiar faces, seeing none of the Kelley kids. “Alright, let’s start this party, Becca. What do you say?” Monica shouts into the microphone before passing it and the crowd cheers as she exits the stage.

The smooth rhythm of Lizzo’s “Good as Hell” fills the room. I sing through the song, being powerful and unapologetically me. Feeling stronger, I continue the set with more women’s power songs. I sing “no tears left to cry” directly to Andrew’s table with sass and play up my mischievous mood. Monica motions for me to go to intermission when I am finishing Kelly’s “favorite kind of high”. “Don’t go anywhere, folks! We’ll take a short intermission and come back with your love song requests. Go grab a drink and your lover!”

I step off the stage and make my way to the bar, saying hello to everyone I pass. Everyone from Jessamine is here tonight. I hear Bryan’s laugh before I see him. Following the sound, I continue to the other side of the room and find the Kelley kids and Evelyn sitting at a large table, playing cards, and laughing together.

“Becca!” Emily shouts as I step closer.

My eyes meet Bryan’s, holding me captive. I am a prisoner to his deep blues. Evelyn wraps her arms around me and Matt steps between us, breaking my line of sight. I am thanking everyone for coming and asking their opinion of the set so far when Bryan’s hand is on the small of my back. I could never forget his touch. I slowly turn toward him, and he places a glass of water in my hand. “Thought you could use some hydration, Ace.” He watches me as I guzzle the glass down. Performing always makes me so thirsty even though I

drink while on stage.

He reaches for the empty water glass and replaces it with a red sangria. I smile. “How did you know?”

He places his hands in his pockets and rocks on his feet. Finally, he admits, “I overheard someone order ‘The Ace’. I asked Sam about it since it wasn’t on the menu, and he reluctantly told me that you loved it so much, he just named it after you.”

I take another sip of my drink and hum in satisfaction, turning toward the main part of the room. *Oh, this man is stealing my heart all over again.* He hesitates beside me. *Is he nervous?* I stand on my tippy toes, kiss his cheek, and whisper in his ear, “Thanks, Bry.”

The second set is a more intimate setting. We reduce the stage lights to a single spotlight on a black stool with the cowhide area rug and microphone stand. The crowd cheers as I take the stage, Monica directly behind me. I take a seat on the stool, adjusting my purple sundress on my lap as I cross my legs.

“Who was here for our fundraiser night?” Monica asks and hands all over the room go into the air. “Great, so you remember the app that we used? We are using that again. There’s no requirement for a donation, but anything raised tonight will go to the beautiful Becca Cooper!”

Shaking my head, I watch Monica jump from the stage and return to her table with Andrew and Robbie. The first request comes through for approval, and I begin singing. I love taking requests, but I really love dedications. A few songs in a dedication comes through the app and I ask the couple to join me on stage to dance. I pull my stool to the side to make room for their slow dance, center stage, and watch them sway together as I sing. After that first dedication, the donations and dedications come flooding in. “Tonight, all donations raised will go to the amazing employees here at The Attic,” I say into the microphone, and the audience cheers. While I am talking, a dedication comes through for my approval.

Request/Dedication To Ace

From Bryan

Song Perfect

Artist Ed Sheeran

I search the crowd, seeing the table where he is sitting with his family, but I can’t make out who is there. Why would he do this? Did he do this? What if it was Matt? What if it’s a joke? Andrew is also monitoring the

requests and dedications and sees my hesitation. Meeting his gaze, he twirls his fingers in the air, suggesting for me to wrap it up.

“Okay, y’all. The last dedication tonight is special. Jenny and Sam, can you join me on stage, please?” The crowd cheers as they make their way through the tables. I untie and hold their aprons as they hold each other close. I close my eyes as I sing the song my sister requested. *Just get through the song. Just sing the words.* Thankful the song is almost over, I stand and sit the aprons on the stool, preparing to leave the stage quickly. I sing out the last few words, but when I open my eyes, the bluest of blue eyes greet me. *No. Not now. I can’t do this. I just can’t.* I turn and rush out through the stage door as Sam takes the microphone and thanks everyone for coming tonight.

*Blue eyes. Bryan. Proctor. New York. Room 146. Babies. Miscarriage. Blue eyes. Bryan.*

# Chapter 22

## Bryan



I stand at the side of the stage, amazed as I watch her sing our song and sway to the music. I need her in my arms. This is the first time I have heard the song and didn't get to dance with her. I am not hurt that Jenny and Sam are dancing to it, but I want her to at least look at me. Did she get my dedication? Did she ignore it?

As soon as the song ends, she looks directly at me before turning and running out the door. I jump onto the stage and follow her. She turns into a room, and we collide when I try to enter as she is exiting. "Bryan, you shouldn't be here," she mutters over her shoulder as she continues down the hall and out the employee door.

"Why shouldn't I be?" I jog to catch up to her now that we are outside. "Becca...talk to me."

"I have nothing to say, Bryan. Just go home. I'll see you tomorrow."

She sounds sad. It is obvious I am the reason for the change in her mood. I should just listen to her and go home. She told me to go home. *No. I'm not leaving this time. I'm not making that mistake again.* I continued walking with her toward her house. It is only a couple of blocks, but it feels like a marathon with the silent tension between us.

We stop at the steps to her door, and she turns to look at me for the first time since we left the club. Her brown eyes, even darker with the dimly lit street, are full of emotion and turmoil. I can't pull my eyes from her beautiful



face but stop myself when I reach for her. I step toward the door and, like magnets; she follows. She enters a code onto the keypad “1025”. *My birthday. Her door code is my birthday.* I hold back my smile and hold the door open to allow her to step inside, prepared to say goodnight.

“Would you like to come in?” she whispers, without looking at me.

“Sure.” *Ok. Progress.*

I follow her into her home, locking the door behind us. Her walls are a soft white with black trim and earthy accents. The dark-toned wood floors create a very inviting space, peaceful even. I am walking into the living room, taking in her home, when she asks, “Can I get you anything to drink?”

“Water, please.”

“Sure,” she opens the fridge and pulls out a bottle of water, setting it on the counter. “I’m going to go change. Make yourself comfortable.” I watch her hips sway as she walks down the hallway. If only I could grab her hips and bring her closer to me without fear of pushing her away.

Moving into the kitchen, I start the kettle for tea. She has plants hanging in a bay window and a seat cushion against the frame. It looks like the perfect spot to have morning tea. I am adding the tea bags to the cup when she returns to the kitchen. She has changed from her purple dress to a pair of leggings and an oversized t-shirt. “Hope Chai is ok.”

“Yep, thanks.”

I watch her move around me in the kitchen without looking at me. *Am I making her that uncomfortable?* “I guess I should head out.”

She reaches for my arm. “No, I’m sorry. I just don’t know how to do this.”

I pull her to me and wrap my arms around her, resting my hands on the small of her back. “Do what?”

“This. Us. I don’t know what this is.”

I see the honesty in her eyes. She is opening up to me. *Don’t screw this up.* I lean down and pause before placing a kiss on her forehead, hoping she will meet me halfway. I watch as she wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me to her lips. Like fireworks on the fourth of July, this kiss turns frantic, passionate. I reach for her hips and lift her to me. She wraps her long, sexy legs around my waist, and I groan when the warmth from her pussy presses against my stomach. Her nails dig into my scalp and send need rushing through my veins. She grinds her hips into me. Her lips still pressed to mine.

“Bryan. Bedroom. Now.”

I step through the kitchen and down the hallway she went down earlier. I kick the door open and maneuver through the room, trying not to run into anything. I sit on her bed with her straddling my lap.

She moves to kiss my neck. “Did you miss me?”

“Woman, please. Yes, of course I did.”

“How much?”

Distracted by her lips on my neck and her hands at the hem of my shirt, I can’t formulate an answer.

She pulls back, “Bryan,” stopping until I look at her.

We are both panting from the passion, but I know it can’t go any further, not tonight. I guide her to the bed beside me and stand. “What the hell, Bryan?”

“I just don’t want to rush anything.”

“Rush anything,” she deadpans.

Before I can say anything else, she charges out of the room.

*Damn it.*

I follow her out, “Just wait a damn minute, Bec. Let me explain.”

She stops and turns to me. “Explain what exactly?” She waits for my answer, but I can tell she has more that she wants to say. “Why are you here, Bryan?”

*That’s easy.* “Because I can’t stay away from you. You’re like a magnet. I’m drawn to you, and I want you. I need you.”

She watches me with a confused look. “Then why did you leave? Why did you stay away for so long?”

I sigh and pull my hands through my hair. “You hated me. I ruined everything. You had every reason to hate me.” I feel my hands shake and ball them into fists.

“You left. You moved to New York without me. You moved on. You’re probably married with kids now.” The hurt etched on her face breaks me.

I rush to her, holding her shoulders, and pulling her face to look at me. “There is no one else.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“What, why?”

She pulls from my grasp, “Because look at you! You’ve only gotten hotter. There’s no way you aren’t married or at least engaged.”

I take a steadying breath. “Becca, in case you forgot, I gave my heart to

someone special. And that someone hasn't given it back."

Shaking her head, she mumbles, "I was a nobody."

"That's where you are wrong, Bec. You were never a nobody. Especially not to me."

We stay in the kitchen, staring at each other. I hesitantly take a step towards her, reaching to hold her hands. "A part of me has been missing for a long time and I need it back. I need you back, Becca."

She steps into my arms and curls into me. "I'm so confused." I rub her back and kiss the small spot behind her ear. The last thing I want is for her to be confused about me, about us. I know she's it for me, it just took me a while to know it.

There is a sudden clap behind me, and Becca gasps and jumps from my arms. Andrew and Robbie appear at the door, and Andrew is clapping. "Academy Award Performance, you two!"

"What are you doing here?" Becca asks, with her arms crossed over her chest and stepping in front of me.

"Well, you didn't answer your phone, and I saw you entered the house on the ring with him." Andrew shrugs.

"Just had to make sure our girl was alright," Robbie adds.

"You came here because I came inside?" *What is this guy's angle?*

"No, I *came* here because you came inside, and Becca wasn't answering her phone."

I furrow my brow, not comprehending this train of thought.

"Can I be real?" Andrew asks.

"Please do." *This should be good.*

"You're a flight risk. I don't know you, but I know her," he points to Becca, who is still standing in front of me, leaning into my chest. "And while this is the happiest I've ever seen her, I can't have you breaking her." *She's happy? I make her happy?*

I outstretch my hand. Andrew hesitates, then grasps it for a firm shake. "Thank you."

"Thank you?" Becca asks and turns to meet my eyes.

God, she's adorable. I notice Andrew and Robbie exchange looks, surprised by my response. "Yes, Ace." I raise my hand to cup her cheek. "I'm grateful to him for taking care of you the way I should have all this time. You deserve so much love and happiness, and I'm thankful that he's been able to give that." Becca jumps into my arms, wraps her legs around me, and kisses

me. I hold her tightly, savoring her in my arms.

I gently squeeze her to remind her of the audience we have. She giggles and slides down my body, allowing me to feel every luscious curve of her body. She turns to the guys and gestures for them to join us inside.

I lean back onto the couch as I watch Becca and Robbie get snacks together, chatting away about work. “She’s strong.” Andrew sits across from me but leans toward me as he speaks, “which means she’s always forced to be strong in every situation.”

I nod and watch as he leans back onto the couch and crosses his legs. “Sometimes being strong comes with a burden...She has to be strong all the time. Bryan, she needs someone stronger than her. Someone who values her, makes her feel appreciated, and protected.” He pauses and turns toward the kitchen. “I hate to admit it, but you’re that someone,” he confesses, just as Becca and Robbie walk over with food and drinks. *Hell yeah, I am.*

Becca sits beside me, and I lift my arm as she curls into my side. She turns on some chick flick, but I can’t tear my eyes from her. I pull her hair from her bun and gently scratch her scalp. I move on the couch so she could sit between my legs, leaning on my chest, and I wrap her in my arms. This is my heaven. *Vanilla and lavender.*

I hear snoring from across the room and nudge Becca, pointing to the guys. They are intertwined together on the couch, zonked out. It is late. Becca turns the movie down and turns to straddle my lap. I gently pull her hair to the side. “You’re so beautiful,” I whisper as I hold her hair back. She grabs my face, staring directly into my eyes.

“I need you to be honest with me, Bryan. No more secrets.”

I nod and tangle my hands in her hair as I pull her lips to mine. *She’s here. She wants this. She wants us.* Immediately, she opens for me and our tongues dance. Exploring her body, I slide my hands down her back. Pulling and squeezing as I caress her, wishing this shirt wasn’t blocking me from touching her soft skin.

Her hands move to my chest, and she gently pushes, halting our kiss. “Then I need to tell you something,” she whispers. I freeze. *Oh no.* “I heard you talk to your mom this morning.”

“When did you see me with Mom?”

“Outside on the bench.” She draws circles on my chest. “Did you really mean what you said?”

Her honey eyes make me want to lose myself in her touch. “Every

word.” Her eyes fill with tears and her breath becomes unsteady. “Please don’t cry.” I guide her head to rest on my chest and kiss her forehead. Speaking into her hair, I tighten my hold on her. Now is my chance to explain, to apologize. “I should have put that letter in the mail. I should have stayed with you that night. I should have been there when you needed me. It took me a long time to realize that you needed me.” I breathe in her sweet scent and whisper, “You were always it for me, Becca. I wanted to be what you needed.”

“I did need you,” she breathes, and my body goes rigid. Misconstruing my response as anger, she leans back from me. “No Bryan. You don’t get to make me feel guilty for bringing up things you did. You broke me, Bry.”

I tighten my grip on her thighs, holding her in place. “Becca, I need you to calm down and listen to me.” She watches me. “I take full responsibility for leaving. It’s not an excuse, but I was young, and I didn’t consider how you felt when you saw the letter. I know I caused everything to fall apart. I know I can’t change history, but...”

“Were you going to propose?” she interrupts.

“Yes.” I pause before continuing and see a small smile form, “Dad and Jake helped me plan it for the going away party.”

“And what if I said no?” she challenges with a straight face.

“I would have convinced you otherwise, Ms. Cooper,” she laughs and returns to her place on my chest. I wrap my arms around her, running my fingers along her arm.

We stay there in silence for a few minutes. I love having her in my arms, near me, with me. I can hear her breathing become deeper. “Hey, Bec?”

“Hmmm?” She turns her face toward my neck but doesn’t open her eyes.

“I still have the ring if you’d like to see it,” I whisper.

She shakes her head gently and mutters, “I’ll see it when you ask, and I say yes.”

I hold my breath, unsure if I heard her correctly. *When she says yes? Does she mean that?* I listen to her breathe, steady and deep, as she falls asleep. Eventually, my eyes feel heavy, and I join her, holding her. *This is my heaven. She is my heaven.*

# Chapter 23

## Rebecca



Matt and Evelyn meet me in the driveway of the Kelley's house. I wanted to arrive before Dr. Smith comes to administer the dose. When I called him yesterday to tell him I would handle it, Dr. Smith was adamant he needed to administer the first dose and I could take over from there. He hasn't mentioned my request for leave and I haven't brought up that the hospital has approved it.

"Good morning, Becca!"

"Hey Evelyn, you look so good today. I love this dress!"

"Thanks," Evelyn replies, smiling back at Matt. "My husband is coming home today from deployment and I'm picking him up tonight."

"Oh, that's great. I'm so excited for you!"

Matt grabs my bags from the passenger seat. "So," Matt starts, "I noticed Bryan didn't come home until this morning. I'm assuming you guys are okay, considering you are both alive?"

Evelyn playfully slaps Matt in the chest as we walk up the driveway.

"Yes, Matty, we are alive and well. Thank you for your concern."

"You're not gonna give away anything, are you?"

I make the gesture to zip my lips and walk through the side door. Art is sitting in his usual recliner, reading a book and Charlotte is in the kitchen cooking, per usual.

"Rebecca!" Charlotte exclaims, "It's so good to see you! I'm so glad

you're here. All the kids are coming for brunch today. I hope you will stay."

Matt answers for me, "Yes Mom, she's planning on staying."

I take my nursing bag from Matt and walk over to Art. I am doing vitals and prepping his port for his medicine when the doorbell rings. Evelyn opens the door to Dr. Smith standing on the porch. "Good morning, Dr. Smith," Evelyn answers sweetly. I can't say I blame her. He is quite handsome.

"Evelyn, you're looking well. I heard Mav is coming home this week, right?"

"Yes, I'm actually picking him up tonight!"

Dr. Smith gives her a warm smile and turns toward me and Art in the living room.

"How's my favorite patient doing?"

Art looks up from his book and gives Dr. Smith a kind smile. "Feeling pretty good today, but I'm sure my lovely nurse is the reason for that."

"Yes, I would have to agree," Dr. Smith replies. "Hi, Rebecca." He says with a wink.

"Good morning, Dr. Smith. Art's vitals look stable. I've already flushed his port, and he is ready for his medication." I reply neutrally. I stand and walk to the other side of the room, leaning against the wall as I watch.

"Okay...back to business, I see." *Who does he think he is?* He can't flirt with me, especially in front of a patient. Even more so in front of ~~my father-in-law~~, Art.

Art and Dr. Smith make small talk about sports while the IV begins. Once the medicine has been running for an hour, Dr. Smith finds me in the kitchen with Charlotte.

"It looks like Art will tolerate this medicine very well. Rebecca, can I show you the disconnection and discuss the treatment plan?" I nod and follow him into the living room. Art is asleep in his chair as Dr. Smith quietly explains the treatment plan he has decided on with Dr. Jones.

While he is packing up his supplies, goosebumps run up on my spine and I know he is here. I turn toward the backdoor just as it is opening, and he steps inside. Our eyes immediately meet, and I can't contain my smile. He doesn't break eye contact, as he wishes everyone a good morning in the kitchen and makes his way to me in the living room. He stops directly in front of me. "Good morning, Ms. Cooper." His voice is soft and kind. *Is he hiding that we already saw each other today? Last night was simply amazing. We really needed that time to talk, and he was right when he said we were*

*like magnets.*

“Well, Good Morning Mr. Kelley,” I reply playfully.

Bryan notices Dr. Smith is in the room and wishes him a good morning out of politeness. “Dr. Smith was just showing me the treatment plan for your dad,” I explain and turn toward Art. Bryan steps beside me, placing his firm hand around my waist, and gently pulls me to his side.

“That’s great to hear. Thank you so much for making the drive out here, Dr. Smith,” Bryan says coldly.

Not missing Bryan’s possessiveness, he simply turns to me. “Give me a call if anything changes or you need anything.”

Bryan and I watch as Dr. Smith says his goodbyes and leaves. Still standing in the living room, he leans down and whispers in my ear. “Is he anything I need to worry about?”

I shake my head in response, lift my hand to hold his cheek to mine, “He asked me out a few times, but I always deflected.”

I feel his cheek raise in a smile. “How long has it been?”

“The first day I saw you on the porch was the first time. I was on the phone with him. It’s happened one time since then.”

Bryan leans back with a smirk on his face. “You said no because of me?”

“Don’t let it go to your head, Kelley.”

He leans to press a kiss to my neck, and barely above a whisper says, “It’s definitely going to my head, both of them.” I scoff in reply and pull from his grasp, laughing.

“I enjoy seeing you two together again,” Art says from his chair.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Art.”

“We didn’t mean to wake you, Dad.”

He waves us off. “Help me up son, I need to kiss your mother.”

I smile and watch as Bryan and Art make their way to the kitchen. I follow behind, pulling the IV pole with me. Emily, Matt, and Evelyn are at the table while Jake helps Charlotte bring the food over. We help Art sit at the head of the table, and Charlotte leans in for a kiss. Bryan grasps my hand and pulls me to the last two open chairs. The room grows quiet as we all watch the love birds. “I’m going to miss this,” Art whispers as she pulls away.

Charlotte’s face turned somber. “You’re still here, dear. Let us enjoy today.” Turning toward the table, she motions to all of us watching, “Go on,



make you a plate.”

The men reach for the largest dishes to begin the merry-go-round of passing food. I watch as Bryan dishes eggs on my plate, then his. Grabs a biscuit for me, then him. He hesitates at the sausage patties and looks at me with a raised brow. *Is he purposefully serving me first? How did he remember I prefer bacon over sausage?* I shake my head no and the merry-go-round continues. Once everyone has their plates, the table grows silent as we all eat.

Matt breaks the silence first. “We have something we need to talk about, but first, I need to know.” He says, pointing at me and Bryan with his fork, “You two. What’s going on?”

I laugh and continue eating. I knew he would bring this up again and turn to his brother to answer. Without a glance at me, Bryan simply says, “We’re inevitable.”

*We’re inevitable.*

*Like waves on the sand.*

*Like magnets.*

“I’d have to agree,” Emily pipes in.

“Well said,” Lottie whispers.

Bryan slides his free hand under my sundress, placing it on my thigh, and gives it a gentle squeeze.

“I’ve always considered you my daughter,” Art says in a raspy voice.

I turn to Bryan with tears in my eyes. Hearing how everyone feels after all this time is overwhelming emotionally, but makes me so happy. He reaches up and wipes an escaped tear from my cheek, smiling. *Those blue eyes. He’s home. This is home.*

“Jake?”

Shrugging his shoulders, “Do I really need to say it?” Everyone turns to him, waiting. “She’s always been your *Fidus amor*,” he answers pointedly to Bryan. The brothers share a secret smile and continue eating.

“I’m what? *Fidus amor*?”

“It means true love,” Matt answers.

“In Latin,” Emily adds. “But it’s an unconditional love.”

I turn to Bryan, “Really?”

“Really, that’s what it means, or really, that’s what he thinks?” he asks with a Cheshire smile.

“Both?”

Bryan's silverware clamors to the table. He turns and takes my face in his hands, startling me. "Yes, and Yes. And it's true." He presses his forehead to mine and whispers, "You're my forever, Bec."

I search his eyes for any hesitation but only find adoration. I kiss him softly, not sure what to say.

"Aww cuties," Matt teases. "Now that's sorted, let's talk about the next thing. Mom, Dad, just listen until we are done with all the details, okay?" Charlotte and Art nod and hold hands above the table. Matt takes a deep breath to settle his nerves. "I bought the Harrison house and redid the entire thing last year. I was planning on fixing it up and flipping it, but I couldn't afford rent and a mortgage, so I lived in the house as I renovated it."

"Yes, I remember," Art says.

"I fell in love with it, Dad. I couldn't leave. I poured so much love into it and I couldn't imagine anyone else living there but me."

"It's your form of art, Matty," I explain. I want him to know I see his masterpiece.

"Well, Bryan helped me buy the other houses on the street and I've renovated them, too." Charlotte and Art are both smiling widely, beaming with pride. "I bought them for us," he adds, gesturing to the table.

"I'm not sure," Charlotte hesitates, "that I understand."

Emily places the map and floor plans on the table in front of her parents. Evelyn pulls pictures of each of the homes from her bag as well, and Matt holds them out for Art.

"This one is mine," Emily says.

"This one is Bryan's," Jake says as he points to a picture and the map.

"This last one on this side of the street is Jake's," Emily explains.

"Evelyn, are you taking the last one?" Art asks softly.

"No sir, we were hoping you and Lottie would take it," Evelyn answers. Bryan and I look at each other. Concern etched across his face. The room is so quiet. Everyone is holding their breath, waiting for a reaction.

"For us?" Art asks and turns to his wife with tears in his eyes. "Oh, Lottie, we can finally live at the beach." Charlotte and Art hug and softly cry. Each of us look around the table at each other, silent. *Is this a good thing? They're crying...*

Bryan breaks the silence. "We asked Becca to ensure your bungalow is safe for you, Dad. I finished the ramp to the dock this morning."

"You did all this for me?" Art asks. "All of you?"

“Of course we did, Daddy,” Emily answers, reaching for his hand. “We love you so much and we want to enjoy every day with you.”

“Are you staying in town, then?” Lottie asks, turning to Bryan and then Emily.

“I took a leave from work. I want to be here, with y’all,” Emily answers, holding her mom’s eyes and wiping the tears on her cheeks.

I lock eyes with Bryan. I want to know this too. Bryan doesn’t turn away when he answers, “Yes ma’am, I’m here to stay.” The tears that fall to my cheeks are immediate. *He’s here. He’s staying.*

“So, when do we move in?” Art asks. “Can we hire movers to pack the house up?”

“Actually, Daddy, I already furnished your house with everything. You’ll just want to pack personal items.”

“Emily, what? How? That is too much! You take all of that back. We can pay for movers if we need to.” This is the harshest I’ve ever heard Charlotte speak to any of her children.

Bryan huffs but Jake interrupts, “Non-refundable, I’m afraid.”

The table goes quiet again, waiting for Charlotte to react. “There’s one more thing.” Jake breaks the silence. “Becca will be a live-in caregiver for you. She’s moving into the spare room in the bungalow.” My cheeks redden, and everyone’s eyes are on me. I loop my arm into Bryan’s and use it as a shield to hide my face.

“Oh, sweet Rebecca,” Charlotte hesitates before continuing, “You have been an angel, and we appreciate you more than you’ll ever know.” Bryan smiles down at me and adjusts his arm to wrap me in a side hug. “But I could never ask you to do that.”

I smile. “Well, it’s a good thing you didn’t ask me. Jake did.”

“She’s being stubborn and won’t let me pay her, though,” Jake adds, sticking his tongue out at me like we are kids.

Laughing, I walk to the other side of the table and kneel between Charlotte and Art, taking their hands. I meet Bryan’s gaze across the table, those beautiful blues smiling at me. “You two have done so much for me. You’ve always been there for me. You’ve been like parents when I needed you and showed me what being a family means. You have forgiven me countless times and loved me through my hardest. This is a no-brainer for me.” Art squeezes my hand and Charlotte kisses my cheek as I stand, taking in everyone’s expressions.

*Family, my chosen family. This is my family. This is why everything happened the way it did. This is why I'm a nurse.* This realization sends tears flowing from my eyes as I excuse myself from the table and rush out the front door.

# Chapter 24

Bryan



**M**y heart leaps for joy as I watch Becca talk with my parents. She is my constant. She is my everything. I watch her expression change and panic fills me as I leave the table, running after her when she bolts for the door. I don't know if my face is wet from the rain pouring down or the tears. Fear cripples me. I can't lose her. Not again. I search the porches and when I don't see her in the driveway, I know where she was. I run to the oak tree, our oak tree, and find her standing under the protection of the branches, tracing the initials I carved ages ago.

**BK + BC = <3**

I want to rush to her and wrap her in my arms, but I wait. A small smile touches her lips. "I know why all of it happened."

"What happened?"

She slowly turns to face me, staying an arm's distance away. "I know why we lost the twins," she explains and heaves a heavy sigh. I take a step toward her and loop my arms around her. "I've asked myself 'what if?' for years."

"I have too, Bec. All the damn time." *Fuck.*

"If I would have moved to New York, I would have gone to Proctor."

"I know," I fall to my knees in defeat, still hugging her body, "I am so sorry, Becca. I ruined your dream. It's all my fault," I cry.

She runs her fingers through my hair and pulls the strands on the back of

my head to force me to look up at her. “You’re not connecting the dots here.” She waits and watches me. When I’m not following, she continues. “If I went to Proctor, I would be a musician.” She pauses, swallowing hard. “I wouldn’t be a nurse. I wouldn’t be in Jessamine. I wouldn’t be your dad’s nurse.”

She kneels in front of me in the mud and roots, and my hands fall to my sides. “What are you saying?” *I am so confused.* “That we lost the twins, and we broke up so you could be my dad’s nurse?”

She nods, “Is that crazy?”

“You’re amazing,” I confess. I run my hands through her hair and pull her in to kiss her. This is everything that is good in the world.

The screen door slams and Jake yells into the yard, “Come on, love birds. Dad wants to go see the new place.”

We both smile, our lips still pressed together. I pull her up with me as I stand, “I better go disconnect his IV.” I wrap her hand in mine, and we dash through the rain.



Once Dad is ready to go, we all file out of the house to the cars. I walk Becca to hers and open the door, leaning in to kiss her goodbye. “See you soon, baby girl.” Her smile captivates me. I reluctantly get into the Jeep and drive home.

When I pull into my driveway, Becca is standing outside Jake’s car, watching as he helps Dad. I wait on the porch of Mom and Dad’s bungalow to allow more space for everyone to see the design. Emily and Evelyn did a great job furnishing this place for our parents. It isn’t until I see Mom, Dad, Matt, and Jake walk outside that I enter through the front, looking for my girl. I peek into my parent’s room where Evelyn is unpacking Dad’s bag. “Hey, have you seen Bec?”

Her smile beams, and I know the answer. I turn and walk to the other side of the house, to Becca’s room. Emily is standing in the doorway and I peek around the corner to watch. Becca is standing in the middle of the room, her hands covering her mouth and turning in slow circles. “Does she hate it?” I whisper to Emily. She rolls her eyes and shoves me through the doorway and into the room.

I slowly reach for Becca’s shoulders and squeeze gently, pulling her against my chest. “Penny for your thoughts?”

She places her hands around my neck and I slide mine to her waist as if

we are dancing. “You did all this?”

I shrug, “Emily and Matt did.”

I hear my sister scoff behind me. “Modesty does not become you, brother.”

I pull Becca in for a hug and speak into her hair. “I just told them what to do and paid for it.” I hear Emily laugh as she leaves the room, pulling the door close behind her. This is why I love my sister. She understands privacy. I slide my hands into her hair and guide her face to kiss me. “Did I do ok?”

She laughs with her lips against mine. “Okay? It’s perfect,” she answers, pulling out of my arms to walk into the ensuite. “Thank you, Bry.”

“You’re taking on a lot of work for my family. I just wanted you to be comfortable.”

“I don’t consider it work. This is what you do for your family.” I think my heart just exploded. Intertwining our fingers, she pulls me toward the door. “Come on, I’m sure they’re wondering where we are.”

“I’m pretty sure everyone knows where we are,” I tease, as she pulls me into the kitchen.

The open floor plan allows for my family to be visible despite being spread out throughout the house. Jake and Emily are at the table with Mom and Dad while Matt stands and watches Evelyn on the porch. From here, it looks like she is on the phone and upset.

“We’ve all talked about it and have a schedule of sorts, so we all have time with you,” Emily explains. I pull out a seat for Becca to sit down and lean on the back of her chair.

“We will have family dinner every night and have a schedule for that as well,” Matt adds.

Mom laughs. “You made a schedule? My kids?” She’s not wrong. We aren’t organized enough to do this.

“Gee, thanks for the confidence, Mom,” Jake playfully says and winks at her.

Dad reaches for Becca’s hand across the table and cradles it. “Thank you, my dear.” Becca smiles and simply nods.

“If you hand me your phone, I’ll add the calendar to it, so you know what to expect.” I cough into my hand to cover my accusation. “Mom.”

Soon after, Evelyn and Matt leave to head to the airfield to pick up her husband. Emily and Jake head out, too. Becca and I stay at the bungalow to help my parents get moved in and settled for the night. Dad wants to wake up

to a beach sunrise now that he knows he can. I hold Becca's hand as we say goodnight, lock up their house, and head down the pathway to mine. I open and hold the side door open, welcoming her in.

"Can I get you a drink?"

"No thanks," she says as she pulls out a stool. She pauses when I shake my head "no" giving me a questioning look. She watches me as I grab a beer from the fridge. Stepping directly in front of her, I pin her to the counter with my hips. I take a long sip of my beer and watch as her eyes roam my body. Her cheeks darken when her lustful eyes meet mine, and I smirk as I put my drink on the counter beside us.

Without a word, I wrap her hair in my hands and press my lips to her mouth. She moans against me, opening deep. Her hands roam my chest and mine down her curves. I caress her back, feeling her tight shoulders, and massage lightly as I move down to her waist. I want more. I need more. Wrapping my hands around her hips, she yelps as I pick her up and place her on the counter. Without the height difference and with the new vantage point, I can touch everywhere I want, everywhere I have dreamed about for the past decade. I kneel on the floor to untie and remove her shoes and socks. Our eyes lock as I place a gentle kiss on the inside of each ankle. I run my fingers along the outside of her legs as I stand and land just above her knees.

I slide my hand between the counter and her thick thighs, just below her ass, and squeeze. I drop my mouth to her neck and feel her head tip back as she moans my name. *Yes!* Hearing my name on her lips lights me on fire. I pull her closer to the edge of the counter and she wraps me in her legs. I kiss and gently suck a line from the side of her neck to her earlobe and nibble softly around her stud earring. Releasing her ear with a slight pull, I slowly slide my tongue down her neck to her defined collarbone. Her reaction is immediate. *Always so sensitive.* She whimpers as I kiss and suck along her freckled skin on and around her collarbone, making my way slowly to the center of her neck. My hands support her mid back as she leans further back, and I kiss and lick her sensitive neck to her chin.

Standing, I guide her into a sitting position and place my hands on either side of her face. She looks at me with bright, wide eyes. "This ok?" I whisper. She tries to lean forward to kiss me, but I hold her in place, keeping her eyes captive. "Bec, I need to know you want this."

Holding my gaze, I can't resist those honey eyes when she leans forward again and buries her face into my neck. I close my eyes when she gently



kisses and sucks on my skin. I growl softly, and she hums in approval as she moves from my neck to just in front of my ear. She moves her hands to cup my face as she kisses my ear and I hear her softly whimper, "I do." My dick pulses at her words and my desire takes over.

I pull her into my arms, and she holds on to my shoulders, as I jerk her pants and panties down, and place her gently back on the granite countertop. I hold her eyes as I expect her to stop me. I slowly but firmly slide my palms along her thighs, spread her legs, and drop to my knees. My mouth feels dry seeing the perfect pink skin. I run my nose along her crease and moan loudly, "God, I've missed your sweetness." Still giving her time to stop me, I slowly slip her legs over my shoulders and pull her tight to my face.

When she doesn't object, I devour her like a starving animal, licking, and sucking everywhere. Her hands pulling my hair when I flick her clit with my tongue. Her whole body tense as I tease her. Sucking on her clit, I hum, causing her moans to grow louder. I gently slide one, then two fingers inside.

"Fucking hell. Baby girl, you're soaked," I mutter against her.

"Oh, yes...Bryan," I watch as her lips fall open and she moans loudly as I push her towards an orgasm. Fucking beautiful.

I release my hold on her clit and pull my fingers out. I lean on my heels and lick my fingers. "Ready for more?"

She frantically nods. "Please, Bry. Please, baby. *Please*," she whimpers.

I chuckle. "Ace, you are so gorgeous," I admit as I run my finger along her clit. Spreading her wide, I shove two fingers inside, fluttering them and feeling her walls take a vice-like grip. "Yes, baby girl, that's it." I increase the pace and use my tongue to tease her clit.

She cries out, "No Bryan, please don't stop!" *I wouldn't dream of it, beautiful.* I watch her head fall back. She moans my name over and over again as her body unravels around my fingers.

"Yes baby, just like that," I groan as I replace my fingers with my tongue, swallowing every drop of her until the last ripple of her orgasm passes through her body. I place a gentle kiss on her slit and rock back on my heels, stand, and wrap my arms around her. When her breathing evens, I steady her on the counter and step into the linen closet. I watch her hold on to the edge of the counter, leaning slightly forward with her eyes closed, her cheeks a rosy pink and swollen lips. I quickly wash my hands, run the warm water over the washcloth, and return to gently clean her. She smiles as she watches me. I love caring for her like this.

I scoop her clothes up from the floor, folding her pants and setting them on the counter beside her. I slide her panties on as I carry her to the couch. She holds on like a koala as I reach for a throw blanket and lie on the sectional.

“That was,” she pauses as she unfolds the blanket to cover us.

“Amazing,” I answer for her as she snuggles into my side. I envelope her in a hug, kissing her hair with a grin. *I'll never get enough of you, Bec.* I run my fingers softly across her back with her arms hugging me tightly. It only took a few minutes, and she is fast asleep. I watch her eyes flutter as she dreams and I drift off to sleep, holding her against my chest.

# Chapter 25

## Rebecca



The sun streams through the window, casting a warm glow across the room. We are intertwined on the couch. I fold my hands under my chin, leaning on his chest and watch him sleep. He looks so peaceful, so happy. His eyes flutter open, and he smiles when he sees me.

“Morning, baby.” His morning voice is deep and sexy, sending a warmth to my belly. He brushes a strand of hair from my face and leans up to kiss my nose.

We lay there together, silent, holding each other. I rest my head on his chest and listen to his heartbeat. *This heart used to beat for me.* A tear slips from the corner of my eye. Bryan reaches up and catches it with his finger. “What’s going on, Bec?”

I turn my face into his chest, avoiding him, but when I don’t reply, Bryan sits up and positions me in his lap. Still cradling me, he tries again. “Bec, we said no more secrets.”

I try to stand, but he wraps his arms tighter, preventing me from moving. I try a few times before I huff and cross my arms over my chest. “You can’t control me,” I whisper in an accusatory tone. *I hate that feeling.*

Bryan immediately releases his hold on me, but I don’t move. “Becca,” he hisses, catching my eye, “I don’t want to control you. I want to know what’s going on in that beautiful head of yours.”

I roll my eyes but can’t contain my smile. I move from his lap to the seat

next to him and turn to face him. “It’s silly. I was listening to your heartbeat and was thinking about how it used to beat for me.”

The smile on his face can lit up the night sky. “Baby girl, it never stopped.”

*What? He can’t stay stuff like that.* I stand from the couch and make my way to the kitchen to put on my clothes from yesterday. “That’s not true,” I snap.

“Of course it is, Bec,” he replies, obviously frustrated as he makes his way to where I am standing.

How can that be true? I back away from him slowly. “You left me, Bryan. You left...You! You stayed away. You can’t come back and say that I’ve had your heart this whole time. That’s not fair!”

“Becca, please stop walking away from me.”

I am shocked by how calm he is. I stop walking and plant my feet on the hardwood floor. He slowly walks toward me. “I know I fucked up. I could give you every excuse possible, but it doesn’t change the fact that I left, that I hurt you.” He stops when he is an arm’s distance away. “I want to make it up to you. I want to fix us...fight for us.”

Tears fill my eyes, and I look at the floor, shaking my head. “I’m not going anywhere, Bec.” He takes a hesitant step closer. “You’re it for me. I will spend every minute, every hour of every day trying to show you that...to win you back.”

I snap my neck up to glare at him. “Win me back?!” Before I realize what I was doing, I slap him across the face. “I’m not a prize, Bryan!” With tears flowing down my cheeks, I storm out the door, grabbing my bag before slamming the door behind me. I run to my car and peel out of the driveway but stop at the end of the road. *It’s not safe to drive like this.* I take some deep breaths and roll the windows down. Breathing in the fresh salty air is calming on my drive home. “Perk to small-town USA,” I mutter as I pull up at home less than five minutes later.

After a shower, I make a cup of lavender and honey tea and watch the birds out the window. I cannot believe I actually hit him. I twirl my hair around my finger and eye my phone. *Damn it.* I need to apologize.

I open my text messages and start a separate message with only Bryan.

**Rebecca: I am really sorry I reacted that way. I never should have slapped you. There’s no excuse, I’m sorry.**

**Bryan: I deserved it a long time ago, Ace**

**Rebecca: That doesn't make it ok  
I think we need to slow down, become friends again  
Bryan: Friends again?  
Rebecca: Yes, just friends.  
Bryan: What do you call what we have been?  
Rebecca: Whatever, Bryan, I'll see you later.**

Surely he thinks of me as more than a friend...unless...does he think we're friends-with-benefits?

**Rebecca: Just so we're crystal clear...I'm not interested in a friends-with-benefits arrangement.  
Bryan: Neither am I, Ace. I meant what I said.  
Rebecca: Just friends, Mr. Kelley.  
Bryan: I understand, Ms. Cooper.  
Just so we're crystal clear, you've never been anything less than my everything**

I exhale a long breath that I didn't realize I was holding. *His everything.* I am interrupted from my thoughts by a light knock followed by Jenny entering the room carrying a bunch of bags.

"Hey! What are you doing here?"  
"What? I can't have breakfast with my sister?"  
I roll my eyes and begin unpacking the grocery bags.  
"So...you didn't make it home last night?"

I try so hard not to look at her when I reply, "No, it was late, and my room is all set up over there."

"It was too late to drive five minutes home?" she asks, unsatisfied with my answer. "How is your room set up, but your furniture is here?"

I cook the bacon and eggs to keep my smiling face from my sister. "Bryan had it designed for me."

"Designed for you..." She pauses. "That's...nice of him."  
I shrug and keep my focus on cooking. "Yeah, I guess."  
"Yeah...you... guess..."

"What Jenny? Just ask whatever it is you want to know."

"I want to know what's going on with you," Jenny says, slamming her hands on the countertop. "You've been so busy between work and helping the Kelley's. You've cut every set short at The Attic and run away after each

show. Then you quit your job.”

“I took a leave of absence.”

“Oh, excuse me. You took a ‘leave of absence’. Now you’re moving in with them to be a caregiver to Art, who, if I remember correctly, you’ve had nothing to do with for the last ten years.”

I finish plating our breakfast and slide her plate to her. Purposely not replying, I eat as Jenny watches me. Finally giving in, she sits and begins eating, too. My phone pings with an incoming message.

**Andrew: be there in 3**

“Andrew will be here in a few minutes...” The next message is from the Kelley thread.

**Matt: I want to have a party for Dad tomorrow.**

**Emily: A party?!?**

**Jake: it’s too early for this**

**Emily: Is this like a “welcome to the neighborhood party”?**

**Bryan: Wouldn’t that be a housewarming?**

**Emily: duh.**

**Matt: @Becca @Evelyn you in? Mav can come too!**

**Evelyn: I’ll let you know**

**Rebecca: sure, let me know what to bring**

**Jake: I’ll never turn down your pepperoni dip @Rebecca**

**Matt: Can you make a red velvet cake? It’s Dad’s favorite.**

**Emily: Sausage balls!**

**Rebecca: Pepperoni dip, sausage balls, and red velvet cake. Any other requests...@Evelyn @Bryan**

**Bryan: just you and a promise for a dance**

**Matt: awe shucks! I was going to ask her to be my date...**

**Bryan: ha-ha.**

**Jake: Actually I talked to her already and she’s with me**

**Bryan: I’ll kill you both**

**Emily: omg.**

**Matt: LOL - It’s set then! PARTY TOMORROW NIGHT!**

I smile at this exchange between the Kelley kids. “I feel like this is something I need to do.”

She reaches across the table to take my hand. “Bec, you don’t owe him

anything.”

“I know. Well, I think I know.” I cover my face with my hands as Andrew walks into the room. “I feel like I don’t know who I am anymore. I’m so confused.”

“You are the same amazing person you always have been, Bec.” Andrew doesn’t skip a beat and wraps an arm around my shoulder, kissing my head. “Bryan’s return must have been tough, but he’s attempting to catch your attention...”

“Oh, he’s got my attention. I can’t say no to him.”

“You can’t or you don’t want to?” Jenny asks.

I cover my face to hide my blushing cheeks. I peek through my fingers. “Both?” Jenny laughs and reaches for my hands. “You were with Bryan last night, then?”

“The past few nights,” I admit.

“Do you want to be with him?”

“I’ve only ever wanted him, Jenny.”

“What’s the problem, then?”

“Really?” I whine to my best friend. “Maybe the fact that he ran when things got hard and didn’t come back until his dad was literally dying.”

I watch Jenny and Andrew, waiting for them to agree with me. He even admitted he ran when it got hard. “Did he run, or did he leave because you told him to?”

“Are you defending him, Jenny?”

“No, of course not! But I don’t think he ran from you. I think he didn’t know what to do and was doing what you asked him to do...leave.”

I turn to the window, trying to remember. Did I? Did I ask him to leave? Did I push him away?

“I have a question,” Andrew’s voice pulls me back. “Did he really not come back until now? I can’t imagine him staying away this whole time seeing how his family is...”

“Well, if he did, he never came to see me.”

“Have you asked him?”

I shake my head. I haven’t really asked about much of anything. I wring my hands in my lap. “I told him today we needed to stay just friends. We’re going too fast, and we have too much going on with Art.”

Jenny and Andrew turn to each other and laugh like I told some hilarious joke. “What’s so funny?”

“Ace,” He grabs my shoulders and leans down until we are eye to eye. “How that man watches you? You’re not just friends. You can never be just friends.” He wraps his arms around me and whispers into my hair, “What are you afraid of?”

“I can’t go through losing him again.”

Jenny walks over to us and rubs my back. “I’m not convinced you lost him. You have loved him this whole time, that’s obvious.”

“You’ll never feel ready to do things that scare you, Ace,” Andrew leans back and holds my gaze. “It’s unlikely you will feel ready to love him the way you used to. You are on defense, protecting yourself, I get it. I just do not think it is a leap to love him again when you never stopped.”

I close my eyes and inhale deeply. “Damn it. Why do you always have to make so much sense?”

Laughing, we work together to clean the kitchen and pack my personal items. I decided to keep my place and rent it out for some extra cash. Jenny and I are almost done packing up the pictures from the living room when there is a knock at the door. “I got it,” Andrew calls and runs up the hallway.

“Expecting someone?”

I shake my head and look up to see Andrew walking in with three guys behind him. They are in jeans and a green company shirt, “Packers R Us”. “Ace, this is John,” Andrew says, motioning to the men as I stand. “They’re here to help you finish packing and move what you need to the attic.”

“I’m sorry, what? I didn’t...”

“Yes ma’am, I can see y’all are confused. We received a work order from a ‘Kelley’ to come today.”

“A Kelley?” I cut my eyes to Andrew.

“Is there another name?” Jenny asks, as she stands beside me.

“No, I’m sorry there isn’t. Where should we get started?”

Jenny leads the men into the kitchen and shows them where the access to the attic is located. A Kelley...but which one? I could see Art, Charlotte, Jake, Bryan...hell, I could see any of them doing this. I pull my phone from my back pocket and open our group text.

**Rebecca: John just arrived...who placed this order?**

**Emily: Who’s John?**

**Matt: Did someone order you a stripper? Kinda early in the day for that...freaky, I like it!**

**Emily: You’re an idiot.**



**Jake: Did they deliver something?**

**Rebecca: It wasn't a delivery exactly.**

**Emily: Then what was it?**

I pass my phone to Andrew and wait for his opinion. "Guilty by association?" I shrug and put my phone in my back pocket, not responding or continuing the conversation. We finish packing the living room and continue to the bedroom. Jenny rushes out when Mom calls her, asking for help. Something about her cat getting outside. Who knows? It only takes another hour for us to finish packing everything and for John's team to put it in the attic. Once the men are gone, Andrew and I carry the last two boxes to the car. "Need help to get these over there?"

I laugh, looking at the packed car. It really isn't full, my clothes, which are minimal outside of scrubs, three boxes of decor, toiletries, kitchen items I might need, and my plants. "I think got it," I answer sarcastically.

Andrew wraps his arms around me and squeezes. "I'm proud of you."

I kiss his cheek goodbye and slide into the drivers' seat. Why am I so nervous right now?

# Chapter 26

Bryan



After she left so upset the day before, I spent the greater portion of the day staying busy, distracting myself. Today, I woke up and came to the bungalow to cook breakfast for my parents and, of course, they could tell immediately something's wrong. My parents have always been the best for advice on feelings and shit. Dad has had little to say but listens as Mom and I toss around ideas to show Becca how serious I am about her, about us. I am loading the dishwasher after breakfast when Dad comes and stands beside me.

"Everything ok, Dad?"

"Sure, Sure."

"Where's mom?"

"She hopped in the shower, wanting to get ready for the day while you were still here. Sometimes she acts like I'm a baby and can't be alone."

I laugh under my breath. Sounds like mom. "She's just worried about you, Dad."

"I'm more worried about you."

"Me? Dad, I'm good."

"No, son, you're not good. You haven't been good for a long time."

I dry my hands off and lean against the counter as I watch him make his way to the table. I hesitate before joining him. "Listen to me when I say this. This is from experience and it's a hard lesson to learn." He waits for my nod

before he continues, “The greatest lesson that you struggle with will repeat itself until you learn from it.” He pauses and reaches for my hand across the table. This is new. “This life is a gift and to find true love in this life is the most precious gift. It takes patience and effort to have a strong relationship, but more than anything, it takes communication. Tell her how you feel. Take it from this geezer.”

“I know, Dad,” I say as Mom walks in and joins us at the table with a soft smile. “It’s amazing how one day someone walks into your life, and you don’t know how you carried on without them. She’s been my everything for so long, I don’t remember a time when she wasn’t. Even when I left, I considered her in every decision.

“Really, Bryan?” My mom asks.

“Absolutely Mom.”

“It just doesn’t seem that way from where I sit.”

“I left because she told me to. I have dated no one seriously and even when I tried, I only saw her face or said her name. When I came home to visit, I would find her and build up the courage to talk to her. I never could, but I watched her and loved her from a distance.” I pause, realizing I really was a creeper. “A few years ago, I came home and saw her walking on the pier with some guy. She looked so happy and it hurt so much knowing I wasn’t the one making her that happy. When I got back to New York, I found a new focus on work and did what I could to help her.”

“But how would she know that?” my dad asks.

“I don’t know.”

“What did you do Bryan?”

I hesitate to answer; I don’t want praise. I did it because I wanted to make her life better in some way, even if it was small.

My eyes meet Dad’s, and he nods, “It’s ok, son.”

“I’ve donated to the hospital since she started working there,” I pause, but know my parents are expecting and waiting for the truth. “I paid off her house, then Jenny’s.”

“How did you manage that?”

“Anonymous payments. Jake helped me send it without a trace. Her mom told them some lie about an uncle leaving them a trust fund.”

“How would she know it was you?” Dad asks softly.

“It didn’t matter to me.” I drum my fingers on the table quickly.

“Have you sent her flowers, Bryan?” Mom asks, with tears in her eyes.

I nod and run my sweaty palms down my shorts. "Twice a year."

"Their birthday," Mom whispers.

"And hers," I finish.

I watch Mom and Dad exchange a knowing look, but before I can ask questions, there's a knock on the door and Jake walks into the house. He's responsible for getting Mom and Dad away while we prep for the party. "Have fun today," I tell them and head home to cook.



I just finished getting dressed when Matt walks in. "Smells good in here!"

"Sides are about done and the steaks are marinating for you to pop on the grill when you're ready."

"Thanks for helping me with that."

"No problem, is everything ok with Evelyn?" Earlier, Matt called in a panic, saying Evelyn needed him and he had to go.

He shrugs. "I think so. Man, Mav can be a real prick sometimes. They should be here soon."

We take the food to the covered patio when my doorbell rings. I run through the house to find Andrew standing there. "Hello Bryan, Is Becca here?"

"No, I haven't seen her today," I say and open the door wider for him to enter. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't think so."

I drop the tongs I am carrying on the floor. "You don't think so? What does that mean?"

"It means," he huffs and bends to pick up the utensil, "I've tried calling and texting and I haven't heard from her all day."

Without saying a word, I run out the back door and down the pathway to the bungalow. I hear Andrew running behind me as I step through the back door. "Becca, are you here?" I yell into the house, making my way to her door. "Becca!"

Her door opens before I get to it, and she steps into the small hallway. Wow! I stand frozen by her beauty. She's a Greek goddess in her flowy sage green dress for tonight's dinner.

"What is it, Bryan?" she asks, annoyed. I reach for her, but she looks at my hand and takes a step back.

“I was, I mean, Andrew came to my house looking for you. He said he couldn’t reach you.”

“So, you ran down here to search for me?”

“I just...” *Yes. Yes, I did, woman.*

“We just wanted to make sure you were ok,” Andrew interrupts. “You look stunning!”

I step back and watch as he holds out his hand for her and spins her. *I wish I could do that.* Knowing she is okay, and Andrew is with her, I step out of the bungalow and back to my house to finish setting up. *Do not be jealous of him. They are just friends.*



The look on Mom and Dad’s faces when they get back is priceless and completely worth my afternoon of work. We lead everyone to the table, including some neighbors that my parents have been friends with for a long time. My siblings and I carry platters around the table to serve everyone, starting with Dad. At the front of the line, I get to Becca first. She is sitting at the end of the table with an empty chair on each side of her. “You look beautiful tonight, Bec.”

“Thank you, you still clean up good,” she says, pulling on the lapels of the linen jacket I’m wearing. Our eyes connect, and we both smile, her cheeks slightly blushing.

“Steak, madam?” I ask in a horrible accent.

Her eyes dance with humor, and she nods as I place a steak on her plate. Before I step away, she grabs the plate for the seat to her right and says, “Don’t you want one too?”

I put a steak on the plate she is holding, smiling down at her. “I’ll be right back.”

Once the table is served, I grab a few drinks and go back to my seat beside Becca. “This is for you,” I say as I place a sangria in front of her and lean over to kiss her cheek. I don’t know how to behave, how to be just friends with her, but I want to *try to* honor her wishes.

Conversation with Becca always flows, and we laugh with my family as we reminisce. Going around the table, each of us share our favorite memories together. When it is Becca’s turn, she retells the story of our family trip to the lake sophomore year. On that trip, Matt broke his arm, and I sprained an

ankle with our antics. Becca has the entire table laughing. During her fit of laughter, she places her hand on my thigh, distracting me from the present. Her touch is burning through my clothes in the best way. I am looking at my plate, dreaming, wishing for more, when she squeezes my leg and I turn to her quickly. Once our eyes meet, she whispers, “Babe, it’s your turn.” *Babe*. I smile and place my hand over hers, intertwining our fingers under the table. *Perfect fit*.

I hold her eyes captive. “That’s easy, seventh-grade homecoming.” My brothers laugh with my dad. Becca’s face lights up with joy, and I raise her hand to my lips to kiss her delicate skin.

“What happened?” Evelyn eagerly asks.

Matt puts his arm on the back of Evelyn’s chair, which Maverick doesn’t miss based on his expression. “My brother had been harping over this chick for so long and he convinced us to help him build a float ‘confessing his love’.”

“It wasn’t just a standard homecoming float though, we’re talking glitter signs, spotlights, the whole thing,” Emily adds.

“Don’t forget the life-size cutouts,” Dad laughs. “We redid those like three times, right?”

I nod, laughing. “It was four, actually.”

Evelyn turns to Becca. “I’m guessing you’re the chick?”

Becca turns her gorgeous face to mine, those honey eyes full of spirit. “Yep!” she answers with a ‘pop’ to the ‘p’.

“Isn’t that the sweetest, Mav?” Evelyn asks as she reaches for his arm. He gives her a quick smile and continues eating.

I lean forward to kiss her cheek, but she wraps her arms around my neck, catching me by surprise. “It was the sweetest,” Becca whispers into my ear.

“Only for you, babe, only you.”

Dad stands at his seat with Jake helping him steady on his feet. “I’d like to make a toast,” he starts, “To my children - all of you, whether by birth or relationships.” I reach for Becca’s hand again. “All of my joy, my love, my happiness is because of you. And to my beautiful wife, Lottie, you are my everything. You shine so bright; you make the sun seem dim.” Damn, he is such a romantic, although cheesy. We all clap, whoop, and holler when Mom stands to kiss him.

Dad slowly leads her over to the makeshift dance floor we created out of

pallets, and they sway to the music. I only remember them loving each other like this. This could be his last time dancing with Mom. Tears fill my eyes as I watch them dance in their own little world, a single focus, each other. Her fingers run through the hair above my ear to the back of my head and I turn toward her. “You made tonight so special for them.”

“We all did. Including you, Bec. I don’t know what I’d do without you here.”

“Bry, I’ll always be here for you.” I search her eyes. *Is this over or is this the beginning?* “Don’t overthink this,” she whispers before she pulls me to her and kisses me softly. I rest my forehead on hers and keep my eyes closed, just breathing her in. Committing this to memory.

“Would you like to dance?”

“Only if it’s on the beach.”

With a wide smile on my face, I pull out her chair and we head toward the surf. The sun is setting, casting a golden glow over the waves. I reach for her and spin her toward me. I hold her close as we dance in the surf to the distant music. We are far enough away that we can’t make out the song but feel the rhythm, our rhythm.

“Do you remember our last dance at senior prom?”

“Of course, I do, Bec.”



## ten years earlier

*Becca and I held hands as we stepped into the school’s gymnasium. Walking through the black and gold balloon arches, Becca’s smile lit the room as we took in the decorations. The senior classes decided on a roaring 20s theme and since Becca was on the student council, our outfits reflected that same era. When she first showed me the tux she rented for me, I was concerned I would look like I just stepped off the Titanic with its formal vest, handkerchief square, and tie chains. I was thankful she picked the gray and black tux, so if I was overdressed, it wouldn’t be very noticeable. To my surprise, most everyone was in three-piece suits and flapper-style dresses.*

*I wrapped my arm around Becca’s waist as we walked further into the*

room. “This looks amazing, Ace.”

She turned to face me. “I told you we wouldn’t be overdressed,” she said while straightening my tie.

“I was never worried about you being overdressed.” I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her against my chest and whispered in her ear, “You look delicious in this dress. From this fancy headpiece to your sparkly shoes, no one can take their eyes off of you.”

I felt her face turn into my neck before she said, “They’re looking at you, definitely not me,” and placed a soft kiss on my neck.

I squeezed her tighter in my arms and slowly walked her to the dance floor so I could hold her longer without a teacher yelling at us. How can she not see how stunning she is? We danced through the slow song, holding onto each other tightly. This is my heaven.

About midway through the dance, the principal was on stage and ready to announce prom king and queen. This year, there were three nominees for each, Becca and I being one of them. There have been whispers all week about who was elected, but I don’t really care about being prom king. I only want my beautiful girl in my arms all night long. Becca stood in front of me and leaned into my chest as the announcements started. I wrapped my arms around her shoulders and pulled her close, resting my chin on her head. When Becca saw her name on the nomination paper, she begged for it to be removed. She didn’t admit it, but she was afraid it was a cruel joke, like one you’d see in the movies. In actuality, this entire school admires her.

“This year’s prom king is... Bryan Kelley!” Becca squeezed my arms as I leaned forward to kiss her cheek. As I walked up the steps and accepted my crown, I watched Becca’s smile fall.

“And this year’s prom queen is...Rebecca Cooper!” The entire room clapped and cheered while she was crowned. I pulled her into a hug, lifting and twirling her. The smile on her face was simply magic. When I placed her feet back on the ground, I held her face and kissed her. I didn’t care that we had a spotlight on us or that everyone was watching. I loved her and I wanted her and everyone else to know how happy I was with her. “Okay, you two lovebirds. Time for your first dance.”

I held Becca’s hand as she made her way to the stairs. I didn’t want her tripping over her floor-length dress. Jake was at the bottom of the steps and reached for her when the principal called my name from behind me. He and I spoke briefly, but I turned when laughter erupted from the room. In the



*middle of the dance floor, my little brother held his hand out as he spun Becca out and back into him, placing his hands on her waist and swaying to the music. Becca's black gown twirled and sparkled around her as she glided across the floor. They were both laughing when I jumped off the stage and beeline it for where they were on the dance floor. I wasn't actually mad, but I didn't want anyone else's hands on her except mine, and I knew Jake liked to get a reaction out of me.*

*"Ahem, if you'll excuse me. Would you mind if I danced with MY girlfriend?"*

*"Enjoyed that, did you?" I asked Becca when she was back in my arms. She looked up at me and smiled before resting her head on my chest as we danced. I closed my eyes as I held her and swayed slowly to the music. Having her in my arms was the best feeling. Knowing that she loved me, and we had each other, made moving away from my hometown easier. We were doing it together, starting this next chapter of life together.*

*"Bry?"*

*"Hmm?"*

*"You know how I haven't been feeling great?" Her beautiful face was still resting on my chest, her eyes closed. She told me last week she was going to the doctor because she was always tired and thought she had a bad stomach bug.*

*"I'm pregnant."*

*I stopped dancing, cautious of her hair pinned in curls along her head and the jeweled headpiece she was wearing, and placed both palms on her cheeks to gently turn her to me. Her tearful eyes searched mine. "Did you say pregnant?" I asked softly, barely able to contain my expression. She nodded and tried to pull away from me in shame. I held her in place. "Becca, look at me."*

*She turned her warm brown eyes to mine, filled with desperation and sadness. I've never seen her so vulnerable. I stroked her bottom lip with my thumb and kissed her. I felt her tremble against me. "How are you feeling now?" I asked. I didn't know her thoughts on the pregnancy and didn't want to assume. I only knew I would support her.*

*"Still kinda sick to my stomach, but better."*

*"What else?"*

*"Scared."*

*"Oh baby, don't be scared. We will do this together. Me and you.*

*Promise me, we're in this together."*

*"I promise."*

*I lifted her in my arms and kissed her. "I love you, Becca Cooper."*



I lift my hands from her waist to her face. "Of course I do, babe. It was one of the happiest nights of my life." I lean down and kiss her gently. Without pulling away, I speak against her lips, "You gave me the second-greatest gift."

She leans away, "Second?"

I pull her closer to me, wrapping my arms around her back until she's against me completely. "Your heart was the first, Bec."

She leans on her toes and kisses me with a featherlight touch of her lips. Our kiss deepens, our tongues interweave and urgent. My hands roam down her back, exploring and caressing her skin. This kiss feels like a promise. A promise that everything will be ok, that we will be ok. Long after the music fades and the party lights are gone, we dance and kiss under the stars. "Take me home Bryan."

"Yes, ma'am." I lean down and scoop her into my arms, laughing falling from her smiling lips.

# Chapter 27

## Rebecca



I snuggle into Bryan's neck as he carries me to the alcove of houses. Cedarwood and citrus. He steps onto the pathway, and I slide down his body until I am standing. I run my fingers through his hair and slide them down his jacket, grabbing the lapels. "I really like you in this suit."

"Oh, yeah?" He asks with a cheeky grin. I pull him to me and feel his arms wrap around me.

Humming in satisfaction, I move my lips to his ear. "I'll like it even better when I'm peeling it off." Bryan's arms tighten, and I squeal when he lifts me again, practically running to his back door.

"Drink?" he asks as he places me on the counter.

I nod, and he turns on the kettle.

"So, how's this 'just friends' thing going?" he asks with a wicked grin.

I hop off the counter. "Oh, you think you're funny, do you?" I meet him toe for toe and playfully push his shoulder. He gently grabs my wrists and pulls them over my head. Chills go up my spine and my back arches into him slightly. His lips meet my collarbone, and his tongue runs up my neck slowly until he nibbles on my earlobe.

"Not funny, realistic. I know I can't stay away from you, and I don't want to, not anymore."

"Anymore?"

"I don't want to fight with you."

“Bry, we have to talk about it at some point.”

“And we will. After you’re out of this gorgeous dress and lying in my arms.” His eyes roam over my body as he grasps the fabric at my hips. “You seriously look like a goddess in this.”

“Come on, lover boy,” I say, laughing. “I’m going to need something to sleep in.”

“Coming right up.” I follow him down the hallway and hear him start the shower. I step into his bedroom and immediately feel the comforts of home. The walls are a soft white and his bedroom furniture is cool wood tones with cream and blue bedding. I walk to one of his nightstands and pick up the two picture frames.

The first is a picture of me and Bryan between his parents, all smiling and sun kissed. His parents wanted to take us on one more family vacation before we moved to New York, but Bryan didn’t feel comfortable with me flying pregnant, so we went to the lake. I run my finger over the picture, remembering that weekend. Bryan’s muscular arms wrap around my waist and his chin rests on my shoulder.

“Remember this weekend?” I ask, turning the picture so he can see it.

He hums in my ear and flexes his palm against my stomach. “I remember how sexy you were in that red bikini.”

I huff and roll my eyes as I switch the pictures in my hands. I smile, seeing the Kelley kids in workout clothes. They are flush and look exhausted. “When was this?”

He reaches for the picture and holds it in front of us. “Everyone came up to help me move into my first office space.”

“And who’s this?” I point at the unfamiliar petite blonde woman.

“That’s Lynn,” he answers quickly. *Oh no.* I feel my heart drop.

“Lynn?” *I knew this was too good to be true.*

He throws the picture on the bed and spins me in his arms, so we are face to face. He lifts my chin. “Yes, Lynn. She’s my assistant.”

I nod and pull gently from his grasp. His assistant. I bet she assists with a lot of things.

He steps into the bathroom and holds a towel, washcloth, and an outfit in his hands. “Get out of your head, Bec. There’s nothing there, she’s just an employee.”

I step around him, grab the bundle from his hands, and close the door. *Just an employee.* I step into the shower and relax as the water beats on my

skin. Get out of my head. God, I hate how well he knows me. I turn off the shower and wrap myself in a towel before the bathroom door opens. Using the reflection in the mirror, I watch Bryan lean against the door frame. Holding my gaze, he motions to the counter in front of me. "I ran to the bungalow and grabbed your toiletry bag from your bathroom."

"Thanks." I reach into the bag to find my toothbrush. "Are you planning on standing there and watching me the whole time?"

"Is that a problem?"

I shake my head in disbelief but continue my nighttime routine. "Did you bring any clothes back?" I ask, hoping he grabbed some of my pajamas. I don't want to be embarrassed when his clothes don't fit me.

"A sundress for tomorrow, unless you planned on being a goddess again."

I smile and walk to him, gently pushing him out the doorway so I could close the door and get dressed in private. Instead, he holds my hand to his chest and pulls me with him out of the bathroom. I follow his lead until we stop at the foot of the bed. He clenches his jaw when my hands roam over his chest and slide the jacket over his shoulders before tossing it on the bed.

He leans in, my eyes close and his lips meet mine. He kisses me slowly and holds onto my hips tightly. I run my fingers over the buttons of his shirt, teasing the hem. He pulls back slightly and when his gaze meets mine, I can see the desire filling them.

He cradles my hands and moves my fingers to the buttons of his shirt again. "Open them." I smile up at him and bite my lip as I work my way down his shirt. His shirt falls open, and I freeze, taking in the sight of him. This sexy man...and he has ink now?

I push his shirt over his shoulders and gaze into his deep blue eyes as I run my fingers over the tattoo on his chest. "When did you get this?"

"A long time ago."

"What is?" I begin to ask when I move to see the ink, but immediately tense. On the left side of his chest, just over his heart, are two flowers. *Two lilies*. My eyes fill with tears as I trace the outline of the flowers. Just above the flowers, in a script, is "Fidus Amor." I feel the tears burn my cheeks as they fall. *Fidus Amor. For me. For us.*

Bryan kisses the stream of tears on my cheek. "Let me hold you, Bec." I nod softly, and he guides me to his bed, opening the covers for me to lie down. I drop the towel to the floor before laying down and tucking the sheet

around my neck. When I am settled, I turn to Bryan. He stays standing by the bed, a surprised look on his face?

“Is that a problem?” I ask, echoing his earlier concern, but also very unsure of my bold move. I should not be naked in his bed right now.

He slides his shoes off, flips the light off, and lies on top of the sheet, facing me and leaning on his elbow. “Of course it’s ok,” he whispers as he tucks my hair behind my ear. He presses a kiss to my forehead and lies on his back beside me.

“Why the flowers?” I whisper in the darkness.

“I think you know why.”

I take a deep, uneven breath, willing myself to not cry again. He opens his arms to allow me space, and I move to lie on his chest. The warmth of his body even through the sheet gives me goosebumps. He runs his fingertips along my spine, and I draw small circles on his abs.

“I never blamed you, Bry.” I take a deep breath. “I didn’t lose the babies because I was upset with you. I lost the babies because my body couldn’t handle the pregnancy.” I swipe at my tears and his arm tightens around me.

“I never should have left, or I should have made you come with me.” The defeat in his voice makes my heart physically hurt. “I failed you.”

I jump up from where I am laying and press my chest to his, grabbing his face in my hands. His hands immediately go to my hips to steady me on top of him.

“No. Don’t you dare!” I snap, tears dropping onto his chest, “You did not fail me,” I lean down and kiss him, hard. “You have never failed me,” I whisper, holding our foreheads together. When I realize my bare chest is against his, I quickly return to my spot beside him. Feeling embarrassed that I put my weight on him like that.

“Come back,” he asks softly. “Please Bec. I want to feel your heart against my chest.” I smile and crawl onto him fully, straddling his waist and then sliding my legs between his. “I’ve missed this. I’ve missed you.”

I snuggle my face against the side of his neck, just behind his ear. “I realized something. Actually, Andrew and Jenny made me realize something.”

He runs his fingers through my hair. “What’s that?”

“I told you to leave.” I pause. “You did exactly what I asked you to do.”

“That doesn’t mean it was the right thing, Ace.”

I nod, a cry caught in my throat.

“Why didn’t you come back?” I croak.

“I did. I was just too scared to see you. I guess it was when you came home from school, I saw you around town and watched you. You looked so happy. I didn’t want to disturb that.”

I lean up to see his facial expression. “You turned into my stalker?”

He laughs and moves my hair behind my ears. “Yeah, I guess I did.”

“I wish you would have said something,” I whisper, and rest my head on his shoulder again.

“I have a lot of things I wish I would have done.”

I hug him tight and snuggle into his strong arms as I fall asleep. *I’m safe. I’m safe here. I’m safe with him.*



I hear Bryan talking, “Yeah? Bring her here.” My eyes flicker open, and Bryan tightens his arm around me possessively. “She’s here. Yeah, see you in a few.”

“Everything ok?”

“I hope so. Matt needs our help, though. He’ll be here in a few minutes.”

I sit up quickly, forgetting about my lack of clothing or the blanket. “What’s wrong?”

Bryan shrugs one shoulder and bites his lip as his eyes wander from my eyes to my exposed breasts. I feel my nipples hardened under his gaze.

“Bryan! Answer me!”

“What?” he asks, laughing. “You can’t blame me, Ace. You’re stunning and in my bed.”

“I’ve been in your bed for hours,” I huff and move to the other side of his giant bed to get up. Bryan jumps up and is already standing there when I get to the edge. He takes a step back, allowing me to stand, and wraps his body around me.

“Yes, and I can’t wait to get you back in it,” he says in a husky voice. The front door opens, and he groans in frustration.

“Let me get some clothes on. I’ll be right there.”

“K babe, I don’t know what’s going on, but I know they need nurse Becca.”

I rush into the bathroom and pull on the clothes Bryan set out for me

yesterday. I tie the pants as tightly as I can and roll them onto themselves to make them shorter and fit better. I don't have a bra on, so I leave the oversized shirt unchanged. *This will have to do for now.* I can't believe I thought these would be too small for me.

"Becca!" Matt yells from the living room. I run up the hallway to total chaos, the unmistakable metallic smell of blood permeating my nose. Bryan is on the phone by the back door. Emily is sitting on the floor holding someone's hand, crying, and Matt is pacing the floor.

"What happened?" I ask, looking between Matt and Emily as I make my way to the woman on the couch.

"I don't know. Evie called me a few hours ago, saying she was going for a walk because Maverick was pissed off about something. We talked through it and when she got home, he wasn't there and she went to bed," Emily explains.

Evelyn...this is sweet Evelyn. I move Evelyn to her back and check for a pulse and respiration.

"What do you need, babe?"

"I have a medical kit in my trunk and a first aid kit in my dash."

"Got it."

I turn to Matt. "I need warm water and towels." He nods, and Emily cries harder. "Em, can you sit over there, please?" I ask calmly, not to upset her but to get her out of the way, too. The back door flies open, and Bryan enters with my supplies. He helps me open them quickly, and I pull out what I need, starting with clean gloves.

While I am taking her blood pressure, I watch Jake standing at the back door. His eyes are wide in horror and his fist clenched by his sides. My eyes meet Bryan's, and I nod towards his brother. Jake is the calm one, so to see him like this, I know it is bad.

Matt enters the room with the water and towels. "Ok, what else happened?" I ask Matt.

"I don't know. I was on the patio drinking with Jake when I got a text from her. All it said was 'Help'. Jake and I jumped up and Emily drove us to her place. When we got there, we found her in the kitchen like this...I didn't know where to take her except to see you." I nod and call for Bryan.

"Em, can you get clean clothes for her?" I ask over my shoulder. Emily is curled up on the couch, crying as she watches me.

"Matt, go with her," Bryan adds.



Once they are out of the house, Bryan is by my side. “I need to see where the blood is coming from. Can you wipe her face? Just be as gentle as you can.” We get to work cleaning the dried and fresh blood from her skin. “Do you think her husband did this?” I ask Bryan in a whisper.

Before he can answer, Evelyn moans, “Yes.”

“Evelyn! Are you in any pain?”

She nods.

“Where? Can you tell me where?”

She lifts her arm and touches her left shoulder and chest.

“Don’t touch that joint until I look at it,” I say to Bryan, and he nods in understanding.

“Do I need to call 911?” Jake asks from the kitchen.

“No, please don’t,” Evelyn moans, and Jake turns the corner again, running his hands through his hair. *What is that about?*

“I’m going to check your stomach now, okay?” Evelyn nods. “No pain with palpation,” I mutter.

“That’s good, right?” Bryan asks, and I give him a soft smile. *My sweet man.*

“Evelyn, I need to check your cervix and make sure you’re not in labor, okay?” She nods again. I discreetly lift her skirt and gently move to check her. I watch Bryan as he continues cleaning her face, my gentle giant. “All good.”

After changing gloves again, I move to check her shoulder and can see it is clearly dislocated. “Bry, call Robbie and put it on speaker.”

“Hey Sunshine.”

“Hey—we need your help,” I explain the situation to Robbie and my findings. He agrees she needs to be in a stable environment, and he will meet us at the hospital. I am packing up my supplies when Matt and Emily walk back in with a bag of clothes. “She’s okay, not in labor, and it looks like the baby is fine. Her shoulder is a different story. It’s dislocated, at least.”

“Shit,” Matt yells, making me jump in surprise.

“Dude, calm down,” Bryan stresses to his brother. “You can’t come with us if you’re going to act like that.”

We agree that Bryan, Matt, and I will go to the hospital first. If she is staying, I will switch with Emily and the guys will switch out, too. Matt is convinced her husband will look for her soon and wants her protected, understandably.

As promised, Robbie and Andrew meet us in the ED. I give a report to him as well as the charge nurse and organize security at the door with a list of those who can enter. Luckily, we can set her shoulder without surgery and the OB checked her to confirm the baby is healthy. After a round of IV fluids and some pain medicine, they discharge Evelyn home after only a few hours.

Bryan holds my hand as we walk to the car behind Matt and Evelyn. “You’re pretty amazing, you know that?”

I smile and look up at the early morning sky. “Thanks for your help tonight.”

Bryan pulls my hand slightly to stop my steps and turns me to him. “What is it?” I ask softly. He raises his other hand to my face and tucks some hair behind my ear before cradling my cheek and searching my eyes.

“Thank you.”

“I didn’t really do anything.”

He laughs. “You did everything.” He rubs the pad of his thumb over my cheeks. “You jumped into action without a question. You put Evelyn’s needs tonight before any other thought. I couldn’t have managed without you.”

I lean on my toes to kiss him quickly before leaning back to study his deep blue eyes. He kisses me again and leans our foreheads together. I close my eyes, breathing him in. “You’re welcome.” *Citrus and cedarwood. Home and it terrifies me.*

# Chapter 28

Bryan



The sun is rising as I step out onto the back porch with my coffee. Just an hour prior, I was carrying Evelyn into Matt’s house after we left the hospital. From my back steps, I can’t see the surf over the dunes, but I can hear the gentle roar of the waves. Living in this alcove surrounded by my family isn’t what I expected. I seriously thought I would hate being this close to my nosey siblings, but so far, everyone has been cool about it. I like it even more because my girl is always close. The door opens, and I turn to see Becca stepping on the porch. She is radiant in my shirt, disheveled hair, and bright eyes.

“Morning, baby.” I lean back in the chair to open my lap for her. She sits over my knees and curls into my chest with her legs on the arm of the chair.

“Have you heard from Matt?” She reaches for my coffee cup in my opposite hand, and I can’t help but smile at the familiarity between us. I shake my head and watch as she turns the cup in her hands, placing her lips directly over where I was just drinking. I groan inside, watching her lips pucker against the rim. *Damn. I’m jealous of a mug now.*

I run my palm up her leg and down the outside of her thigh until I am cradling her hip. “I like seeing you in my clothes,” I whisper as I kiss her hair and run my finger just inside the elastic of her panties. She smiles and turns her face away from me toward the sunrise. *Not exactly the response I was*

*hoping for.* I run my fingers through her hair and guide her face to mine. “I like seeing you in my bed first thing in the morning.”

I watch her cheeks turn a slight pink. “What do you have planned for today?” She asks, ignoring me.

“Dad mentioned he wanted to go swimming today. Mom was planning on inviting some friends over and having another party.”

“Another party? That might be too much for him.”

I love how she is always concerned for him, for us. I shrug and run my hand along her thigh. “I think they want to enjoy every moment...”

“Afraid it might be his last,” she finishes. I sit frozen, captivated by her honey-brown eyes. She leans into me more and I wrap my arms around her plush, soft body. I hold her, and we watch the sun continue to rise until my phone ring from inside the house. “I better head to the bungalow,” she mutters.

“Can I see you tonight?” I ask as we stand, and I follow her into the house.

“Perhaps,” she replies over her shoulder, giving me a wiggle of her eyebrows.

I answer the phone on speaker. “Hey Tater Tot, what’s up?”

“Is Becca still there?” I turn to Becca, hearing the panic in my little sister’s voice. “I tried calling her cell, but it went straight to voicemail.”

“Yeah, I’m here Em. What’s wrong?”

“Can you come to Matt’s? Evelyn’s awake and asking for you.”

“Yes, of course.”

I can see the concern in her eyes. “I’ll go to the bungalow to help Dad.” Her return smile is enough to make me want to drag her to my bedroom, but I settle for a kiss and a view of her ass swaying as she walks out to the bedroom.

After a quick shower, I head to the bungalow. Dad is sitting in his chair, sound asleep and Mom is cooking in the kitchen, “Hey mama.”

“My boy! How are you?” She’s barely able to contain her excitement. “How’s Becca? I heard the two of you saved the day last night.”

“She’s good and went to check on Evie really quick.” I sit at the table. “She was amazing last night. Seeing her in her element like that.”

“She’s an impressive young lady,” Dad answers from the chair.

“I hear you want a pool day today, old man?”

Dad nods. “I’ve made a bucket list.”

“Oh yeah? Let me see that.” I move over to the couch. It shocks me not to see any travel on this list. My parents always put a focus on experiences over gifts.

#### ART’S BUCKET LIST

- CELEBRATE ANOTHER COUNTRY’S HOLIDAY
- GET A TATTOO
- DANCE WITH LOTTIE IN THE RAIN
- WRITE LETTERS TO MY CHILDREN FOR THEIR BIG MOMENTS THAT I’LL MISS
- NAME A STAR
- LEARN ORIGAMI
- WATCH THE SUNRISE & SUNSET OVER THE OCEAN IN ONE DAY
- SLEEP UNDER THE STARS
- MAKE S’MORES OVER A FIRE

*Easy enough.* I make plans with my parents, texting my siblings to see which ones they want to be a part of. When we are on the last item, the door opens and the whole family enters. I watch as Matt helps Evelyn settle in a chair. She’s wearing a hoodie and leggings, likely to cover most of her bruising. Emily and Jake follow behind, whispering together. I crane my neck around them to see her. I watch her close the door behind everyone, and her face lights up when our eyes meet. *Damn, she’s beautiful.*

“Hey big guy!” Becca greets Dad as she moves to his side. “Let’s get your medicine started and we can head outside for some fun after lunch.”

“Sounds good, princess.” Dad gives me a sly smile.

I hit the side cushion of his chair, laughing. “She’s my princess, old man.” After watching Becca and Dad get set up, I kiss her hair and head out with my siblings.

**Matt: @Becca Will you be ok with Evie and Dad solo?**

**Jake: She’s a fucking nurse, bro. Of course she can handle it.**

**Emily: What do you think it was like for her at the hospital?**

**Dumbass.**

**Matt: Chill...damn I was just asking**

**Bryan: @Becca if you need help, let us know. We’re outside helping Mom set up.**

**Rebecca: Perfectly fine here y'all**

I open a separate text to Becca.

**Bryan: You're so right.**

**Rebecca: While I love to hear those words from you, I have no idea what you're talking about...**

**Bryan: You are perfect and oh so fine**

**Rebecca:** 

**Bryan: lol See ya later**



Between the mid-afternoon sun pounding on my back and the heat from the grill, I am pouring sweat. I moved away ten years ago, but I didn't think I would need to re-acclimate to summers here. Looking out over the deck, I take an inventory of my family. Jake is with me at the grill. I hear Matt inside talking to the neighbors. The girls are huddled together under the shelter with Mom close by, listening in, I'm sure. We are all pissed about the whole Maverick situation, and everyone is in protection mode. When I close the grill, my eyes immediately lock on Becca, and I can't hide my smile.

"Damn, you got it bad." He isn't wrong. I slapped Jake's shoulder and make my way to her as she helps Dad to the shallow end of the pool.

"Here Dad, let me help." I am talking to Dad, but I can't take my eyes off her. Her hair is up in a messy bun on the top of her head, but a few strands are falling and framing her freckled cheeks. After settling Dad in the water, I go back to the grill. My eyes are still drifting to her. They sit in silence for a while, until Dad breaks the silence, and my family all grows quiet, eavesdropping. I'll admit it, we are all nosey bastards.

"I love this weather."

"Yes, it's a beautiful day." Becca turns her face to the sun.

"I love this place, this alcove."

"It is a special place. I like how Matt and Bryan connected their decks. It's perfect for entertaining."

"I love that you're here."

"I'm happy to be here," she replied and smiled at him.

"You don't seem very happy."

“What? What makes you say that?”

“Well, I’ve known you a very long time and I’ve known my son, well, his whole life,” Dad laughs. “One minute I see you two and you’re madly in love, the next you two are sad and avoiding each other.”

I watch for Becca’s response and take a sharp breath when her gaze holds mine across the yard. This is the first time since we’ve reconnected that anyone has even brought up the “L” word. With our eyes still connected, she answers him. “It’s not like that.”

“You’re not sad or you’re not in love?” Dad asks pointedly. Since Dad’s diagnosis, he’s been much more forthcoming with his thoughts, opinions, and even affections. Not that Dad wasn’t loving, he just didn’t show it very often.

From where I stand with Jake, I can’t hear Becca’s response, but I read her answer on her lips. “I don’t know.” *Dad is the best wingman.*

I refocus on the food, breaking our connection. I can’t expect her to love me still. It has been so long, but I really want her to. I’ve known since seventh-grade she would be the only woman for me. I just need to make sure she knows that. I try to focus on plating the burgers and chicken instead of listening to their conversation but do so unsuccessfully.

“You know, feeling sad after making a hard decision doesn’t mean it was the wrong decision. I will not pretend I don’t see the way you two look at each other. I may be an old geezer, but I know what love looks like.” Mom is beside me, with a weary smile. Her eyes are full of love and understanding. *It’s going to be okay. It has to be okay.* Together, we carry the grilled food to the table.

Everyone is getting settled at the table, but Becca isn’t here yet, so I make my way back to the pool deck. I grab her towel in just enough time to watch as she runs towards her bag, one arm wrapped around her stomach and the other wrapped around her breasts. When she sees me standing there with an outstretched towel, she stops moving. I struggle to keep my eyes from roaming her curves. God, I want to touch her. Replace her arms with my own and hear her soft moans as I love every inch of her. Ditch dinner and feast on her tonight. With my eyes glued to her face, she slowly walks toward me with the towel open for her. She steps into the towel, and I wrap it around her and rub my palms down her arms. With a gentle squeeze to her elbows, I turn and walk to the table, her following behind.

Becca sits between Jake and Evelyn, directly across from me. “How’s your shoulder, Evelyn?” she asks softly.

“It’s sore.”

“Anywhere else hurt?”

“Actually, everywhere.” Evelyn’s answer catches my attention and my brother’s because all three of us jerk our heads in her direction.

“Everywhere, where?” Matt asks through clenched teeth.

“Please stop,” Evelyn pleads with him. “Everywhere is just tender.”

“There’s no ‘just’ about it,” Jake mumbles as he lifts his beer to his lips and meets my eyes. I shake my head in warning. I don’t need him to lose his temper. Not Now. Not Here.



## Chapter 29

### Rebecca



I turn to Evelyn with apologetic eyes. I don't mean to drag the guys into this, but I secretly love how protective all of them are of her. Through the rest of dinner, I keep quiet, listening to Art and Charlotte talk with the neighbors. I try to steal glances at Bryan through the night. I don't want to give him the wrong impression, and I am determined to hold firm on the 'just friends' idea. Each time, though, he is already looking at me and smiles when our eyes meet.

After dinner, I help Charlotte settle Art at home for the night. I make each of them a cup of tea and Charlotte thanks me, adding, "Go ahead, dear, enjoy the rest of the night." I know Evelyn will come tonight to stay with them. Matt is also planning on sleeping on the couch here. I give each of them a kiss goodnight and head straight to the pool for some alone time.

Inside the living room, I hear the guys playing cards, so I drop the towel I am still wearing and run to the water. Floating on my back, I relax, listening to the ocean waves crashing and take in the salty breeze. I watch the sky change from blue to pink as the sun sets. Once the stars are filling the night sky, I reluctantly get out of the pool for the night. I wrap myself in the towel again and pad to the back door. Matt, Jake, and a few other men I don't recognize are playing cards in Bryan's living room. I really don't want to walk through there...I turn towards Matt's house, hoping the back door is unlocked when I see the door to Bryan's master bedroom on the side of the

deck. He's playing cards with the guys, I can pop in and take a shower, it's fine. I quickly duck inside the dark room and close the door quietly behind me. Turning into the room, I see a shadow sitting up on the bed and my hand flies to my mouth, smothering my scream. Bryan looks at me with an amused look. "Hey Ace."

"I'm so sorry, I'll just," I say and turn back toward the door to leave. Before I can pull the door open, Bryan is there, leaning against it.

"What's up?" he asks with a devilish grin.

"I just didn't want to walk through the room of guys." My cheeks are on fire as I tighten my arms around my torso. "Like this..."

Bryan takes a step closer to me, pushing my wet hair behind my shoulder. "And you thought coming through my room would be safer?"

"I figured you were out there." My throat feeling dry, I swallow and meet his intense stare. I shrug, "There are a lot of guys out there and you're not gonna care to look, so..."

"See, that's where you're wrong, Ace," he tugs gently to release the towel. "I have, I am, and I will." Goosebumps cover my skin as Bryan's eyes wander over my body. When his eyes meet mine again, he picks me up over his shoulder, like a caveman, and carries me further into the dimly lit room.

"Oh," I yelp in surprise. "Bryan, if you drop me..."

A firm hand across my ass cheek causes another yelp out of me. "Never, baby girl," he replies before he lowers me onto his massive bed. I bounce slightly and can just barely cross my arms over my stomach before he climbs up my body.

He gently grasps my arms and moves them above my head. "Don't hide from me," he mutters against my neck. His lips on my skin are like fire and ice. "I want to see all of this glorious body." He leans back to meet my eyes and smiles at my wide-eyed expression.

"Let me show you, Ace. Let me show you how beautiful you are", he kisses my collarbone. "How much I love this body." He runs his tongue along the length of my neck. "Your sounds drive me wild", he kisses my jaw. "All of you". He leans back slightly, his eyes bouncing between mine with a furrowed brow.

"What's wrong?"

"Ace, I love every portion of you." He reaches up and intertwines our fingers. "Your body will always be a gift to me that I never want to take for granted. I never want to take **you** for granted." Lifting our hands, he places a

soft kiss on my knuckles. “If you want me to stop...”

I swallow the lump forming in my throat and move until I am sitting up on the bed. I should say yes, ask him to stop. I should protect my heart right now. *We are just friends. Just friends.* Bryan moves too, allowing me free movement, but his body is tense. My eyes meet his and my carefully constructed walls crumble. *Those eyes. His heart.* I can’t ask him to stop...I lean forward until my lips brush against his gently. He groans and pulls me to him until I am sitting in his lap. His lips crash into mine, desperation taking over. His hands caress my hips, squeezing my pelvic bones and pulling me closer to him. Panting, my hands roam over his defined shoulders and arms. What was I thinking? I can’t be just friends, not with him.

Bryan slides his palms over my hips and up my back. He slows our kiss, leaning back slowly, his lustful eyes watching as he pulls the string of my bikini top until it falls open, releasing my heavy breasts. I inhale sharply at the sudden cool temperature. He grins, forming that adorable dimple. Both of his hands move to hold them, kneading and squeezing the soft tissue. My head falls back, and a moan falls from my lips. “My beautiful girls,” he mutters against my skin as he takes my left nipple into his mouth and sucks softly. I chuckle at the endearment.

“What’s so funny, Ace?” I watch him kiss and suck from one breast across my chest to the other nipple, focused on his task. I sit straighter, forcing him to release my sensitive skin from his mouth. He growls in annoyance, but I run my hands through his hair and pull his face to mine. Bryan runs his nose along mine and kisses my forehead. “I want you, Bec. I want to feel you.”

A warm sensation fills my belly. *He wants me.* I suck in a stuttered inhale as his hold on me softens and he runs his fingers down my back. I lean into his touch as he caresses my hip.

Bryan stands with me still in his arms, turns, and lays me on the bed, flat on my back. He joins me on the bed, propping up on his side, and I watch the smile on his face pull into worry as he pulls at the strings of my bikini bottoms. *Did he think I was going to say no? Does he think I’m going to stop him?* I trail my fingers slowly down his arms, feeling his muscles flex beneath my touch. I can only hear our breaths, soft pants above my pounding heart. Untying the bow at my hip, Bryan slides his hands into the crevice of my leg and squeezes. I push his hands away from my chub rub, but his grip tightens, and he shakes his head at me.

“I love the feeling of your thighs.” His words light me on fire.

I gasp as his fingers go along my slit and slide into me slowly. His mouth forms an “O” when he runs his fingertips through my folds.

“I knew you’d be wet for me.” I moan at his words and hold his gaze. He moves slowly to my opening, sliding one finger in, and then a second. I tilt my neck up in pleasure, a soft moan falling from my lips. He quickens his movements, and I already feel my muscles tightening around his fingers. My breathing turns to panting, and I lean on my elbows to watch him pleasure me. The smile on his face and the lust in his eyes push all self-doubt out of my mind. “Come for me,” he demands as he strokes his thumb over my clit. His fingers pistoning in and hooking in the perfect spot. I hit my peak and moan his name as I climax. Grasping for his arms, he chuckles, “That’s my good girl.” *Oh shit.*

I lay back on the bed, catching my breath. I am expecting him to lie beside me, or at least move, but when he doesn’t, I leaned up to see what he is doing. My eyes meet his just as he raises his hand to his mouth and sucks my juices off his fingers. *Oh my god.* Every part of my body comes alive under his stare. I move until I am kneeling in front of him, my hands sliding from his chest over his abs to the waist of his shorts. I press my palm over the unmistakable bulge, and I sheepishly look up at him for permission. He runs his fingers into my hair, pulling the bun loose, and nods once.

He releases a breathy, delicious groan when I slide my hand into his shorts and slowly pump him, base to tip. He helps pull his shorts off and laughs when I attempt to push him to lie down. *Asshat.* It’s not my fault he’s a giant. Leaning against the headboard, Bryan watches with lustful eyes as I wrap my hands around his erection and tease his tip with my closed lips. When I open my watering mouth, his hands are immediately in my hair, collecting and holding it in a ponytail.

Our eyes connect and I lower my mouth to place single wet kisses along the underside of his shaft, tip to bottom. I lick my way back to the end, smiling when I hear a sharp hiss come from him. Once at the tip, I open wide and take him in my mouth until I gag. Pulling back entirely, I slowly bob on his erection, taking more of him on each pass until he is completely covered and down my throat. I can only take him that deep for a few seconds before my gag reflex forces me to move, but each time I feel his fingers in my hair tighten in his fists and his hips shift toward me slightly.

I replace my mouth with my hand, pumping him gently, and lean on his

legs to look at him. His wide fiery blue eyes watch as I lower my mouth to him again, but Bryan stops me by gently clenching my hair in his fists. It doesn't hurt physically, but what did I do wrong? Why would he stop me?

Annoyed, I sit up quickly, releasing my hold on him, and feel my breasts bounce as I move to the head of the bed. I pull at the comforter to cover my body, feeling ashamed and rejected. Before I can get the cover tucked around me, his arm is there, pulling it from me.

"Oh, no you don't," he says, laughing. I allow him to pull the blanket away. Ok, maybe not "allow" but I roll onto my stomach to hide the tears burning my eyes.

I focus on steadying my breath. The bed shifts and I hear his feet touch the ground. *I need to leave now.* Before I can move, I feel his legs against the outside of my own as he lies on me, my back to his chest and his erection pressing against my lower ass. With just a slight tilt of my hips, he would be inside of me. I exhale a hard sigh.

He wraps one arm between my arm and head, leaning on his elbow to hold his weight off me, and uses his other hand to move the hair that is covering my face and neck. Placing gentle kisses just behind my ear, down to my shoulder, "I want you," he hesitates, "completely."

"Do you think I don't?"

I feel his head shake. "It's been a long time, Bec. I want to have all of you, not cum prematurely, like a teenager." I shift slightly to turn toward him, and he lifts enough that I can lie on my back.

"How long is a long time?"

Bryan wraps his arms behind my head and nuzzles into my neck, his erection pulsing against his thighs.

"A really long time," he whispers.

With my heart pounding, I tip my mouth to his neck and suck gently. Anywhere my hands can reach, I grab, pull, and dig my nails into his skin. I need him. I want him. Bryan returns every kiss, every grab, every pull. He leans to his side table drawer, reaching for a condom. Our eyes meet just before he opens the foil packet.

"I'm on birth control," I admit. "There's been no one since you." *Oh my gosh. Did I just admit that to him?*

The growl that comes from Bryan's chest is dark, needy, and almost feral.

"Only me, huh?" He asks between kissing and nipping my lips. He

positions my legs wide, stretches me, and dips a finger inside of me. His eyes holding mine captive. "This time won't be gentle." I nod quickly, and he crushes his lips to mine. His tongue exploring my mouth just as his fingers stretch me. "I don't want to hurt you," he whispers, his eyes searching mine.

I wrap my arms around his neck, hands stretched across his shoulders. I press my forehead into the side of his neck and take a deep breath. *Citrus and cedarwood*. He grips my hips and groans as he inches into me slowly. I pull his face to mine and our lips brush against each other with each gentle thrust until he is completely seated inside of me. So full. I tighten around him, and he pulls out of me quickly.

Before I find my voice to protest, a cry bursts out of me when he slams into me again and again. My need for him reflects in his eyes. I slide my hand between us and pinch my clit, needing the pressure, the relief "Yes baby, touch yourself." *His voice. Those words*. Every praise from him has my blood boiling and my breathing hitched. "That's my girl. Come on my dick."

Bryan slows his thrusts before wrapping his arms under me and rolling us in the bed. I'm unsteady from the sudden movement and hold on to him tighter. He places my legs, so they curve along his hips. I lean up, steadying myself with a single hand on his chest as I grind against him. Leaning forward, Bryan tweaks my right nipple, twisting and pulling a moan from me. I rest my hands on his shoulders when he wraps his arms around me. Closing my eyes, I extend my neck, giving him access to my most sensitive spots. He kisses the base of my neck, biting and sucking gently on my collarbone. Feeling the warm ecstasy rising, I hit my climax and Bryan meets me thrust for thrust as he finds his own release inside of me.

I collapse onto his chest as we slowly catch our breaths. Still inside of me, Bryan pulls me closer, kissing me gently.

This kiss differs from all the others.

This feels like more, more need, more desire, possessive. He holds on to my hips, flexing his palms down my thighs as he gently pulls out of me, positions me beside him, and gets up from the bed without a word. I curl onto my side and hum in exhausted bliss. He returns with a warm washcloth and tenderly cleans me. When he is satisfied, he lifts me enough to pull the comforter from under me and gets in bed behind me.

He lies on his back with his arm extended for me. I cover us both and snuggle against his chest. His muscular arm wraps around me and strokes my hip slowly. Laying with him skin to skin, we stay silent. My mind is so clear.

The clearest it has been in a long time. When his breathing shallows, I am certain he is asleep, but peek up to find him watching me. “Did you mean it?”

I circle my fingertip over his abs. “Mean what?”

“There’s been no one since me?” He asks softly. I can hear the vulnerability in his voice. I push up on my arm so I can see fully.

“No one.” I pause, waiting for a reaction, but when he doesn’t give one, I continue, “There’s been no one but you, Bry.”

He leans up to be face to face with me. “Tell me you’ll give us a shot.”

Tears fill my eyes, but I hesitate. Of course, I want to, but what if he breaks me again? But what if he doesn’t? I nod softly.

“I need you to say it aloud. Tell me you’re mine.”

Silly man, how do you not know this? I chuckle before pulling him to me and kissing him. Against his lips, I give in to his request, “I’ve always been yours and I always will be.”

# Chapter 30

Bryan



As I wake, I instinctively wrap my arms tighter around Becca. She fell asleep in my arms last night after we made love, multiple times. It isn't until I dig my nose into her hair and kiss her shoulder that she wakes up.

“What time is it?”

“Just after 8, family breakfast starts at 9:30 and this is my week.”

She pulls my arm tighter around her shoulders and slides closer to me, pressing her back to my chest. “I can help too,” she whispers, with her eyes still closed.

“I got it,” I say, kissing her temple before rolling out of bed. My steps feel lighter that morning. I feel happy for the first time in a really, really long time.

I am in the kitchen, starting omelets, when I hear Becca's soft footsteps on the floor. Her hands slide under my t-shirt and gently wrap around my midsection as she hugs me. I turn slightly to wrap my arm around her shoulder, bringing her to my side and kissing her hair before she looks up at me.

“You're gorgeous.” I gaze into her brown eyes. They are lighter than normal this morning.

She smiles up at me and pats my chest softly. “What can I help with?”

“Food's good, nearly done here. Could you set the table?”

She stretches on her tiptoes and kisses my cheek before turning to leave.



I tighten my arm to pull her back to me. With one hand on the small of her back, I run my fingers through her hair with the other and drop my lips to hers. The moan that slips from her forces me to deepen the kiss.

I can't get enough.

Pulling away, I place my forehead on hers. "I love you." The words slip out of my mouth without a second thought.

My eyes fly open, afraid of her reaction. She tilts her head and places a soft kiss on my lips before spinning out of my arms, heading outside.

I hear my family has arrived. Becca greeting them as helping everyone get settled at the table with drinks. I carry the breakfast platters outside and begin serving, beginning with Dad. When I get to Emily, she shrieks with excitement. "French toast sticks?!? Oh, you *do* love me!" I laugh and pile her plate full. I have never seen anyone love French toast the way she does.

I pull out the open seat and stand in front of my chair, wrapping an arm around Becca as she sits beside me. "We're happy to have you all here with us. Dig in."

"We?" Jake whispers to me. "Have you finally got your foot out of your ass?" Becca chuckles, hearing my brother's loud whispers, and I cut my eyes to her in warning. I love seeing her smile. The way her lips pull up, the right a tad higher than the left. The way her eyes dance with joy.

She leans toward me, placing a hand on my arm to lean in for what I think was a kiss on my cheek, but I turn more, so she kisses my mouth. It's a quick kiss and her eyes sparkle with mischief when she meets my gaze. A smile spreads across my face. I love this playfulness with her. I kiss her nose, lost in our own little world together, and only pulled out when Dad calls my name.

"Yes, sir?"

He places a fork full of French toast in his mouth, pointing the fork toward me. "Think we could do s'mores tonight?"

I laugh and start eating, "Yeah, Dad."

After breakfast, Emily goes to the bungalow with Becca and my parents. Jake heads to the beach without really saying anything, leaving Matt and Evelyn to help me with cleaning up.

"How's the shoulder?" I am hesitant to ask. Matt still seems on edge about the other day, and I don't want to overstep.

Evelyn doesn't look at me but replies quietly, "Much better. Dr. Jones came by this morning to check on it."

Matt throws a balled-up napkin toward me, hitting my chest before landing on the plates I am carrying. “Andrew was asking a lot of questions about you and Becca. Any idea what for?”

“No idea.”

He squints in suspicion. “She’s not cheating on anyone with you, is she?”

“I can’t believe you just said that!” Evelyn shrieks.

“What? You saw how he responded this morning!”

“How did he respond?”

“He didn’t say anything,” Evelyn explains, “But when Matt said she was probably at your place, his expression went blank, and he clenched his fist a few times...”

“Did he scare you?” I ask her quickly.

She softly shakes her head and walks toward the beach. Matt and I lock eyes, concern etched across his face. I nod toward her, telling him to go to her. *Poor Evie*. I can only imagine how she’s feeling right now. I don’t know Maverick well, but any man that can put his hands on a woman is worthless.



The sky is changing from orange to pink as the sun sets behind me. I spent most of the day organizing Dad’s ‘wish list’ items. Emily freaked out when we kept calling it a bucket list, saying that he’s still here, so why use words that will remind him he’s dying? Out of all of us, she is struggling the most with the inevitable future. Using the fire poker, I move the logs around in the pit.

“Hey, son.”

*Shit!* I jump to my feet but steady my balance and turn to him. He’s trying hard not to laugh, but I’m not that prideful. “It’s ok to laugh, Dad.”

The sound of his cackling laugh makes me smile. I watch him closely as he slowly takes a seat beside me. Passing him a metal kabob stick with two marshmallows on the end, I ask, “Where are the girls?”

“Coming along.”

*Huh*. That’s an interesting response. “Do they know you’re out here?”

He just shrugs and lowers his marshmallows closer to the fire. *Crazy old man*. I take my phone out and sent a quick text to Becca, hoping to avoid anyone’s wrath tonight.

## **Bryan: Hey gorgeous - Dad's outside with me.**

We sit in silence together, roasting our marshmallows and listening to the waves crash in the distance. Emily is the first to join us and begins softly singing when Dad requests her song. I watch as the rest of my siblings silently join us outside. I feel soft fingertips run along my shoulders and turn toward Becca as she circles my chair and lift my arm in invitation. She hesitantly sits on the arm of the Adirondack chair and drapes her long legs between mine. Wrapping my arm around her hip, I try to pull her into my lap, but her glare has me frozen in place. I motion for her to come closer to whisper in her ear, "I want to feel you." Her sharp inhale is enough permission for me to pull her into my lap again, and she wraps her arms around my neck. I watch her eyes bounce between mine; her eyebrows furrowed. Leaning my forehead to hers in a breathy whisper, "I spent years without you. I want to spend every second I can with you, touching you, kissing you, loving you." Becca pulls my chin to her and kisses me softly.

I settle into the chair with my girl curled in my arms. Surrounded by my family, singing, and laughing together around the fire on the beach. Emily was always the musician out of all of us, but Dad seems to really enjoy us all singing together lately. That leaves us with a limited number on our "set list" and we were down to church songs. When Becca takes the harmony on "Amazing Grace", I run my fingertips along her spine. The voice of an angel, my angel.

The sun continues to fall behind the houses, turning the sky into hues of pink and purple. Emily stands and moves in front of where Becca and I sit together, holding her hands out for her. Hesitantly, Becca leans into my chest, kissing me softly, and takes Emily's hands as she stands. We all watch as the two of them dance on the patio and sing old Broadway songs. These two are something else. Becca is just a couple of inches taller than Emily, but my little sister always takes the lead in a dance. I can't pull my eyes from her as she moves, swaying her hips softly and twirling around with my baby sister. Our eyes connect each time she faces me, and I can see, can feel her joy.

When I can't stand to watch her anymore, I make my way to interrupt their dance, stealing Becca. Only before I reach them Jake is there asking my girl to dance. I growl just softly enough for Jake to hear. I swear he lives to always piss me off. It doesn't stop him though. He continues to take her hand and leads her to the other side of the deck to dance with a shit-eating grin on

his face. I move in front of Evelyn. “Care to dance?” I ask and hold my hand to help her up from the chair.

I must have caught her off-guard because Evelyn’s usually soft green eyes are saucers staring up at me. I clear my throat awkwardly, and she blinks twice before placing her hand in mine. I gently lift my arm to twirl her into my arms and meet eyes with Mom and Dad. They are cuddled together, watching us all paired up and dancing to Emily and Becca, singing. Evelyn is extremely pregnant, which ensures there is a large space between our bodies, but at 5’4“, Evelyn is a whole foot shorter than me, making this awkward.

When it is Matt’s turn to provide the music, Becca taps Evelyn on the shoulder, hugs her gently, and steps into my arms. I bow my head into her neck, placing soft kisses on the sensitive skin, and wrap my arms around the small of her back. Becca’s arms are over my shoulders, with one hand in my hair and the other on my neck.

It isn’t until Jake starts singing “Thinking Out Loud” that I take in my family. Over Becca’s head, I see Matt dip Emily in the most ridiculous move. I turn slightly to find Jake dancing with Evelyn, holding her gaze as if he is singing to her. *Interesting.* I tighten my arms around Becca and dip my face to hers. When I sing with Jake, she reaches for my hand, pulls it to my chest, and intertwines our fingers. This song, our song, is magic. I knew the first time I heard Rebecca Cooper sing the national anthem at a school assembly that I would love her forever. It was love at first sight. It wasn’t for her, though. It actually took me four days to convince her to even tell me her name. I knew, though, I saw the passion, the kindness, and the love that made her, her. From that day, I knew I wanted her and only her.

# Chapter 31

## Rebecca



Let the tears fall from my closed eyes as I'm wrapped in Bryan's arms. Being here with him, dancing together while he sings our song, is healing the tears of my heart. Since I moved back to Jessamine Beach after college, I knew I made the biggest mistake of my life not fighting for him, for us. But here I am, breathing in his rustic scent mixed with the salty air and feeling the love we share pouring out of him. "Ready to get out of here?" Bryan asks. I meet his pure eyes. "Bec, what's wrong?"

I quickly wipe my tears away and smile. "Not a thing." He holds my eyes captive, searching them. He reaches for my hand and leads me to the bungalow.

"I'll check on Dad. While I love you in a beautiful dress, I need you to change into something warmer." *Warmer? It's summer.* Why would I need warm clothes? But I don't question him and nod, stepping into my room. I change into leggings, a tank top, and a hoodie, grabbing my tennis shoes and flip-flops as I make my way out the front door.

Bryan is leaning on the deck, scrolling on his phone when I pull the door closed behind me. "Art ok?"

"Yes ma'am," he spins toward me with a cocky grin. "Matt is setting up a campsite outback for them to check off another bucket list item. He seems excited."

"Where are you taking me?" I ask as I follow him through the yard to

his dad's old pickup truck.

"You'll see," he finally answers as he pulls the passenger door open for me.

I stop in front of him before climbing in. "Well, what if I don't want to go there?"

Bryan leans toward me, his forearms against the truck, pinning me between the back window and his body. He looks around us, grins, and leans to my ear. "Well, then you'll have to get over it." I can't help but smile. I want to be wherever he is, he must know that by now.

He watches me for a beat longer before scooping me into his arms and placing me in the truck. "You need to stop picking me up like that. I'm too heavy for that," I argue.

Bryan pulls my seat belt across my body, clicking it locked before he pulls my face to his, his grip on my bottom jaw. His eyes flicker from my lips to my eyes, then back to my lips. "No," is his only reply before kissing me hard and closing the door.

I watch as he jumps into the driver's seat and pulls out of the driveway. The windows are down, and the nighttime summer air fills the cabin. I pull my hair to the side to contain it and keep my eyes glued to him. The way his palms flex over the steering wheel. The way his thumbs tap a rhythm on the dashboard. In high school, Bryan picked me up for school every day in this old truck and it feels like we were back in time, foolishly in love with each other, indestructible. *Except we weren't. I destroyed us.*

A sharp turn and abrupt stop pull me from my thoughts. I quickly shift around to see where we are, but it isn't until I see the headlights on the old oak tree that I figure it out. He brought me back to where it all began. I slide out of the truck and meet Bryan at the tailgate. He hands me a basket and tosses a blanket over his shoulder before taking my hand and leading me under the canopy. After spreading the blanket out, I slide my shoes off and sit on the edge.

"Do you remember the first time I kissed you?" he asks before sitting beside me.

"Of course, I do. You said your mom wanted to meet me and you invited me over to work on homework. My naïve middle school brain didn't realize you didn't want to do homework," I laugh, rolling my eyes.

Bryan loops his arm over my shoulder and pulls me gently until we are lying on our backs. I snuggle against him, with my head resting on his chest

and my hand over his heart. “I was so excited when you got here. I grabbed your bag and pulled you to this tree.” He runs the soft pads of his fingertips along my shoulder before continuing, “I didn’t want to lose my courage. You were looking at the heart I carved and when you turned to me, I made my move.”

We laugh. “I’m still shocked we didn’t chip a tooth with that one.” While the scene was a very sweet one, that first kiss was more of a crash. That was before his growth spurt, but after mine, so we were about the same height. As soon as I realized what he was doing, I closed my eyes and leaned in. Unfortunately, he did the same and in all of our inexperience, our first kiss was a gentle peck that led to the clicking of teeth. We lay together, watching the canopy sway gently in the breeze. “It was perfect. All of it was perfect.”

“Until I screwed everything up.”

He tightens his arm around me, pulling me tighter to his chest. “We screwed everything up. We had a lot going on...it would have been hard for anyone, especially two eighteen-year-old kids.” *Understatement of the year.*

“Sometimes I regret the way I reacted and the fight. But then other times, I don’t know.”

“I get that.”

“Tell me about New York.”

His exhale tells me all I need to know. He doesn’t want to talk about it.

“When are you going back?” I ask in a hushed tone.

Bryan sits up and reaches for the basket. Pulling out a box of chocolate-covered cherries, my favorite, and holds one by the stem for me to eat. I lean forward and close my lips around the fruit. “Not for a while,” he finally answers. I lay back down with a soft thud. *Not for a while. He’s not staying. He’s leaving again. This is only temporary. Only a way to clear his conscience while he’s here for his dad.*

“Get out of your head, Bec. I’m here right now.”

I don’t answer him. Lay back, and watch the stars shine through the canopy. The sound of our breathing is steady and lulls my busy mind to sleep. *What if he goes back to NY? What if he stays here? What if he doesn’t want to be with me? What if he does want to be with me?*

# Chapter 32

Bryan



I jump up at the sound of the screen door closing. What the hell? Turning, I find Becca walking toward me with a tray and I jog over to her. “What’s all this?” I ask, taking in the random items as I reach for the tray.

“I couldn’t find a lot since no one has lived here in a little bit, but I was able to scramble some eggs and make coffee.” I lean toward her for a kiss, but she dodges, turns, giving me her cheek.

“Everything ok? You look...worried.”

Her eyes pop up to mine. “Yeah, I’m fine, just sore.”

I nod as I move behind her, pulling her to my chest and rubbing her shoulders. *I love the feeling of her pressed against me.* We sit in an uncomfortable silence. The tension is killing me. I lower my mouth to the outside of her earlobe and ask, “What’s on your mind, Bec?”

She shrugs, but I know better. “I’m ready when you are,” I whisper.

“Ready for what, exactly?”

I lift and spin her until we are facing each other. “Anything. Everything.”

I watch her beautiful eyes fill with tears and pull her onto my lap, so she is straddling me. “Hey, talk to me. What is it?”

Her eyes close and tears fall down her cheeks. I pull her closer and kiss the paths they leave on her cheeks. I feel so helpless. I don’t know what to do. What to feel. How to act. I rub my hands along her back to calm her and



watch her. After a couple of deep breaths, Becca slowly opens her eyes and holds back a sob. “I’m so confused,” she admits.

“About what?”

“You. Us. Work. Being here with you. Everything.”

“What can I do?” Her frown causes her lip to quiver, and I pull her into my arms again, pressing her head to my chest. “What do you need?”

She fists my shirt and buries her face into my chest as she cries. I tighten my arms around her and lean my head against the tree when my eyes burn with tears. I try to keep my chest steady but fail miserably. *Just let it go. Let her see you, all of you.* When I stop pretending, I let my fear and my pain rip through my chest, and tears flowed down my face. I press my forehead to hers and whisper, “I can’t lose you again. Becca, please. I’m begging you. Please let me in...”

“I don’t know if I can.”

Squeezing her tighter, I tilt my face into her neck. “What do you need from me to change that?” It’s like the Earth is standing still. I can only hear our heaving chests and stuttering sobs as we sit there, wrapped in each other.

“You’re it for me, Rebecca Cooper. I’ve known since I was thirteen who I wanted to marry and that’s you. I had everything planned out. I got us that apartment in New York, and I was going to propose at our going away party before we moved. I had been planning it all year.”

Becca leans back and moves the hair from my face, running her fingers through the hair at the base of my neck. I hold her gaze. “Most people would be pissed if their girl got pregnant in high school, but I wasn’t. It scared me shitless but the idea of having you forever, made me so happy, the idea of having a baby with you, makes me so happy. Sure, it threw a wrench in some of my plans, but I wrote that deferment request, and a change request to a two-bedroom for the apartment.” I pause and drop my hands in defeat. “I thought I mailed both requests. I thought I did it weeks before. I was ready to take a gap year to stay home with the twins while you were in class and then work in the evenings. Between that and the money in my savings, we would be ok.”

The tears pour from my eyes again, and I lean against the rough bark. Feeling completely defeated I whisper, “That morning when you found the deferment request...You were so angry. I don’t blame you for being mad. You trusted me to handle it, and I didn’t. It hurt that you didn’t give me an opportunity to figure it out, though. I was mad we were fighting, and that you

thought I wasn't there for you. It hurt me even more that I was causing you so much stress. Before I realized what was happening, you were on the phone turning down your spot and ready to leave me to raise them on your own." My voice skips and I can barely speak. "I ruined your dreams and mine with it. I know I made you mad when I wouldn't leave you so upset. I never would have forgiven myself if I wasn't with you when you went to the hospital that day."

"Bry...", Becca starts, but I shake my head. I need to get this out.

I straighten and take her face in my hands, rubbing my thumbs along her cheeks. "I lost you. I am the reason you lost the twins. I'm the reason you didn't move to New York. I'm the reason you didn't go to Proctor. I took all your dreams from you. It was me. I knew I fucked up. I knew I ruined everything. When you asked me to leave, I couldn't fight you. I should have, but I was scared. I was scared you'd hate me even more than you already did." I take a deep breath and exhale at my confession.

"What about now?"

"Now? Now I hope you can understand why I did what I did to take care of you then and since then."

"What do you mean? I haven't seen you all these years..." I can hear the suspicion in her voice.

"No, but everything I have done since the last day I walked you to your door, I have done with you in mind."

I watch the confusion etched on her creased forehead. "The flowers..."

I nod. "I wanted to celebrate them and you."

She tilts her head and looks away. "What else?"

"The KT children's wing," I mutter. Don't get me wrong, I am proud of my donation and accomplishments, but I don't want to tell her this way.

"KT..." she whispers.

"Kelley Twins," I explain.

Her mouth falls open. "What? I had no idea. How did I not know?"

"That was intentional, Ace. I wanted to honor them, honor you."

She studies her hands. "Bryan." She pauses, and I watch as the realization hits, "My house...and Jenny's house..."

I don't reply. I don't know if she is mad or not. We sit there together, watching, waiting for each other's reaction. When I don't respond, she pounds on my chest, causing me to smile and nod my head once.

Becca jumps out of my lap and paces toward the truck. I jump up to

follow and practically collide with her when she stops suddenly and turns to me. Her eyes furious. “How dare you!”

Raising my hands in surrender, I take a step away, but she meets me with a step just as large. “I wanted to make sure you were always okay. It was the absolute least I could do.” I plead.

“You’re exactly right,” she yells. “It was the least you could do.”

“What do you want? What do you need? I’ll give it to you!” I pause. “Anything, you can have it all!”

She laughs and throws her arms in the air before turning to walk away. *What is happening? How did we get here?* She takes two steps before turning toward me again, tears flooding her eyes. “I wanted you. I wanted you to come back here for me. I wanted you to protect me. I wanted you to provide for me. I wanted you to be the person I woke up to and fell asleep with every day!”

My feet feel like their cement blocks, glued in place. I’m completely shocked by her reaction. “You told me to leave, Bec. I did what you told me to do. I was a kid, what did you expect me to do?”

“Why didn’t you just come back?” she cries. “Why didn’t you talk to me? I don’t care about the flowers or the house. I care about you. About us!”

I move to her, wrapping and lifting her in my arms until her legs are wrapped around my waist. Burying my face in her hair, I lose it. “I’m so sorry, Bec. I’m a stupid man and I didn’t want to get in the way. I’m so sorry.” I grasp her shoulders, her hips, everywhere to pull her closer to me and kiss anywhere my lips can connect with her delicate skin. “God, I’ve missed you so damn much.”

Neither of us say anything. We stand in the front yard of my childhood home, under the canopy of an old oak tree, wrapped in each other’s arms as the sun rises above the tree line.

Becca groans when an alarm sounds on her phone. “We need to head back.”

I gently place her back on the ground and collect the basket, tray, and blankets to tuck back into the house before returning to the truck to head back to the bungalow.

It isn’t until I pull into my driveway and turn off the truck that she speaks again. “Do you think we could try again for that date?”

“Yeah? How’s tomorrow for lunch?”

Her cheeks flush pink. “I was thinking about dinner tonight.”

My heart is pounding against my chest. “I’ll pick you up at seven.”

“It’s a date,” she replies, leaning over and kissing my cheek before sliding out of the truck. I watch her walk up the pathway to the bungalow, drumming my thumbs on the dashboard. The whiplash of emotions over the last twelve hours has confused me and I have no clue where we are right now. What I do know is I’m not giving up on her, I’m not giving up on us, not again.

# Chapter 33

## Rebecca



**Jenny: Hey sis - just confirming you're still available tomorrow night**

**Rebecca: ABSOLUTELY! I have my overall shorts ready to go!**

**Monica: Oh, this is going to be good!**

**Jenny: Is LB coming too?**

**Monica: Yes, please! I haven't met his gorgeousness yet...**

**Rebecca: Who's LB?**

**Monica: Lover Boy aka Bryan Kelley**

**Rebecca: I don't know...I haven't talked to him about it...**

**Andrew: How are things going there?**

**Rebecca: Art's decreasing slowly but he's in good spirits**

**Andrew: I meant with LB...**

**Rebecca: We're going out tonight...Shocked doesn't even cover it.**

Within seconds, my phone is ringing with a video call. I prop my phone up and slide on my headphones while I finish getting ready. They all start shouting "SPILL" when they see me.

I try my best to explain the last couple of days, but when I get to this morning, Andrew stops me. "Are you telling me he sends those ridiculously enormous flower arrangements for your birthday? He funded a fucking wing of the hospital and paid off not only your house but also your sisters?"

I nod, dabbing at the tears threatening my makeup. "I didn't know what to say to him. 'Thank You' just didn't feel like enough." There is a loud crash

and Jenny's phone is now looking at the ceiling fan.

"Jenny, are you okay?" Monica asks, concern etching her voice.  
"Jenny?"

Sam comes into view, "Hey y'all. Everything is fine."

"She's mad, isn't she?", I ask. This is the Cooper Sister curse. When Jenny or I get mad, we immediately cry. "Jenny, he didn't do it to make you mad."

"I know," is all she replies before Sam waves goodbye and disconnects.

"It's just hard for her to accept help, especially from him. What are you wearing on your date?" Monica asks.

I stand on the small stool in the bathroom to show her and Andrew my ruby red dress. They vote on the perfect necklace to complement the scoop neckline, and I opt to pin one side of my hair up with a comb. Saying my goodbyes, I rush off the call and slide on my black heels.

At 6:55 PM, I step into the hallway just as Bryan steps into the front door. I freeze, my eyes roaming over him. He has his hair styled and swept to one side. The sleeves of his navy button-down shirt are rolled up, showing off his forearms, and he has tucked it into dark khaki pants. He smiles wide and takes a step into the hallway toward me, ignoring his brother calling for him.

"You look so beautiful," he whispers when he reaches for my hand and slowly spins me into the small hallway. I can only smile in reply, feeling uncharacteristically shy. "Ready to go?" he asks.

I nod. "Art's all set, and Matt's on duty tonight." Bryan intertwines our fingers and holds my eye captive as he places a gentle kiss on my knuckles and guides me to the door. *Those blue eyes.*

As soon as we step out of the hallway entirely, everyone turns toward us. Matt is catcalling and causing a ruckus when we step into the living room. I lean down and say goodbye to Art and Lottie, "Take good care of her, son," Art teases.

Bryan loops his arm around my hip, and I lean into him, "Always, Dad."

We quietly make our way to the Jeep, hand in hand. Bryan stands with the door open for me but gently pulls my hand before I can slide in. "In case I forget to say it later, thank you for an amazing night."

"Don't jinx it," I laugh.

I stare out the window as we drive through town. Lost in thought, it startles me when Bryan's door closes. I look out the front windshield just as the "Luigi's" sign illuminates at dusk. I quietly follow Bryan through the

parking lot and into the restaurant. Why here?

“Un uomo così benedetto,” Isabella practically sings as she kisses Bryan on the cheek after wrapping me in a warm hug. This family watched us grow up and fall in love. She would be excited to see us together again.

Bryan waits as I slide into the booth to sit across from me as Isabella fills our wineglasses. “Only my best wine for my favorite couple.”

We hold our glasses up, and Bryan toasts. “To us and the promise of right now.”

Isabella watches as we take our first sip and is thrilled when we nod at her. She rushes to collect our menus, asking us to trust her, and she’d take care of everything. Looking around the old restaurant, very little has changed since the last time he and I were here together, but that’s not what makes this place magical. It’s the people.

“Can I ask you a question?”

Bryan nods and reaches for my hand across the table. “Anything.”

I immediately have butterflies in my stomach and a lump in my throat. Why am I so nervous? I watch our intertwined fingers and the gentle way he runs his thumb along my palm. “You said it’s been a long time. How can that be?”

“Just that. There has been no one else.” *Just me? Did he wait ten years?*

“You haven’t dated anyone? In ten years? That’s hard to believe,” I huff.

“I’ve taken women on dates, dinner, a movie, but there was never anything there and they were all short-lived.” Bryan keeps his eyes locked on me. “I haven’t been intimate with anyone but you.”

“So, you’ve been celibate...for 10 years...” I deadpan.

Bryan laughs, his voice husky and hushed, “I wouldn’t call it celibate, but I have not had sexual relations.”

“Nothing?”

“Why is this so hard for you to believe, Ace?”

I gesture toward him with my free hand, “Because you’re...incredibly handsome, kind, generous. You must do well for yourself if you can take this much time off from work and you’re incredibly domesticated. Basically, every girl’s dream,” I laugh before taking a long sip of my wine and looking anywhere but at him.

“You think I’m handsome?” he asks with a playful smile. I roll my eyes, shaking my head at him. He stands and slides into the booth beside me.

Gently, he moves my hair over my shoulder before laying his arm behind me on the bench. “I only care if I’m *your* dream.” My eyes are locked on his, lost in their depths. I’m pulled away as the server brings out the appetizers. When I see the mozzarella sticks, I squeal with glee and immediately reach for the plate, but he blocks me.

“Let me,” he says, and I watch as he carefully breaks apart a few sticks to allow them to cool. Stabbing one chunk with a small fork, he dunks it in the marinara and holds it to my mouth. Hesitantly, I lean forward and take a bite. The sweetness of the sauce causes my eyes to close, and a low hum comes from my throat.

“I’ve missed you so much.” My eyes fly open and bounce between his. My heart clenches before turning from him slightly. “I found no one that remotely compared to you. It’s always been you.” I face him quickly, searching his eyes for the lie. *This isn’t real. This can’t be real.*

As scared as I am to get hurt again, I decide to trust my heart. “I didn’t realize I was waiting for you, but I also haven’t found anyone that compared to you and wasn’t really looking,” I admit softly.

“What about Andrew? Dean?”

I lean back and smirk. “Exactly how long have you been wanting to ask that?”

Bryan drops his chin to his chest as if I caught him. “Since I saw you with each of them.”

“Were you jealous?” I’m probing. I know I am, but I want him to admit it to me.

“Of Andrew, yes.”

I laugh and turn to grab my drink and another mozzarella stick, delaying. “Why exactly?”

“He seemed so possessive of you, like he knew you. Physically, emotionally, all of you. I wanted to be that for you and knowing I stepped away and another man stepped in.” Bryan’s jaw ticks sharply. “Well, it pissed me off.”

I nod and purse my lips but remain silent. I run my finger along my wine glass, dragging out a response. I laugh when he huffs at my delay. “Andrew and I met in college at a party.” Bryan’s expression immediately hardens, and he takes my hand possessively. “I was a mess then. I was drinking way too much and at this party with my roommate. We were playing some beer games but taking tequila shots instead, so I was pretty hammered. I got



ridiculously sick.” His body stiffens beside me.

“Did something happen to you?”

“Oh no, definitely not. I went outside to get some fresh air but ended up throwing up over the side of the porch. Unfortunately, Andrew was directly below me.”

Releasing my hand, a smile lights his face. “You threw up on him?”

“Yep, I was mortified, but in typical Andrew fashion, he walked up the stairs, took me by the hand, and led me upstairs. He pulled me into a bedroom and laid me on a bed with a bottle of water and a trash can.” I pop another appetizer in my mouth, completely aware Bryan is watching me lick the marinara from my fingertips. “I didn’t know it then, but the party was at his place. He disappeared through a doorway to clean up, but when he came back to his room, I was dead asleep. It was morning when I woke up and he was sitting in the chair watching me like a creeper.” I smile at the memory. “After that night, we were pretty inseparable.”

“Were you together?” I watch him for a minute, contemplating lying to him about it.

I shake my head. “No, we were never interested romantically. Don’t get me wrong, I love him dearly and trust him with anything.”

“But...”

“But he wasn’t you,” I admit softly.

Bryan tilts my chin up with his finger and kisses me. A long, tender kiss. It feels like we are making up for lost time. When I pull back, our appetizers are gone, and our entrees are waiting for us.

“Sneaky Isabella,” I laugh.

Bryan slides out of the booth to sit across from me again as we eat. “How would you describe him now?”

“My best friend.”

Between bites of ravioli, Bryan probes more. “There’s no way he’s just a best friend.”

“It’s hard to explain otherwise. We’ve been through a lot together.”

“But why are you so comfortable with him physically?”

I shrug. “We act like an old married couple more than friends. Just over the years, I stepped in when he needed a woman and he was there when I needed a man, but we’ve never slept together. At least not in that sense.”

We eat the next few bites in silence. I can tell Bryan doesn’t love the dynamics of my relationship with Andrew. *Get over it, lover boy.* “He’s here

to stay, Bry. You'll have to get over whatever this is." I motion to him with my fork.

"I know," he nods. *Thank God for that.* "What about Dean?"

"I already told you everything there is to know about him." Bryan just watches me, waiting for a response. "He's asked me out a few times, but that's it."

"Has he hurt you?"

"What?"

"Anytime I see you together, you're moving away from him or flinching..."

"No! Of course not!" I am shocked by the suggestion, "He's very... persistent, but he's never been inappropriate." He nods and finishes his plate. "What about you? You know so much about me, and I don't even know what you do for work or where you live."

He places his napkin on his plate and folds his hands on the table in front of him, watching me as I eat. "Well...I own a finance firm that specializes in small businesses. I poured a lot of time into it very early, and it has grown from a small two-employee storefront to twenty locations with about fifty employees."

"Wow, that's amazing!"

"After college, I was married to it, but now I have the freedom to work when and where I want, with little effect."

I am genuinely happy for him. And that explains why he didn't really date. He is married to his work.

"Come on, Ace. Let's get out of here." We stand and make our way to the Jeep after paying and thanking Isabella for dinner.

Once we are on the way home, I ask, "And where do you live?"

"I own a few places, but I live in a great three-bedroom house in this small coastal town. It's a very charming town...everyone knows everyone and genuinely cares about one another."

"Sounds like how it was here when we grew up. Why on the coast?" I ask. "That must be very expensive in New York."

He chuckles out a soft laugh as he puts the car in park. "Because you're here."

My neck snaps up, and I look up at Bryan in surprise. "What?"

He reaches across the console and gently caresses my cheek. "I'm moving back. I'll need to organize everything in New York, but I'm not

leaving here without you again.” He runs his thumb across my cheek, catching the tears there. *He’s back. He’s here. He’s really here.*

# Chapter 34

Bryan



The sun has just peeked over the water's edge when I start my run. Dinner the night before with Becca was perfect. The past few days with her have been challenging, but that was my fault. Until now, I've hidden these feelings, these secrets from everyone. When I saw Becca on my parents' porch for the first time in ten years. I knew I couldn't hold this in anymore and wouldn't be able to stay away from her. I felt relieved to talk about it with someone other than my therapist. I just wish I would have tried way before now. Who knows, maybe I would have moved home sooner and had more time with my dad. I have loved being here with my family and disconnecting from work. Lynn is likely upset with me because I haven't responded to her messages. Oh well. I slow as I approach the connected porches of our little pod of houses and my phone pings with a text.

**Matt: Any suggestions to prevent paper cuts during my origami adventure with Dad today?**

**Jake: Don't touch the edges?**

**Evelyn: origami paper rarely causes paper cuts, it's pretty thick...**

**Matt: How do you know? You know the art of origami? How did I not know this?**

**Evelyn: I lived in Japan for five years before moving here...**

**Matt: But that doesn't mean you know how to do origami**

**Emily: Finally, Matty doesn't know everything**

**Matt: Shut up. Evie, I need you to help me today, please.**

**Evelyn: OK, I'll be over later**

**Bryan: I was thinking of doing the sunrise and sunset tomorrow.  
Anyone want to come?**

**Jake: I'm in**

**Emily: When are you leaving? I told Becca I'd go to the show  
tonight**

**Bryan: show?**

**Rebecca: It's 90s night at The Attic**

**Bryan: We can leave after...Dad can sleep in the car**

**Emily: Count me in**

**Matt: I'll bring the energy drinks**

Instead of wondering and guessing why I didn't know about the show, I go toward the bungalow in search of her. When I turn the corner, I see Becca walk out the back door and onto the porch.

"Hey, I was coming to see you."

"Oh, yeah?" I ask as I take in her long legs, showcased by her short, black shorts. She wraps the robe tighter around her chest.

"I didn't realize until yesterday that I forgot to tell you about tonight. I meant to ask you to come last night, but it slipped my mind."

Still a few steps away from her, I nod and turn my back to her, leaning on the railing. A heartbeat later, her arms wrap around my torso, and I turn slightly to pull her to my side. "Will you come?" she leans her head back to look up at me. I can't even pretend to be upset with her.

God, she is stunning. I smile and kiss her nose. "If you'd like for me to, I will."

She tightens her arms around me. "I do."

I run my fingertips down her back, and she squirms in my arms. "Will you come with us tomorrow?"

"How will that work, exactly?"

I run my fingers over her hair and turn until we are chest to chest. "We will leave after your show and drive to Florida. I'm thinking of St. Augustine for the sunrise and breakfast. Then drive to Tampa and get a couple of hotel rooms to rest. Dinner on the bay and a walk at sunset." I am confident in my plan and really want her to come with me. Her brows furrow and her head shakes slightly. "You don't have to come, Bec."

“No, it’s not that. Of course, I want to come.”

“But...”

“But I don’t think Art will be up to that. He might say he is, but that drive will wipe his energy before we even get to the Florida border.”

“Okay, so I’ll book a plane.”

Her arms fall to her sides. “You’ll. book. a. plane. A private plane.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Yes, babe. I’ll charter a private plane. Will that make it possible for him to go?”

She nods but starts shaking her head and turns to walk away. I reach for her arm, “Hey what’s this?” I ask, catching her eyes. She comes back to me without hesitation when I pull her arm gently.

Her hands are on my chest, and I rest mine on her hips, squeezing gently. “You trust my judgment without question. Why is that?”

“Because you’re you and I trust you without question.”

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, Becca jumps into my arms. Her arms are around my neck and my hands grab her ass, lifting her. Her lips crush mine and she moans when I lick the seam, asking for her to open. I will never tire of this, the taste of her kiss, the feel of her body in my hands. She pulls back and rests her forehead on mine. I run my nose along hers slowly and whisper, “I love you, Bec.”



I open the passenger door of Jake’s Tahoe and extend a hand to help Evelyn out of the car. She smiles at me and allows me to loop my arms around her shoulders to help. Evelyn is almost eight months pregnant and isn’t comfortable climbing in and out of lower cars. That limited us to the truck and the Tahoe. Emily passes me the bouquet I bought when I slam the door closed behind her.

“Oh my gosh, Bryan, these are beautiful!” Evelyn gushes, and I pass her the arrangement so she can smell them.

“What the hell is he doing here?” Emily whispers to Matt, motioning to an old silver Honda on the other side of the parking lot.

Before I completely register what was happening, Matt and Jake are storming off and shouting. Emily wraps Evelyn in her arms, and I stand in front of them protectively.

“Is that...” I ask.

Evelyn clenches the back of my shirt. “My husband.”

My back stiffens, and I turn to her quickly. I grasp her shoulders and hold her eyes. She looks terrified. “Stay behind me. Keep breathing. I got you. You’re safe.”

She nods in response. “Say it,” I demand.

“I’m safe,” she whispers before I turn around again with my arms behind me, caging her and Emily between me and the car.

The guy jumps out of the car and waves a camera frantically in the air, yelling. Evelyn jumps in surprise when he slams the car door. “You stupid...” was all he gets out before Jake punches him in the face, and he falls to the ground. *Not so tough now.* I watch as Matt leans over him, takes his camera from his hand, and slams it on the ground. I proudly watch as Matt grabs Maverick by the collar of his shirt before punching him. “Do not come near her again,” he seethes, leaving him bleeding on the ground.

When they walk toward us, I turn and wrap Evelyn in my arms. “You’re ok. You’re safe.” I mutter into her hair and Emily rubs her back, hugging us, too.

Matt takes her hand and pulls her out of my arms, immediately replacing mine with his. “We should head home,” Matt suggests.

“No!” I smile at Evelyn’s yelling. She is a firecracker. “I want to be here. I can’t let him control everything I do.”

Matt, Jake, and I exchange looks, deciding the best option...I will support whatever they decide and know I can walk home as a worse-case scenario.

“Oh my god, you’re such men!” Emily huffs as she reaches for Evelyn’s arm and pulls her toward the front door of The Attic.

I run ahead of them and hold the door, following behind them as they enter. Scanning the room, I don’t see Becca or Jenny anywhere. I turn to the bar to grab some drinks and head toward where Andrew is sitting with a blonde woman.

“What can I get ya hot stuff?” the male bartender asks, and Andrew chuckles beside me.

“Three waters, three drafts, and a Becca,” I reply as I lean onto the bar.

“Wow, you must be really thirsty,” Andrew mutters sarcastically.

The blonde is staring at me intently. I have only seen her here, but never met her officially. Looking at Andrew, I wait for an introduction.

“Where are my manners? Monica, this is Bryan Kelley. Bryan, this is Monica.”

Monica tucks her short blonde hair behind her ear and blinks quickly. “So, this is LB?” she asks Andrew quietly. Before I can extend a hand or ask questions, *vanilla and lavender*, her aroma surrounds me, and two arms wrap around my waist. I glance over my shoulder to see her gorgeous smile resting on my shoulder.

I turn and place a gentle kiss on her lips. “Hey Ace.” She just smiles a big goofy grin. “I ordered you a drink. I was going to bring it to you backstage.”

“That’s sweet of you, Lover Boy,” Jenny says as she rounds the bar. *Lover Boy, LB, ok that makes more sense.*

“He is the sweetest,” Becca beams at me.

The bartender carries a tray with my drink order and asks, “Hey hot stuff, where should I deliver this?”

Becca laughs, “Here I’ll take it, Brad.” She balances the tray and adds, “And he’s my hot stuff. Stay away,” before walking to the table where everyone sits. *Her hot stuff, huh?*

I freeze in place, watching her walk away, a little sway to her hips and her ponytail swinging as she walks.

Andrew nudges me with his elbow, pulling me back to the present. “You got it bad, huh?” Monica chuckles. I excuse myself and follow her to the table.

Emily and Matt are filling Becca in on the scene from outside. She has placed the tray on the table and wraps her arms around Evelyn, listening. I place everyone’s drink in front of them with two glasses of water and a bowl of pretzels in front of Evelyn. She and Becca glance up at me questioningly. “Eat.”

“Don’t go all alpha on me, Bryan Kelley.” Evelyn chirps back, “You have your own woman to do that to.” *Yeah, right!* Becca and I both laugh at that. There would never be a day in hell that I would turn alpha on her. She’s far too strong to be told what to do like that.

“I have to head backstage,” Becca says as she squeezes Evelyn again and stands from the seat. Making her way around the table, she gives me a tight hug and thanks me for the flowers before rushing off.

Grabbing my beer, I turn the old wooden chair around and lean on the back of it as I watch my family talk. It isn’t long before Becca comes on the



stage, with Jenny and Monica acting like a DJ. They have the crowd rolling with laughter as they reenact famous movie scenes and music videos from the 90s. I admit I am completely in my own thoughts, so when Andrew slaps a firm hand on my shoulder; I am startled and jump up in defense. I want to punch that smirk off his face. He knowingly is riling me up. I gesture toward him, asking what he wants, and he nods toward the stage. I follow as he leads me through the stage door and into an oversized living room space. The flowers I brought for her tonight are in a vase on the vanity.

“Nice touch,” he says as he closes the door behind me.

I don’t have a reply. I know he is Becca’s best friend, so I don’t want to get on his bad side. I can’t risk it. I sit on the edge of the leather couch with my elbows resting on my knees. I can still hear Becca and Jenny singing on stage, so I know she won’t be in here soon.

He pulls a chair across from me and mirrors my posture. “I don’t know much about you other than before the breakup and what’s happened over the past week. I trust Becca, and she seems to really like you.” *Like me?*

I cut my eyes to him. If I could shoot daggers from them, I would right now.

He laughs, “Okay, maybe more than like. All I want to say is, dude, don’t break her.”

I nod. “That was never the intention.”

“No, but it still happened. And before you go explaining everything, I get it. You were young. But you’re not a kid anymore. Don’t. Break. Her.”

I nod again.

“Do you love her?” he asks.

Without hesitation, I answer, “More than anything.” That must be the right answer, because he chuckles to himself and walks out of the room, closing the door behind him.

I lean back on the couch and let out a heavy breath. Closing my eyes, I imagine walking to the end of the pier with Becca and dropping to one knee. I pull out the velvet box I’ve kept all these years and ask her to marry me. I dream of our wedding day. She is pregnant and glows radiantly as she walks down the aisle to me. Andrew gives her away and our sisters cry when we both say, “I do” and kiss for the first time as husband and wife.

“Hey sleepy head,” I blink my eyes open. Becca is straddled over my lap, her hands on my chest, smiling at me. I grasp her thighs as my mind clears from my dream.

“Is the show over?” I ask in a gruff voice. I move my palm to the small of her back and pull her to me. She leans forward willingly and kisses me.

“Yes.”

“Ready to go home?”

“Not yet.”

I smile against her lips. “What do you want to do?”

Her kisses turn sweeter, with less force behind them, and she wraps her arms around me tightly. I tuck my face into her neck and take a deep breath. *Vanilla and lavender...home.*

“I was thinking we could go for a walk on the beach.”

I place a gentle kiss on her neck. “Anything you want, babe.”

Hand in hand, Becca and I return to the main room and the bar. I don’t see my family and pull out my phone and see a text from Jake.

**Jake: Headed home. The girls are tired. Let me know if you need a ride.**

After saying goodbye to Jenny and Monica, we walk out to the parking lot. “You think you’ll fit in my Mustang?” she asks with a wink.

“I could walk if you’re concerned.”

“Don’t be silly.”

I fold myself into her car. Thankfully, the ride is only a few minutes, otherwise I’d end up stuck like this. Becca pulls into my driveway. Not my parents, mine. *Progress.* We get out and meet at the front of the car. Dropping her things inside, we continue out the back door and see Evelyn and Emily sitting at the fire pit.

“Do you mind if we sit with them for a bit?” Becca whispers.

“As long as you’re in my arms, I don’t care where we are.” I lean down and kiss her temple before leading her to the double lounger. This was the best investment for this space. It’s as long as a normal lounger chair but wide enough for Jake and me to lie comfortably. And that’s saying something, considering the size of the men in my family.

Laying on my back with one arm behind my head and the other around Becca, I watch the girls talk animatedly about some movie that’s coming out next week. Matt and Jake eventually join us, but I am so lost in my personal euphoria, I miss it. I tighten my arm around Becca, and she tilts her head up on my chest, “You ok?” she whispers.

“Never better.”

I look around us and know I am one lucky son of a bitch. I hate it took Dad being sick to bring us back together, but I am so thankful to have this relationship with my siblings and I am thanking a lucky star that Becca is giving me another chance.

# Chapter 35

## Rebecca



“B

aby girl,” Bryan whispers and kisses my cheeks softly, “If we’re going to make it to the hangar on time, we need to get moving.” I yawn and stretch out my stiff arms.

“Did we sleep out here all night?”

Bryan lifts me from the lounge gently, carrying me to the bungalow. “We fell asleep, but it was only a few hours ago.” I snuggle into his neck, loving the feel of his arms around me, grasping my thighs and back.

“Do I have time for a shower?”

“Yeah, baby girl.” Bryan leans down and kisses my nose. He lowers me just enough that I can reach to turn the doorknob. Once we are inside, he lowers me to my feet and wraps his arms around my shoulders. “I’m running home to shower. I’ll be back in 10.”

I tighten my arms around him, stopping him from leaving. “Why don’t you just shower here?” I pause, “with me.” A knowing smirk lights up his face. I intertwine our fingers and lead him to my bedroom and ensuite.

Bryan steps into the shower and turns on the water, checking the temperature before closing the glass doors. He turns to face me and watches as I slide my hands under his t-shirt, lifting it over the firm ridges of his stomach and chest. When I get the shirt to his shoulders, he bends at the waist and helps me pull it off completely. I wrap my arms around his neck before

he stands up completely and kiss his pouty lips. Running my fingertips over his neck and shoulders as he stands completely. I trail my lips after my fingers down his chest and abs until I reach the band of his jeans. Quickly, I undo the button, eliciting a soft growl from him. Looking up, his eyes are fierce, full of desire. I hold his gaze and tug at his jeans and briefs until they are over his hips and drop to the ground for him to step out of. He leans down to free his feet before kicking his clothes to the side.

“I can’t believe you found overalls,” he jokes as he undoes the buttons on the denim straps.

“They’re coming back in style. I found these at Marshall’s.” He quickly undoes the buttons, pushing the straps over my shoulders, leaving me in my white crop top and thong.

Bryan’s arms wrap around my lower back, pulling me against him. His hands slide to my ass before hooking his fingers in the band of my underwear and pulling them down. He taps gently on my ankle for me to step out. I place a hand on his shoulder to steady myself as he undresses me and watch him on his knees in front of me. His touch is gentle and seeing him in such a vulnerable position makes my heart skip a beat. His hands return to my hips as he presses his lips to the skin just below my belly button as he stands. I slide my hands from his shoulders to his chest as his move from my hips to my ribcage. Our eyes connect. The only sounds are our breaths and the water warming in the shower. “Up,” he commands, and I raise my arms above my head. He gingerly runs his wide palms up my sides, barely touching the outside of my breasts, over my shoulders, and down my arms until my crop top falls to the floor beside me. He intertwines our fingers and turns me until my back is to the closed door. Pressing me against it, holding my hands captive above my head. He drops his lips to the base of my neck. I tighten my legs to ease the pulsing between them.

His tongue licks up my neck until his lips are against my earlobe. “I am dying to taste you,” he growls in my ear. “I want you so bad.”

“But?”

He smiles against my neck. “But I want to make love to you, not fuck you against the shower wall.” He runs the bridge of his nose along my jaw. “Okay?”

I nod, and he gently pulls my lips to his, lowering my arms until they are wrapped around his neck. “Up,” he mutters against them, and I wrap each leg, one at a time, around his hips. His erection presses against the underside

of my thigh as he carries me into the shower. Holding me under the water, he watches as I lean back and wet my hair, running my fingers through the long strands. He even squats down when I need my shampoo. Each time I open my eyes, his are on me, and a smirk exposing his dimple.

“I can stand, you know.”

“I can also hold you.”

“Touché.”

I wash my body around him, holding me and twist to grab a clean washcloth from the shelf. Once the suds are washed off of me, he spins so the shower head is pounding on his back. He tilts his head back slightly, and I run my hands through his blonde hair before adding shampoo and massaging his scalp.

“I could get used to this,” he moans softly.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Your ass in my hands and your fingers in my hair? Yes. Absolutely.”

I laugh and tilt his chin up to rinse the shampoo out. Using the washcloth and bar of soap, I lather his chest and arms. I reach below me to clean from his hips to his thighs.

“You’ll have to put me down to reach your back and legs.”

“No way,” he chuckles with a mischievous smirk, “Figure out another way.”

*Oh, this man.* “You better not drop me.”

“I’d rather die.”

I lean back and arch my back as if I am doing a backbend off him. I balance myself by holding his ankles and twist slightly to wash the rest of his lower body. The blood rushing to my head is making me lightheaded, but it doesn’t take long and when I am done, he places a firm hand on my lower back to help me back up. His eyes are trained on mine as I hold on to his shoulders, allowing the blood to return to my head. Once I am back to normal, I use my hands to press off his shoulders until I am now hinged over one of them, giving me access to his entire back. He never removes his hands, only moves with me as I do. When I am done and return to my original position, Bryan reaches behind him to turn off the water before he crushes his lips to mine, pressing me gently against the shower wall. He has my head cradled in one hand, the other gently lowering my feet to the floor. He pushes the shower door open and guides me out onto the plush rug before releasing my lips to grab a towel. He hands me a small one for my hair and

uses a larger one to dry my body. I watch him carefully pat my wet skin, his cheeks flush from the heat of the shower. Once I am dry, he reaches for a towel to dry himself. I step into the closet to dress as he steps into my bedroom.

I brush through my hair before braiding it quickly and applying a small amount of makeup and brushing my teeth. When I return to my room, Bryan isn't there. I slide on my shoes and walk to the kitchen. Art and Bryan are sitting at the bar, each with a cup of coffee.

"Good morning," I say.

Bryan stands and steps toward me, grabbing a cup from the counter. "Good morning," he says as he places the cup in my hands and kisses my cheek.

I watch him circle back around to his seat, taking a slow sip, allowing the tea to soothe my sore throat.

"Good morning, dear," Lottie says as she walks into the kitchen. "How was the show last night?"

"It was good."

"Amazing," Bryan corrects with a smile and Art slaps him on the shoulder in appreciation.

"I'll need just a few minutes to get the meds together, and then we can be on our way."

"Rebecca, I'm not going to take today's dose." I freeze in place and look at Bryan. He is just as shocked as I am. "Close your mouth, son. You're not catching flies."

Of course, Art must crack a joke right now. "Are you sure, Art? We can set up the drip and it will only take about two hours." Before I can finish, he is already shaking his head. I hesitate, wanting to honor his wishes, but know missing this dose can be detrimental to his treatment plan. "Ok. I'll just grab your pain meds just in case and my nursing bag, then I'll be ready." Bryan nods and stands to help his dad to the car. I rush to grab my things and meet Bryan on the porch.

Jake is waiting outside the Tahoe, holding the door for his mom to climb in. We decided last night that Jake would drive his parents, Evelyn, and Matt. Bryan, Emily, and I would ride in the Jeep. Once the house is locked, Bryan reaches for the bag in my hands and intertwines our fingers.

He tosses my bag in the back seat and holds the door for his sister before opening my door. "You're worried." It is more of a statement than a question.

All I can do is nod. Skipping a dose of his treatment is risky. We haven't had any recent scans, and his energy level is dropping quickly each day. Bryan kisses my temple and opens the door wider for me.

The ride to the hangar is silent. I pivot in my seat toward Bryan, and he gives me a soft smile and places his hand on my thigh with a quick squeeze. I turn just as Emily wipes at her face, hiding her silent tears. I reach for the tissues in my bag and pass them to her before holding her hand. I know there is nothing I can do to ease this fear, this pain. Bryan pulls into the car park, and I squeeze Emily's hand. "Deep breaths. Today's going to be a great day."

She leaps forward and wraps her arms around me the best she can in the cabin of the Jeep. "I'm so thankful you're here with us."

I kiss her cheek, "Me too, tater tot."



# Chapter 36

Bryan



The cabin is dark to allow my parents some more time to rest in the bedroom of the small private plane. Becca is beside me, our fingers woven together as she snuggles against my arm, sound asleep. The chairs are positioned as if they are in a limousine instead of a plane allowing a view of each other. Matt's head is against the headrest, mouth hung wide open, and most likely snoring. Luckily, the sound of the engines prevents that from carrying. Emily has her head on Matt's legs and her feet in Jake's lap, who is reading on his phone. Evelyn's curled into Matt's chest with his arm around her protectively.

"Mr. Kelley?" The male flight attendant kneels in front of me. "The pilot said we will begin descending in about ten minutes."

"Great, thank you." I reply, before gently nudging Becca awake.

She tightens her grip on my arm. "Everything ok?"

"Yes, it's almost time to land."

She nods and leans up to kiss me before opening her eyes entirely. Becca and I make our way to the bedroom while Jake wakes up the girls and Matt. Once everyone settles in their seats, I sit and wrap my arm around Becca as the plane lands. I can't seem to get my hands on her enough. I have missed so much time being the dumbass that I am. We thank the crew and hop in the waiting van to head to the shore.

"How did you manage all this?" Becca asks as we walk behind my

family. Dad is cruising in a rented beach wheelchair, trying to find a good spot for Emily and Mom to lay blankets out. Once everything is settled, we all huddle together to keep warm in the cool shore breeze.

“I have my ways,” I answer, pulling Becca to sit between my legs, wrapping my arms around her. We all sit in a comfortable silence, watching the waves crash on the shore and watch as slowly the stars fade and the sky turns to a lighter blue, then to yellow and orange as the sun rises above the waterline.

I watch Mom and Dad walk hand in hand to the surf, only stopping just before reaching the water. Becca pulls her phone out and takes a few pictures of their silhouettes wrapped in each other’s arms. *God, she’s cute.* I pull her closer and kiss her temple. She flips the camera to selfie mode. “Bryan... smile...” I smile against her cheek, and she pushes her shoulder into me. Chuckling, I turn my face and rest my chin on her shoulder. “Our first picture together again,” she whispers and turns to kiss my cheek. *The first of many.*

As soon as Mom and Dad make their way back to where we huddle together, Matt jumps up. “Where are we eating?” Of course, Matt would be the one to worry about food, as if we would starve two old people and a pregnant lady.

“There’s a breakfast house a block over. I thought we could walk over,” I explain. I’m met with eager, nodding heads. After helping Becca up, I move in front of Evelyn. “Are you up to walking?”

“I’m good right now,” she grunts as I help her to her feet in the sand. Becca and I grab the blankets while everyone else pairs off, helping each other to the boardwalk. The walk to the restaurant is quick, and they just opened, so finding a table large enough for the eight of us isn’t a problem.

Jake orders for everyone and the table is soon covered in platters of bacon, eggs, French toast sticks, and pancakes. As we pass the platters around, I notice Jake skips Evelyn for pancakes and French toast. She doesn’t seem too concerned about it, so I don’t say anything, certain she would cause a stink. Pregnancy hormones and all that. Within minutes, the server sets a huge waffle with strawberries and honey packets in front of her. The smile on her face is infectious. She may have cried if we weren’t all there.

“Thank you, Jake!” she chirps and throws her arm around his neck for a hug. “My favorite!”

Jake blushes slightly, takes a drink of his coffee, and waves off the recognition. I lean over Becca toward him. “Special order waffles, huh?”

“Asshole.”

I can't help but laugh. The joy on Evelyn's face over waffles was priceless, and she's been through so much lately. I'm glad she can be happy with us. I place my hand on Becca's leg and squeeze gently. I can feel her eyes on me and smile without turning toward her. Just having her here with me, being able to touch her, this is a gift.

“Well, that was delicious,” Dad announces as he throws his napkin on his plate. “Where to now?” *Wow, Mr. Energetic.*

“We head back to the hangar to fly to Tampa. We have a hotel suite reserved for the night and will rest up before heading out for dinner and the sunset.”

“Lordy, I can't wait for a nap,” Evelyn adds. She is a trooper running all around with us, very pregnant, and a bum shoulder.

We all pile back in the van, then the plane, landing in Tampa 45 minutes later, and pile into another van to head to the hotel. I run inside to check-in while everyone unloads. Becca meets me at the check-in desk while I wait.

“Were the snacks and drinks already delivered?”

“Yes sir, they are in the kitchenette awaiting you and your guests.”

“Perfect. When should we expect lunch to be delivered?”

“1 pm, sir.”

I nod my thanks and lead my family into the elevator. “Top floor, Em,” I say as I scan the room key to the pad. When the elevator doors open, Evelyn and Emily squeal in delight. The penthouse suite takes the entire top floor of the building, so the elevator opens to the living room framed in large floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the bay.

“Oh Bryan, this is too much,” my mom whispers.

I shake my head and wrap her in my arms. “Let's enjoy today, yeah?” I hold her and watch Becca over her head as she helps settle my dad in a recliner. Mom helps me pull out the snack boards and drinks for everyone before joining my dad in the living room. We all settle down, quietly whispering as Dad snores from the chair.

“Ma, why don't you go rest?” Matt asks before leading her into the bedroom.

“What if I wanted that room?” Jake huffs quietly from the couch.

Evelyn reaches over the arm of the chair and pats his hand. “There, there little one, we'll get you down for a nap too.” Becca crushes her face to my chest to hide her laughter. I love seeing her like this with us. She fits so well

into my life, into my family. It isn't long before everyone found their way to a bedroom, leaving us with Dad in the living room. I wrap my arms around her, drawing circles along her back, and prop my legs on the coffee table.

"Hey, Bry?"

"Hmm?"

"Thank you for today," she whispers, setting her chin on my chest to look at me.

"Thank you for being here." I lift her hand to my mouth and place a kiss on her palm.

We lay there, holding onto and watching each other. I tuck a loose piece of hair behind her ear and run my fingertips along her cheek. I can't tear my eyes away from her. I am lost in her. Completely lost for her.

Dad moans in pain and we both jump up.

"Hey Dad, you ok?" I ask as Becca rushes to his side. He nods, but I can see the heaviness in his eyes.

"Mr. Kelley, I need you to sit up a little more and take some deep breaths."

"What's this Mr. Kelley, stuff?" He huffs as he pushes himself higher in the chair. "You might as well call me Dad." I smile, listening to them. I know my parents have always considered Becca part of the family. I'm smiling when Becca's beautiful eyes meet mine, but hers flood with tears. I mouth, "I love you." That gets me a return smile, her beautiful smile.

Once Dad settles back in his recliner, Becca sits at his feet and sings for him. I make my way to the kitchen to prepare the lunch that was delivered and shoot a text to everyone to come eat. Emily is the first to join me. She pauses beside me and watches Dad and Becca. Matt joins us next and wraps his arms around her, his breath hitching from emotion. It was only seconds before Jake wraps his arm around Matt and I put my arm around Emily, forming a line in the kitchen watching as my beautiful, well I don't know what she is, but I know I want her to be mine, my Becca. I hate it took Dad getting sick for us to be back in each other's life like this again, but here we are and I'm thankful.

Evelyn and Mom step out of the bedroom but pause when they see Becca on the floor, her eyes closed and singing. When they look toward the kitchen and see us in a line, Mom comes running and lands in Matt's and Emily's arms. Evelyn slowly walks over, rubbing her very pregnant belly, tears streaming down her face. Jake pulls her to his chest, smoothing his

hands over her hair, and kisses her forehead quickly. I think this is the first time since Dad's diagnosis that we all together and realizing how little time we have left. *But we have today.*

I cleared my throat, blinking back the tears and turn to make a plate for me and Becca. Joining her on the floor beside Dad, I sit in awe as I watch her. She holds my gaze and smiles softly as she sings. *How did I live without her for so long?*



We just finished an amazing dinner at Seb's Captain House. It was loud and rowdy, just like when we were growing up. Dad laughed the whole time, and it was so refreshing seeing him happy after watching him be in pain for most of the afternoon. We walk to the boardwalk just outside our hotel, pausing to watch a pelican dive into the water. The brilliant colors of the sky as the sun begins to set provide the perfect backdrop to a great day. Becca slides her hand into mine and I pull it to my lips to kiss her knuckles. "You are beautiful," I whisper against them. I have always found her gorgeous, but especially now, seeing her love my family, my dad, it has only amplified.

My dad claps me on the back, and I turn to him. "I'm proud of you, son." *My hero.* I pull Dad in for a hug, always so strong and honest, caring and good. Hearing his voice quiver and shake worries me. He pulls back slightly, our eyes mirroring each other in color and expression, "Thank you for today." I nod and close my eyes to break the tension I feel in my chest.

"You, my boy, are meant for greatness." He motions for Becca to step closer. She steps to my side, wrapping her arm around my back, and I lift mine around her shoulders, so she joins our makeshift huddle. "I am so happy to see you two together, happy." I look down to see her smiling up at me. A tear drops from my cheek to her dress. She softly wipes my tears with her thumb, only compassion in her eyes. "So many people dream of a love like yours," Dad continues. I turn back to see him smiling. "Cherish it. Cherish each other."

Instinctively, I pull her into my chest, both arms around her head, blocking her view from everyone but me. "My one and only," I whisper against her lips. I am lost in Becca, taking in every feature, every dimple, loving her.

Dad and Mom say goodnight, gently patting us on the back.

“I’m going to get him situated,” Becca leans in and kisses me softly.

“I’ll be here,” I answer, gesturing to the chairs on the boardwalk where Evelyn and Emily are sitting. I watch as she turns and follows my parents into the hotel lobby.

Jake hands me a beer from the hotel bar. “You’re one lucky asshole.”  
*Yeah. I really am.*

# Chapter 37

## Rebecca



Once Art is settled in bed, and Lottie is peacefully reading, I slip outside to find Bryan. I can't stop thinking about what Art said to us tonight. Cherish each other. I must look like a smiling idiot, practically skipping through the hotel lobby to the boardwalk. I head towards the chairs where I saw him last and walk up to Evelyn, sleeping in Jake's lap. "Need help?" I ask softly.

Jake shakes his head and tightens his grip on Evelyn's legs. "We'll head upstairs soon. Bryan walked that way," he adds, pointing further down the boardwalk.

I nod in thanks and make my way in that direction. The lamps illuminate the wooden walkway, and I stop briefly to look out over the bay and the endless dark sky still marveling at today. It was perfect. Every bit of today has been perfect.

"I know I promised you." I can hear Bryan, but I can't see him. I move further down the boardwalk and see him sitting on the steps to the shore. His back is to me, his phone to his ear with his hands in his hair. Not sure if I should interrupt him, I decide it would be best to step around him so he will know I am here but go to the waterline to give him privacy. When I hear what sounds like a woman crying and watch his shoulders slump in response, I freeze. "Please baby, don't cry. I know this isn't what you wanted. I know this is hard, but I have to do this." My heart drops. My cheeks grow hot, and tears sting my eyes. *I could throw up. I knew this was too good to be true. I*

*knew he was too good to be true. All of it is a lie.* I need to move, get away from him. My feet feel like they are glued in place. The wind whips my hair into my face, sticking to the tears streaming down it.

He turns his head to the sky with his eyes closed and lets out a loud exhale... “I know that...” he pauses mid-sentence. “I will fix...” he stops talking again and hits his fist on the step beneath him. I need to move. I can’t watch this anymore. I need to move now. I need to get away from him and pretend all this never happened *again*. I could feel my heart physically breaking within me.

“Damn it Lynn, stop talking over me! I hear you. I know I promised you I was coming back. I know I fucked it up for us!” He pauses. “Please don’t cry, baby. I know. I love you too.” And with that, I release the breath I didn’t know I was holding with a soft whimper. Bryan’s head snaps toward me, but before our eyes can meet, I turn and run. Holding the skirt to my long maxi dress at my hip, I run as hard as I can toward the hotel. The tears streaming down my face blur my vision. *Get away. Anywhere but here. Anywhere but with him.* My tears blind me, and I nearly collide with a table and chairs, pushing them to the side as I run.

“Becca!” I can hear Bryan call for me, but I don’t stop. I can’t stop. “Becca, please! Let me explain!” *A little too late for that.*

I run to the main road and weave in and out of the streets until I come to a small park beside a pond a few blocks from the hotel. The pathway is lit with small solar lights, giving just enough light to see where I am going, but not enough to see more than a silhouette. I slow to a walk, catching my breath, and stop at a wooden bench. I lay on my back, covering my face with my hands as I sob. My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I pull it out, turn it off and drop it to the ground under me. *Breathe in, breathe out. You are ok. You are strong. You are loved. Just not by him. You are strong. You are worthy. You are ok. Breathe in, breathe out.*



The next morning, I wake up with a chill and a stiff back from sleeping on this bench. My eyes are still blurry, but I sit up and look around quickly. A man is sitting on the ground beside the bench and lifts his head when he hears me gasp. *Bryan.*



His eyes meet mine and I can feel the tears threatening again. He moves toward me, but I hold up my hand, asking him not to come any closer. I cannot give in to him again. I never should have opened up to him. I never should have loved him again. *Ok, not again, still.* I should have stopped loving him a long time ago. He sits back down where he was and runs his hand through his hair, his elbows resting on his knees and his head in his hands.

I reach for my phone, powering it on. A steady stream of notifications flood in over 30 notifications. Mostly calls from Bryan, Jake, Andrew, and Matt. The newest is a text from Andrew.

**Andrew: Call me now.**

I press his name and hold the phone to my ear, turning my back toward Bryan, taking a deep breath. *Don't get emotional.* I can't explain this to him, not with Bryan right here.

"Thank God you're ok." Andrew exhales loudly. *No hello?*

"Of course, I'm ok, why wouldn't I be ok?" I try to keep my voice steady.

"Don't give me that bullshit!" he yells. "I talked to Bryan last night. What the fuck were you thinking, Rebecca?" He doesn't pause for a reply before he continues yelling. "I can't believe you ran off like that! Something could have happened to you!"

"Yeah, but it didn't," I mutter and turn to have Bryan in my line of vision again.

"Someone could have taken you!" *Yeah, right.*

I laugh, my voice stronger. "I'm not worried about that. No one wants me."

I watch Bryan stand and step in front of me, his eyes ablaze. He's just close enough that I can smell him, *cedarwood and citrus.*

"Don't give me that self-deprecating bullshit. I'm furious with you right now!"

"Did you call him?" I ask Bryan harshly.

He throws his hands wide in exasperation. "What else was I supposed to do, Becca? You ran from me." He glares at me and clenches his jaw and fists. "You. ran. from. me."

*Now he's going to give a shit.* I roll my eyes. "How did you find me?"

"I tracked your phone," Andrew answers for him.

“Of course, you did, asshole,” I spit into the phone.

“You’re pissed with me? You have no reason to be pissed with me! You are in a different city without your things and running from the only people you know there. You cannot be pissed with me!”

“I can and I will Andrew!” I yell back. “Do you even know why I ran?” I ask, refusing to meet Bryan’s glare.

“Actually, I do. He told me last night.”

“Then you know why I ran.”

“Yeah...because you’re a stubborn woman who doesn’t know the entire story,” Andrew yells.

*What? Is he on Bryan’s side?* I am baffled. “Are you defending him?” I shout at Andrew. Bryan takes a step toward me and holds out his hand for my phone. It’s useless at this point. I give it to him, feeling defeated and betrayed, and begin walking back to the hotel. I don’t care if I never see that phone again at this point.

“Thanks, man, I’ve got it from here. I’ll have her call you when we get home.”

I am almost at the street before Bryan reaches for my hand. I pull it away from him quickly. “You have no right to touch me!” I shout at him.

He smirks. The jackass actually smirks at me. “Why did you run from me?”

“I think it’s pretty obvious,” I step toward him, pointing an accusatory finger at his chest. “You lied to me!”

“What did I lie to you about?” *How is he so calm right now?*

I must look like a disaster. My hair fell from the braid a long time ago and I’ve cried my makeup down my face over the past ten hours. I huff in defeat. “You told me there was no one else.” I close my eyes, stopping the tears from flowing again. *Stay strong. You are strong.*

“There is no one else.”

“Stop lying to me! I heard you, Bryan! I heard you tell Lynn that you love her and you’re sorry you fucked up! I heard you...” I cry, hiding my face with my hands.

Bryan places his hands on my wrists moving my hands from my face gently, but I resist. “Becca, please. Please look at me.” I separate my fingers to see between them.

He laughs. “You heard me say all those things. But it wasn’t in the way you thi...”

“Don’t insult my intelligence, Bryan. There’s only one way to mean I fucked it up for us,” I snap, throwing my arms out in frustration and breaking our connection.

His face turns a dark shade of red. *Get mad. Welcome to the party.*

“I did fuck it up. Moving from New York means there is no need for the administrative building there. Which means Lynn can work from anywhere. Which means the plans she had for the extra office space can’t happen. Which means our working relationship will be very strained or I’ll need a new assistant.” He pauses, searching my eyes. “When I got the call about Dad, I flew out the next morning. I gave her no notice, and she’s been handling everything without me. I promised her I would be back in two weeks. Obviously, that isn’t happening.” *Oh.*

He hesitantly moves the hair from my face and tucks it behind my ear. Moving his hand to the back of my head to tilt it up then takes a step toward me. “You told her you love her,” I whisper, feeling vulnerable.

“I do love her. As a friend. We’ve been through a lot over the years. She’s pissed I’m moving, and she’s scared I’m replacing her as my assistant.” He runs the pad of his thumb over my bottom lip. *Should I believe him?* “There’s only you, Bec. There’s always only been you,” he whispers before leaning down and pressing his lips to mine.

# Chapter 38

Bryan



The flight home was uneventful, but it wiped out Dad's energy just as Becca thought it would. He stayed in bed the rest of the day with Becca by his side. I took comfort in knowing she was there with him, but I also needed to get her alone. Things between us since the other night have been strained. I needed to wrap her in my arms and tell her how much I needed her, needed us. I have only talked to her via text or briefly when I brought her and Dad meals.

**Bryan: Good morning beautiful. How are you?**

**Rebecca: I'm fine. Thank you for my tea this morning.**

**Bryan: Anything for you. Think we could go for a walk together later?**

**Rebecca: Probably not.**

**Bryan: Can I get you anything?**

**Rebecca: I'm good.**

**Bryan: okay baby, let me know if that changes**

**Rebecca: Dr. Jones should be here soon, will you show him in when he gets here?**

**Bryan: Sure thing**

I run my hands through my hair and throw on some clothes before running over to the bungalow. Within minutes, there's a knock at the door.

Except, when I open the door, it isn't Dr. Jones. It is Dr. Dean Smith.

"Good morning, Mr. Kelley," he says with a smile on his smug face. I nod and hold the door wide for him to enter. I lead him to the room Dad and Becca are in, knocking twice before peeking inside.

The smile on Becca's face when our eyes meet makes any fear I had about us being on sinking sand evaporate. I step into the room with Dr. Smith behind me and wrap my arm around her, giving her a quick kiss. *We are going to be okay. We are inevitable.*

"Hi Dr. Smith, I thought Dr. Jones was coming this morning," Becca questions him.

"I asked him to switch so I could see yo..." he pauses and clears his throat awkwardly., "So I could check in on Art." I tighten my arm around Becca. *Mine.*

She nods softly, and she updates him on Dad using medical terminology that I do not understand at all. It is like a different language. Determined not to leave her side, I lean against the wall and watch as Dr. Smith checks his vitals and Becca tucks the blanket around Dad's feet gently. She places her hand on my forearm to get my attention. "Could you get our family together, please?" she asks softly. *Our family.*

We are all gathered at the table waiting on Becca and Dr. Smith anxiously. It feels like hours have passed. I stand to check on them when the bedroom door finally opens, and they step out together. My fist clenches when I see his hand on the small of her back, leading her out of the room, but she doesn't seem to notice and walks over to me. I gesture for her to sit but she shakes her head. "You'll need to sit down for this," she whispers. I know then why they want us together. I knew this was it. Dad is dying. I sit but pull her into my lap. I need her close and want to feel her in my arms.

The room is quiet, and we all watch Dr. Smith fidget from one foot to another. He is avoiding eye contact with all of us. *So unprofessional.* The silence in the room is deafening.

"Just spit it out," Jake snaps.

I close my eyes and tuck my face into Becca's neck, squeezing her to me. She turns in my lap to straddle me and lays her head on my shoulder as she hugs me. She draws circles on the nape of my neck gently, which I find oddly soothing. My eyes meet each of my family's until we all land on Mom, who is looking at Dr. Smith.

"How long do we have?" Mom asks quietly. I tighten my grip, needing

to feel in control of something. Anything in that moment. The doctor just stands there, silent, unmoving. *Man, he's annoying.*

Becca turns in my arms slightly. "Maybe through the weekend," she whispers, her voice laced with sadness. "We can't really pinpoint timing, but it's soon." It feels like the air is being ripped out of my lungs. Taking deep breaths, I try to push the emotions to the side. *Stay strong.*

I look around the table at my family, each of us responding differently to the news.

Emily cries, and Matt huddles with her, consoling each other.

Jake's head is in his hands, his face red with anger, Evelyn rubbing his shoulders and whispering into his ear.

Mom is calm, her expression stoic.

This news isn't shocking but never easy and unexpected, considering he traveled well the other day. I watch Mom as she looks at Dr. Smith expectantly, perhaps waiting for more explanation. Dr. Smith remains silent, looking at anything around him except us. *Coward. How is he even a physician?*

Becca runs her fingers through my hair, stopping at the base of my neck to pull my face to hers. She kisses me gently. "I have to prepare you, though," she whispers. When she speaks, everyone stops to give her their attention. She holds my gaze as if we are the only ones in the room. "It's going to seem like he's getting better. He might get up and walk around or sit and eat a meal. But it is only temporary and after he will be worse, much worse, until he passes." The room is silent except for the soft sobs of the twins. I run my hands along her thighs, thankful she is with me but also sad she even knows how to explain this to us as a family.

"Thank you dear," Mom reaches for her, and Becca leans over to hug Mom.

"Why are you even here?" Jake challenges, turning toward Dr. Smith. He points to Becca. "She's done everything for Dad. What have you done? Why are you even here?"

"Jake, relax man." Matt reaches for his shoulder, calming him down.

"I'll step out." Dr. Smith turns to Becca before leaving. "If you need me, you know where to find me." *Over my dead body, will she ever need you.*

Once the door closes behind him, Emily is the first to speak, with tears running down her face. "What do we do?"

Everyone sits at the table quietly.

It was Evelyn who finally speaks. Her eyes locked with Jake's. "We love him through it."



Dr. Smith left only a few hours prior. We haven't left the bungalow since, afraid to miss any time with Dad. The doorbell rings and I open it, surprised to see Jenny and Sam on the porch with their arms full. "Hey, what's all this?" I ask, holding the door open for them.

Jenny rolls her eyes and practically throws the bags of food she is carrying into my hands. "Where's my sister, LB?"

She didn't wait for my response before rushing into the living room when she sees my mom. I help Sam maneuver a huge wheelchair before shaking his hand and leading him inside. Becca comes out of Dad's bedroom, rushing to her sister. I watch the two embrace, squeezing each other tightly. Leaning back to look into each other's eyes, nod, then squeeze each other again. The love these two sisters have for one another is unmatched. I remember growing up, Becca said it was always her and Jenny against everyone else...her mom and her mom's boyfriends. Their bond is unbreakable.

I step into Dad's room to sit with him, listening to their hushed voices through the open door. When I grab his hand to hold, Dad whispers, "How's your mom?" His voice sounds pained, but all I see is the worry for her in his eyes.

"She's so strong, Dad. She's okay."

He nods and reaches for the pillow behind him. I jump up to help him reposition in the bed. I wish we would have gotten the hospital bed when Becca suggested it. He would be more comfortable now.

Dad is looking over my shoulder into the living room. "Take care of her, yeah?"

"Mom will be fine. I'll make sure of it."

His eyes, identical to mine, search my face. "I wasn't talking about your mother," he smiles a knowing smile. "Do you know what I love most about you, son?"

I wait for him to continue, wrapping my hands around his. "Your greatest strength is love. You love others so deeply. Just don't let it blind you from what you want out of this life."

I watch as Dad settles back on his pillows again, his eyes drifting closed, continuing to rest. *Had I been blind to what I wanted?* After moving to New York and our breakup, I swore off relationships. I graduated from college and then focused on building a business. I'll admit, my focus was on making money and becoming financially independent, but did I love it my life? I feel alive again being back in Jessamine...or was it Becca that made me feel alive again?

Once Dad is back to sleep, I join everyone in the living room. Becca jumps up from where she is sitting at the table and meets me in the kitchen. I wrap my arm around her shoulder and kiss her temple. "Did you do all this?" I gesture to the trays of food along the countertop.

"We had to eat," she shrugs, and I pinch her side, gently eliciting a smile and a giggle.

I turn and wrap both arms around her, bending slightly to lift her into my arms. I bury my face in her neck and kiss her gently there. "I'll never be able to thank you enough. I don't know what I would have done without you." Her cheeks shift against me as she smiles and tucks her face into my shoulder.

"Can you put my little sister down?"

I turn to see Jenny standing beside us, annoyed, hands on her hips and ready to tap her foot. I bend slightly to place Becca's feet on the ground and turn to Jenny, offering my hand to her. I always knew I wasn't Jenny's favorite person. She tolerates me, at best.

"Thank you, Jenny."

She just stands there and watches me for a beat too long. I turn to Becca, questioning what I should do when two arms wrap around my torso. Jenny is hugging me. Actually, hugging me. Granted, it is a brief squeeze, then she steps back before turning to say her goodbyes and leave. *Wow! Never saw that coming.*

After lunch, Dad is awake and wants to walk on the beach with Mom. Jake and I get him situated in the rental beach wheelchair and help her push it to the firmer sand before stepping back. We all watch as they move away from us, slowly walking behind them.

I stop and pull Becca to me in a hug, needing to feel her. She pulls back slightly, and I can see the worry in her eyes. "You ok?"

"Yeah, I am." I twirl a rogue piece of her hair around my finger mindlessly. "I thought I would be sadder. Is it bad that I'm not sad?"



She shakes her head, “What are you feeling?”

“Thankful. So thankful.”

She smiles, “I’ve learned that most people are saddest when they’re grieving for everything their loved one will miss or they’re guilty of not doing more while they were still with us. Being thankful means you are at peace. You know what’s coming, and it’s ok to be sad, but you also know he wouldn’t want you to stay sad.”

I smile and pull her lips to mine. “I love you so fucking much,” I say against her lips before kissing her deeper, harder. As I slip my tongue to explore her, a soft moan escapes from her lips. Her responsiveness encourages me even more. I want her. Forever. Always.

Jake’s booming voice startles us, “Ok love birds, Dad’s ready to do a crossword puzzle.” I pull back and laugh, grasping Becca’s hand and walking back to the bungalow with my family. Once inside, we all settle around the living room and kitchen. Evelyn and Mom are baking something, Matt close by. Becca is on the couch closest to him, and I am seated on the floor at Dad’s feet, leaning against it. Emily and Jake are curled into chairs opposite Dad’s, watching silently as he settles into his recliner.

“Don’t look so sad, Tator tot. We still have today,” Dad smiles softly. “Will you sing for me?” With tears falling freely, Emily takes a steadying breath and begins to sing softly. I lean my head back onto the cushion and close my eyes, listening to my dad’s steady breathing. With Becca’s fingers in my hair, scratching my scalp softly, and the sounds of my family around, I feel at peace.



I wish I could tell you that everything got better as the night progressed, but it did not. Dad is restless most of the night. He wants to stay with us in the living room but is in a lot of pain, even with his medicine. Emily and Becca take turns sitting close by and singing to him, which seems to bring him relief. We are all exhausted, physically, but more so emotionally. The day is weighing on us, heavy.

I sit quietly on the back porch with my brothers. I hate the feeling of just sitting around and waiting. I hate not being able to do anything to help him. I hate knowing there would soon be a hole in our family that can’t be filled. The back door opens quickly, and my eyes meet hers. Becca is standing in

the doorway, her eyes teary and full of sadness. She doesn't have to say anything. I know what this means. We all stand and follow her inside to find everyone kneeling or sitting around Dad.

His breathing is shallow, labored. Mom caresses his face, kissing his cheek. "I love you," she whispers. Dad's eyes flutter quickly. Matt steps beside the recliner, squeezing his hand gently and we each follow suit, saying our last goodbyes to the pillar of our family.

The only sound in the room is Dad's shallow breathing. My eyes meet Becca's across the room, and she begins to softly sing the lyrics to Amazing Grace. Hearing her delicate voice brings peace to my spirit, even though I am watching my dad struggle to breathe. He needs to be at peace. It's time for him to feel at peace. I crouch down beside his chair and reach for his hand. When I squeeze gently, his eyes open into slivers, "It's ok Dad. You can let go," I whisper with a smile. "I love you."

We all watch silently as he takes his last breath. *He's gone.*

I stand and wrap my arms around Mom. I turn slightly to search the room for her, needing to be grounded, needing her here with me. As if she could sense it, she steps beside me, looping her arm into mine and resting her head on my bicep.

The room is somber. The emotional exhaustion of the past few weeks taking over. The physical exhaustion of the past few days weighing heavily on each of us.



Just before sunrise the next morning, I walk to the kitchen to find Becca sitting at the counter with a cup of tea in front of her. So lost in thought that she doesn't hear me and jumps when I wrap my arms around her from behind. She leans into my chest, rubbing my forearms around her. "I love seeing you in my kitchen," I say between kisses to her neck.

She leans forward out of my hold and turns to face me. "How's your mom and Emily?"

I run my fingers through her hair. Of course, she's worried about everyone else. "They're good. Staying at Matt's with Evelyn." I watch as she sips her tea and run my hands up and down her arms in a comfortable silence. "Move in with me."

She swallows hard, and shock covers her face. Becca is silent,

unmoving. *Shit, I scared her.* I pull out the stool and sit beside her as she studies me for what feels like hours. *Ok, maybe not.* I stand and make my way to the fridge saying, “Sorry, that’s a crazy...”

“Yes.”

Her voice is barely above a whisper. I freeze with my back turned to her. *Did she just say yes? Am I hearing things?*

I slowly turn to find her smiling, with tears in her eyes. “Yes, I’ll move in with you.”

I can’t get around the island fast enough, reaching for her and wrapping my arms around her. I run my hands down her back and over her ass, lifting her. She giggles as I quickly kiss her collarbone, neck, then jaw. Anything and everything I can reach; I want to kiss. The emotions of the day, hell, the turmoil I’ve felt since I landed, finally catching up with me. I squeeze my girl, tears streaming down my face as she pulls me in for a kiss. *Finally. She’s mine.*

# Chapter 39

## Rebecca



“A

nd you said yes?” Jenny shrieks through the phone. I am in the kitchen, unpacking the groceries I had delivered, when Jenny calls asking how things are here. I didn’t realize she was looking for an update on Art and the family until it was too late and I let this morning with Bryan slip. I huff, listening to her lecture. “Bec, he just lost his dad. He’s grieving. How do you know he meant it?”

“Because I know him!”

“No, you used to know him!”

I huff in response. Our yelling match is getting us nowhere.

“I’m calling Andrew,” she threatens, and I freeze.

“You wouldn’t dare.” I feel my face redden. Thankfully, I am home alone. Bryan is with his family at the funeral home planning for the service next week.

“Oh, I absolutely would! I can’t believe you agreed to this! First, you quit your job...”

“I didn’t quit! I took a leave of absence.”

“Okay, fine. You took a leave of absence,” she mocks. “Then you moved in as Art’s caregiver. Now you’re moving in with your high school boyfriend. The same boyfriend that left you ten years ago and never came back!”

“That’s not fair, Jenny. I told him to leave, remember?”

“But he still chose to leave.” The silence is deafening. I know she’s right, but we were just kids. Plus, she was the one who pointed out he only did what I told him to.

“Just be careful. I don’t want you to get hurt again.”

“And I don’t want to have to kill him,” I hear Sam yell over the line.

“Sorry bro, I don’t have bail money,” I laugh and turn to see Evelyn walk through the back door. “I gotta go sissy. Love you.”

“Hey E, come in!”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“It’s totally fine. My sister isn’t thrilled with me right now,” I explain. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Water is perfect, thanks.” Evelyn pulls out a barstool and slides into the soft seat. “What’s wrong with Jenny?”

I pass her a tumbler with ice water and explain my conversation with my sister. It is nice to have someone to talk to who doesn’t know all of our history and isn’t super protective like Andrew would be. “Ok, enough about me. How are you feeling?”

“I feel pregnant, very pregnant.”

“Well, that’s because you are.”

“Could you help me with something, actually?” Evelyn looks at the counter, running her finger along the marble top nervously.

“Sure, what’s up?”

“I need you to not tell the guys about it.” *Oh no.*

I nod hesitantly. The Kelley brothers are incredibly protective of their family, which includes Evelyn.

“I have a scrape on my thigh that I cannot see very well to clean, and I think it is infected.”

I nod, motion for her to follow, and lead her to the hallway bathroom where my nursing bag is stored. Evelyn lifts her tank top and lowers her leggings while I prep the counter space. When I turn toward her and see the large gauze pads covering from the top of her left hip to her lowest rib, my eyes immediately fly to hers. This is not just a scrape. I knew her husband was abusive in the past and I don’t want to trigger her or make her think she can’t come to me...but this is bad. She avoids making eye contact, and I remove the tape as gently as I can. Once everything is removed and cleaned, I go to the kitchen to get some Tylenol and water for her.

“I’m sure you think awful of me,” she meekly whispers.

I shake my head as I gently begin redressing the wound. “Absolutely not.” *What in the hell happened?* I work in silence before Evelyn begins to speak.

“I went home to get some clothes and pack my hospital bag, but Mav came home.” Her breath hitches. It takes everything in me to not look at her, not react. “He was furious with me. Said he was worried about me, and the baby and he didn’t know where I had been. When I didn’t give him any details, he accused me of sleeping with Matt.” I suck in a breath at the accusation. *Absolutely ridiculous.* I hate this guy. “He cut the dress I was wearing off of me, saying I never make myself decent for him so no other man should have me looking pretty.”

“Do you think he meant to cut the dress or your skin?”

“The dress. I was so upset, I didn’t even realize it was there until I showered after...,” I watch as she bites her lip in embarrassment.

I stand to help her redress. “It’s not my place to judge you. You’re safe here. With me.” *Stupid, arrogant man. He has a god complex that needs to be put in place!*

She nods and cries softly when I wrap my arms around her tightly. “I was scared to say no. I didn’t know if he would hurt the baby and I didn’t want to chance it,” she explains. *Say no?* Did he force himself on her? Poor Evie. I pull back and wipe her tears from her cheeks, readjusting her hair. “I’m leaving him. All I need is a permanent address and a restraining order before I can file the divorce papers.”

“That’s so brave of you. I’m sure you could use Matt or Emily’s address. Hell, any of their addresses.”

She nods knowingly. “I need to do this on my own.” *I get that. That’s why I moved out of Mama’s during college.*

We walk back to the kitchen, and I package up some supplies in case she needs to change the bandage before I see her again. This woman is so strong and brave but can’t seem to catch a break. *A permanent address.* “I know of a really cute place that’s available,” I turn to her, smiling. Moving in with Bryan meant my house would be empty. We spent the next hour discussing the house, showing her pictures, and finalizing details. By the end, I had Jake on the phone getting the moving company organized to pack up her house and move her belongings into mine on Monday morning.

When Bryan came home hours later, Evelyn and I were asleep curled on

the couch. I feel his hands under me before lifting me. I immediately wrap my arms around his neck. “How’d today go?”

“I missed you like crazy,” he answers before laying me on the bed gently.

I rolled my eyes. “I meant at the funeral home.”

He nods and gives me a boyish grin as he climbs up my body, pressing his to mine. I return his firm kisses with soft, quick ones, waiting for my answer. With a huff, he rolls to his side and leans on his elbow. “It was hard. Mom seemed ok but Emily was not at all. Jake had to take her home early because she was so upset.”

“I wish you would have called me. I could have come and picked her up.” I turn and face him, running my hand from his chest to his shoulder.

“I know, but you deserve a day without my family drama. What did you do today?”

“I spent a good bit of time with Evelyn.” Before I can tell him about the house and her moving, his cell phone is ringing.

“Hold that thought,” he says before rolling off the other side of the bed, answering his phone, and stepping out of the bedroom.

*Why did he leave the room? He hadn't done that before...unless I walked up to him talking to her. Lynn.* Her name makes me nauseous. We still haven't talked about that night. I don't trust her. I don't like her. She is too close to Bryan, and that really upsets me. I know it is irrational. They work together and have for a long time. She helped build his business as his assistant. His sexy assistant, who probably couldn't keep her hands to herself. I shake my head in frustration. I have no proof that there was ever a relationship or situationship there. I need to stop obsessing over her.

I reach for my phone, contact HR, and set my return to work for Tuesday morning, understanding that I would need next Friday off for the funeral. Thankfully, I could keep my previous schedule but would work with Dr. Jones instead of Dr. Smith. I know Bryan would be excited about that.

**Rebecca: My return to work is set for Tuesday. Looks like I'll get Dr. Jones to myself for 12 hours each day.**

**Andrew: I'm jealous. Glad you got that set.**

**Jenny: What did LB say?**

**Rebecca: He doesn't know yet**

**Jenny: And why not? I mean, you are LIVING WITH HIM NOW.**

*Shit.* My phone rings in my hand, Andrew's handsome face on the screen.

"Explain."

"Can we not FaceTime? I look like shit."

"Explain,"

Rolling my eyes, I give in to my best friend. I know he won't drop this until we talk about this. I watch his face turn from angry to shocked to proud as I explain the last 24 hours. My eyes go to the door when Bryan steps into the room.

"Where is he?"

"He's right here," I say and flip the camera to face Bryan.

"Put on some damn clothes!"

"It's my fucking house," Bryan retorts as I flip the camera back to me. My eyes are glued to Bryan's bare chest and low-hanging gym shorts.

"It's not very lady-like to drool, Ace."

I roll my eyes at Andrew, reluctantly pulling my eyes from Bryan. "Are we good here?" He nods before I say goodbye with a promise to call him tomorrow.

I sit up in the bed and watch Bryan move around the bedroom. "Is Evelyn still asleep?"

"Matt came and got her while I was on the phone." He continues moving things around in the dresser.

"Did your call go ok?" I ask and pull my knees into my chest tightly.

"Yep, just work stuff," he says as he flops on the bed beside me and rubs my back gently. "One storefront beside a branch in New Jersey had an electrical fire, and they were freaking out. So was Lynn."

At the sound of her name, my body clenches. I drop my head to my knees, knowing he felt my reaction. "Hey..." he pulls on my shoulder gently, but I pull back. "Bec, what's wrong?" I close my eyes, knowing this conversation needs to happen, but I don't want to fight. "Bec."

I turn to him, hurrying to my knees. "I don't like it."

"Like what exactly?" He sits up and reaches for me, but I lean away, knowing if he touches me, I will lose my courage. "You can tell me."

I close my eyes to avoid him. "I don't like you with her."

"Her? Who's 'her'?" he asks innocently. *You've got to be kidding me.*

"Lynn!" I throw my arms in the air in frustration and stand from the bed, walking toward the bathroom, but he is quicker than me and intercepts my



hand, twirling me to him.

He places the hand he is holding on his chest and pulls my hips toward him. "I'm not in a relationship with her. We just"

"Work together," I interrupt and roll my eyes, turning away from him. "I know."

"She's my assistant, that's it." He lifts his hand to my chin. "I swear to you."

I know I am being ridiculous and unreasonable. Hell, I don't even know her. How can I be so jealous of her? *Because she has been his constant since he left me.*

"Babe?" He studies me, waiting for a response.

I close my eyes in exacerbation. "I'm jealous of her," I admit quietly.

I drop my forehead to his chest, and he leans to whisper in my ear, "You're pretty cute when you're jealous." I groan in response. *Asshat.* "What can I do?"

My mouth moves before my brain catches up. "Stay away from her." *Why did I just say that?*

"Done," he replies immediately.

"What?" I ask, stepping back. *Really?*

Bryan meets me toe-to-toe, holding my face in his palms. His sky blue eyes bored into mine with complete sincerity. "Baby girl...It's you. You are the only one that I will ever want." I inhale sharply, my eyes filling with tears. My heart is full of hope and promise. "We belong to each other," he confidently declares, leaning down to kiss the tears now streaming down my face.

I can't find my voice, shocked by his admission. I didn't realize how much of my life I was missing without him. I feel so loved, happy, and cherished.

He pulls me to the bed where he sits against the headboard, pulling me to sit between his legs, leaning against his chest. He wraps his arms around me, holding my hands and playing mindlessly with my fingers. "I see us ten years from now, sitting on the back porch with a pitcher of sangria, listening to the waves crash on the shore." He pauses. "Some kids, running through the yard."

"That sounds perfect," I whisper, turning my face toward him slightly.

He kisses my cheek sweetly. "You are the only thing that matters to me. I need you, only you."

# Chapter 40

Bryan



I tighten my arm around Becca's waist, pulling her toward me. I run my palm along her side, squeezing the curve of her hips. I can't believe we have only been back in each other's lives for less than a month. I didn't realize how much of my life I wasn't living in New York, how much of my heart was here, with her. Becca shimmies her body softly, asking for me to rub her back. That was something that hasn't changed over time, much like my love for this woman. I will never give up an opportunity to have my hands on her beautiful body and nuzzle my face into her hair, breathing her in as I gently massage her.

My phone vibrates, signaling the start of my very busy day. "Gotta go, babe." Becca stays sprawled out on the bed; her eyes closed as I lean over to get a kiss before hopping into the shower.

It is almost 7 am when I step into the bungalow to have breakfast with Mom. My siblings and I decided that each of us would continue our days that were dedicated to our parents for the next few weeks.

"Morning, Mom," I yell as I close the door behind me and step toward the smell of cooking bacon. "Oh, you're not Mom."

I am surprised to see Matt standing at the stove, cooking breakfast. "Very observant of you."

"Where's Mom?" I ask, peeking into the living room. Matt gestures toward the guest room Becca had been staying in the past few weeks. *I need*

*to get this room packed up and taken home.*

I knock twice before opening the door to Mom and Emily cuddling on the bed together, reading. “Everything ok?” I ask when neither of them looks up.

“Hi, honey.” Mom gives me a hesitant smile. “Dad left your sister a letter. We were just reading it together.”

“A letter?” I ask, taking a hesitant step toward the bed. Emily says nothing but passes me a single piece of paper in Dad’s handwriting.

MY SWEET EMILY,

I KNOW YOU’RE SAD TATER TOT. I’M SAD I’M NOT WITH YOU, BUT I NEED YOU TO TAKE A DEEP BREATH AND STAY STRONG. I’M SORRY I RAN OUT OF TIME TO TELL YOU, AGAIN, HOW MUCH I LOVE YOU, AND HOW PROUD I AM OF YOU. WHEN YOU CAME HOME A FEW WEEKS AGO, I KNEW YOU WERE UNHAPPY. AND I FAILED YOU. WHEN YOU TOLD ME AND YOUR MOM THAT YOU FELT LIKE YOU DIDN’T KNOW WHO YOU WERE ANYMORE, I WAS SHOCKED AND DIDN’T KNOW WHAT TO SAY. I’M SORRY THAT I DIDN’T GET TO SAY THIS TO YOU IN PERSON, BUT I’M SORRIER I FAILED TO ENCOURAGE YOU THEN.

I KNOW YOU FEEL STUCK AND LOST. YOU HAVE MANY PASSIONS AND SOMETIMES IT’S HARD TO FEEL FULFILLED WHEN THERE ARE SO MANY DIRECTIONS. BUT WHAT IF THAT’S EXACTLY WHO YOU ARE? WHAT IF YOU’RE A PERSON TRYING NEW THINGS, EXPLORING, AND CREATING A LIFE THAT YOU LOVE? TAKE THE TIME TO SEE WHAT FEELS RIGHT AND DO MORE OF THAT. THAT SOUNDS LIKE A BEAUTIFUL LIFE TO ME. YOU HAVE SO MUCH TO GIVE THIS WORLD. KEEP SHINING YOUR LIGHT, PRINCESS, AND YOU’LL FIND YOUR WAY. I KNOW YOU WILL.

LOVE,

DAD

“Wow.” I run my fingertips along the written words. “Em, I didn’t know you were struggling...Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Oh yeah, I’m going to tell my super successful big brother that I suck at life...great plan.” *What’s with the attitude?*

“Really? That’s where we are?”

“Come on, you two, let’s go eat,” Mom says before walking out of the room.

I wrap my arm around Emily’s shoulder. “We’re not done talking about this.” I expect a smart comment or argument, but Emily just nods and walks with me to the kitchen where Matt and Jake sit at the table waiting. I look around the table at my family. *Only missing Dad.*

After breakfast, we sit on the porch together and listen to Emily explain what she’s been dealing with over the past couple of years. I did not know she was struggling with money and relationships like that. The more Emily went into detail, the redder Matt’s face turned. The twins have a unique relationship, but since Emily moved away from home, they’ve been able to keep their secrets, well Emily has been able to.

Matt slams his fist on the arm of the chair, causing Mom to jump. He is seething, “Why the fuck didn’t you say anything before now?”

Emily clenches her teeth. “Because you can’t always scoop in and save me! None of you can!”

“The hell we can’t,” Jake says as he types away on his phone.

Emily is defensive, understandably so. While arguing her independence is unsuccessful against the three of us, I am glad she is talking to us now. “I am going to be fine,” she whines, stretching that last “e” in the annoying way only a little sister can.

“We know you will, tater tot.”

“You do?” She looks genuinely surprised. *I need to do better by her.* “What the hell, Jake? Take it back. I don’t want your money.”

Jake stands, leans down, and kisses our sister’s head, “Sorry, no returns or exchanges.”



By mid-afternoon, I hide in my office dealing with the Jersey issue. After multiple calls with the insurance company and landlord, I finally can conference with my team.

“We need to empty the building and switch everyone to remote.” Lynn is leading the decision on this. Dressed in her usual navy business suit, she is scary to those who didn’t work with her.

“Are you good with that, Brad?” I ask the branch manager.

“Sounds great. I know my team would love to be remote.” I really

appreciated the flexibility of our industry. Over the past month, my schedule has really allowed me to be present for my family and with Becca.

“Great, I’ll call the landlord next and end the lease agreement. Lynn, can you work with Brad to ensure his employees have the internet requirements and equipment to transition home by the end of the week?”

That call, much like the earlier ones, had eaten up hours of my day. I am exhausted and ready to crash. I miss Bec. I haven’t talked to her since this morning, so I shoot her a quick text and then join my next conference call.

**Bryan: Hey gorgeous - I’ve missed you today. How’s your day been?**

“I can’t come up there this week,” I try to reason with the landlord. He needs a termination agreement signed before he will release the contract. “Lynn’s name is also on the lease. Can she sign these in my stead?”

After another hour of arguing with the landlord and Lynn about breaking this contract, I realize I haven’t heard back from Becca. I listen to Lynn drone on about the never-ending list of items to follow-up on and shoot her another text.

**Bryan: It’ll be a late night in the office, I’m sorry baby. Breakfast tomorrow?**

By the end of the night, I have a flight booked for Jersey for Wednesday morning, returning the same day to sign that damn paper. I am beyond pissed at how the landlord is handling the whole situation. After another two hours of work, I finally shut off my computer and cell phone, not wanting any distractions for the rest of the night.

The house is dark and quiet. I peek out the window and see Becca’s car in the driveway, so I know she’s here. I grab a sandwich and make my way through the house, looking for my girl. The bedroom door is cracked with a soft light shining into the hallway. I push the door open to find Becca curled up on my side of the bed. She looks so peaceful with her hair sprayed across my pillow. I quietly get ready for bed and when I join her under the covers, she turns toward me sleepily and lays her head on my chest. *Finally. This is home.*

# Chapter 41

## Rebecca



I jump out of bed frantically when my alarm sounds. I was afraid of oversleeping, so my volume is as high as it could be, and I set three different alarms. I'll admit it was a bit overkill, but I didn't want to be late on my first day back at the hospital. I rush through my morning routine but lost track of time as I perfect the French braid; I am insistent on wearing today.

I step into the kitchen, smiling when I see Bryan standing at the stovetop. "Morning Bry."

"Hey baby," he replies, lifting his arm for me to step into a hug. "I missed you yesterday. How was your day?"

"It was good, just really busy."

"Me too. I'm sorry I missed seeing you before bed." He leans back slightly, noticing my clothing. "What's with the scrubs?"

"Today's my first day back." I really am excited to be back. I didn't realize how much I missed working. I stand on my tippy toes to place a kiss on his lush lips before spinning out of his arms to pack my lunch for the day.

"I didn't realize you were going back so soon."

"It's not soon. I didn't see a need to wait."

The pan drops onto the counter, and I watch Bryan grip the countertop ledge and take a deep breath. *Woah...*

"Is that not ok?" I ask softly.

His posture straightens, turning toward me, and smiles. "Yeah, of

course. Do you have time for breakfast before you leave?”

The smirk on his lips causes my heart to flutter. “I wish I could. I should have left already.” I watch his face shift from hopeful to disappointed before adding, “I’ll see you tonight, okay? I’ll be home by nine,” I say as I walk out of the room, waving goodbye.

The drive to the hospital is quick and after the monotonous paperwork with human resources, I am free to work. I practically skip to the second-floor nurse’s station where Dr. Jones and Claire are standing. When our eyes lock, Claire squeals, dropping everything in her hands to run to me. I wrap my arms around her tightly. “Rebecca Cooper, I missed you so damn much. I didn’t even know you were gone until, well, you were gone!”

I laugh. “Yeah, sorry about that. I had something come up.” We loop our arms and walk the rest of the way together.

“Good morning, Dr. Jones,” I smile as I step up to the counter and see Dr. Smith behind the desk. “Dr. Smith.” Dean nods a hello before returning to his paperwork.

“Turns out you’re stuck with me now, Becca.”

“So, I hear,” I reply with a grin. I am so thankful to be pulled from Dr. Smith. It is already awkward between us and things moving forward with Bryan will make it even worse.

The rest of the morning flies by. Claire and Dr. Jones bring me up to speed on all our long-term cases and I complete some continuing education courses in between patients. I sit down in the break room to call Bryan and eat lunch when my phone pings in my hand.

**Andrew: Hope you have a great first day back! Don’t get any funny ideas with my LB**

**Rebecca: Lol! Thanks! It’s been a great day back - so far!**

**Andrew: Drinks tonight to celebrate?**

**Rebecca: Yes! I miss you!**

**Monica: I’m inviting myself**

**Andrew: Get your own date! Don’t leech off me!**

**Jenny: I’ll be your date, Mon**

**Monica: THANK YOU! I’m so glad SOMEONE loves me**

**Seriously though have a great day, see ya tonight**

I look up to see Jenny and Dr. Jones walking into the break room, laughing at what I presume to be our text conversation. “I’m stealing your

man tonight.” I playfully toss a carrot at Robbie.

“So, I hear,” he mocks. “It’s cool. I’m on call tonight, anyway. Y’all have fun. He’s missed you.”

“Me too. All of you.”

“It hasn’t been that long. Are you gonna make it Friday?”

Looking at my sister, I point to myself in question. “Yes, Rebecca. Are you going to be at the funeral for your would-have-been father-in-law?”

I roll my eyes and huff. I know she isn’t being mean, but the truth stings. My eyes fill with tears, thinking about Art missing our wedding. *Our wedding.*

**Bryan: Hope your day is going good**

**Rebecca: I was just thinking about you...**

**Bryan: Oh yeah? What about me?**

**Rebecca: It was actually more about getting my stuff over to your house...what should I do with my old decorations? They don’t exactly match your aesthetic...**

**Bryan: You can change whatever you would like in our home. If you’re happy, then I’m happy.**

**Rebecca: Oh goody! My lighthouse lamp will look great on your side of the bed.**

I laugh, chewing on my lunch. Bryan hates beachy themes and always has. “What’s so funny?” Jenny asks. I shake my head with a big smile. Not going there with her.

**Bryan: Is it red and white or blue and white? I want to make sure I order the perfect comforter to match. Unless of course, you already have one...**

**Rebecca: I have one to match, It’s sky blue with pictures of seashells. You’ll like it, it’s very realistic.**

**Bryan: Lol, God I love you. Seriously though, change what you want. I’ve added you to my credit card. Your card should be here in the next few days, but I’ll give you mine in case you need it before then.**

**Rebecca: I don’t need to buy anything. And if I did, I don’t need your money.**

**Bryan: No but it’s a new place and I want you to make it our home.**



*Our home.*

**Rebecca: You don't want to decorate with me?**

**Bryan: Change what you want, keep what you want. The only thing I care about is that you are there with me. I've loved having you in my bed every morning. I've spent far too long without you and don't want to waste any more time.**

**Rebecca: Gotcha. So I'll sleep at my house then sneak into your bed before you wake up. That sounds perfect!**

**Bryan: ha-ha**

**Rebecca: JK**

**Bryan: You're in this with me, right?**

**Rebecca: 100%**

I spend the rest of my shift spinning scenarios in my head. I'll go home and tell him I want us, not the old us, the new us. I want commitment from him, a promise not to leave. I won't be able to handle it if he leaves again. *What if he leaves? What if Lynn comes here since He's not going back? What if I told him I loved him? Do I love him?* Before I know it, it is time to leave the hospital and head to meet Andrew.

The Attic is practically empty when I walk in, which isn't uncommon for a random Tuesday night. As soon as I see Andrew, I run into his arms. I've missed my best friend. His hands wrap around me tightly and he holds me when my body shakes. I didn't realize how much pain and hurt I was holding back until I saw him. Once my breath steadies, I climb into his lap and finish his sangria. We sit at the bar, chatting away like we haven't seen each other in years when it has really only been a few days, very eventful days.

"You're moving in with him, then?"

I nod hesitantly, "Am I crazy?"

"Yeah, you are," Andrew laughs. "Just be careful, okay? I don't want you to get hurt."

"I don't want to either. But I don't want to regret not doing it either."

"I get that." Andrew slides his glass toward the bartender, signaling for a refill. "If it matters, he really does care about you."

I wrap my hands around his neck. "Of course, it matters to me." Andrew is great at reading people's characters and is rarely wrong. Plus, I trust him. "He told me he loved me." I watch Andrew for a reaction, but he won't meet

my eye.

“What did you say back?”

“I didn’t know what to say.”

His eyes cut to mine. “You need to tell him.”

“I can’t tell him what I don’t know,” I whine.

Andrew cups my face, pulling me closer. His dark eyes boring into mine. “You do know. You’ve always known.”

*I do. I love him too.*



I wake up the next morning refreshed and feeling more like myself than I have in a really long time. Before Bryan stepped back into my life, I was so unhappy and constantly going through the motions. Admittedly, I focused on others’ needs and ignored my own, but my relationship with him has empowered me. I reach for my phone to silence my alarm and found a note slid under a glass of water with two aspirin. *Such a sweet man.* I grabbed the note and started getting ready for the day.

Morning Ace - You were sleeping so peacefully I couldn’t wake you. I hope you had fun with Andrew last night. Take the Tylenol and hydrate. I don’t want you to have a headache. I realized something yesterday... Some people think the word forever means something is unending. And that may be, but for me, forever means you. You’re it for me, baby. You’ve always been it for me. I love you, Bryan

*I love him.* I have to tell him tonight. I am floating on air the rest of the morning. I really try to focus on my patients, but if someone or something doesn’t need my immediate attention, my mind wanders to his crystal blue eyes. A throat clears, and I look up from my seat at the nurses’ station to see Claire staring at me, smiling. “And what has your head in the clouds?”

“Nothing,” I answer quickly and return to writing. I am not about to tell the hospital gossip that I’m in love with my patient’s son.

“It sure doesn’t seem like nothing. What’s going on with you?” Claire leans against the counter, propped on her elbows, insistent on an answer.

“Nothing’s going on. I’m fine, I promise.” I try not to look up at her and hope my tone will make her drop it.

“If you say so...I just think you’re hiding something.” She pauses and leans closer to me, whispering, “or someone.”

“Oh, is Bryan a secret?” Dr. Jones steps behind me, squeezing my

shoulders gently. “You should have thought about that before you moved in with him.” *I could kill him.*

“I knew it! I knew he had a thing for you!”

“Whatever,” I huff, rolling my eyes at Robbie and Claire.

“Please! He couldn’t take his eyes off you the last time I saw him!”

“That’s not all he couldn’t take off her,” Robbie snorts in laughter.

I stand quickly, closing the folders I am working on. “I’m not doing this here. I’m going to lunch.” I try to sound harsh, angry even, but knowing Claire saw Bryan’s attraction to me brought butterflies to my stomach. I push through the break room door and turn when footsteps followed me inside.

“You’re not really upset, right?” Robbie asks, fear paints his handsome face. For a minute, I think about messing with him, but in the end, I decide against it.

“No, definitely not,” I laugh as I unpack my lunch bag.

“Okay good. I didn’t want to overstep.”

I can’t help but laugh and practically choke on my sandwich. “Trust me, you’ll know if you make me mad.”

He gives me a knowing smile before leaving the room. I can’t imagine the stories Andrew has told him about us, about me. My nickname in college was Hornet for a reason. I pull my phone out, hoping to catch Bryan. The phone rings and rings, eventually going to his voicemail.

“Hey, Bry. I’m having my lunch. Was just hoping I could hear your voice. I can’t wait to see you tonight. Talk to you later. Bye.”

I wonder what he will say when I finally say it back. I know I hurt him when I didn’t say it back the last time.

I am packing up from lunch when a text notification comes through from Bryan.

**Bryan: Sorry I missed your call. Work has been crazy today. The landlord is being a pain in my ass and rescheduled our meeting for this afternoon. Looks like I’ll be in Jersey later than I intended.**

Jersey? Did he tell me he was traveling today? Surely, I would have remembered that.

**Rebecca: No worries. Thank you for my note and medicine this morning. <3**

**Bryan: I wish I could have been there to tell you in person**

**Rebecca: You could always read it to me tonight...**

**Bryan: Consider it done**

**Rebecca: See ya tonight**

**Bryan: Later Bec**



The roar of the engine makes me smile. There are very few possessions that I love, but my car is one of them. I scroll through my phone to find my favorite playlist, a compilation of cover songs I often perform at The Attic. I left work a few hours early and hope to have dinner ready for when Bryan gets home, eager to lay everything out for him, for us. Rolling my windows down, I enjoy the afternoon air on my way home. Jessamine Beach isn't a big town by any stretch of the imagination, but the new drive home takes even less time. I roll up my windows and stop the music as I make my last turn onto our street. Since I started back to work, I have seen none of the Kelley siblings or Lottie. I knew Matt and Jake had been helping Evelyn with the move, but I needed to check in on Emily. I make a last-minute decision to pull into her driveway to run in and check on her before heading home to cook dinner for Bryan.

I turn to the back seat to grab my bag, but something catches my eye, rather someone. Bryan is standing at the front of his driveway, turned toward the bungalow. I can't help but smile. *He's home.* A jolt of excitement flows through me. That is until someone walks around a black Mercedes. I watch as he stretches his arms wide, and a blonde woman smiles up at him. She is practically half his height. I watch her wrap her arms around his waist, rubbing his back. I don't recognize her, but obviously they know each other. That is crystal clear. I reach for my bag but stop with one leg outside of the car when my eyes lock on them again. Her arms are wrapped tightly around him now. His face tucked into her neck intimately.

*No.*

*I am frozen.*

*Blood rushes to my ears.*

*My heart pounding out of my chest.*

Then it hits me like a ton of bricks, *Lynn.* His assistant, that he swore he would stay away from, just the other day. I knew it. I knew she was more than his assistant. I knew this was all too good to be true. I'm so glad I didn't

tell him how I truly felt. I knew deep down I was protecting myself for a reason.

The tears burn my eyes as I quickly get back into the car, slamming the door in the process. I watch Bryan turning quickly toward me, his arms still wrapped around Lynn. Her hands rubbing his chest. *Damn it.* His eyes widened slightly before locking with mine through the windshield. *I can't do this. I won't do this.* I put the car in reverse and speed down the street as my heart breaks all over again.

## Chapter 42

Bryan



“F

uck, fuck, fuck,” I yell and throw my phone against the counter. I fucked up royally. I was surprised, shocked Becca was home early. But she left before I could even explain. I wasn’t hiding anything or anyone, but that’s exactly what this looks like. I pull my hands through my hair and lean on the counter.

Emily rubs my shoulder. “Did she say anything?”

I shake my head in response. The day was a shit day at work. I had to cancel my commercial flight home, so I chartered a plane to get back today to spend time with Becca. It made sense for Lynn to fly with me instead of flying here tomorrow for the funeral in a few days. She just dropped me off from the airport when Becca pulled into Emily’s driveway. My plan made the most sense...

Mom’s voice is timid. “Where do you think she is?”

“No idea.”

“Have you not gone to look for her?” Jake asks incredulously.

I stand up quickly, “Of course I have!” I am furious and completely lost on what to do. “She wasn’t at the hospital. Jenny was working but wouldn’t talk to me. I went by the Attic and talked to Sam, but he hadn’t seen her.”

“Oh, I bet that was fun,” Matt chuckles. Sam is like a big brother to

Becca, super protective, and isn't my biggest fan.

"So much fun," I deadpan. "I went to her house thinking she just went home. Did you know Evelyn moved in there?" Everyone nodded. *Had I been that disconnected? How did I miss that?*

"Have you tried to call her?"

I turn to glare at my sister. "What do you think I am? She's not answering calls or texts. I tried Andrew too. Hell, I even tried Dean!" I called her repeatedly, letting the phone ring until her voicemail picked up, just to hang up and try again.

**Bryan: Baby, please talk to me. Please let me explain. I know what it looked like, but I promise you it isn't what you think.**

**She means nothing to me.**

**Baby girl, I need you. Please don't leave.**

**Please. I'll do anything. Whatever you want.**

**I'm worried about you. I can't find you anywhere. Can you let me know if you're ok?**

**I'm begging you baby. Please talk to me.**

**Please come home.**

When my efforts to reach Becca aren't working, I reach out to Jenny and Andrew, hoping that one of them will give her the message.

**Bryan: Look, I know I fucked up. But I'm really worried about her. Can you please let me know if she's safe?**

**Jenny: She's safe.**

**Bryan: Thank you. Tell her I love her more than anything. She has to know that.**

**Jenny: No, she really doesn't.**

*Well, shit.* "This is exactly what I didn't want to happen. I never should have gotten close to her again. I should have left her alone and carried on how I was," I grumble and fall onto the couch.

"No honey, don't say that." Mom, always the optimistic. "She's just hurt right now. Confused." I lean into my mom, and she rubs my back reassuringly. "It will all work out. It always does."

It takes everything in my power not to laugh at that. Since I left for New York, nothing with Becca has worked out. I bury my face into the cushion and let the tears fall freely. I feel lost. I am alone. My dad is gone. Becca is

gone. Lynn is upset with me. My siblings are mad at me. I feel like it is me against the world, against pain, time.



I startle awake, reaching for my phone, praying I have something, anything, from her. I tap the screen but only see my background picture. It is the selfie we took on the beach. *Damn it.* The sun will rise soon, and I need to clear my head and figure out my next step. I mindlessly tie my shoes and throw on a hoodie before taking off for the beach. The cool morning air forces breath in my lungs. The darkness surrounding me brings an innate peace to my mind. I focus on my gait, escaping from the shit storm I have created. I stop at the pier and sit on the cool sand. The sun peeking above the horizon, turning the sky from a gradient orange to yellow. Focusing on the crashing waves, I watch a group of dolphins swim and leap out of the water. *I wish Dad could see this.* I drop my head into my hands, resting them on my knees. He'd be so disappointed in me right now. *Shit. What am I going to do?*



Stepping through the back door, I am surprised to see Jake cooking at the stove. "I didn't realize you were coming over?" He turns slightly and looks at me with an annoyed expression, as if that is the dumbest thing to say. We sit silently at the counter, drinking coffee and sharing fresh breakfast sandwiches.

"Have you heard from her?"

"No, man. I don't know what to do. Jenny said she's safe, but I don't know, it's not enough."

"Think she'll come tomorrow?"

"I don't know."

"I know you don't want to hear this, but it will work out. It may not end up how you want it, but everything happens for a reason. You know that."

I can feel his eyes glaring at me. *I disappoint so many people.* Deciding to try one more time before heading to the funeral home for today's services, I dial her number. I clasp my phone tighter, tapping it on my forehead in frustration when her voicemail picks up.



**Bryan: I miss you.**



Each time the heavy door to the chapel opens, I turn too quickly, hoping to see her walk through the doors. I sit between Evelyn and Emily in the second row, waiting anxiously. I want the service to be over. I want Becca to come. I need to see that she is ok. It feels like everyone from town here, making their way to the front of the chapel to see Mom and the rest of us.

The officiant steps to the front of the room and I turn to scan the rows, searching for her. “She’s not here,” Emily whispers as she loops her arm into mine. We decided we would have a visitation today and take this time to say our goodbyes. The officiant introduces me, and I step to the podium, unfolding my notes, and take a deep breath.

“I’d like to thank you all for being here today and for your support of our family over the years, but especially in the last few months. Dad was many things: a fierce friend, an affectionate father, a fair jury, and a doting husband. He demonstrated and embodied the strength and passion of the man I want to be.” I brave looking into the audience for the first time since stepping on the stage. Immediately locking eyes with a beautiful brunette with honey eyes, sitting across the room. The streams of tears staining her cheeks is tearing at my heart. “Dad taught me that life is too short to be anything but happy. He challenged me to choose joy, to choose love, and that’s what I intend to do.” *I’m choosing you, Becca.*

When I finish, Becca stands and walks out of the room, Andrew following immediately behind. I rush off the stage and run down the center aisle through the heavy doors into the afternoon heat. “Becca!” I call out, running to catch her. She pauses on the walkway with her back to me. I am an arm’s distance away, reaching for her, but Andrew steps between us. “Please,” I whisper. I’ll give it to him. Andrew is a great protector. He remains between us, Becca’s back to me, and won’t let me pass. Feeling defeated, I take a couple of steps back and nod at Andrew, “I get it. Take care of her, yeah?”

“Take care of me?” Becca snaps, stepping around Andrew and directly in front of me. *My beautiful Ace.* I can’t help but smile hearing her voice. She is so close. I lift my hand to reach for her, but she takes a step back, pointing at Andrew. “It’s not his job to take care of me, Bryan!”

We stand there, eyes searching each other. Her face is pale, a light dusting of purple circles under her bloodshot eyes. I did this to her. *Damn it.* “Please,” I plead.

She shakes her head quickly, and I watch helplessly as Andrew takes her by the hand and leads her to the passenger seat of her car. *She’s leaving.* I stand paralyzed, completely powerless, watching the brake lights fade in the distance. *Fuck.*

# Chapter 43

## Rebecca



I hear hushed whispers coming from the other room, recognizing my sister's voice, and suck in a deep breath before getting out of bed. I go to Andrew's closet and pull on an old college hoodie before stepping into the kitchen. I head straight to the kettle to make tea, when Andrew steps up behind me and wraps his arms around my shoulders. "Let me get that for you." I drop my hands and watch as Andrew adds the honey and tea bag to the cup, only stepping away from me to grab the lemonade from the fridge. While the kettle continues to heat, I turn to lay my head on his chest, grounding myself with the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. I feel numb and only realize I am crying when Andrew wipes a tear from my cheek before handing me a warm cup of lavender tea.

A throat clears behind us and Andrew steps to the side, exposing Jenny and Monica sitting at the counter, Robbie standing behind them, but that isn't who causes me to pause. My eyes fall to the petite red-headed woman standing just a few steps away from me, and I gasp. *Lottie*.

"Oh honey, please don't cry." She steps toward me with her outstretched arms but stops hesitantly. I placed my tea on the counter and run into her hug. She runs her hands up and down my back when I tighten my hold on her before releasing her gently. "Is there anything I can get you?"

I laugh at that. "That should be my question to you. Not the other way around."

“I disagree.” She slowly takes a step toward me and runs her hands from my shoulders to my wrists.

“How is he?” I ask softly. I have ignored his texts and calls. I was avoiding a confrontation at the services earlier today, but when Bryan chased us out of the chapel, I wanted to touch him, needed to hold on to him. Thankfully, Andrew was with me and kept his promise to get me out of there quickly before I did something I would regret.

“Miserable,” she answers. *Of course, he is. He is saying goodbye to his dad.* “I’m worried. I’ve never seen him like this, Becca. Just think about talking to him, please.”

She turns on her heel, and Robbie leads her outside, walking to her car. I curl myself on the couch, Jenny and Monica joining me silently. I sip my tea and stare into space, completely detached from life. I’m not mad that Lottie came, and I can’t be upset that she is advocating for her son. I am the one who asked about him, lapse in judgment on my behalf. Robbie steps back inside with a bouquet of red peonies in his arms.

“Where did those come from?” Jenny asks.

Robbie looks at me. “Bryan asked me to give them to Becca.”

I jump up, “He’s here?” Jenny stands and wraps her arm around my shoulder in protection or comfort. I wasn’t exactly sure.

He runs his hand across the back of his neck, “Um yeah, He’s parked on the street.” I rush to the window, opening the blinds to see Bryan sitting on the curb of the street with his back to the house.

“He’s been out there for a few hours,” Andrew admits.

“And you didn’t tell him to leave?!” I shout.

“Yes, I did,” Andrew answers calmly.

“Then why is he here?” Jenny questions.

“He said he couldn’t stand to be away from you any longer and if it was all the same to me, he’d stay.”

I step into the kitchen area holding out a hand expectedly. “Give me the flowers.” Robbie reluctantly hands me the bouquet and watches as I storm outside, Andrew directly behind me. Bryan stands when he hears the door open and turns to face us. It is just after sunset; the sky is painted purple. I watch his face turn into the most handsome smile. I charge toward him, only stopping just over halfway through the yard.

“I don’t want your fucking flowers, Bryan!” I scream and throw the bouquet as hard as I can toward him.

“All I wanted was you!” I wait for a response, but he stands there staring at me. When he takes a step into the grass, I turn and run back to the house.

“You have me, Becca. You always have!” he yells just before I claim the front door closed and run to Andrew’s bedroom, blinded by my tears.



I wake to the morning sun streaming through the window. My muscles are aching, and my throat feels like the desert. Begrudgingly, I step into the bathroom, avoiding my reflection in the mirror. I know my face is swollen from the cry fest last night after I saw Bryan. After my shower, I wrap myself in a fluffy white robe and head to the kitchen for tea. I hear soft voices murmuring in the kitchen and stay hidden in the shadows of the hallway to listen.

“How much bigger of a gesture do you want, Jenny?”

“A big gesture isn’t enough. Consistency is, though, and he has shown everything but! Plus, how is it a grand gesture if she didn’t even know he was here?”

“That’s because I didn’t tell her, and I wouldn’t let him in. Don’t misunderstand me, I’m pissed at the guy. She’s devastated and I will always back her.”

“But...,” Jenny prompts.

Andrew takes a deep breath. “But we don’t know his side of the story. Hell, they work together, and he was on a work trip. I’m sure they’re friends too. You don’t build a company with a stranger for years and not become close. You, of all people, can relate to that.”

“It’s not the same.”

I quietly step into the kitchen to see Andrew shrug in response. I silently open the fridge to pull out the ingredients for an omelet. I can feel their eyes on me as I work on breakfast. I slide them each a plate with a personalized omelet. Andrew grabs my wrist and intertwines my fingers with his. “You don’t have to do this, Ace.”

I try to playfully pull my hand away. “It’s just breakfast, Andrew, not a marriage proposal.”

It did not impress him. “You don’t have to do this today. You don’t have to go, Art would understand.”

“Yeah, I know,” I whisper, pushing around the food on my plate. There

is no way I can eat right now. I have two hours before I need to leave to meet Emily at the chapel. The family asked me to sing a few songs during today's service and a duet with Emily. "I'll be fine."

"That's what worries me," Jenny admits. I step around the counter and give my sister a tight hug. I feel guilty for taking up so much time and energy from the two of them, but I also know it wouldn't be healthy for me to be alone. *Alone again.*

"Help me pick out a dress?" I ask, turning to my sister. The next two hours fly by. Jenny and I work together to dry and then curl my hair, leaving ringlets along the open back of my dress. She paints my face, specifically using waterproof everything. Beyond the issues with Bryan, this is Art's funeral. The last goodbye and I wanted to be prepared for honoring Arthur Kelley.

Andrew holds the wooden chapel doors open for me and Robbie to enter. Jenny and Sam were planning on meeting here, but didn't arrive before the time I promised Emily I would meet her.

"Got yourself an entourage, Cooper?" Jake asks with a smirk as he waves a microphone in my direction. The guys sit in the front row as I step onto the stage, wrapping my arms around him for a quick hug before standing by the piano.

There is a bang on the door behind me before it opens. "You swore you wouldn't make a scene." Matt seethes. Jake's eyes meet mine.

"I won't," Bryan whispers, and I turn toward his voice slightly. *Don't turn around. Don't look at him. Don't talk to him. Focus.* From the corner of my eye, I see Bryan walk with Evelyn to the seats and I let go of the breath I didn't realize I was holding.

"You good?" Matt asks from beside me, searching my face. I nod, but keep my eyes low. "We really appreciate you doing this. All of us." I nod again, stepping behind the stand and holding our sheet music. *You are strong. You are worthy. You are capable. You are loved. You are powerful.*

My quick rehearsal with Jake goes smoothly. I keep my eyes locked on Andrew the entire time, even though Bryan is in my peripheral vision. Emily and I are practicing our duet when the chapel doors open and Lynn steps into the chapel. I quickly glance at Bryan to find his eyes locked on me before turning back to Andrew. He sees my expression shift and turns to see her walking up the aisle. Robbie points in her direction, looking for confirmation. I nod once and close my eyes, praying the song would end soon. *I can't see*

*them together. I can't. I need to get out of here. I can't breathe.*

The music stops mid-verse. I open my eyes to find Robbie walking Lynn toward the back of the chapel with his hand at the small of her back. Andrew is taking the microphone from my hand and pulling me off stage, saying, "You both sounded beautiful. But there's no need to finish this, you're both professionals." Bryan stands where he is sitting with Evelyn and I stop a few feet away from him, waiting for him to speak. When he remains silent, I allow Andrew to guide me out of the chapel. *Why do I even try? Of course, he couldn't say anything to me.*

Lottie had asked me to sit with the family, and I reluctantly agreed to sit in the second row with Evelyn. I decided sitting closest to the center aisle would be my safest bet for getting on the stage when I needed to, but also for a quick exit. Evelyn slides in beside me. "Can I sit with you?" she asks sweetly.

"Yes, of course, please do. How are you feeling?" Evelyn's brows furrow slightly. "Are you in pain?" I see movement in the corner of my eye and watch Bryan take a seat in the front row at the very end. His eyes lock with mine and I take a moment to take him in. His usual smiling face is frowning, dark circles around his eyes, the weight of the week within them.

"A bit. I overdid it this week with the move." I turn my attention back to Evelyn, but flush when I feel his eyes on me.

Robbie and Andrew sit behind me just as the officiant walks on stage. "She needs to talk to her." Robbie whispers, "It isn't what we thought it was." As I was about to turn to ask what he meant, my name was called to the stage.

I keep my eyes locked on Lottie, Evelyn, and Andrew. They are directly behind each other, so it is easy to avoid eye contact with everyone else. The service is beautiful, not emotional like I imagined it would be. Emily and I hold each other as we sing "The Prayer" during the procession out of the building. I reach for her hand and lead her down the steps to the main aisle, stopping at the second row for Evelyn to join us, and the three of us walk behind the Kelley brothers into the afternoon sun.

The family plot is on the same land, so the walk to the gravesite is minimal, thankfully. Evelyn grasps her stomach through most of the walk but reassures me and Emily that everything is fine. I exhaled in relief when I don't see Bryan seated with the family. Once I help Evelyn to the folding chair between Matt and Jake, I turn to step beside the officiant for my last

song.

Before I can correct myself, the most embarrassing thing that could happen, happened. My foot catches on the leg of Jake's chair and I fall backward. That is, until a warm, large arm wraps around my waist, pulling me to a firm chest and preventing me from falling. It could have been a scene from a rom-com, only missing an apology and a leg-popping kiss. I roll my eyes at the thought. I gently push on his chest, attempting to separate us. His hand holds mine in place, searing my skin, and his blue eyes searching mine. *This is too much. Too hard. It hurts too much.* When he wipes a tear from my cheek with the pad of his thumb, I am freed from the depths of his eyes. "Um, thanks," I say before stepping out of his arms. *For the last time.*



## Chapter 44

Bryan



I can't pull my eyes from her. I had her literally in my arms and I said absolutely nothing. It was sheer luck I was walking to my seat while she helped Evelyn, but I was thankful for it. I listen to her beautiful voice singing the lyrics to Amazing Grace, just like she did the night Dad peacefully passed. I watch as she holds Mom's hand, placing a rose on the top of the casket. I meant it when I said Becca was it for me. She has always been my beacon, even when she didn't know it.

We are lined up like the Brady Bunch to say goodbye to the attendees as a family. When Andrew, Robbie, and Becca came through the line, Becca stares at the ground. "I'm sorry for your loss." I'm sure she meant every word but seeing her being so impersonal with me hurts. Andrew shakes my hand before moving on to my brother. It is Robbie who gives me some hope. "She'll come around. Let us know if you need anything."

I feel helpless as I watch them hold hands and walk to the parking lot. Becca glances back toward us and gives me a small wave.

*The next few minutes happen in slow-motion.*

Evelyn screams loudly. A scream like I have never heard before, full of pain and agony. Emily catches her as she falls to the ground, holding her pregnant stomach, crying for help. Jake and I look at each other, silently

weighing our options, and I gesture for him to go.

“Becca! Dr. Jones!” I hear Jake yell as he runs through the parking lot. I pull off my jacket and help Matt move Evelyn into a more comfortable position, her head in his lap. It feels like hours have passed before Becca is back. I step to the side, not wanting to get in the way or be a distraction from Evelyn. She needs help right now and as much as I want to wrap Becca in my arms and never let her go, now isn’t the time.

“Evelyn, honey, what happened?” Becca’s voice is calm but firm. I watch as she and Robbie position Evelyn onto her side, check her pulse, and push on her stomach.

“I don’t know,” Evelyn pants. “I’ve had cramps all day, but I took some medicine, and they went away until I got here.”

“I don’t think those were cramps,” Robbie adds. “We need to get you to the hospital to see what’s going on with this little bundle of yours.”

Jake and Andrew take off running to the parking lot. I presume to get the cars. I take a step closer to Becca. “What can I do?” I ask her softly.

She looks up at me from where she is sitting on the ground. “Can you get her to the car?” I nod, holding her gaze. God, I love when she looks at me like that. “E, I’m gonna pick you up, okay? Do you want a bride or a piggy?”

“Piggy,” Evelyn answers breathlessly.

“A what?” Robbie asks Becca.

She laughs. “He’s asking if she wants to be carried against his chest like a bride or with her legs wrapped around his chest like a reverse piggyback ride.”

I scoop her into my arms, wrapping them under her as she wraps her legs around me and lays her head on my shoulder. Matt is right beside me, guiding me through the grass.

I gently place Evelyn in the front seat of Jake’s car and wrap her seat belt around her before there’s a small hand on my back. Leaning out of the car slightly, I make room for Becca to peek around me. “Can I ride with you, Jake?”

“Fuck yeah, get in the back.” Jake answers, and I open the door for Becca to slide in before closing it behind her.

*What the fuck just happened?* I stand there long after the brake lights can be seen.

Andrew steps beside me. “Do you need a ride?”

“No, I have my car.” We stand there in silence. “Am I losing her?” I

need to know, and who better to ask than her best friend?

He stays quiet. I turn to him, waiting for an answer. He rocks on his toes, then heels with his hands in his pockets. “No. No, I don’t think you are.” His words lit my face on fire, and I can’t stop smiling. *She’s still mine.*



**Matt: E I set up in a room. Baby is healthy and will be here soon.**

**Emily: OMG!**

**Rebecca: I’m running to the house for a change of clothes. Need me to bring anything back for you?**

I wonder if she’s coming here, of course she is, where else would she go? I stand abruptly from the couch and rush to the kitchen to clean off the counters. The sadness I have felt over the past few days as evidence through the house.

**Rebecca: I’ll stop by Evelyn’s to get the hospital bag she has packed too.**

**Emily: Will you pick me up on your way back?**

**Bryan: If it’s out of the way, I can drive you Tater tot.**

**Rebecca: It’s not out of the way.**

Ten minutes later, there’s a knock at the front door. A second later, the door swings open and Emily steps into the house. “Hey, bro!”

“What’s up? Need something?”

“Um yeah. Becca asked me to get her some clothes and they’re all here?”

“Where is she?”

“She’s on her way over from Evelyn’s. We didn’t want to waste any time.”

I nod, leading her into our master closet, and motion to her dresser and the side of the closet. My caveman tendencies want to kick my sister out and tell her that Rebecca Cooper can come get her own things if she wants them. But that won’t help anything. I pull out an overnight bag and sit it on the floor before pulling out Becca’s favorite pajamas, leggings, and a few shirts and jeans.

Emily stands in the closet’s doorway with a shocked look. “What?” I

step around her to the master bathroom. She follows and watches as I pack a toiletry kit for Becca. Before zipping up the bag, I grab one of her hoodies and my hoodie that she loves to wear. “Should be all set,” I say as I hand the bag to her.

“Just surprised.”

I stay on the porch and watch as Emily gets into the car, hoping Becca will say something, look at me, anything at this point. I’m disappointed though. She keeps her head down, focused on her phone and not looking my way.



My cell phone ringing startles me awake. *Becca.*

“Becca?”

“Hey, Bry,”

“Is everything ok? You sound...”

“Yeah, I’m just tired.” She pauses, and I hold my breath, waiting for her. “Um, Evelyn asked me to call you. She is actively pushing, and she wanted to know if you’d bring Lottie.”

“Now?”

“Yeah. When I stepped out, we could see the baby’s head. It’ll be any minute now.”

“Ok. Yeah. Sure, I can. Are you, um,” I pause. “Are you ok? Do you need anything?”

“No, I’m good. Thanks though.”

“Sure, see you soon.”

“Bye.”

Mom and I arrive at the hospital ten minutes later. Becca texted me a room number as we were pulling into the hospital parking lot, and I lead Mom inside. We step into the room and see Evelyn resting in the hospital bed. Her hair is wet, and you can see the exhaustion on her face. Becca is standing beside the bed, with her back to us. Hearing us enter, Becca spins around quickly, and our eyes lock. I look down to see she is holding a baby wrapped in a pink blanket. *My home.* My beautiful Becca, standing in a hospital room in her floor-length black dress from the funeral, her curled hair on her head with a pencil stuck out of it. Then add in a baby.

I step closer, tears flooding my eyes, and smile. The pure joy in her eyes

erases the pain of the past week. Seeing her happy throws gasoline on the fire that burns for her in my soul.

She steps closer to me, my hand resting on her elbows as I lean in to look at the baby. Becca's face is just inches from mine, and I hold her gaze. "Beautiful," I whisper. *Always so beautiful.* How can my fingertips barely touching her create such an intimate moment? She's perfect. If this is happening with someone else's baby, imagine what it will be like when we have our own.

"Lottie! I'm so glad you came!" Evelyn's shrieking pulls us into the present.

"But of course, my girl," Mom gushes as she steps around the bed to hug Evelyn.

Evelyn and Becca recount the labor for Mom, apologizing for personal details that may have been inappropriate for me to hear but, I am so lost in Becca holding this baby that I wasn't listening to their conversation. "Do you want to hold her?" Evelyn asks me.

"Me?" I hesitate, "I mean, sure."

"Take a seat," Becca directs tenderly.

I turn and sit on the small couch. Becca steps closer, and I open my feet to give her the space to stand between my knees. I watch the baby, so *peaceful*, as she moves from Becca's grasp to mine. Once I have the bundle in my arms, Becca gently moves my arms to cradle the newborn.

"All good?" she asks softly and sits beside me when I nod.

Becca pulls her feet under her and turns toward me. "I like seeing you with a baby in your arms."

"I like having a baby in my arms," I whisper back, glancing up to see her smiling back at me.

"Bryan, you're a natural!" Mom softly says as she leans against the arm of the couch.

"No, Mom, I just have a really great teacher," I answer, looking directly at Becca.

The moment is rudely interrupted when my siblings walk into the room carrying to-go bags. Jake steps right up to Evelyn's bed, opens a bag, and hands her a plate of sushi. Her face lights up, and she wraps her arms around Jake's neck. "Oh my gosh, you're the absolute best!" she exclaims before kissing him on the cheek.

The chaos of the room continues, but I turn to Becca, still sitting beside

me. “Bec, could we talk?”

“We already are.”

“No, I mean, really talk?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she sighs and pats my shoulder before standing from the couch. *Shit.*

I stay on the couch, my arms wrapped around the baby, while my family practically dances around the room, tending to Evelyn. Visiting hours will end soon, so I gently place the baby back with her mom. “Congratulations, E. I’ll stop by tomorrow. Let me know if you need me to bring anything.”

“Yeah, ok, Thanks, Bry.”

Mom and I switch places so she could say goodbye. “Oh Evelyn, I forgot to ask. What are you naming her?”

Evelyn looks at Matt, then at Mom. “Charlotte,” she answers. Mom raises her hand to her mouth, shocked. Tears streaming down her face.

I am happy for Evelyn and honored that she named her daughter after my mom, but I am feeling drained. Emotionally spent. I step out of the room and sit in a chair lining the hallway. I hold my head in my hands. *What should I do? Why did I love holding that baby so much?* Evelyn’s door opens and Becca steps into the hallway.

She stands by the door, watching me. “I’m sorry.”

She shakes her head, “Bryan, don’t.”

“Yes, Becca. I need you to know it wasn’t what it looked like.”

“So, you’ve said.”

I step in front of her. “So, you got my texts?” She nods. “And you ignored them.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “I have nothing to say to you.”

“Ok, then I’ll do all the talking.” I take a deep breath. “Lynn flew back with me from Jersey to be here for the funeral. She was dropping me off. That was it.” I am waiting for a response. “Becca, say something.”

“You told me you’d stay away from her. You made me think I was more important to you.”

“Because you are.”

She shakes her head, “Except, I’m not. Your actions have shown that loud and clear.”

“Becca...” I grovel. “I’m not perfect. I’ll never be. But I love you with all that I am, and that will not change.” I ping between her brown eyes, hoping for a spark, a glimmer of hope.

“I wish that was enough.”

# Chapter 45

## Rebecca



“S

o, you’re telling me he stood in front of you and told you he loved you and you didn’t fall into his arms?” Monica asks.

We are sitting at The Attic before opening when I recount the day before. My emotions are all over the place, even remembering the day.

“I deserve more.”

“Of course, you do,” Jenny adds.

I turn to Sam, standing behind the bar. “You’re being mighty quiet about all this. I thought you’d be thrilled. You hate Bryan.”

“I don’t hate him.”

“Yeah, okay.” I laugh before taking another sip.

Jenny turns and points to her boyfriend. “There’s more there. What aren’t you saying?”

He shrugs. “It’s not that I want to say anything. But I don’t agree with you, Bec.”

“Yeah, I don’t either,” Andrew adds.

I turn to my best friend, feeling hurt. “What do you mean?”

Andrew gently swipes my hair behind my ear and reaches for my hand. “I think you’re making a mistake.”

“And you do too?” I ask, turning to Sam.

He nods. “Here’s the thing, Ace. When two hearts are meant for each



other, soul mates, lovers...whatever you want to call it, it doesn't matter how far apart they are or how much time has passed. They will always be it for each other."

"Okay..." I pause. This was Sam. He usually wasn't so insightful, and I am surprised. "And you think that we're meant for each other?"

"Yep."

"And you too?" I ask Andrew.

"Yes, I do."

I turn to Monica and Jenny. "Anyone else?"

Jenny shrugs. "It makes sense." My jaw falls open.

"So, you think I should just sit back and let him tell me exactly what I want to hear for him to turn around and do the complete opposite? You think I should turn an eye on him lying to me?"

"I don't think he lied to you."

"Woah, talk about whiplash! Just the other day, you were saying the opposite. I stand from the stool, completely shocked. "Maybe he didn't lie. Maybe it's all me, all in my head." I head for the door before turning around quickly. "But here's what I do know. If he loved me, he would never do anything to lose me."



I am soaking in the garden tub at home. Well, Evelyn's home now. I did not expect her to be home for another couple of days. After the past few days with Bryan and then today with my family, I need quiet. I need to be alone. I place my glass of wine on the tray beside me and lean back into the water, resting my head on the small spa pillow. *I'm going to be okay.* I'll just buy another house. I wanted to invest in real estate, anyway. I should move, avoid all the heartache, and focus on myself.

A loud bell rang through the house. I didn't even realize the doorbell worked here. Figuring it was a package or something, I settled back into the bubbles. Not a few minutes passed before the bell rang again, accompanied by pounding on the door. I jump out of the water, quickly drying and wrapping myself in a robe. I pull the door open quickly to find a blonde woman in a business suit standing in front of me. *Lynn.* I close the door and lock it.

"Rebecca! I just want to talk!"

She is persistently ringing the doorbell and banging on the door. I lean against the counter and take a deep breath. It can't hurt any more than it already does. I might as well hear what she has to say. I open the door and hold it wide for her to enter.

"Anything to drink?" *Why am I being nice to this woman?* Damn southern hospitality.

"No, thank you though." I really don't like this woman. I watch as she shifts her weight from one leg to another.

"Why are you here?"

"I, um, I wanted to give you something."

She is visibly nervous as she reaches into her bag and hands me a brown leather-bound book held together by rope. "What's this?"

"Bryan told me what happened." I freeze. "I understand why you don't like me. I wanted to reassure you that nothing has ever and will never happen between me and Bryan."

I scoff. "I doubt that. I saw you together. You can't lie about it."

"You saw us together, hugging, outside of your home. I get it. I do. You're pissed. I understand that. But I can 100% guarantee you I am not interested in Bryan."

"The way you guys are always talking? The way you held on to him? There's no fucking way!" I yell. "You're insulting my intelligence by denying it!"

Lynn looks directly at me, grabs my shoulder, and laughs. *The bitch laughs in my face.*

I roll my eyes. "I'm so glad you find this so funny."

"Oh, but it is," she continues laughing.

"Whatever, I don't have time for this. Take the book, take him, and go back to New York," I snap, pulling out of her grip and holding the front door open for her to exit.

Still laughing, she steps behind me and pushes the door closed, leaning against it. *The audacity.*

"What is so fucking funny?"

"I'm not interested in Bryan. He's not it for me. He never will be it for me."

She's delusional. "I know what I saw."

"You saw a friend hugging a friend who just lost their dad to cancer. You saw a coworker who hugged a colleague after a really long day at the

office.”

I scoff and turn to head back to my bath, not caring if she stayed or left.

“Rebecca, I’m more attracted to you than him!”

I freeze. *What?* “You’re a lesbian?” I ask. Lynn nods, a knowing smirk on her painted-red lips. “Does Bryan know that?”

She shrugs. “I haven’t directly said those words to him, but I would imagine he knows.”

“I don’t think he does.” My brain is spinning. If Lynn truly wasn’t interested in Bryan this whole time, then I just wasted another week being mad at him for nothing.

“Either way. I’m not after your man. And trust me, he has always been your man.”

I shake my head. “Just high school sweethearts.”

“That’s not what that says,” Lynn says, gesturing to the leather book in my hands. “I slid my card in there. Call me if you need to.” She turns to leave before spinning back around, “Or if y’all don’t work out,” she adds with a wink. *Ha. yeah right.*

Untying the rope, I open the book to the first page.

*August 20th - I wish I was hugging you right now instead of thinking of you. I shouldn’t have left without you. I miss you. I miss our talks and our inside jokes. I miss ordering banana splits just to take them apart. I miss the feeling of your hand in mine. I miss your laugh. I miss your smile. I miss your singing. I miss you. I miss us. You’ll forever be my always, Bryan*

I lean against the wall and slowly slide to the floor. I hold the book against my chest and let the tears fall freely. I’m not imagining it. We really were in love. We really are in love. I flip through the next couple of pages and see more entries, like this one. I stop turning and read some more.

*December 22nd - I’m home. I’m in Jessamine for Christmas with my family. I drove by your house yesterday, but it was dark, so I guess no one was home. I would do anything to see your beautiful face right now. I’ve been so afraid of losing you, but deep down, I already have. Do you know what I want to be in your life? I want to be the reason you smile every morning. I want to tickle you until you’re squirming on the couch, laughing. I want to be the reason you keep your phone close to you just in case I’ll call. I want to be the reason you have hopes and dreams and I want to be a part of all of them. You’ll forever be my always, Bryan*

Oh Bryan, you’ve never lost me. I turn more pages and stop when the ink changes.

*March 18th - I realized something today. For as long as I can remember, you have been my entire life. I can’t breathe without you. I can’t sleep without dreaming of you. I exist to love you. Happy Birthday, Becca. You’ll forever be my always, Bryan*

*May 12th - Today is a hard day for me. I hope it isn't for you. Everything will be okay, Ace. This is just a page in your story, not the entire book. Happy Mother's Day, baby. You'll forever be my always, Bryan*

I glance up to see a furious Andrew step into the house. "Where the hell have you been?" His shoulders relax a bit when he sees my face. "Becca, what's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"I fucked up. I fucked up big time." I cry. Andrew sits on the floor beside me, and I hand him the book.

"What's this?"

"Bryan's notebook. Lynn brought it to me." I watch as he flips through the pages. Remembering her declaration, I ask, "Did you know she was a lesbian?!"

"Yeah."

"What?!" my voice echoes through the empty hallway. "And you didn't think to tell me?"

He shrugs his shoulders, "She told Robbie at the funeral, and it slipped my mind with all the other events that happened that day." Andrew wraps his arm around my shoulders and kisses the side of my head.

"Pick one to read for me?"

*July 14th - My sweet Bec. I need you to know you're it. You're not a maybe. You're not a second choice. You're not optional. You're absolutely not a backup plan. You're not a "when it's convenient" or a "wait and see". No, my beautiful Rebecca. You are an "absolutely hell yes", always. You're it for me and maybe one day I'll get to prove that to you. You'll forever be my always, Bryan*

# Epilogue

*one year later*

I carefully balance the tray of mimosas as I walk into the bridal suite. Do not drop it. Do not spill this on your dress. This was the first wedding I had ever been a part of. Even my own was more of a board meeting at the courthouse. I step into the room just as Jenny zips the back of Becca's gown and I pause as our eyes lock through the mirror. "You look gorgeous." She smiles and turns to Emily to apply her signature rose lipstick.

"Is everyone decent?" Matt asks from the hallway. We laugh and Lynn opens the French doors for the groomsmen, each taking a glass from the tray I was holding.

"Rebecca..." Sam holds his hand out to spin the bride slowly. Tears fill his eyes, and he turns to his fiancé. "How did you do it?"

"Do what?" Jenny asks.

"Turn the ogre from this morning into this beautiful bride." He wasn't lying. This morning was rough. I'm still not convinced they were sober when I got here at ten.

"Ha, ha," Becca answers in an annoyed tone but leans in to place a kiss on his cheek.

"This is for you," Matt says, replacing the tray in my hands with a glass of wine and holding his arm out for me. *Thank God*, I hate orange juice. I loop my arm in his and allow him to lead me onto the balcony. We are all meeting there before the ceremony at the couple's request. I sip my wine, watching everyone as they step outside.

"Are we supposed to be in order?" I whisper into Matt's shoulder. He surveys the balcony and shrugs. Everyone here is a part of the bridal party but has gravitated to our aisle companion as we stand along the banister. Jenny carefully places a blindfold on her sister and leads her to a seat in front of us. Jake and Bryan enter the room next with Bryan, also blindfolded. The smile

on the groom's face is nothing short of majestic. The joy on their faces warms my icy heart. I'm so happy for them. They deserve today after everything they have been through to get here.

"Hey Ace," Bryan whispers softly and reaches his hand out to her. We all laugh as we watch them search for each other's hands despite sitting close together. I step forward and gently lead Bryan's hand to find hers. "Thank you..."

"Evie," Becca finishes, smiling toward me. *How did she know it was me?* I return to my space beside Matt. "Thank you all for being here and bringing my crazy ideas to life."

"Both of us selected each of you to stand by us on our wedding day. Traditional gender roles would not work out for us," Bryan adds.

"You two are anything but traditional," Monica jokes.

"True, but we couldn't imagine anyone else here with us today." Becca pauses, taking a steadying breath. I have never seen her nervous like this. "Each of you have loved us."

"Supported us," Bryan adds.

"Listened to you grovel," Jake adds. *True.* And the laughter begins...

"Forced you to see reason," Jenny pipes in. *Another fair statement.*

"Yelled at you until you came to your senses," Lynn yells.

"Ok, ok, we get it," Becca laughs along with the rest of us. *At least she's a good sport about it.*

Once the laughter calms down and we wipe the tears from our eyes, Bryan stands from his seat. "Seriously though, thank you. Thank you to our family by blood but friends by choice and our friends that have become our chosen family. Cheers." We all raise our glasses to toast. *Chosen family.*

"Ok lovers, let's get you married, yeah?" Jenny asks, and we go into our assigned places for the wedding procession.

The beginning of the wedding is very traditional. The groom and groomsmen stand at the altar and watch each of us as we walk down the aisle. I am the first and keep my eyes on the ground to avoid all eye contact. *I hate this.* When I get to my spot, I look up to find all three Kelley brothers smiling at me. We watch as Monica, Andrew, and Emily walk down the aisle to stand with me. As the Maid of Honor, Jenny is the last before the bride. She is pulling Charlotte in a white wagon, covered in flower petals. I am surprised she's awake, but even more thankful she's giggling as they make their way down the aisle. Sam reaches for the wagon and Lottie for Charlotte just

before the doors open for the bride. My eyes go to Bryan. I want to see his reaction once the music starts, and Becca takes her first step into the aisle. He did not disappoint, not that I thought he would, but when he realizes the music is Becca singing “Thinking Out Loud”, Bryan bends at the waist and cries out. Jake’s eyes meet mine, a wide smile lighting his handsome face, patting Bryan on the back. Bryan stands, tears streaming freely down his face as he watches Becca continue down the aisle. She reaches for him, smiling wide, wiping the tears from his cheeks as the congregation sits and the wedding begins.

Sam stands between Becca and Bryan. “First, I’d like to begin by welcoming everyone and thanking each of you for being here today. It’s no accident that each of you are here. Each of you represents someone important in the individual and collective lives of Bryan and Rebecca. The most remarkable moment in life is when you meet the person who makes you feel complete. The person you share a bond so special it supersedes all other relationships and becomes something so pure, so wonderful that you can’t imagine spending another day of your life without them. For Bryan and Rebecca, that happened in middle school. Young love is hard, but these two loved so deeply, there was never anyone else. I am privileged to be here today, among all of you, as a witness to their commitment to a lifetime of love for one another. But first, we have a special letter for you.”

Sam motions to Lottie, and she stands, holding Charlotte in her arms. The flower girl’s dress is puffy and makes it impossible to hold her comfortably. I step forward to grab her but freeze when Jake steps forward and gathers Charlotte from his mom’s arms. Lottie kisses both of them on the cheek before standing beside Sam. Once situated, he looks at me and smiles, holding onto my baby tightly and waves her little hand to me in hello.

“To Bryan and Rebecca, today has been a long time coming. It has taken years, literally, to get you here, but I am so proud of you both. Your wedding day is like a new beginning to a life with another person you love, and you will never do anything alone again. Most would groan at that idea, but not you two. This is what you were made for, loving each other. I couldn’t be prouder watching you together, treating each other with love and kindness. Becca, you quietly slipped into our hearts as a twelve-year-old little girl and have always been a part of our family. I am proud to know you will officially become a Kelley. Thank you for loving my boy so well. Congratulations kids. Love, Dad”

The room around me sways slightly. Arthur Kelley was the kindest man. To know he wrote Bryan and Becca this letter before he passed amazes me. My eyes stay on Charlotte, in Jake's arms. She is my purpose, my whole world. His hand rubs Charlotte's arm and my eyes meet his. "You ok?" He mouths to me, and I nod slightly before refocusing on the ceremony.

"Bryan Kelley, you are my best friend, my love for life. I promise you my deepest love, my fullest devotion, and my most tender care, through the pressures of the present and the uncertainties of the future. I promise to encourage and inspire you, to laugh with you, and to comfort you in times of struggle. I promise to love you when life seems easy and when it gets hard, when our love is simple, and when it is an effort. I choose you and I'll choose you over and over, without pause, without doubt, in a heartbeat. I'll always choose you."

"Rebecca Cooper, you are without a doubt the most caring and loving person I have ever met. I promise to protect you, especially when you're afraid of the dark. I promise to keep you smiling, even when you want to cry. I vow to honor you, cherish you, and respect you. I've never told anyone this but when I graduated college, my dad said that the two most important days in my life are the day I was born and the day I figured out why." Bryan raises their intertwined fingers and kisses her hand. With his eyes locked on her, he continues, "It's you. You are my why. I love you more than anything in the world. Thank you for allowing me to."

"And now I pronounce you husband and wife. Bryan, you may kiss your bride."

"I've waited for this day my entire life," Bryan whispers as he wraps his arms around Becca's back before kissing her to deafening cheers.



I sit with Charlotte and watch as everyone dances in the center of the room. Focused on feeding my daughter, I leisurely gaze around the room between bites until my eyes lock with Jake's across the room. He sits with Lottie on the other side of the dance floor. I refocus my attention, only to see him still watching me from the corner of my eye.

"Can I have your attention, please?" Andrew announces over the sound system. "Jenny, care to join me?" The room grows quiet, and we watch as Jenny gracefully stands and joins Andrew in the center of the dance floor,



directly in front of the bride and groom. Bryan watches his bride with adoration, a loving smile on his face. *Cuties*.

“Ok, Becca, I want you to place your hand on the table please,” Jenny instructs, and Becca places her hand palm down on the table.

“Great, now Bryan put your hand on top of hers,” Andrew adds, and we watch as Bryan places his palm to the back of her hand and intertwines their fingers. “Perfect. Now Bec, look deep into Bryan’s eyes and tell him how much you love him.”

Laughing, Becca obliges, “You and me, babe. It doesn’t get any better than us.”

Andrew makes a gagging motion, pulling laughter from the room. “Okay, dork,” Jenny teases. “Bry, it’s your turn.”

Bryan caresses her cheek with the back of his hand, “You’ll forever be my always. I love you, Rebecca Kelley.” The crowd cheers as they kiss.

“Ok love birds, let’s take a breath.” Andrew pauses until they both turn to him. Speaking away from the microphone, but still speaking loud enough for the room to hear, Andrew looks directly at the groom. “Now Bryan, I want you to savor this moment. Ok?” He then turns to the crowd and in an announcer’s voice says, “Ladies and gentlemen, you have just witnessed the last time this married man will ever have the upper hand...”

“Or the last word,” Jenny finishes.

The laughter that erupts from the room is thunderous and startles Charlotte. Tucking her into my arms and cradling her close, I turn to see a shocked but jubilant bride. I watch as she and Bryan stand, still holding hands, and meet the amateur comedians on the dance floor as the DJ starts “Thank God” by Kane & Katelyn Brown. Charlotte is calm in my arms as I sway to the music and run my fingers through her fine hair.

“Would you like to dance?” Jake asks, standing behind Charlotte’s chair.

“I would but...”

A small hand is on my back, “I can keep her,” Lottie says. “You go, have some fun.”

I stand, passing Charlotte to her namesake. Jake follows me to the dance floor, gently placing one hand on my lower back and holding my hand with the other. I cautiously look around the room to make sure we aren’t attracting unwanted attention. “Having fun?”

“Yeah, the ceremony was really beautiful.”

“Yeah, it was,” he replies softly. “You look lovely, Evie.”

I can feel my ears burning and I’m sure they are bright red with embarrassment. Jake tightens his grip on my back, and I lay my head on the lapel of his jacket. “Thanks, Jake.”

He leans his head on top of mine, and I close my eyes, breathing him in. His fresh sage and suede cologne clouds my mind. I take another deep breath and tuck my face closer to his chest. We are opposites that are magnetically pulled together. With each movement closer, Jake tightens his hold on me. The exhale of his warm breath on my shoulder leads me to extend my neck and tilt my chin toward his shoulder. Our slow movement lighting a fire of torment in my belly. He slowly tucks his face into the crevice of my neck, running his nose along the sensitive skin and placing a soft kiss there. My pulse is racing, and I stiffen under the feeling of his lips on my skin. A low groan leaves his lips.

“What?” I ask, my rigid against him.

He holds me against him and moves his lips dangerously close to my ear, “I love the smell of eucalyptus, because of you.” *My sweet Jacob.*

“If everyone will please line around the dance floor,” the DJ instructs, and I exhale, thankful for the distraction. We all stand on the edge of the black and white tiled floor. “Perfect, now where are my single ladies?” Hands shoot up around the room, Emily pushing mine into the air as well, and I glare at her. *Not exactly.*

“Soon enough,” she replies, as if she could read my thoughts.

“Y’all take a step forward. It’s time for the bouquet toss!” The room fills with squeals from women of all ages.

Reaching down, I lift Charlotte into my arms and plant her on my hip. Matt turns to me with a knowing smile. “You good?” I nod in response and watch Bryan walk Becca to the front of the dance floor, giving her a quick spin, the skirt of her dress twirling around her. *I want someone to look at me the way Bryan looks at Becca.*

“Princess”, Charlotte says as she points to Becca.

“Just like you,” Jake replies stepping to the other side of me.

Becca turns to her friends and family. “Y’all ready?”

“Yes!” They all reply, eager to catch the flowers. *Such a dumb tradition. Why waste perfectly good flowers?*

“Here we go! One...two...” Before Becca says three, she turns to her brother-in-law, tossing him the bouquet of red peonies. The room fills with

“Awes” of disappointment.

The next few moments happen so quickly it feels like an out-of-body experience.

He smiles broadly at the bride as she steps into her husband’s arms. He turns to his love, bending to one knee and holding the flowers out to her. “You know, I was hoping one of these days you’d propose to me.” His eyes bounce with humor as he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a black velvet box. “But since you haven’t, I thought I better ask before you get the chance to pick someone else.” She laughs and steps toward him as he stands tall, wrapping his arms around the small of her back. Their smiles reflect around the room, mirroring the bride and groom’s. “Before you answer,” he places his forehead to hers, “Make sure, because if it’s not forever, then I don’t want it, baby cakes.” She stands on her tiptoes to kiss him, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him closer to her.

“Yes, I’ll marry you, Mr. Kelley.”

The End.

## About the Author



C.Z. Reeves writes contemporary romance with lots of heart and a side of sarcasm. A natural-born storyteller, she takes you on an emotional journey from heartbreak to happily ever after. When not writing, you can find her curled up with a cozy blanket, a book, and a beverage...coffee, tea, or wine, depending on the time of day. A lover of sappy movies, C.Z. has been known to shed a tear for even Disney releases. Music is a necessity, every day, all day, and she will play songs on repeat until she knows every word. Tacos are her favorite food group and loves great sangria.

C.Z. is living her own Happily Ever After in Florida with her husband and three entertaining and wonderful humans who call her Mama. She has a goofy sense of humor and a crazy, loud laugh...everything else is subject to change without notice.

## Keep in Touch with C.Z. Reeves



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# Acknowledgements

I have always loved reading the acknowledgments of the books I am reading, but now that I have to write one, this is weird. I am a storyteller; thus, I do not love talking about myself. Anyway, I hope I tell my people how much I love and appreciate them every day, but this book would not be possible had it not been for my tribe, so here we go.

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Last, but certainly not least—Let me say thank you to YOU! I am truly honored that you chose my book to read out of the millions of romance novels available. I hope that some part of this story resonated with you, and everyone can find a small piece of themselves in these characters.

XO, C.Z.